

UNBELONGING:
DIASPORA AESTHETICS
IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK BRITISH WRITING

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature is a mainstay of the international literary landscape. Although the fraught and often complex notion of identity and belonging has been dissected, reassembled and challenged by the work of writers and academics, in the following years a new generation has grown. R. Victoria Arana's seminal collection of essays *Black British Aesthetics Today* explores the work produced by Black British writers from a position of aesthetics Arana calls 'a deliberate design of an appeal to an audience.' Yet a focus on the 'avant-garde' causes writers less concerned with an examination of identity, loss and the in-between, and more with the aesthetics of cultural wealth and cohesion to be ignored. The first part of this thesis examines a range of writers from the postcolonial to Black British in an attempt to re-evaluate their shared aesthetics. I argue that Arana's 'deliberate design' is an expression of Pan-African or diasporic thought that can be found in writers as diverse as Alex Wheatle and Helen Oyeyemi. By dissecting Black writing in Britain from a position of inclusion that embraces the works of C.L.R James, George Lamming, Zadie Smith and Diran Adebayo, I argue that this aesthetic mode has become a dominant expression of W.E.B Du Bois' and Paul Gilroy's 'Double-Consciousness' that complicates established theories and critiques of their work.

The second part of this thesis is a short story collection that articulates a multifaceted Black British experience via the diaspora aesthetic African Futurism, a sub genre of speculative fiction.

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Introduction

Dream of a land my soul is from
I hear a hand stroke on a drum

Shades of delight, cocoa hue
Rich as the night, afro blue¹

(Abbey Lincoln, 'Afro Blue', 1959)

Previous academic discourse on modern and contemporary British diasporic writing has made much of how writers working within the tradition of African diaspora engage with postcolonial themes and influences. This thesis is a response to that critical orientation, suggesting that while such discourse identifies useful themes of alienation and otherness in diasporic writings, this is often to the detriment of the appreciation of themes of African cultural heritage and Pan-African community. These themes, I suggest, are rich sources of interpretation that provide the opportunity to identify connections between seemingly disparate diasporic British fictions. By forging such connections, it is possible to identify a distinct tradition of contemporary Pan-African diasporic British writing.

In this thesis, I want to suggest that this discourse, which encompasses authors as wide-ranging as Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith, offers us only a partial understanding of African diasporic writers, leaving notable omissions regarding their artistic endeavours. The insistence of many critics to read contemporary writers of colour in Britain via a postcolonial framework can be read as a neo-colonial endeavour that severely hinders the depth of any serious study.²

The fundamental concerns of postcolonial writing - identity, rootlessness, the desire for acceptance from the host society - remain a primary focus, not just of authors from previous generations, but those born and bred in Britain. If anything has changed, it's the idea that oppositions of racism, mistrust and sometimes violence from outside forces solely define the ethnic community. In many works, forces of antagonism tend

¹Abbey Lincoln, *Afro Blue* (New York: Riverside RLP 12-308, 1959).

² See for example: C.L. Innes, *A History of Black British Writing* (Cambridge University Press 2002)

to come from within, even while they depict a cohesion that has its origins in a sense of kinship and healing.

This cohesion serves as an alternative to the postcolonial that often takes the form of a latent, yet still powerful Pan-Africanism that exists as a primary means of communicating discourse of all kinds, across the diaspora. It could possibly be described as connectivity of necessity – the need to develop lasting knowledge of ancestral diaspora histories, express a sense of African derived heritage in the present day, and imagine ways both might be articulated in the future – that most commonly stems from Pan-African thought. Such tools are necessary because they hold the means of survival in world forged by colonialism, for members of the African diaspora. Although it is not solely a force of opposition; Pan-Africanism also exists as a means of communicating complex hybrid identities that draw from a shared source, even while retaining fixed cultural specificities: whether they occur in London, Paris, Johannesburg, Christchurch or Atlanta. In the arts, especially in literature, it is one of few aesthetic modes universally agreed upon by practitioners, even if it has never been acknowledged in formal terms. Its continuance and transformation in the contemporary is what we refer to as a New Pan-African Diaspora Aesthetic. And it is this New Aesthetic, both connected to the past and to particularities of the present, that is the subject of this thesis.

i. Aims and Research Questions

In the past decade, literary criticism has recognised the need to realign its reading of contemporary diasporic texts with the complex transformations of identity in diasporic communities and their relationship to Britain.

Nevertheless, while exceptions exist, the majority of criticism focuses on a small range of Black British texts which do not represent the totality of Black artistic production, but instead those which have received mainstream critical attention. The lack of representation of Black British writing within the mainstream is evident in publishing, festival programming, and media attention.

Recognition of this lack is overtly expressed by a number of new literary festivals in the UK run by young writers and academics. Apart from the notable exceptions of more established literary festivals, work is not being read as having

necessary literary merit, or the writers' perspectives deemed important enough for inclusion. Writing by young academics positioned outside the Academy, including Kavita Bhanot's 2015 essays 'Decolonise not Diversify', her introduction to the inaugural *Bare Lit Anthology* (2016) and 'No Nation to Call Home: Rejecting Britishness' (2019), outline strategic methodologies for more nuanced and often complicated reading that takes literature 'off its pedestal,' recognising it as 'a site for normalized oppressions and supremacies, including whiteness.'³ Texts that include *Write Black, Write British: From Postcolonial to Black British Literature* (2005) "*Black*" *British Aesthetics* (2007), *Black British Perspectives* (2011), *Black British Writing* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (2016), and *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2019), show clear evidence that the Academy itself advocates the need for realignment, even if the precise means has proven difficult to locate.

The 2015 *Writing the Future* report found only 1 percent of authors who appeared at the big three literary festivals (Edinburgh, Cheltenham and Hay) hailed from a British born multi-ethnic heritage.⁴ Bhanot, a co-founder of Literature Must Fall, highlights the need for self-run literary festivals to work hard in order to 'decolonise literature today.'⁵ Bare Lit Festival, and Literature Must Fall, two of the most prominent events, have recently sought to reframe traditional methods of disseminating writing produced by artists of colour, curating festivals run by, and exclusively for said writers, while paying special attention to the ways in which literature can be decolonised. The role of literary festivals as sites of validation is well established, and yet Black writing is often 'relatively less noticeable' in these spaces, despite the rise of writers finding deals with major publishers and winning prestigious prizes.⁶ Irenoson Okojie makes the argument that, 'Britain doesn't champion the voices of its female writers of colour enough,' while Alex Wheatle claims that before publishing YA novels, he was invited

³ Kavita Bhanot and Courttia Newland, 'Introduction', in *Bare Lit 2016, First* (London: Brain Mill Press, 2016), p. 2.

⁴ Danuta Keane and Mel Larsen, *Writing the Future Black and Asian Authors and Publishers in the UK Marketplace* (London: Spread the Word, May 2015), p. 34 <<https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Writing-the-Future-Black-and-Asian-Authors-and-Publishers-in-the-UK-Marketplace-May-2015.pdf>> [accessed 25 October 2019].

⁵ Kavita Bhanot, 'Literature Must Fall', *Literature Must Fall*, 2019 <<https://www.facebook.com/LiteratureMustFall/>> [accessed 24 October 2019].

⁶ Benedicte Ledent, "'Other" Voices and the British Literary Canon', in *British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, ed. by Deidre Osbourne (Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 241.

to one literary festival in 14 years.^{7,8} The attention given to 2020's resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement may have begun a move to highlight a wider range of Black British writers. It is, however, too early to say whether this imperative will be sustained with longer-term impact.

In that context, this thesis is a response to the dominant critical framing of British African diasporic writing through what can be referred to as a postcolonial framework, drawn largely through that criticism's reference to a small group of representative texts. These representative texts, I suggest, draw criticism towards concepts that resonate with postcolonial discourse and its interest in cultural hybridity and otherness, and away from notions of black community, racism, and Pan-Africanism, which are of critical significance.

Attention to these themes reorients our thinking on British African diasporic writing. For example, commercially successful literary work tends to cast the host society as a site of comparative liberal freedoms, a place where the willing cosmopolitan descendants of immigrants can be fulfilled without restriction, as in Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), or Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017). In contrast, there is a wider literature which draws attention to both continued racism and intra-community tensions, the latter exemplified for example in the works of Alex Wheatle and Peter Akinti. Britain's reluctance to view the present-day experience of immigrants and their descendants as one in which racist and xenophobic hostilities are lived experiences is sometimes echoed in critically acclaimed texts that are held up in celebration of life in the UK, particularly within pre-Brexit literature. Liberal/capitalist narratives of freedom from the misogynist and homophobic embrace of cultural expectations, or economic limitations and sometimes all three, are the desired emphasis of many critically discussed texts. Kavita Bhanot labels this centering of Britishness, 'expressed as identification, if not uncritical optimism and loyalty,' as 'surprising and suspect.'⁹

⁷ Irenoson Okojie, 'Black British Writers: We're More than Just Zadie Smith and Monica Ali', *The Guardian* (London, 2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/23/black-british-writers-more-than-zadie-smith-monica-ali>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁸ Homa Khaleeli, 'Alex Wheatle: "I Felt like the Token Black Writer Who Talks about Ghetto Stuff"', *The Guardian* (London, 2016), section A life in... Fiction <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/18/alex-wheatle-interview-guardian-childrens-fiction-prize-crongton-knights>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁹ Kavita Bhanot, 'No Nation Called Home', in *The Good Journal Issue 3* (London, 2019), p. 46.

One key facet of this reorientation is a reappraisal of emphases placed on hybridity, away from a binaristic representation of Britishness and African identities towards an intersectionality that encompasses multiple cross-cultural reference points, fused into a distinct formation of communal interactions and shared influences. Thus, the New African Diaspora aesthetic attempts to build on previous critical articulations of diaspora aesthetic that often trace singular, one way influences, like that of American cultural imperialism in the UK, by including possibilities of influence that stem from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe. These aesthetic choices are communal in literature, rather than individual. Leila Kamali underlines the broad scope that such reading affords, noting it as an ‘affective, feeling realm of the diaspora experience which cannot be accounted for fully by theory.’ However, she argues, it is a methodology common within Black and Asian diaspora fiction.¹⁰

The project investigates the idea that despite their vast and obvious differences, many authors share similarities in themes and motifs, performing an act of conscious literary defiance that underlines the existence of this aesthetic. It will also question whether this literary aesthetic is actually one that has existed for decades, and whether postcolonial readings of former African Heritage writers in Britain, while accurate in most regards, neglect to locate the presence of a diaspora aesthetic in a number of their novels and stories.

This critical thesis is part of a broader methodology including the creative element of this research project. A collective work of speculative fiction short stories entitled *Cosmogramma*, this element is a literary exploration of the sub-genre known as ‘Afrofuturism,’ an umbrella term coined by Mark Dery in his essay ‘Black to the Future,’ (1994) encompassing sci fi and fantasy literature, film, music, art, and even dance.¹¹ Art curator Ingrid LaFleur defines Afrofuturism as ‘a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens, ’ but also ‘a way to encourage experimentation, reimagine identities...’¹² Bettina Jansen’s study of the Black British

¹⁰ Leila Kamali, ‘Diaspora’, in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, First (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p. 173.

¹¹ Mark Dery, ‘Black to the Future’, in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Duke University Press, 1994), p. 182 <<https://thenewblack5324.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/mark-dery-black-to-the-future.pdf>> [accessed 24 June 2015].

¹² Ytasha Womack, “‘What Is Afrofuturism?’”, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci Fi and Fantasy Culture*, First (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Press, 2013), p. 9.

short story draws particular attention to critical research that suggests the short story form is well suited for articulating ‘alternative conceptions of community.’¹³

These stories engage and experiment with the New Diaspora Aesthetic in a number of ways. Although most take place in London, some are set either in the Caribbean, or on imagined distant planets. Diaspora nation-myths are woven into the work, and enforced identities are often eschewed by the refusal to ‘race-name’ – meaning their race or countries of origin are not stated, centralising their role as Black characters rather than ‘other’. The title of the collection itself, *Cosmogramma*, derives from an album of the same name by renowned U.S. Afrofuturist musician Steven Ellison, a.k.a. Flying Lotus. In turn, Ellison reinterpreted the motif of a Sun symbol on that album cover, formerly used by Herman Blount a.k.a Sun Ra, a 50’s jazz musician and early pioneer of the Afrofuturist movement. An epigraph within the creative element of this project is taken from Sun Ra’s album linear notes.

The titles origin derives from cosmogram, ‘a two dimensional geometric shape that represents a cosmology, or understanding of the universe.’ Its usage spans the breadth of human history, and is used as a means of ‘inscribing and encoding memories by drawing connections between people and places through space and time.’¹⁴ A contemporary interpretation of a cosmogram, created by Houston Conwill and entitled ‘Rivers,’ is on permanent exhibition in Harlem, New York at the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture. This artistic rendition links the lives of the historian and activist Auturo Alfonso Shomberg and the writer Langston Hughs, two major figures of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁵ The painting is also inspired by the African ritual of ground markings.

¹³ Bettina Jansen, ‘Introduction: Negotiations of Community in the Short Story Form’, in *Narratives of Community in the Black British Short Story*, First (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 14.

¹⁴ Thomas and Roderigo, ‘What Is a Cosmogram?’, *A Cosmogram of Harlem* <<http://cosmogramofharlem.weebly.com/what-is-a-cosmogram.html>> [accessed 24 March 2021].

¹⁵ Anon, ‘Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: History’, *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project* <<https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/schomburg-center-for-research-in-black-culture/>> [accessed 24 March 2021].

ii. The Contemporary Landscape

A mixture of deep contradictions, alongside a range of economic woes that have blighted the publishing industry at large, caused Black British literature to arrive at an interesting juncture. There is Bernardine Evaristo, the first Black British Booker winner. There are prominent bestsellers, exemplified by Candice Carty-Williams and authors like Alex Wheatle who made the transition to YA and won the Guardian Fiction Prize in 2016. And yet Black writers still contend with many of the issues that affected their predecessors. To analyse how this has happened, it might be best to go back to an earlier, previous heyday of the recent past.

Mark Stein, writing in 2004, notes the success of Zadie Smith as a pivotal moment for Black British literature, citing that, 'high print runs, huge advances, and prize-winning publicity all seem to point to a *centrality* of black and Asian cultural commodities in today's Britain.'¹⁶ Gail Low and Marion Wynne Davis chart a noticeable upsurge in production during this period: 'Key scholarly texts began appearing as early as 1996, but 2000 saw a flush of publications.'¹⁷ Even dramatists were buoyed high by the strong currents of success. Deidre Osborne, writing in *Hidden Gems Vol.1*, an anthology of Black British playwrights published in 2008, says in her introduction:

The year 2003 marks the beginning of a significant phase in British theatre history. In that year, eleven plays by black British dramatists were staged in London theatres, creating an unprecedented profile for work that had not experienced continuous visibility in the British theatrescape.'¹⁸

So what had changed the landscape of modern Britain to make Black British writing so mainstream at that time? Sarah Brouillette marks the rise of a New Labour government in power between 1997-2010, who ushered in an 'unprecedented incorporation of culture into governance.'¹⁹ They established the Department for Culture, Media and

¹⁶Mark Stein, 'Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation', in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2004), p. 175.

¹⁷'Introduction', in *A Black British Canon*, ed. by G Low and M Wynne Davis (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁸'Introduction', in *Hidden Gems*, ed. by Deirdre Osbourne (London: Oberon, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁹ Sarah Brouillette, 'Introduction', in *Literature and the Creative Economy*, First (California: Sanford University Press, 2014), p. 1.

Sport (DCMS) in the year they won the election, that in turn designated a Creative Industries Taskforce.²⁰ This approach, which viewed art and literature especially as instrumental to the creative economy, provided the means for writers to become more inclined towards capitalist marketing and promotional tools, even if they critiqued the varied infrastructures those tools upheld. Multiculturalism, promoted in every facet of modern life but particularly the arts, became a much-banded buzzword, and a social inclusion agenda to be promoted and extolled.

In publishing, the aftermath of the high profile publicity campaign and sales of Zadie Smith's debut, published in 2000, arguably lead to the prominence of bestselling and prize winning women authors from Britain (Orange award winner Diana Evans and Helen Oyeyemi, who both published debut novels in 2005) and Africa (Chimanda Ngozi Adiche whose debut won the Caine Prize in 2002). It's important to note that previous to this success, initiatives like the SAGA Prize, independent publishers X-Press, and the Caine Prize for African writing, all focused on promoting African heritage writing of various styles and formats. It's very likely that an amalgamation of all these events brought Black British writing to the fore.

Somehow, despite, or some might say because of this success, critiques of prominent authors, the publishing industry and the marketplace have been raised frequently by critics and writers, from Graham Huggan, to Tabish Khair, to Ali Nobil Ahmad, identifying a trend for postcolonial exoticism or 'champagne hybridity', to use Ahmad's term. Mark Stein, although unconvinced by Ahmad's choice of phrase, is also wary about the focus of the writers themselves, asking whether they were, 'absorbed into corporate publishing as icons of racial and cultural otherness? Have Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru and Monica Ali been co-opted, or are they indeed actively colluding in this scenario?'²¹ Brouillette laments the burden placed on 'ethnic' or 'minority' writers (both troubling terminologies), by industry expectations that they should write about a whole or organic community.²² Malachi Mackintosh highlights critiques of several critics who challenge the tendency of postcolonial literary studies towards a 'lack of

²⁰ Sarah Brouillette, 'Introduction', in *Literature and the Creative Economy*, First (California: Sanford University Press, 2014), p. 25.

²¹ Mark Stein, 'Conclusion', in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2004), p. 180.

²² Brouillette, p. 10.

close attention to local character.’²³ McIntosh himself expresses awareness that ‘post-colonial’ is a ‘contested term,’ even while using it to frame certain aspects of Black British writing.²⁴

By 2011 the flush of arrival had dulled into something akin to discomfort. It was clear there had been a shift in the fortunes of Black British writers that seemed to adversely affect writers who were not concerned so much with identity, and more about stories of Britain’s underclass. A growing body of recent critics have addressed this shift, including Sara Upstone, who notes that these fictions are not simply concerned with tales of poverty and woe, as they were so often accused, and uses the term ‘post racist fiction’ to address ‘a specific sub-genre of popular black writing, one that is largely marketed by its almost exclusive appeal to black readers.’²⁵ Upstone discusses these texts in relationship to their reinvention of common identity tropes in Black British fiction, by their retention of race as an expression of relevance in wider British identity.²⁶ These novels, she argues, posit a utopian view of Blackness, being that they express racial identity and belonging to specific communities in a positive light.

Modhimita Roy focuses on the stark realities imagined by these texts, calling the work ‘Brutalist Realism’, and asking ‘What then, might a new kind of realism, neither exhausted or hysterical look like?’²⁷ He argues further:

‘The novels present, collectively and individually, in vivid and unflinching, (even uncomfortable) detail a social ecology far too often elided or ignored in fiction set in London: the experience of a racialized city... especially for young black men...’²⁸

A 2011 *Guardian* article by Catherine Johnson admired the courage of non-Black writers in creating novels about the Black experience, yet wondered, ‘why is it that, right now, the stories that receive the most mainstream recognition all seem to be the

²³ Malachi McIntosh, ‘Post Colonial Plurality in Fiction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, First (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 195.

²⁴ McIntosh, ‘Post Colonial Plurality in Fiction’ p. 195.

²⁵ Sara Upstone, ‘Utopian Bodies: Some Kind of Blackness’, in *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction*, Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature, 16, First (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 87.

²⁶ Upstone p. 86.

²⁷ Modumita Roy, ‘Brutalised Lives and Brutalist Realism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, First (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 96.

²⁸ Roy, p.96.

ones written by white people?’²⁹ Alex Wheatle also expressed concerns, writing for the *Independent* on Man Booker shortlisted Stephen Kelman, author of *Pigeon English* (2011), a novel written from the point of view of a Ghanaian protagonist on a working class housing estate. Wheatle asked; ‘why it had to take a white author to explore the black underprivileged to finally attract the attention of a major award?’³⁰

Wheatle’s argument fails to account for Man Booker longlisted Yvette Edwards’ debut novel *A Cupboard Full of Coats* (2011), with its focus on working class black British east London. However, the fact that *Pigeon English* was shortlisted in 2011, the same year that *A Cupboard Full of Coats* was not, is significant. Before Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman Other* (2019), the last Black British novelist to be shortlisted for the Booker was Caryl Phillips for *Crossing the River* (1993). No Black British women were shortlisted before her.

Years before, Mark Stein argued that white writers were excluded from literary discourse pertaining to Black experiences. For Stein, authors like Marina Warner, Barry Unsworth, Colin McInnes and Maggie Gee were not being read alongside Caryl Phillips. Stein questioned whether the canon should be expanded to include their works. Since then, the prominence of Smith, Adiche, and Taiye Selasi, a Granta Best of Young British Novelist of 2013, led not only to the adoption of a new categorical term for African centred diaspora writing – Afropolitan - and its British counterpart term Afropean, prominently adopted by essayist Johnny Pitts. It also accounts for the phenomena of Black women writers becoming so well known and their novels so visible, that for perhaps the first time in literary history, writing from an African perspective was seen as fertile territory for white writers, *and* their publicists.

The Afropolitan/Afropean standpoint is an interesting evaluation. Most noticeably, it runs the quite obvious risk of becoming elitist, focused on wealthier, upper class, infamous and overall privileged immigrants and their descendants, largely privileged with the luxury of a transnational lifestyle, ignoring those who are poorer and less influential. While essentially drawing from shared ideas of transnational cultural Black experience, Pitts expresses consistent disconnection with the African

²⁹Catherine Johnson, ‘Where Are Britain’s Black Writers?’, *The Guardian*, 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/05/where-are-britains-black-writers>> [accessed 8 August 2014].

³⁰Alex Wheatle, ‘The Race Problem with the Booker’, 2011 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-race-problem-with-the-booker-2371944.html>> [accessed 8 August 2014].

diaspora at large in favour of communion with ‘a wider black European diaspora,’³¹ he admits to believing as ‘more encompassing and nuanced than the Black British club.’³² Though Pitts goes on to repudiate this opinion as a utopian fantasy of European inclusivity, it remains a perpetual bias in his work, conscious or otherwise, made in part perhaps because of his mixed upbringing of African American and white working-class. Whether his further claim that 90’s Black British culture seemed out-dated originates from a perceived exclusion from that community, or the community’s exclusion of him, is quite difficult to ascertain, although it accurately reflects the negative manner in which Black British culture and its related art forms were viewed at that time. However, his efforts to relocate African culture and experience outside of expected, conventional norms is one shared by the New Diaspora Aesthetics many practitioners.

The effects of such complex dynamics on Black British writing are partly witnessed in Osborne’s introduction to *Hidden Gems Volume 2*, published in 2012. In a notably more sombre tone, she laments:

This presence [of Black British playwrights] has tapered dramatically. In the second decade fewer than ten plays per annum (as distinct from eleven in 2003 alone), have been staged in the same arena. Prospects for today’s black theatre makers still remain in the side-lines of Britain’s theatre complex.³³

Although a similar decline in the number of Black British novelists on the shelves of our national bookstores was also apparent during that time, a deficit arguably lasting until 2018 at least, there wasn’t a commissioned study of the publishing industry for over a decade. The *Writing the Future* report, a small-scale survey commissioned by Spread the Word regarding diversity for writers of colour in publishing, was launched at the London Book Fair in April 2015, and provided conclusive evidence that Black British writers and other ethnic minority writers, were still, apart from some notable exceptions, being marginalised. Many of the writers surveyed told researchers they ‘still struggled to challenge stereotypes’³⁴ Some said they were expected to portray a

³¹ Johnny Pitts, ‘Prologue: Sheffield’, in *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe*, First (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 16.

³² Pitts, p. 2.

³³ ‘Introduction’, in *Hidden Gems Volume Two*, ed. by Deirdre Osborne, First Edition (London: Oberon, 2012), p. 11.

³⁴ Danuta Keane and Mel Larsen, *Writing the Future Report* (London, 14 April 2015), p. 10.

limited view of their cultures or risk being accused of inauthenticity if characters or setting didn't conform to white expectations. They believed failure to comply limited their prospects of publication.³⁵ The *Ethnic Diversity in Publishing* report, launched in 2006, published findings that suggest how this might occur:

92.3% of employees within the publishing industry are from a white background, whilst 7.7% are from a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) background. The overall percentage of BME employees is in line with the average for the UK population as a whole, but *does not* reflect the ethnic make-up of London (71.2% white/28.8% BME) where most respondents to the survey were in fact based.³⁶ (Emphasis mine)

Following *Writing the Future, The Good Immigrant*, an anthology of writers of colour focused on non-fiction essays on race was published in 2016, edited by Nikesh Shukla. It was a publishing phenomenon that thrust Shukla into the limelight. In the same year, he co-founded the Jhalak prize with novelist and academic Sunny Singh – the UK's first literary award exclusively for writers of colour. Winners have included Renni-Eddo Lodge, Johnny Pitts, and Jacob Ross. Despite charges of reverse racism, the prize runs to this day, and is annually inundated with submissions.

In the same year, independent publisher Crystal Mahey-Morgan wrote an article for *The Bookseller* that claimed she had published the only Black British debut mail novelist that year, Robyn Travis's *Mama Can't Raise No Man* (2015), from an estimated 1000 debuts. No one publically refuted her claim. Morgan launched the book at Hackney Empire to a sold out audience of 1,300 people. Before that, Travis said that he'd struggled to find a publisher for the book.

Although it would seem today that more writers of colour are being published in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter global movement, many new writers face the same battles as their predecessors. *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing* (2020), a report commissioned by Spread the Word and undertaken by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra Van Lente, found an industry still conceding that they had

³⁵ Keane and Larsen, p. 5.

³⁶ BML, *Ethnic Diversity in Publishing - A Report* (London: Diversity in Publishing Network, September 2006), p. 11.

‘a problem with diversity.’³⁷ Findings included a reliance on out-dated notions of reading audiences being white and middle class, an inability to reach diverse audiences, and a wider belief that Black and Asian writers were economically and culturally undervalued. In her foreword to *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing*, Bernardine Evaristo asks ‘how many novels by Black British male writers were published last year? I can think of one. How many novels by Black British women? I can think of eight.’³⁸ Following the publication of this report, the Twitter hashtag #publishingpaidme encouraged authors to share details of advance payments, highlighting an alarming disparity between the advance payments for writers of colour and that given to white writers. Often, as was the case with Matt Haig and many others, these disparities ran into six figures.³⁹

Despite much of mainstream publishing going unchanged and unchallenged, small battles were won. Derek Owusu, the writer Evaristo alluded to in her foreword, won the 2020 Desmond Elliot prize for *That Reminds Me* (2019), and was named ‘Caring Man of the Year’ by The Book of Man. Ireneson Okojie won that year’s Caine Prize for her short story ‘Grace Jones’ (2019). Jacaranda Books, a Black British, female owned independent press launched ‘20 in 2020’, an initiative that published 20 Black British writers and their novels over the course of the year, many of them debuts. The Black Writers Guild, comprised of more than 200 authors, agents and publishers was formed and ratified. Dialogue Books, an imprint of Hachette with the remit of publishing marginalised writers from all backgrounds and run by Sharmaine Lovegrove, a Black British woman, strengthened and grew. In an attempt to combat the marginalisation on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class and the intersectional amalgamations of all, literary and academic industries consolidated. Amid a hostile literary environment more writers emerged than ever before, further redefining notions of what the Black British writer does, and is. Writing on the state of Black British

³⁷ Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente, *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing* (London: Goldsmiths University, 2020), p. 2 <https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf> [accessed 8 March 2021].

³⁸ Dr Bernardine Evaristo, *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing: Foreward* (London: Goldsmiths University, 2020), p. 5 <https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf> [accessed 8 March 2021].

³⁹ Alison Flood, ‘#Publishingpaidme: Authors Share Advances to Expose Racial Disparities’, *The Guardian* (London, 8 June 2020), Online edition, section Publishing <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/08/publishingpaidme-authors-share-advances-to-expose-racial-disparities>> [accessed 8 March 2021].

literature, Evaristo observed ‘The field had been so arid up to this point that each of these works feels urgent, essential.’⁴⁰

While such gains are obviously welcome, there remains however little evidence of systemic, structural reformation. In March 2021, *The Bookseller* tweeted a featured article on The Publishers’ Publicity Circle (PPC) Annual Awards, celebrating the best book campaigns of the year.⁴¹ A screenshot of the Zoom ceremony revealed that none of the pictured winners were of colour, and all were white women. Ella Patel at Quercus, who ironically won *The Bookseller Award* for hardback non-fiction with Layla F. Saad’s *Me and White Supremacy* (2020), was not pictured. When challenged on the omission, neither *The Bookseller* nor the PPC made comment.

iii. Writing on Black British Literature

While a growing body of criticism reflects Black British writings’ recent growth and success, much of this criticism still articulates the postcolonial experience primarily as one of otherness. This unintentionally underemphasises the work of writers striving to render diverse realities, and limits the range of the black British literary landscape for the next generation of writers, their critics, and those who may facilitate their work. Graham Huggan calls this inadequacy *cultural translation*; ‘not so much a process of convergence, mutual intellection and cross fertilisation [...] but rather the superimposition of a dominant way of seeing, speaking and thinking onto marginalised peoples and the cultural artefacts they produce.’⁴² As early as 1989, Stuart Hall expressed concerns about this cultural and social imbalance, calling the subjugation of colonial experience ‘a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation, precisely because they were not superficial. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as other.’⁴³

⁴⁰ Dr Bernardine Evaristo, ‘What a Time to Be a Black British Womxn Writer’, *The Guardian* (London, 2019), Online edition <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/19/bernadine-evaristo-what-a-time-to-be-a-black-british-womxn-writer>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

⁴¹ Mark Chandler, ‘PPC Annual Award Winners Revealed’, *The Bookseller*, 3 March 2021 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/ppc-annual-award-winners-revealed-1239753>> [accessed 8 March 2021].

⁴²Graham Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’, in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 24.

⁴³Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, in *Black British Cultural Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 213.

Elsewhere, Jude Okapala's work highlights the genesis and limitations of the definition of a Black British writing as a postcolonial sub-genre. He states, 'Black British literature is an offspring of the excesses of postcolonialism,' a reading Britain thrives on because of, 'The redundant notion of centre and periphery.'⁴⁴ This reading becomes misleading when used solely to examine *any* generation of African diasporic writing, precisely because it cleaves the writers and their sense of *being* (described by Okapala as the philosophical nature of the colonized), into two categories – *being-with-self*, and *being-with-other*.⁴⁵

Okapala describes, 'the first form of "being" as the existence of the postcolonial within his own world,' and the second as 'his engagement with the coloniser in all fashions.'⁴⁶ In this thesis, the world of the postcolonial and that of the coloniser is defined respectively as the 'community' and the 'host'. The 'community' is the existence of the individual alongside others who share their cultural heritage and some aspects of their beliefs. The 'host' are those who do not share that heritage or their beliefs.

Okapala's definition is of major importance, distinctly articulating the frustrations of a new generation of writers and thinkers, and their long dissatisfaction with an emphasis on writing focused on the second form of being. It can be argued that writers who express the first form, and display an active, although challenging engagement with the community - Diran Adebayo, Leone Ross, Chris Abani, and Anthony Joseph to name a handful - have been limited by being read (or not) within such narrow parameters, and in some cases are entirely ignored by postcolonial critics and some UK mainstream publishers. Adebayo says of his resulting literary vision that 'black-on-black' writing is often disregarded by Black and White critics in equal measure, sometimes leaving artists, 'so alone, you feel so alone, it can kill you, because the whole thing feels silent... Black working class, black middle class, the sort of diasporic classes... The academy, everything just feels such a science and it can finish you off.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴Jude Chudi Akapala, 'Postcolonial Aesthetics and Black British Aesthetics: Kindred Spirits in Error', in *'Black' British Aesthetics Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 50.

⁴⁵ Akapala, p. 52.

⁴⁶ Akapala, p. 52.

⁴⁷Diran Adebayo, 'Championing Digital Channels', in *Black British Perspectives* (London: SAKS Publications, 2011), pp. 152, 153.

This is in stark contrast to the attention awarded to writers who, consciously or otherwise, opt for Okapala's second form, an aesthetic choice that sometimes leads to the creation of what Bishnupriya Ghosh describes as 'artefacts that contain whiffs of colonial contamination.'⁴⁸ This contamination is labelled *the postcolonial exotic* by Graham Huggan, who levels the charge that 'postcolonial theory [...] exhibits and to some extent manipulates its status as an intellectual commodity, providing at worst a pretext for continued cultural ignorance.'⁴⁹ The stark disparity between the choice to write for 'community' or 'host', or how much of a choice actually exists raises important questions about the criteria by which writers of African descent are accepted into the academy, a point succinctly addressed by Ghosh when he asks, 'need we be obsessed by texts that refer only to other English texts?'⁵⁰

Although Ghosh poses this query with regard to Indian writing in English, it is a question of utmost importance for the Black British writer. If the literary landscape is becoming ever more commercialised, then the colonial commodification Ghosh speaks of could possibly be advanced when writers positioned outside of the canon witness the success of earlier works and decide to emulate tropes that these novels are seen to expound. 'A migrant past [...] Rooted not in black British culture but in the contexts of postcolonial theory.'⁵¹ Thus, contemporary success and canonisation may be acquired.

Sarah Brouillette cites initiatives like *decibel*, an Arts Council funded program that partnered with Penguin Books in the early 2000's, which 'appear to have heightened writers' sensitivity to the idea that they need to appeal to their belonging to a specific minority niche... To receive funding.'⁵² Or perhaps it is as simple as those prevalent themes being the topics young writers have read, admired, want to write themselves. The realities will only be learnt by greater examination of writers who set their works within and about the community from a position of yield, rather than lack.

Huggan argues 'postcolonial studies not only embraces cosmopolitan principles; it is also complicit in the preferential treatment of cosmopolitan writers –

⁴⁸Bishnupriya Ghosh, 'The Postcolonial Bazaar: Thoughts on Teaching the Market in Postcolonial Objects' (Utah State University, 1998).

⁴⁹Graham Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic', in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. xv.

⁵⁰Bishnupriya Ghosh, 'The Postcolonial Bazaar: Thoughts on Teaching the Market in Postcolonial Objects' (Utah State University, 1998).

⁵¹Sarah Upstone, 'Magical Realism and Postcolonial Studies: Twenty-First Century Perspectives'.

⁵² Sarah Brouillette, 'Introduction', p.10.

especially novelists.’⁵³ James Proctor speaks of this in his introduction to *Writing Black Britain* (2000):

The extent to which a Black British literature has been signpostable through a celebrated and select elite of literary *individuals* is notable [...]Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Ben Okri and so on are solitary writers who have almost been canonised out of, or at least seem peculiarly resistant to, incorporation within a communal black British framework.⁵⁴

It is interesting that even while Proctor recognises this fact, and *Writing Black Britain* was published in the year 2000, the text follows the common trend of examining the firm favourites of Black literary fiction, to the exclusion of writers who it could quite reasonably be said do not adhere to overt postcolonial themes. Selvon, Rushdie, Lamming, Kureshi and Caryl Phillips are prominent throughout. There are precious few second and third generation women, so little mention of Andrea Levy, Bernadine Evaristo, Jackie Kay, Leone Ross, Judith Bryant, Malorie Blackman and Joanna Traynor, all published and prominent at the time, or even Buchi Emicheta or Beryl Gilroy, who came before. Third generation male writers such as Diran Adebayo, Alex Wheatle, Stephen Thompson, Victor Headley, and Gareth Joseph, all published by major imprints and critically acclaimed, are not included either. Writing not about hybridity, but about their locales and cultural connections, they do not fit the postcolonial paradigm, and so are seen to not warrant critique.

While it is possible to cite essays on a handful of the above named writers, these are largely non-existent, particularly compared with the amount of essays on luminaries like Rushdie, Naipaul, Phillips and Okri, whom it should be noted are obviously all male. ‘The Language of Madness in Leone Ross’ *Orange Laughter*,’ was published in *Write Black, Write British* (2005), and yet there have been few critical assessments of her work since. It remains to be seen whether the publication of a new novel, *One Sky Day* (2021), will change her fortunes. Diran Adebayo’s work was examined by Emily Wroe in the same volume, and is also recently explored by Upstone and Roy, while Andrea Levy rose to prominence late in her career with the success of *Small Island*

⁵³Graham Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’, in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 11.

⁵⁴James Proctor, ‘Writing Black Britain’, in *Writing Black Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 6.

(2004) and *The Long Song* (2011). Some writers, particularly men, have rarely, if ever, faced academic evaluation. Stephen Thompson, author of four novels and now an acclaimed writer for television, is discussed by Fatimah Kelleher in 'Concrete Vista and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in 1990's Britain', but nowhere else. The crime writer Gareth Joseph, formerly a South London social worker, is never mentioned at all.

An example of this critical imbalance can be seen in the epilogue to C.L. Innes' *A History of Black British Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (2002), otherwise a well-researched and thorough volume. Contemporary black British writing from the 1990s onwards is covered in barely two paragraphs, with stronger analysis awarded to writers who express a 'hybrid culture'. Innes cites Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), Bernadine Evaristo's *Lara* (1997), and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) as key examples of writing that focus on the reinvention of the individual ethnic self, and that self's vision of Britain, concluding that this is most striking when it shows a 'clear understanding that racial and gendered identities are constructed and performed, and where hybrid forms match the themes.'⁵⁵ Writing that isn't a concentrated blend of racial and gender politics, or neglects English and European literary icons, or doesn't play with form and structure, is left without serious analysis. Indeed, even in those works that focus on a range of contemporary writers, generalisations abound. Mark Stein, for example, claims in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, that the third generation are 'mostly entertaining rather than cerebral or somber,' a blanket assessment that does not do the work justice, or assess accurately the wide-ranging subject matter covered by their writing.⁵⁶

A more specific example of the limitations of a postcolonial reading applied to writers is seen in 'Negotiating the Ship on its Head: Black British Fiction.' In his essay, Kwame Dawes claims that those contemporary Black British writers whose work defines an urban experience are engaged in an attempt to create new myths for the Black British World, but these myths are artificial because 'they contain a fundamentally flawed premise: that Black American experience is the same as Black British

⁵⁵C.L. Innes, 'Epilogue', in *A History of Black British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 244.

⁵⁶Mark Stein, 'Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation', in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2004), p. 102.

experience, and that there is an interchangeability (which is really going one way) in the way that myth and style is approached in these two worlds.⁵⁷

As we explore later in the thesis by way of music and the recollections of James Brown, that two-way interchangeability has been in place for generations, and continues. What Dawes suggests is a superiority and homogeneity of African-American culture that, while perhaps visible on a perfunctory, generalised level, is proven untrue when seen from Brown's complex, grounded artistic viewpoint. Dawes admits his reluctance to take Black British writing at face value and not have the writing conform to his own expectations of work connected to what he calls, 'larger questions of defining home and defining the meaning of being British and Black.'⁵⁸

Dawes asks Black British writers to adopt positions of representation which, if not met, can lead to being 'cast out' from critical discourse. This affects Black British criticism as well as writers, for it not only creates a literary class system that systematically ghettoizes literature that does not adhere to an immigrant paradigm, but precludes the opportunity for the next generation to write anything beyond an established narrative defined by those outside the community. Dawes' expectation that the descendants of migrants should underline their inherent 'otherness' by penning texts that allude to a constant uneasiness about who they are and where they hail from helps maintain out-dated stereotypes. Many Black British writers attempt to confound this by writing about England and 'Englishness' from their aforementioned position of ownership; 'this is who I am and where I'm from,' rather than 'who am I, and where do I come from?'

Stuart Hall described this position as 'centered', finding it fascinating that young Black people in London, 'look as if they own the territory. Somehow they too, in spite of everything, are centered, in place.'⁵⁹

Dawes readily admits his own bias, saying the new generation:

Offers a vision of Black British experience that constitutes an inclination to place less weight on the question of origin and the dynamics of immigration politics in the construction of a Black British experience. It may well be that Britain has moved away

⁵⁷Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction', in *Write Black, Write British* (London: Hansib Publications Limited, 2005), p. 271.

⁵⁸ Dawes, p. 274.

⁵⁹Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in *Black British Cultural Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 114.

from the idea of an immigrant nation, to one, closer in character to the American experience of a native born minority culture.⁶⁰

Only this vision of Black British experience, seen from Dawes' perspective, is largely negative. Whether it is a realistic representation of the contemporary Black British community or not seems superficial to his quest to define the writers by his own agenda. What if these works were an articulation of Pan-African experience borne out of the transnational nature of African heritage peoples who made their homes in the United Kingdom? After all, there are communities from almost every corner of the African Diaspora spanning the length and breadth of the country, even more in London. This is not unusual. As John McLeod points out, 'today, many contemporary European nations can boast a wide variety of diaspora communities.'⁶¹ While Leila Kamali maintains: 'A practice of reading fiction, lived experience and theory together [...] can enable a particularly textured recognition of the unique value of humane approaches to diaspora history.'⁶²

Still, Dawes expects the resulting work to behave according to a paradigm used to define an earlier generation of writers, while remaining fully aware this paradigm might be defunct. Mark Stein contests this viewpoint, arguing, 'why do these writers need to display a particular consciousness [...] in the way Dawes' sees fit? And why are they expected to continue a tradition, or inscribe themselves into a particular tradition?'⁶³ Andy Wood surmises that Dawes' critique is too simplistic and does not account for the dialogue between Black British diaspora and the African American diaspora. Arguments such as these, he claims, 'are often based on exceedingly limited and highly selective textual analysis.'⁶⁴ This marginalisation refuses access to the rich nature of the literature currently being produced, or even those produced in the recent past.

⁶⁰Dawes, p.274.

⁶¹John McLeod, 'Diaspora Identities', in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Second Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 240.

⁶² Leila Kamali, 'Diaspora', in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, First (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p. 176.

⁶³Mark Stein, 'Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation', in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2004), p. 104.

⁶⁴Andy Wood, "'New Forms': Towards a Critical Dialogue with Black British "Popular" Fictions', in *A Black British Canon* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 107.

Dawes is not alone in this selective vision. In his forward to *A Black British Canon*, Mike Phillips is critical of Sukdhev Sandhu's anthology of Black and Asian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, *London Calling*, drawing close attention to the fact that the book, although 'highly praised,' is marked by curious omissions: 'There is no consideration of the writers who experience London as part of family life or childhood.'⁶⁵

A number of critical texts have, however, shown awareness of these limitations. Texts such as *Write Black*, *Write British: From Postcolonial to Black British Literature* (2005) "*Black*" *British Aesthetics* (2007), *Black British Perspectives* (2011) and *Black British Writing* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (2016) and *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2019), take up the challenge of breaking the confines of former academic research and approaching the new generation of African diaspora writers in Britain with fresh eyes.

A clear analysis of diaspora aesthetic is most apparent in the collection of essays "*Black*" *British Aesthetics Today* (2007). Following an earlier volume, *Black British Writing* (2004), co-edited by Lauri Ramey and featuring many of the same authors, the second volume seeks to dissect the conveyance of style and form within the works of Black British writers, whereas the first is largely an articulation of these writers concerning the teaching of works, socio-politics, the evolution of Black British writing, identity and belonging.

Within the collection, Adrene M. Taylor's 'Black British Writing: "Hitting up Against" a Tradition of Revolutionary Poetics', resonates most with Arana's definition of aesthetic and the arguments posed by this thesis. Taylor contends that while Black British writers are perceptibly informed by the traditional English literary canon, this next generation is simultaneously an extension of a wide-reaching tradition that includes the Negritude Movement, and the Harlem Renaissance. While Taylor's argument limits the impact of the Caribbean Artists Movement, and African writers like Chinua Achebe, N'gugi Wa' Thiongo, and Ayi Kwei Armah on today's Black British writers no matter their heritage, the crux of her argument embodies the idea that Black British writing is borne of far reaching literary blueprints. It is diasporic leaning, rather than parochial in the formation of its own aesthetic.

⁶⁵Mike Phillips, 'Foreword: Migration, Modernity and English Writing - Reflections on Migrant Identity and Canon Formation', in *A Black British Canon* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), p. 15.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) explores this 'diaspora dialogue' in similar fashion, advancing the idea of 'cross-pollination', or as Huggan terms it, 'cross fertilisation'. Like Taylor, Gilroy's examples are primarily African-American writers; Douglass and Delany, Du Bois and Wright. It would have been interesting to see how the Black Atlantic manifests in the work of British, Caribbean, and European writers of African descent, and for Gilroy to include writers from the African continent. However, his use of music in order to simulate an influence shared by literary aesthetic tradition is enlightening, quoting as he does James Brown's surprise at Fela Kuti's inspirational effect on his band members, even while Brown recognised his own inspirational effect on Kuti:

While we were in Lagos we visited Fela Ransome Kuti's club the Afro Spot, to hear him and his band. He'd come to hear us and we came to hear him. I think when he started out as a musician he was playing a type of music they call Highlife, but by this time he was developing Afro-Beat out of his own music and funk. He was kind of like the African James Brown. His band had a strong rhythm; I think Clyde picked up on it in his drumming, and Bootsy dug it too. Some of the ideas my band were getting from his band had come from me in the first place, but that was okay with me. It made the music that much stronger.⁶⁶

This musical analogy explores the shared belief that Black British writers, and by extension African heritage artists as a whole, are part of a 'larger African diasporic tradition' and 'Black British writing is, thus, created within a framework of multiple relationships.'⁶⁷ Writers not only respond to the single influence of immigrant experience, a sense of 'otherness', and the clash of cultures defined by postcolonial readings. They also draw from the vast wealth of non-immigrant and aesthetic traditions that formed their cultural backgrounds before the advent of migration. While argument can be made for greater specificity, there is a danger of becoming myopic without looking closer at the diverse heritage of authors who have written since the late 1980's until today. Black British literature, just like its artistic counterpart music, is patently

⁶⁶James Brown and Bruce Tucker, 'James Brown: The Godfather of Soul', in *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 221.

⁶⁷Adrienne Taylor, 'Black British Writing: "Hitting Up Against" a Tradition of Revolutionary Poetics', in *'Black' British Aesthetics Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 17.

constructed by ‘diasporic allegiances combined with interdisciplinary and generic cross fertilizations.’⁶⁸

iv. Terminology

The first chapter of this thesis is concerned with articulating The New African Diaspora Aesthetic. Nevertheless, it is useful to define this at the outset as a critical framing most recognisably articulated as a presence of Pan-African cultural practices, cosmology, and recognition of ancestral thought within literature. Pan-Africanism - seen as both a political ideology that aimed to encourage and strengthen bonds of solidarity between indigenous and diasporic ethnic groups of African descent, and as a cultural movement expressing this ideology via art - has long been used as a means of communication and healing. Critics engaged in exploring Pan-Africanism include W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Louis Chude Sokei, and Erna Brodner. Musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, writers and dancers have all been known to engage with its tenets. In this thesis, the methods by which this occurs will be explored in literature through the genre of fiction.

The thesis largely borrows from Victoria Arana’s definition of aesthetic, what Arana calls ‘a vision or conscious scheme for the representation of an idea... the *deliberate design of an appeal* to one or more audiences.’⁶⁹ This definition goes some way in reflecting the unconscious, yet shared intent on the collective part of Black British writers argued for here – ‘unconscious’ in this case meaning unformulated. There have been no meetings called or manifestos written to formally define such a literary movement, as was the case of Leopold Senghor’s development of *negritude*. Rather, these are literary aesthetic choices informed by a diaspora sociological, cultural, and literary heritage. In this thesis Arana’s definition of aesthetic will hold true throughout.

Lastly, a note on the terminology of writing race. Throughout this thesis, Black, when being used to describe people of African heritage, will be capitalised, while black denoting the colour will not. Whether to or not has been a subject of much recent debate

⁶⁸‘Introduction’, in *A Black British Canon*, ed. by G Low and M Wynne Davis (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), p. 6.

⁶⁹‘Aesthetics as Deliberate Design: Giving Form to Tigritude and Nommo’, in *“Black” British Aesthetics Today*, ed. by V. R. Arana (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 1.

between writers and editors of newspapers and magazines, mostly in favour of, although the argument goes back to the 1800's. Karen Yin, writing for *Conscious Style Guide*, a resource for empowering, inclusive and respectful language, points out, 'Black and White, capitalized, already appear in Merriam-Webster Unadbridged and American Heritage Dictionary.'⁷⁰ Other racial groups, Hispanic, Native, Asian American are written in capitals, and publications such as *Essence* and *Ebony* have practiced this stylistic choice for many years. *New York Times* journalism Professor Lori L. Tharps argues, 'Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe.'⁷¹ In 2019 the Seattle Times made capitalising standard usage, and although debates in the UK are less overt, this thesis will adhere to such practice.⁷²

v. Thesis Outline

The project is comprised of three chapters, and a conclusion.

The first chapter examines and define the African New Diaspora Aesthetic, arguing that the diaspora aesthetic is one actually practiced by African heritage writers in Britain since the advent of CLR James, and is an offshoot of Pan-African thought. Postcolonial readings of these works are not to be entirely dismissed, although they are often unable to fully articulate complex works written with the aim of celebrating communal ways of being, as much as they speak of loss, or lack. This chapter attempts to find where the aesthetic originates, by whom, and precisely how writers of the past articulated it then, and contemporary writers do so today.

Chapters two and three serve as case studies for the presence of this aesthetic today, providing an in depth analysis of a Black British aesthetic canon exemplified in the works of contemporary novelists Alex Wheatle and Helen Oyeyemi. Unexplored, or less explored work in some cases, deserves to be examined regardless of class distinctions, as Sara Upstone's *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British*

⁷⁰ Karen Yin, 'Capitalizing for Equality', *Conscious Style Guide* (US, 2017)

<<https://consciousstyleguide.com/capitalizing-for-equality/>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

⁷¹ Lori Tharp, 'The Case for Black with a Capital B', *New York Times* (US, 2014), Online edition <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

⁷² Seattle Times Staff, 'Capital-B "Black" Becomes Standard Usage at The Seattle Times', *Seattle Times* (US, 2019), Online edition <<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/capital-b-black-becomes-standard-usage-at-the-seattle-times/>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

Fiction (2016) does so boldly, bringing together writers cleaved apart by notions of ‘high’ and ‘lowbrow’ literature. Such lack of inclusivity makes a diaspora aesthetic necessary because of its ability to promote diversity by encompassing the work of less well-recognised writers *alongside* the ‘select elite’.

Doing so, this aesthetic can be used to explore disparate work fused by traditions and self-expressions that are cultural in origin; i.e. from the cultures and traditions of the community itself, rather than thematic, as in postcolonial terms of hybridity, identity and belonging, often imposed by oppositional concerns of ‘othering’. A diaspora reading should not, and must not, be dismissive of gender or sexual-orientation, and intersectional writing that includes works of this nature must be considered part of the African diasporic canon. It must accept the myriad religions and beliefs that make up the diaspora, and embrace the diversity of languages. Transnational translation is a key means of encompassing the viewpoints of a larger African heritage world. This will allow an opportunity for the wider critical examination of Black British literature argued for by some academics, critics, and sometimes the writers themselves, a position taken by Fanon who states, ‘A national culture is not a folk-lore, nor abstract populism that believes it can discover a people’s true nature. A national culture is a whole body of efforts made by a people in a sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people have created itself and keeps itself in existence.’⁷³ This is also true of a transnational, diaspora culture.

It is to encompass these important identifications that I choose my two authors for case study: a male and female writer who, despite similar class backgrounds, are treated very differently, due in the main to education and differing choices in literary style and thematic concerns. Both Wheatle and Oyeyemi are vastly accomplished writers with a wealth of on-going contextual writing between them, from academic papers, self-authored newspaper articles and interviews in print and online. Each has authored an admirable body of work, and engaged with a diaspora aesthetic over several novels.

Wheatle, chapter two will argue, does this by representations of a distinctly Caribbean cultural presence made manifest via the use of songs and their titles, material objects and artworks such as paintings and books. Oyeyemi, in contrast, employs a corresponding use of African and African cosmology as the dominant motifs and

⁷³Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New Ed (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

thematic underpinnings of a number of works, drawing from Yoruba and Haitian myths, entwined and fused with European mythologies and fairy tales.

By placing these two very different writers alongside each other, it is possible to see how they are unified by the shared commonalities of a literary aesthetic steeped in tenets of Pan-Africanism, forged by a number of influential writers who came before them. At the same time, their comparison draws attentions to the ways in which both criticism and media attention often filter Black British voices. These writers represent the diversity of Black British writing today, one working class, of Caribbean heritage and male, the other middle class, of direct African descent and female, while they reflect an unfortunate disparity of critical reception that has come to define the literary landscape, highlighting perceptions of class and culture that not only affect the work the reading public receives, but also the fortunes of authors.

Deptford raised and Cambridge educated, Oyeyemi, who writes rarely about her working-class upbringing, is internationally reviewed, included in Granta's Best of Young British Novelists list in 2013. Her work was even the focus of a one-day symposium in 2015. In contrast, when Wheatle received the Guardian prize for his young adult novel *Crongton Knights*, he told the paper that he'd had long railed against how little exposure Black writers get after they are published, speaking at length of the lack of critical or academic attention he'd received before his win. It would seem Black working class stories told by Black working class writers struggle to find the attention they deserve without pandering to tiresome tropes about the communities they speak of. Wheatle's reception reflects what *Writing the Future* notes as 'a sense of weariness from established novelists that they still struggled to challenge stereotypes.'⁷⁴

In the conclusion, I turn to the creative element of the thesis to draw together the relationship between this critical discussion and my own creative practice, a speculative fiction story collection inspired by aspects of afrofuturism, a literary sub-genre of Pan-African endeavour. For this, there is an examination of the diaspora aesthetic that provides a foundation for the stories, and the project as a whole.

⁷⁴ Keane and Larsen, *Writing the Future Report*.

1. The New African Diaspora Aesthetic

There's a land that I
Have heard about
So far across the sea...
To have you there
In my dreamland
Would be like heaven to me...

The origins of modern Pan Africanism began in the early twentieth century. Political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Eric Williams, academics W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R James, and grass roots organisers Marcus Garvey and Henry Sylvester Williams, all spread Pan-African ideology via organisations including the UNIA, the Nation of Islam, the NAACP and global communities like the Rastafarian movement. Aime Cesaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and later in his career, James Baldwin, wrote extensively from and about this worldview. In America, Pan-Africanism was closely associated with Afrocentrism, which was a major feature of the Civil Rights movement. For later generations it was spread throughout the continent and then internationally due to the early Hip Hop movement, described by Greg Tate as 'part of the great Black cultural nationalist reawakening of the 1980s and early '90s.'⁷⁵

Despite sound arguments that outline an African heritage informed by rich transnational cultural experiences contributing to Western modernity, rejecting purity or cultural essentialism, Black arts critics of literature, in particular, continue to treat the expression of centered and rooted Pan-African expression as a deficit. Even the critical understanding of what might constitute a diaspora aesthetic is affected by this lack. The contemporary wave of celebrated diaspora writers are noted for works that 'embrace movement, motion and fragmentariness as key forms of existence and being, instead of stability, rootedness and wholeness.'⁷⁶ Concepts of stability, rootedness and wholeness are treated as exclusionary and troublesome.

⁷⁵Greg Tate, 'Hip-hop Turns 30: Whatcha Celebratin' For?', *Village Voice*, 2004
<<http://www.villagevoice.com/2004-12-28/news/hiphop-turns-30/3/>> [accessed 8 July 2014].

⁷⁶John McLeod, 'Diaspora Identities', in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Second Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 244–45.

R. Radhakrishnan is suspicious of theories that are ‘completely at odds with the actual experience of difference as undergone by diasporic peoples in their country of residence.’⁷⁷ He highlights the inaccuracy of conflating migrant identities with diaspora identities; but if that is the case, surely it must be folly to focus critical attention exclusively on writers who experienced migration, no matter how early or late in life, or authors who write extensively about the migratory experience? Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie, VS Naipaul and Hanif Kureishi are all considered diaspora writers, and write about migration or its effects. Zadie Smith and Monica Ali’s most well-known works, *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane*, followed in their wake to worldwide critical attention. Both exhibit a focus on migration and the fragmentary notion of identity more in tune with the perceived emphasis of postcolonial writers who preceded them, rather than the lived experience of diaspora cultures born in the West.

The previous diaspora aesthetic as defined above has been about exclusion – focused solely on one aspect of the experience, namely migration - rather than the inclusion advocated by Hall, Gilroy and others, which might allow a heterogeneous range of authors and themes. As discussed in the introduction, even when critics have examined Black British experience from the position of dwelling, they have given little critical space to issues of Black community, African heritage, and cross-cultural reference points. Instead, therefore, we need to consider how a reconsideration of these issues might drive a reappraisal of Black British literature. It is this reappraisal that can be referred to as a New African Diaspora Aesthetic, an experience which does include an examination of ‘roots and routes’, but one which is broad, dynamic and centered, not purely concerned with identity in crises or melancholic, but rather a celebration of heritage and culture that befits an aesthetic infused with Pan-Africanism.

Although it is the argument of this thesis that the New African Diaspora Aesthetic permeates the work of a diverse range of contemporary Black British African heritage authors, the roots of this literary positioning sprang to life much earlier. The terrain formed by less volatile literary revolution is by virtue of Africa’s most violent and long-lasting eruption, or as some would have it, disruption – the Transatlantic Slave Trade – both transnational and heterogeneous. The literary aesthetic produced as a response to the long cooling period following slavery and colonisation has evolved

⁷⁷R. Radhakrishnan, ‘Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity’, in *Diasporic Meditations: Between Home and Location* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 174.

from many sources, some of which form and disappear in linear and non-linear fashion, as with postcolonial into Black British, some working simultaneously, not exactly in harmony but deeply informed by each other, particularly in this globalised internet age.

The New African Diaspora Aesthetic falls into this second group, being in fact made up of several minor aesthetics, albeit minor in size and not importance. These minor aesthetics are for the most part concerned with the same goal, and at times when they are not, respond to the same impetus, one of connective ‘oneness’ or ‘African-ness’, or even a rejection of any such notions. For Black British literature, ‘rejective’ rather than ‘connective’ works usually comprise of narratives in which characters of African descent are aware of their African heritage, but express singularly Eurocentric values, or otherwise reject racial classification wholesale while expressing clearly defined European cultural value systems, such as Lad-Lit.

So it is that the traditions, motifs, cosmological leanings and ideals that have become frameworks embedded in text were actually influenced by the work of the previous generation of writers, musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, academics and activists. It was their aim, through their direct political activism and various art forms, to foster a connection to the continent with which they had been severed from for so long, and maintain that connection for their descendants. Many of these earlier writers would have their intentions misread by academics and critics as products of postcolonial leanings, or else be excluded from the canon, unkindly reviewed if reviewed at all, or forced out of print. This chapter traces such literary lineage, and charts the journey of Pan-African thought in literature from its forefathers and mothers, to its manifestations today.

Juba’s Head: Diaspora Connections

In 2003 Erna Brodber, a respected sociologist and author, published *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day*. This collection contained the text of seven lectures Brodner gave to the rural village of Woodside, Jamaica, during 1996 and 1997. It’s a fascinating analysis of the unavoidably transnational nature of Caribbean politics and culture, covering everything from the history of the slave trade to the journeys of Marcus Garvey, and the blossoming of Caribbean intellectual thought. The most interesting article in terms

of Brodber's position on literature is her ideas on the constitution of an African diaspora aesthetic in her essay, 'From Juba's Head'.

In this essay, Brodber asks whether fiction can help in the task of 'learning about ourselves and our societies, the better to equip us to diagnose and prescribe programmes.'⁷⁸ She responds affirmatively by contrasting two novels by Caribbean female authors, Merle Hodge and Paule Marshall, Trinidadian and Barbadian respectively. To do this Brodber uses what she calls a "heuristic device", a mental and verbal construct devised to make more visible such ideas and the connections between them'⁷⁹. She calls her device 'Juba's Head', explaining that Juba is not only a female name popular throughout the diaspora, claimed by the Bambara, the Wolof, the Vi, and the Meande of West Africa, but it is also a noun. To the Bambara, it refers to a hen that has young children. Among the Wolof it means the tough hair on the head. To the Yoruba it is a verb that means to pay homage and to acknowledge as superior. And yet Juba is also a tribal dance transported to the New World of the West Indies by African slaves, and taken to the Southern USA where it became well known. For Brodber the word represents 'a female New World intellectual's sense of feeling connected to Africa.'⁸⁰

Author, cultural critic and journalist Ta-Nehsi Coates refers to Juba in his novel, *The Water Dancer* (2019). In its opening pages, Coates' protagonist Hiram Walker, a mixed-race slave and son of a plantation owner, sees a vision of his dead mother, 'patting juba on the bridge, an earthenware jar on her head.'⁸¹ An antebellum dance form, Patting Juba is defined as both 'a form of music making created by African Americans,' and something that 'came from dances in Africa.'⁸²

This deep connection, combined with an acute awareness of not being made welcome in the place they find themselves, has become a focal point of contention for writers from the African Diaspora. Yes, there are thoughts of migration, whether recent or relegated to a past centuries old, voluntary or enforced, but there is also a sense of

⁷⁸Erna Brodber, 'From Juba's Head', in *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon Books, 2003), p. 135.

⁷⁹ Brodber, p.137.

⁸⁰ Brodber, p.137.

⁸¹ Ta-Nehishi Coates, *The Water Dancer*, Second (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019).

⁸² Olsonhe, "'Juba This, Juba That:' The History and Appropriation of Patting Juba', *Music 345: Race, Identity, and Representation in American Music*, 2015

<<https://pages.stolaf.edu/americanmusic/2015/02/24/juba-this-juba-that-the-history-and-appropriation-of-patting-juba/>>.

belonging or entitlement to someplace else, either spiritually or physically, a place of yearning and hope. As bell hooks elaborates:

Yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice. Specifically, in relation to the postmodernist deconstruction of “master” narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced is the longing for critical voice.⁸³

This yearning is captured by the first truly Pan-African author in literary work and deed to land on British shores, the Trinidadian C.L.R. James. Born in 1901, James received a ‘classical British education’ as taught by expatriate Oxford and Cambridge masters, and lived in Britain and America before he returned to Trinidad for a time, eventually revisiting England, where he lived for the remainder of his life. His politics and writings were far ahead of their time, steeped in Trotskyist Marxism, and a firm belief in a Pan-Africanist political perspective, evidenced by his work as chair of the African Friends of Abyssinia, and as editor of *International African Opinion*. Eric Williams, the inaugural Prime Minister of Trinidad after independence from colonial rule, was James’ student at Queen’s Royal College. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya after independence from colonial rule, the activist George Padmore, and Marcus Garvey’s first wife Amy were among friends and associates. But it was in what could be argued as his most popular book, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), that James’ political Pan-African sensibilities were fused with a transnational literary aesthetic. The resulting work became a benchmark for writers to follow.

In this, a detailed study of the San Domingo revolt led by former slaves L’Ouvverture and Dessalines, James’ seemingly unrelated interests - the continuing relationship between the African diaspora and its former European colonisers, and his self-professed concern with the common people articulated via Marxist thought - becomes a blueprint of Pan-African vision, a heuristic device that could be held in the hands, studied, and is transnational in its very nature, like its author. *The Black Jacobin* was written by a Trinidadian of African descent, living in England, about a slave

⁸³bell hooks, ‘Postmodern Blackness’, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 26.

revolution in the West Indies, ‘not with the Caribbean, but with Africa in mind.’⁸⁴ In the forward to his Penguin reprint of 1980, James’ says of his aims:

I would write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of people’s exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their needs.’⁸⁵

The Black Jacobins goes far beyond parochial concerns of slavery and colonisation to argue a transnational position commonplace, although less politically aware, among British writers of African descent today. It could also be said James helped usher a new sense of power and self-worth for African nations, just as the former slaves of San Domingo helped precipitate the end of the Atlantic slave trade three years after their ‘first successful working class revolution.’⁸⁶ *The Black Jacobins* was published and read widely by those destined become architects in the fight for independence in the Caribbean and key African nations. James would re-state his simple, yet profound insights later in life, when he returned to the Pan-African movement in earnest, writing articles and essays for a Caribbean readership that included *The People of the Gold Coast* (1960), and *The Rise and Fall of Nkrumah* (1966), both of which marked a development of the ideas he introduced almost thirty years before, ‘exploring the dynamic connections between different aspects of the Black diaspora in order to establish the presence of Africa at the centre of the emerging post-war order.’⁸⁷ In a letter to friends dated 25th March 1957, James reveals the depth of his commitment to a transnational perspective, not through essay or prose, but in James’ typically understated fashion, through action:

Yesterday, the Reverend Luther King and his wife had lunch with us and stayed here from 12:30 until nearly 5pm. With us was George Lamming, the West Indian writer who has just received a distinguished literary prize, the Somerset Maugham award of five hundred pounds for his book, *In the Castle of My Skin*. The award demands that

⁸⁴C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, New Ed (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p.xvi.

⁸⁵ James, p.xv.

⁸⁶Erna Brodber, ‘Afro-Caribbean Voices in the International Arena’, in *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon Books, 2003), p. 130.

⁸⁷C.L.R James: A Revolutionary Vision for the 20th Century’, in *The C.L.R James Reader*, ed. by Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 17.

the author must travel and he is going to Ghana. There is also with us Dr David Pitt, who is likely to be the first West Indian or African to run for Parliament. He too was in Ghana.’⁸⁸

It is no coincidence that James had an on-going connection with many figures of importance, men like King, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, and Williams. It is also worth noting that James by his own admission ‘worked closely with George Padmore in London’ who himself worked closely with John La Rose, the Trinidadian political activist and publisher of New Beacon books, who published the poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, who in turn ushered the fledgling author Caryl Phillips inside James’ Brixton flat sometime in the eighties, where he arrived eager to receive counsel.⁸⁹ Padmore and LaRose were equally instrumental in spreading James’ ideals in life and thereafter. La Rose’s New Beacon books continue to distribute and sell important fiction and non-fiction from across the diaspora. The George Padmore Institute campaigns in the local community to this day, stamping an eternal legacy on the political and cultural landscape. Both were staunch proponents of a Pan-African vision articulated through political activism and the arts.

Many postcolonial writers have spoken in honour of James’ achievements. V.S. Naipaul created a character with a glaringly close biographical likeness to James in his novel, *A Way in the World* (1994), and gave him credit by saying *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), James’ non-fictional ode to cricket, gave base and solidity to West Indian achievement. James was a confidante to Lamming, mentioned in high regard by Walcott, and as we have already seen, Caryl Phillips expressed profound respect for his life and work, calling him the most outstanding West Indian of the twentieth century. Here, we see how C.L.R James’ ideology of transnationalism in art and letters is used to express the interconnectedness of the Black diasporic experience, and how this ideology, so innovative for his time, has been passed down by writers and activists over generations.

If James can accurately be described as a father figure for Black British writers, then his politics might well be seen in the work of authors who followed. And there were many. The men and women of African descent who re-crossed the Atlantic

⁸⁸‘Letters on Politics’, in *The C.L.R James Reader*, ed. by Anna Grimshaw (London: Blackwell, 2001), p. 271.

⁸⁹C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.xvi.

published 137 novels ‘in the 15 years between 1952 and 1967 alone,’ besides a wealth of short stories, poems and plays.⁹⁰ After wrestling with their initial desire to make sense of their shared migratory experience, as in the case of Lamming and Selvon who travelled on the same ship, there is also a strong sense of searching for assessment, a grasp for a wider view. Selvon’s eleventh novel, *Moses Migrating* (1983), for example, sees his protagonist, a Trinidadian who has made a home in west London, return to the land of his birth if only for a spell.

Lamming, considered the less ‘light-hearted’ writer by critics, was more obvious in his desire to provide a wider context for the struggles of Caribbean immigrants. After publishing *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Lamming wrote five novels. *The Emigrants* (1980), first in a lineage of novels concerning, ‘The Final Passage’, the return journey along the triangular trade routes from Africa to the Caribbean, and the Caribbean to Europe, was published two years before Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*. *Of Age and Innocence* (1958) explored the evolution of Caribbean independence. *Season of Adventure* (1960) detailed the struggle between traditional and contemporary forces in the West Indies, while *Water with Berries* (1971) and *Natives of My Person* (1971) are about the psychic and mythological routes of Caribbean identity.

Lamming’s novels concerning the migration of Caribbean people to ‘the Motherland’ have perhaps proved the most enduring. *Of Age and Innocence* and *Season of Adventure*, which deal with the Caribbean itself, ‘have never received popular recognition.’⁹¹ Vladimir Lucien is particularly critical of such a selective reading of Caribbean works as a whole, stating, ‘the whole notion of writing back I think is a sinister kind of synecdoche in which a fraction of writers’ oeuvres are made to seem like the bulk of their work.’⁹² This fragmentary criticism has been instrumental in forming the literary canon of postcolonial writing of previous generations, but also those writing today.

In the essay ‘The Disturbing Vision of George Lamming’, Louis James suggests one reason for Lamming being the least read of his contemporaries could be his political

⁹⁰Louis James, ‘The Disturbing Vision of George Lamming’, in *Other Britain, Other British*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto Press, 1995), p. 35.

⁹¹James, p. 41.

⁹²Vladimir Lucien, ‘Monique Roffey’s Discovery of Caribbean Literature’, *Caribbean Lit Lime*, 2014 <<http://caribbeanlitlime.wordpress.com/2014/07/23/monique-roffey-s-discovery-of-caribbean-literature/>> [accessed 27 August 2014].

stance, although he admits that Wilson Harris declared that his 'restless vision can be at odds with the basic requirements for fiction.'⁹³ Lamming's interests lay not only in the psychological trauma of colonisation, but also the means in which the colonised attempt to forge connections with the land from which they originated. James describes how:

In 1956, on a visit to Haiti, Lamming had watched the Ceremony of the Souls, in which the celebrants recover contact with the spirits of the ancestral dead. It was an experience to which Lamming was to return in several works, as a potent image of cultural healing.⁹⁴

A poignant example of such an imagery can be found in the opening of *Season of Adventure*, when Lamming's protagonist Fola Piggott, a privileged mixed race woman steeped in British culture and schooling, attends a ceremony of the souls on San Cristobel, Lamming's fictional Caribbean island. While she only visits the ceremony in order to please her teacher, Fola is quickly noticed by the islanders, and the steel pan music helps to reconnect her with her culture. This leads her towards a journey of exploration, not only of the island and its rich transnational history, but also her own personal identity as she attempts to discover who her natural birth father, an islander, might be. Lamming's desire to embed the healing aspects of the ceremony of souls through his entire novel is clear, as Fola witnesses a ceremonial dance:

The girl seemed startled by the fury of the woman's dance around the bamboo pole. The *tonelle* was an ordinary meeting place, a clean perimeter of earth partitioned by the night. The pole rose from the centre of the yard, climbing through seven feet of shaven joints, dry as bone, to make a funnel through the ceiling: this was the mythical stairs down which the invisible gods would soon descend. A thick, white line of maize marked a circle round the pole, leaving an area of ground untouched by the women who danced around it. No one could trespass within the circle until the gods had arrived.

In the corner of the *tonelle*, beyond the yellow arc of light, a attend rose briefly from the dust like a tower whose walls leaned near to collapse. The flambeaux were blown around like hair. Mounted on the wind, they rushed a blaze up to the ceiling; then fell

⁹³James, p. 46.

⁹⁴James, p. 42.

with a downward pull of air, scattering red jets of flame like a fountain flogged by fire. There were rows of benches on every side; a tumult of feet squeezed close along the corridors of dust. Behind the last row of benches the space was choked by the crowd which stood gazing towards the bamboo pole.

‘Are you alright?’ Charlot asked.

Fola couldn’t afford the luxury of complaint. She was a stranger within her own forgotten gates.⁹⁵

In this passage and others in the novel, Lamming’s obvious passion for the Haitian ancestral ceremony comes to the fore. His attempts to recreate the splendour of the experience provide rich, visceral reading; it’s almost as if he wants the reader to stand alongside him and partake in his memories of that dark, star-filled night of fire and dance. It is an evocation of memory placed in a moment of time and location simultaneously; Lamming isn’t simply concerned with events as they happened, he’s equally concerned with *where* they happened. Each is as important as the other. As such, the scene is a recreation of Caribbean mood and spirit of for those who recall it, as Lamming does, and those who do not, like Fola. Put in Brodber’s terms, Lamming’s writing prescribes a programme in text, a probable solution to be undertaken by indigenous Caribbean readers and diaspora residents alike, and perhaps understood by others who do not share this heritage as a means of empathising with a contemporary diaspora psyche. As such, the work promotes communication and greater understanding, the hallmarks of any major work.

What’s most interesting from a critical perspective is that, essentially, this novel is about identity as much as any of Lamming’s most celebrated works; only here, the concerns are relocation rather than dislocation; a quest for ‘stability and wholeness’, rather than the fraught, troublesome tussle with ‘motion and fragmentariness.’ This is most evident when Lamming writes, ‘she was a stranger within her own forgotten gates.’ Here is a protagonist aware of her cultural lack from the outset. The remainder of the novel follows her attempts to address this and make her identity whole, as it should be. So it’s interesting to find that after the novel’s publication in 1960, it remained out of print for almost twenty years. In contrast, *The Pleasures of Exile*, a migratory text to use a crude generalising term, was republished in 2005.

⁹⁵George Lamming, ‘Chapter II’, in *Season of Adventure*, Second Edition (London: Allison & Busby, 1979), pp. 21–22.

Season of Adventure, Of Age and Innocence, Water with Berries, Natives of My Person, and in many ways *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), *In the Castle of my Skin* and Lamming's many other works, all suggest a complete awareness of the 'larger African diasporic tradition' and 'multiple relationships,' argued for by Taylor in her case for a Black British aesthetic. It can also be seen in the work of Caryl Phillips, who makes the strength of his influence plain in the essay 'Following On: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon'. Phillips explains how his initial influences were African-American - Baraka, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin - urban writers, in tune with his inner city Leeds upbringing. Widening his search, he came across Selvon and Lamming whose non-fiction book *The Pleasures of Exile* 'places the migration of Caribbean peoples into a global political and cultural perspective.'⁹⁶ Phillips readily admits this was a tradition C.L.R James had pursued for many decades.

Phillips's resulting fictional works, from *The Final Passage* (1985) and *Higher Ground* (1981), three stories set in Africa, America, and England, to *Dancer in the Dark* (2005), which explores the life of a Caribbean 'blackface' entertainer in America, make the concerns of James and Lamming Phillips' own. His non-fiction work goes even further in this exploration, leading Phillips to be described as 'a Black Atlantic writer, since much of his fictional output is defined by its interest in, and searching exploration of, the experience of peoples of the African diaspora in England, the Caribbean and the United States.'⁹⁷ *Higher Ground*, a novel-in-triptych, is the most obvious example of this emphasis. The first chapter, a pre-colonial African historical fiction, is told from the perspective of an African who aided European slavers in the capture of his countrymen; the second is the story of an African American prison inmate in solitary confinement; and in the third, a Polish refugee to the UK fleeing Nazis finds herself isolated by her life of exile and unable to find solace even from her West Indian boyfriend. Each story examines the affects of racism on the human psyche, and the huge burden it places on people of African heritage throughout the world.

In the following wave of Black British writers, those who emerged in the early to mid-nineties, these Pan-African concerns became less overt, more embedded in the text and lives of the writers. James' generation forged their own pathways; there was little Caribbean or Black British writing before them. The next generation, Lamming's

⁹⁶Caryl Phillips, 'Following On: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon', in *A New World Order* (London: Vintage Books Edition), p. 236.

⁹⁷'Caryl Phillips', *Caryl Phillips* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caryl_Phillips>.

and Selvon's works were influenced by their direct ancestors, and expanded their vision in fictional terms. The writers of the 1970s expressed an aesthetic defined as postcolonial, and yet was really diasporic. Those of the mid to late 90's gained access to this previous generation of Black writers through independent book stores, sympathetic friends, family, librarians and teachers, who opened up a world of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The blueprint, drawn in the form of literary text, was steeped in diaspora vision.

The New African Diaspora Aesthetic

From this perspective, it's undeniable that the work of a great many modern African heritage writers draws on influences passed on from their forbearers hitherto underestimated; the Pan-African, diaspora aesthetic, speaking less of the difficulties in negotiating hybrid selves, and more of the recognition that their post-slavery condition is one shared in various forms and guises, throughout the globe. The term post-slavery is used here rather than postcolonial, as this diaspora aesthetic by its very definition *must* include the African-American experience of forced migration, not as a singular experience but one part of a whole system of genocide lasting centuries; and enslaved African-Americans did not experience colonialism. The African Holocaust, as it is sometimes known, is the root by which the diaspora branches of Black America, the Caribbean, Europe and the United Kingdom, have grown. Modern African Heritage writers and their lives off the page are inevitably shaped by this history.

If contemporary Black British writers articulate a lived reality of African Heritage people, the question remains; what exactly *is* a New African Diaspora Aesthetic? There are, I would argue, 8 defining values or preoccupations, which can be used to define this aesthetic. They are not rules, more aspects of process and intent that can be used for critical consideration. Works of African heritage literature can express as little as one, or as many as all of these criteria to constitute adherence to the aesthetic.

A New African (or Black) Diaspora Aesthetic, should:

1. Celebrate complex representations of a black particularity that is internally divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness. There is no unitary idea

of a black community and the authoritarian tendencies of those who would police black cultural expression in the name of their own particular history or priorities are rightly repudiated.⁹⁸

2. Be transnational, either in terms of geography, or a range of cultural influences (dress, music, art, food, religion, language/dialect, familial heritage), or all of the above.
3. Express overt or underlying manifestations of Toni Morrison's examination of 'what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor.'⁹⁹ This, according to my own interpretation of Sterling Brown's studies of ancestral concerns expressed in Harlem Renaissance poetry, includes a discovery of Africa as a source of race pride, and the use of African heritage heroes and heroic episodes from African history, folklore, and cosmology. These should be interpreted to create original, inventive literary works.
4. Express the use of African villains and episodes of trauma from African History, folklore and cosmology to create works specific to a tragic literary form. These should also be interpreted to create original, inventive literary works. Examples of this mode are: Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of the Dead* (2009), Orlando Patterson's *Children of Sisyphus* (1968), Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985), and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). The use of these villains and episodes of trauma can be formulated via literary genres such as horror, science or speculative fiction, and forms such as satire, comedy, or ghost stories.
5. Encompass a wide range of literary forms, from experimental to realism or amalgamations of both as an acceptance that these

⁹⁸Paul Gilroy, 'The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity', in *The Black Atlantic*, Second Edition (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 32.

⁹⁹Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *African American Literary Criticism: 1773-2000*, ed. by Hazel Arnett Ervin (NY: Twayne Publishers, 1999), p. 201.

forms articulate the plurality of African Diaspora experience as detailed in point 1.

6. Espouse transnational ‘similarities to be found in diverse black experiences in the modern West’.¹⁰⁰ It must be added that these similarities may also be found on the African continent, particularly in regions which have undergone colonisation.
7. Should be ‘sympathetically alert to contemporary ways of life,’ or historical ways of life.¹⁰¹
8. Write with a purposeful articulation of cultural wealth and optimism.

These considerations are labelled a *New African Diaspora Aesthetic* because they eschew the traditional academy definition of diaspora identity. This previous, longstanding definition produces an aesthetic that is dominated by discourses of migration, colonialism and decolonisation, stressing as a result—motifs of displacement and hybrid identities of the ‘in-between’. As one example, up until recently, diaspora identities largely focused on the notion that any transnationalism found in the work precluded the need to see writers as specifically located in one place, Black Britain: in fact, being labelled Black British was sometimes a reductive, compartmentalising term, fraught with ‘the danger of committing violence to the historical sensibility and transnational fertility’ of work – in this case, Bernardine Evaristo, who since then has been positioned as a ‘Black British writer proper’ in accordance with changing attitudes towards the term in recent times.¹⁰²

It is not so much that the considerations labelled above were not being discussed and disseminated in previous discourse – they were, at length – it is more that the Black British writer whose work concerned primarily British locales and

¹⁰⁰Paul Gilroy, ‘Modernity, Terror and Movements’, in *The Black Atlantic*, Second Edition (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 120.

¹⁰¹V. R. Arana, ‘Introduction’, in *‘Black’ British Aesthetics Today*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁰²John McLeod, ‘Fantasy Relationships’, in *A Black British Canon?*, First (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 101.

sensibilities – language, cultural ways of being-with-self - were not considered diasporic in the same manner as their peers who overtly placed their work in transnational context. To be diasporic was to make obvious reference to Black/White hybridity, or to be a migrant living in Britain, or be influenced by international writers alongside homegrown artists. If you weren't categorised in that manner you were Black British, and viewed academically with all the perceived burdens the term carried since Fred D'Aguiar first raised concerns over its usage (interestingly, D'Aguiar himself was not raised in Britain until he was a teenager, which no doubt influenced his viewpoint).¹⁰³

Kamali argues that equal attention might be paid to the idea that: 'Diaspora in the twenty-first century can be read as referring to a particular set of *sensibilities*, ways of approaching and thinking through contemporary issues which is perhaps more accessible in fiction than anywhere else...' (her emphasis). While it's true that a handful of writers were engaged in this work before the turn of the century, it's also true that Pan-Africanism is only one mode of aesthetic African Diaspora writers are engaged in. There are many more.

Turning towards a Pan-African aesthetic, these themes of migration, colonialism and decolonisation – while still important – are accompanied by an optimism and creation of cultural wealth which advances a shared history, and in that shared history bridges difference through an inherent transnational recognition of similarities. This combination of shared perspectives within the context of a diversity of experience is what defines the aesthetic. The diaspora aesthetic *is* inclusive by way of hybridity. To embrace it in totality is to embrace divergent points of view, all converging and colliding, agreeing and disagreeing, accepting and rejecting dominant ways of seeing the world. A diaspora aesthetic is not based on form or adherence to genre specifications, but is wide ranging and often conflicting, a reflection the contradictory traditions and politics of varied regions. Cultural theory and criticism has long been aware of this.

Stuart Hall, in locating the diaspora experience that gives rise to such an aesthetic, explains:

¹⁰³ Fred D'Aguiar, 'Against Black British Literature', in *Tibisiri*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 106–14.

The diaspora experience as I intend it is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.¹⁰⁴

Identifying shared cultural heritage within the context of diversity, artists have become more ‘centered’ in their various locations. They have taken ownership of the territory. Music, literature, drama, art and academic texts have acted as blueprints of Pan-African thought, and play a big role in this shift. The results are most evident in the generations born during or after the early 1970’s, and before the early 1990’s.

The use of dialect, rich in many novels, is another means of providing a political voice for African diaspora existence, and is fundamental to the New African Diaspora Aesthetic. In Britain, the work of dub poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze MBE and Benjamin Zephaniah have done much for the acceptance of this parlance as a distinct and noteworthy literary form. Many Black British authors mine this territory extensively as a means of ‘centering’ hybrid identities which might otherwise be seen as marginal when judged by postcolonial terms. Koye Oyedeki, for example, argues that Diran Adebayo’s use of dialect asserts ‘that his narrator is either himself, someone informed or someone privy to a language that is born of young Black people on British shores.’¹⁰⁵ Dialect is the equivalent of planting a flag in literary soil, a means of letting the world know ‘we are here.’ David Dabydeen is also aware of this; ‘One of the many ways in which young British blacks have resisted white domination is in the creation of a patois evolved from the West Indian creole of their parents.’¹⁰⁶

This use of language as a cohesive strategy is familiar, and perhaps expected of British inner city writers like Adebayo, and Wheatle. But it is also shared in the work of Oyeyemi, operating mostly as a marker of her White character’s acknowledgment of Black British identity. When Jess’ friend Siobhan cuts her knee, Siobhan tells her ‘It is going to be a BADMAN scar,’ meaning the scar will be good, and worthy of praise.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, in *Black British Cultural Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 220.

¹⁰⁵ Koye Oyedeki, ‘Prelude to a Brand New Purchase on Black Political Identity: A Reading of Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* and Diran Adebayo’s *Some Kind of Black*’, in *Write Black, Write British*, First (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 368.

¹⁰⁶ David Dabydeen, ‘On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today’, in *Tibisiri*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Australia: Dangeroo Press, 1989), p. 129.

¹⁰⁷ Helen Oyeyemi, ‘16’, in *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 216.

Eliot Silver slips into slang when no Black British characters are even present, asking his sister if she is ‘avoiding that brer,’ slang for boy, man, or guy. Miranda has no idea what he is saying to her, and Eliot is forced to add, ‘The fellow you pulled in the pub.’^{108,109} Even Ore makes use of Black British slang on rare occasion; ‘Why did you lock Miri off all term?’ she asks Eliot; to ‘lock off’ is to turn something off when referred to an object, such as a television, or to cut someone out of your life.¹¹⁰

However, Oyeyemi’s forays into Black British vernacular are rare enough not to be determined local, and her brand of Pan-Africanism is relatively subtle. Therefore she does no damage to her literary credentials. Her characters do not live exclusively in Black British environments, or speak an abundance of slang, while the majority of authors who use this political aesthetic device centralise the language, and the environment.

Fatimah Kelleher is cautious about the issues surrounding the use of dialect by Black British authors, seeing them as ‘contentious and intrinsic to arguments of continued literary marginalisation.’¹¹¹ Dabydeen agrees, warning that a predilection towards dialect in fiction reaps meagre literary rewards:

Either you drop the epithet ‘black’ and think of yourself as a ‘writer’ (a few of us foolishly embrace this position, desirous of the status of ‘writing’ and knowing that ‘black’ is blighted with negative connotations), meaning cease dwelling on the nigger/tribal/nationalistic theme, cease *folking* up the literature, and become universal – or else you perish in the backwater of small presses, you don’t get published by the ‘quality’ presses and don’t receive the corresponding patronage of media-hype. Put bluntly, this is how the threat against us is presented.¹¹²

Few contemporary authors use authentic Black British, African, or Caribbean language in their work, despite a rich literary heritage of such use, and of the most popular, only Zadie Smith ventures into this terrain on occasion. Nevertheless, the use of slang, patios, or dialect, is another aspect of the New African Diaspora Aesthetic that would

¹⁰⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, ‘Jennifer Silver’, in *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ Oyeyemi, ‘Jennifer Silver’ p. 114.

¹¹⁰ Oyeyemi, ‘Jennifer Silver’ p. 223.

¹¹¹ Fatima Kelleher, ‘Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in the 1990’s Britain’, in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sessay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 250.

¹¹² David Dabydeen, ‘On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today’, in *Tibisiri*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Australia: Dangerous Press, 1989), p. 134.

benefit from more critical attention if we are to observe exactly how it pertains to ‘particular rituals of ancestry’. In Britain, perhaps more than anywhere else in the diaspora, this language betrays its transnational roots, and like most Black British expression, is informed by influences originating from various global sources. As Oyedeji says:

Our culture is neither submissive to British nationalities nor homeland ones; by homeland I mean the land of our parents and grandparents. Although there are elements of both our parent’s homeland and British culture within our writing, this new generation has got its tentacles in a multi-cultural society and has also taken influence from other shores.¹¹³

Double Consciousness and the Black British Writer

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English*, C.L. Innes explains how critics sometimes define postcolonial writers via several phases; literature of resistance; literature of national consolidation; literature of disillusion and/or neo-colonialism; post-postcolonial literature, and diaspora literature. Though a largely accurate representation of the steady movement from postcolonial to Black British literature, it’s easy to understand how earlier writers, attempting to articulate themes of hybridity, rebellion, and identity inherent in their own lives and times alongside a notion of African/Caribbean connection, were read regarding their depiction of the notion of ‘otherness’, rather than their sense of belonging beyond the realms of their immediate location.

Here we see the notion of ‘double-consciousness’ usually attributed to African-Americans expressed by British writers firmly rooted in a country where subsequent generations feel that, despite being born or spending a greater part of their life in the United Kingdom, race is a constant reminder of unbelonging. Such ‘double consciousness’ can be seen as another way of expressing what – as I discussed in the introduction – Jude Okapala describes as being-with-self, and being-with-other, or community and host. England can be home, temporary or otherwise; it can be a place

¹¹³ Koye Oyedeji, ‘Prelude to a Brand New Purchase on Black Political Identity: A Reading of Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* and Diran Adebayo’s *Some Kind of Black*’, in *Write Black, Write British*, First (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 354.

of familial or cultural ties, friends and relationships. Paradoxically, social expressions, mode of dress, language, music, art, literature, dance, and food, can all point to another place, or even places rich in cultural heritage and that similar delicate see-saw of belonging and unbelonging. They are English and African, or Caribbean, or African-American, or South-American, often at the same time.

Malachi McIntosh notes:

‘While considerations of place and displacement are common and overarching, in the last two decades textual representations of black British experience have been increasingly marked by a Du Boisian double consciousness... Britons by birth and acculturation, but who are not always figured as such, or even see themselves as such, due to their connections to other places.’¹¹⁴

This goes some way to explain why African-American culture, visibly evidenced through Hip Hop, holds such sway for the younger Black British community and its writers. Adebayo cites rap group Wu Tang Clan as a major influence on *My Once Upon A Time*. Zadie Smith interviewed rapper Jay-Z for the *New York Times* and wrote an article on the rapper/mogul for their style magazine, later published in her essay collection *Feel Free* (2018). Gemma Weekes’ protagonist, Eden in her debut novel *Love Me*, is a performance poet, a US bred genre of poetry with distinct ties to rap, and the main events of her story take place in London, Brooklyn and St Lucia. Throughout the novel there is a sense of Black culture being defined not just by what she sees and feels while walking the streets of Tottenham, also her familial connection with America and the Caribbean. There is no search for identity. She knows who she is. These seemingly disparate parts make up the whole.

Many contemporary Black writers in Britain are considered third generation and older when they are actually first or second generation and older; children who were born in the British Isles, or transported to the country when they were very young, with no migrant’s tale or memories of immigration to speak of. It is perhaps this retraction from earlier themes of ‘The Final Passage’ and identity crisis that have helped bring diaspora experiences to the fore, as Okapala and Innes suggest. Writers, unable or

¹¹⁴ Malachi McIntosh, ‘Post Colonial Plurality in Fiction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*, First (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 197.

unwilling to wrestle with notions they perceive as outdated, have attempted to depict concerns more in tune with their own lives and environment.

The diaspora aesthetic accurately challenges and critiques both transnational locations of origin and the experience of living as part of the host nation. It is likely to act as a vehicle for articulating individual concerns, while consistently linking the individual to a communal past, present and future. In some works these concerns might involve race and the machinations of identity as a lived reality of Black life in Britain, while others simultaneously preclude ideas that race should be the Black British writers' primary focus; which is also a reality for many. Indeed, much contemporary writing seems intent on the latter, as Zadie Smith admits when being interviewed about her novel, *NW*:

It's an existential point... I decided the only race I was going to mention was white people, so anyone who's white is identified consistently. I suppose I want to show a world in which people who are not white are not determined by white people. And it proves to be incredibly hard to do that. You realise if you grow up black in England that to a lot of people here being black is in itself a political statement. But we're neutral to ourselves, you understand.¹¹⁵

Smith describes *NW* as a 'black existential novel'¹¹⁶, and yet her description is worlds away from the themes of her previous works, and an interesting political statement in itself. It would seem that international acclaim has freed her from becoming ensnared by the ethnic writer's common quandary whenever, or whatever they write. Who do they write for? Themselves or the wider world? Of racial neutrality or bias? What defines a black existential novel as opposed to an existential novel? The examination of what it means to be Black, as opposed to human? Is there a 'white existential novel' that examines what it means to be white? While Smith has shown herself admirably free to explore these questions in her work, most Black British writers who have attempted to explore similar territory find themselves the subject of a scrutiny that betrays the pitfalls of inaccurate assessments of their work.

¹¹⁵Gaby Wood, 'The Return of Zadie Smith', *The Telegraph* (London, 2012), Online edition, section Books <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9495181/The-return-of-Zadie-Smith.html>> [accessed 21 May 2014].

¹¹⁶Wood.

From the late Andrea Levy and Jackie Kay, to Diran Adebayo and Stephen Thompson, Black British writers have begun to wrestle with the task of tackling the ‘settler’ experience in the UK from a non-indigenous background, entwined with the wider notion of belonging to an international heritage that informs and influences who they are. Levy, in novels that seem journey backwards in time, charting second generation Black British women in *Every Light in the House Burning* (1995), to the women of the post-war Windrush era in *Small Island*, to the women of the Caribbean slavery era in *The Long Song*. Kay, in her poetry, short stories, and novel *Trumpet* (1998), a story of identity concerning the Black Scottish Jazz star Joss Moody, who upon his death is discovered to have been a woman. Of equal importance is Kay’s use of the Blues, the first diasporic music to be adopted transnationally by descendants of slaves and the colonized, to articulate aspects of her protagonist’s life. Adebayo’s *Some Kind of Black* (1997) is an African-British *bildungsroman*, and *My Once Upon a Time* (2000), a novel of African cosmology retold via inner city London. Thompson’s sophomore novel, *Missing Joe* (2001), is the story of a Jamaican man who comes to England for the first time to search for his lost identical twin brother.

This wave of Black British writers, in delving into their transnational past and present, continue a tradition set in place by C.L.R. James even if unconscious of his direct influence. And so the new African diaspora aesthetic is not so new. The current generation might encounter his Pan-African perspective in the work of Selvon and Lamming, or Phillips, Kay and Levy, and numerous other sources, not all of them literary. This is very apparent in the work they are producing. Diana Evans’ *26a* (2006), Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2006), Helen Oyeyemi’s *Icarus Girl* (2006) and Alex Wheatle’s *Island Songs* (2012) all move beyond the writers’ and characters’ London locations to set literary and cultural roots in varied international soil.

In particular, the mix of diasporic heritage and indigenous British experience has led contemporary Black British writers in the UK to express a shared concern with African-American authors. Some contemporary authors from across the US attempt to write back to their European, Caribbean and African fellows, perhaps in hope of creating some form of transnational dialogue through stories that resonate with diasporic experience. Tiphonie Yanique, for example, was born in St Thomas, part of the Virgin Islands, and lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her debut collection, *How to Escape From a Leper Colony* (2011) is an intriguing mix of Pan-African experience, with stories set in Trinidad, St John, Accra and London. In ‘Canoe Sickness’, she tells

a tale of an unnamed African boy who has moved to Brixton with his Ghanaian family, and harbours dreams of becoming a footballer and playing in the World Cup. He begins:

We had moved to the mother country from Ghana when I was six. I'd learned English. I dated white girls. And Chinese girls. And one memorable Italian in the fourth form. I played football on the junior national team, even though I still didn't have a British passport. I'd done everything my friends back in Accra talked about over stolen swigs of akpeteshie. I was going to be a hero.¹¹⁷

It is notable from the outset that Yanique alludes to London's multicultural nature by naming the races of the girls her protagonist dates, even while the language clearly points to a past decades ago, circa 1980s. Breasts are described as 'knockers.' Loose women are 'tarts'. When he rides the school bus with his team mates, they sing about Margaret Thatcher's private parts.¹¹⁸ But it is her desire to tell a story outside of her own Caribbean-American frame of reference that is most interesting. It would seem Yanique's literary concerns are not confined to personal experience, but a global African heritage; 'Canoe Sickness' is dedicated 'For Kodjo'. It is also interesting that Yanique comes from the Caribbean and lives in the US, although whether this has made any impact on her wide range as an author is unclear.

The novels that make up the new African Diaspora Aesthetic are many, and as wide ranging in themes and forms as they are in location. There's the ancestral work of Jamaican Marlon James, and the surrealist, irreverent work of South African Kgebetli Moele; the lyrical, transnational writing of Virgin Islands-American Tiphonie Yanique, and the fantastical African Futurism of Nigerian-American Nnedi Okanfor; the literary realism of Ethiopian-American Dinaw Mengestu and the genre defiant novels of Nigerian-British Bernardine Evaristo; and the work of the most well-known contemporary authors, such as Zadie Smith, Junot Diaz, Colson Whitehead, and Percival Everett who continue to astound, make waves, and adhere to no one style or form while challenging perceived notions of community and host in their writings; the works of each writer moving between both perspectives.

In the next two chapters, I examine in detail how this Pan-African Diaspora Aesthetic works in the diverse fictions of two contrasting authors, whose differing

¹¹⁷ Tiphonie Yanique, 'Canoe Sickness', in *How to Escape a Leper Colony* (Graywolf, 2011), p. 61.

¹¹⁸ Yanique, p.61.

styles obscure shared focus on questions of history, legacy, and transnational cultural wealth. So we turn, first, to the early work of Alex Wheatle – a writer whose former neglect by both publishing and the academy indicates the continued resistance to writing that challenges postcolonial preoccupations.

2. Alex Wheatle's New African Diaspora Aesthetic: Pan-Africanism and Protest

In 1937 Richard Wright, by then the most infamous African-American novelist the world had ever known, wrote his manifesto *The Blueprint for Negro Writing*. Here, Wright outlined his belief that Negro writing to date was overly concerned with preaching to a bourgeoisie readership that ignored the community it stemmed from. He argued that these works were constructed as a marker of artistic or literary achievement at best, a plea for leniency from White America at worst, demanding that the Negro writer turn towards a culture which addressed itself in totality, emanating from two existing sources; the Negro church, and the folklore of Negro people. Wright went on to warn of two separate Negro social classes, perhaps related to, or purveyors of, those cultural sources: the 'Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognised' and the 'rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.'¹¹⁹

This was Wright's call to arms. His proposal was that Negro writers reinvent the novel with an emphasis on the experiences of everyday, working class people of Black America. Yogita Goyal suggests Wright's move was one towards 'urban realism as a new form of protest fiction.'¹²⁰ Novels such as Wright's *Native Son* became emblematic of the urban blight faced by Black Americans who fled the Jim Crow South in search of the comparative, often dubious freedoms of the North. This narrative form, influenced by the bestselling success of *Native Son* and the subsequent writings of its author, developed and grew. Many writers of the diaspora have since taken up that mantle, few more impressively, in the UK at least, than Alex Wheatle. This chapter explores how his work differs from traditional African-American literary protest, by using Rastafarian influenced models of Pan-Africanism to address Black British social struggles, while articulating a New African Diaspora Aesthetic of cultural wealth and racial cohesion.

¹¹⁹ Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Theory from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 99.

¹²⁰ Yogita Goyal, 'From Romance to Realism', in *Romance, Diapora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, ed. by Ross Posnock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 148.

Caribbean Roots, British Shoots

Wheatle's novels explore a period of British history in which iconoclastic events took place, some of which reverberate today; the reign of Thatcherism, civil uprisings across the country that led to the British Nationality Act of 1981, the intellectual 'coming of age' of academics such as Peter Fryer, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Ivan Van Sertima, all of whom sought to deconstruct the academy's previous ideas on race and cultural identity. It was a time of relative cultural prosperity for Black British artists in a plethora of fields, including fiction, drama, poetry, dance and visual arts. These key elements of 'Caribbean roots met with British circumstance,'¹²¹ and possibly more aided the formation of a second-generation Black British identity that had deep connections not only with the land of their parents and grandparents, but with the land of their birth; England.

Ian Haywood cites the *May Day Manifesto of 1968* as 'adamant that immigrant blacks are the new working class of Britain.'¹²² By the 1980s their children, no longer immigrants but British citizens, were no less adamant in demanding fair treatment in areas including work, housing, and a cessation of racist police brutality. A politics of protest which led to the reassessment of identity formation was very much in evidence. It could be argued that this was galvanised by the prolonged existence of a Black working class with their backs pushed against the wall and a sense of entitlement in their eyes.

Wheatle's early novels in particular explore this milieu via 'accurate representations of the 1980's Black British youth culture to which Wheatle himself belonged.'¹²³ And yet the work, although accurate, is not a verbatim recount of Wheatle's life, unlike Oscar winner Sir Steve McQueen OBE's acclaimed film, *Alex Wheatle* (2020): it is not autobiography, even when autobiographical information is addressed. Wheatle fashions tales designed as 'heuristic devices' in the style of C.L.R James' *The Black Jacobins*. The analysis of his past serves an urban fable for those who share his experiences, then and now. This use of diaspora culture differs from Helen

¹²¹ Fatima Kelleher, 'Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in the 1990's Britain', in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sessay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 249.

¹²² Ian Haywood, 'The Influence of Affluence: The Road to 1979', in *Working Class Fiction: From Chartism to Trainspotting*, Writers and Their Work (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 136.

¹²³ Victoria Arana, 'The 1980's: Retheorising and Refashioning British Identity', in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sessay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 230.

Oyeyemi's; her focus is the conflict that arises as a consequence of attempting to reconcile diaspora heritage with British experience. Wheatle, through connections with Pan-African self-education and a history of Black British struggle, offers a space of possibility and 'oneness' in such heritage.

It is interesting in this context to note that despite the heaving weight of historical importance that forms the backdrop of Wheatle's novels and dramatic output, alongside generous acclaim and prizes including an MBE for Services to Literature, and the 2016 Guardian children's fiction prize, Wheatle's novels for adults have been marginalised to almost complete exclusion. Johanna Immonen notes:

While Wheatle's novels may have been reviewed favourably in the newspapers, his type of populist and realist fiction has not been the object of study at universities (in contrast to novelists such as Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith) and thus his production has received perhaps surprisingly little attention in the academy to date.¹²⁴

Immogen supposes Wheatle's fiction has suffered this adverse treatment because 'Post Modernism, post-colonialism and strong female characters seem to be vital ingredients for a successful black British novel' and Wheatle 'scores low' in these areas.¹²⁵ This may be true, but Wheatle's choice of subject matter with regard to class and Pan-African cultural consciousness also score low.

Indeed, these themes are often regarded with caution even by contemporary Black British writers. Whether this is due to the outsider's role played by the writer, particularly the novelist, whatever their race, gender, religion, or sexuality, or a lack of critical attention is difficult to tell. It would seem that the prevalence of transnationalism as a preferred aesthetic has led to a fear that Black British experience is 'too local,' held not only by critics and editors, but also writers. In contrast, African-American localised experience has long been the site of rich works of fiction that are lauded by the academy, ranging from Ann Petry's *The Street*, to James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), up until Edward P. Jones' *Lost in the City* (1992): although recently, transnational migratory texts have become popular in the US too. The recent ascension of *Americanah* (2013) and *We Need New Names* (2013) is notable: both novels being

¹²⁴ Johanna Immonen, 'Brixton Experience: Black Britishness in the Novels of Alex Wheatle', in *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, Autumn/Winter (London: UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, 2007), p. 94.

¹²⁵ Immonen, p.98

written by African women, where American life is seen from the perspective of the new immigrant.

It's not remiss to point out that the very attributes Wheatle extols – 'the stories of a black underclass... Authentic but underrepresented experiences... [that] inspire other black, underprivileged youths to believe in themselves,' – are similar to the virtues Richard Wright posited in his manifesto for African American writing seventy-two years previously, in praise of the writer 'who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent'.^{126,127} Since then, perhaps due to the greater possibility of centered rather than peripheral roles for African Diaspora writers, such forthright political positioning is seen as increasingly problematic by mainstream Black British authors. Ben Okri chastises Black and African writers, without explaining why he makes that distinction, for writing subject matters he deems too 'heavy', saying they will never achieve greatness; presumably by not writing 'light' works.¹²⁸

Wright couldn't have imagined the comparative acceptance of today's African Diaspora writers in the world of mainstream publishing, although he might have hoped for such change. Nor could he imagine the existence of a Black British writer who uses urban realism according to terms he'd outlined so specifically, so many years before. If we are to reevaluate his transnational stance, as many scholars including Goyal and Gilroy have begun to suggest, this might include a reevaluation of his transnational impact on the writers of the diaspora that followed, especially with regard to his aim of championing the experiences of Black working classes through fiction. Of course, that would require another essay.

¹²⁶ Immogen, p. 97.

¹²⁷ Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Theory from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 102.

¹²⁸ Ben Okri, 'A Mental Tyranny Is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness', *The Guardian* (London, 27 December 2014), Online edition, section Comment is Free
<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/27/mental-tyranny-black-writers>>
[accessed 18 June 2015].

Black, British, Working Class

Each of Wheatle's novels portrays the experience of the 'new working class of Britain'.¹²⁹ They may switch generations, as happens in *The Dirty South* (2008), and *Liccle Bit* (2015), or focus on Caribbean origins as in *Island Songs* (2005). Yet consistency is evident in his conscious dedication to marginalised stories and voices of the African heritage community, created in full knowledge that 'to be working class is to be underrepresented.'¹³⁰ To date, Wheatle has written six adult novels ranging from the 1980s to present day; *Brixton Rock* (1999), *East of Acre Lane* (2001), *The Seven Sisters* (2002), *Checkers* (2003, co-written with Mark Parnham), and *Brenton Brown* (2011).

Wheatle's fiction offers stark and gritty representations of life for the 'have-nots', a world of care homes, council estates, blues dances and busy urban streets. The novels are fast paced and pared down, each character and scenario fuelled by what Wright called 'complex simplicity.'¹³¹ Despite the bleak setting and bleak lives, Wheatle's people are both humorous and intelligent. Even the scant critical attention he receives makes little commentary on the interlinked nature of his works, either by blood or community ties. Combined, the novels form a loose saga of the Rodney family, who eventually become the Huggins family. These characters and their kin can be found in minor, peripheral roles (Biscuit in *Brixton Rock* and *Brenton Brown*), or take centre stage as major protagonists (Biscuit in *East of Acre Lane*, Dennis, son of Biscuit in *The Dirty South*, or Jenny and Hortense, aunt and mother of Biscuit respectively in *Island Songs*). Thus, the novels not only trace the lives and fortunes of his characters, but also the lives and fortunes of the community they belong to. They form a historical retelling using fictional means, a literary account of how a working class Black British society came into being, and who they continue to become. This affords Wheatle the opportunity to reflect the concerns of each generation with nuance and care, allowing a freedom of perspective that is rare for contemporary Black British novelists, who often chose their 'patch' – a specific place and time – and stay there. Wheatle's flexibility

¹²⁹ Haywood, 'The Influence of Affluence: The Road to 1979', p.114.

¹³⁰ Ian Haywood, 'From Chartism to Socialism', in *Working Class Fiction: From Chartism to Trainspotting*, Writers and Their Work (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 1.

¹³¹ Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Theory from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 103.

brings to mind George Lamming's dexterous points of view. Lamming too wrote novels that ranged from the perspective of Caribbean migrants to that of a Black British born younger generation.

This working class struggle against the debilitating forces of poverty told through a cast of characters whose lives interweave over the course of generations achieves two major aims. The first is to chronicle the experiences of the Black British underclass from the Windrush era circa the late 1950s until today. The second is to set those experiences against a backdrop of community endeavour enhanced by the adoption of various forms of Pan-Africanism which suffuse the lives of the characters, and serve as a counteraction to negative forces in the guise of hardcore gangsters, societal racism, or police brutality. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Neither does Pan-Africanism enable the characters to magically escape the paths they tread in order to become 'better people'. Rather, it is a pervasive 'cushioning' influence that flows about them continually, innocuous as proverbs and song lyrics in one form (a recognition of Wright's emphasis on Negro folklore), or overt as the teachings of Rastafarianism and historical texts in another. Community engagement is the conduit through which this learning is mostly gained, entering the characters' psyches in a form of 'cultural osmosis'. Immogen notes that although Wheatle's fiction leans towards an essentialist "Black" identity, unlike other popular Black British texts this is often only the starting point of psychological emancipation, a cultural foundation that rehabilitates Wheatle's characters in times of need to enable constructive action, mostly in the form of education.¹³² Pan-Africanism is presented less as an enforced doctrine more as a way of life. This cultural positioning becomes a means of political agency, similar, albeit on a smaller, personal scale, to the agency James prompts via his examination of the Haitian Revolution, and Lamming explores through fiction that traces a Black British reconnection with the islands of their heritage, and the islanders' subsequent reconnection with the continent of their heritage.

This is not coincidental, but a leitmotif as sure as Wheatle's predominantly working class vision. It is constructed with the primary function of enabling him to become a 'purposeful agent' rather than an author who formulates art for art's sake. He is a writer with a social conscious who might engineer change in the minds of his

¹³² Johanna Immogen, 'Brixton Experience: Black Britishness in the Novels of Alex Wheatle', in *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, Autumn/Winter (London: UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, 2007), p. 106.

predominantly Black and working class readership. Wheatle is no member of the ‘Black elite’ that prompted Gilroy’s fearful admonition of their ‘volkish outlook’ and ‘neo-nationalism.’¹³³ His insider view is central to his artistic vision; he comes *from* the ‘black poor’ he writes of.¹³⁴ Therefore, he is able to present an unsullied narrative of ‘being with self’ central to the aims of Richard Wright’s 1937 manifesto.

The African Origins of Brixton

Wheatle ‘shuns the word “political” and does not promote political movements.’¹³⁵ Rastafarianism as a religious and cultural movement (in the form of ‘roots’ reggae music) is his preferred method of transferring his message to young working class readers by way of fiction, just as the message was passed to him as a wayward teenager. Stuart Hall advocates such methods of transference, saying:

Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed.¹³⁶

Any investigation of cultural expression should be gauged by what Hall defines as an ‘enunciated’ location. He says; ‘We all write from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned*.’¹³⁷ Wheatle’s humble beginnings and rise into the literary world clearly inform his work. After a childhood spent in a care home on the outskirts of London, Wheatle was forced to fend for himself as a teenager, when he was sent to live a Brixton hostel along with other young men released from the care system. There, he got involved with the street

¹³³ Paul Gilroy, ‘The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity’, in *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 33.

¹³⁴ Gilroy, p.33.

¹³⁵ Johanna Immogen, ‘Brixton Experience: Black Britishness in the Novels of Alex Wheatle’, in *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, Autumn/Winter (London: UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, 2007), p. 105.

¹³⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 222.

¹³⁷ Hall, p.222.

culture of the time, which led to him taking part in the 1981 Brixton uprising and being imprisoned for five months in HMP Wormwood Scrubbs. It was here that he met his Rastafarian cell-mate who, after some initial confrontation, took young Wheatle under his wing. The Rastafarian encouraged Wheatle to read, and learn more about the history of the Caribbean and Africa. When Wheatle left prison he studied to become an engineer, and wrote lyrics for a sound system called The Crucial Rocker. Prompted by his mentor/cell-mate, he continued to read in earnest, and made regular visits to the local library. It's important to note that he decided he'd become an author after reading C.L.R James' *The Black Jacobins*.

It comes as no surprise that Wheatle's novels make constant reference to this Rastafarian saviour figure bearing gifts of self-knowledge. His fictional counterpart is the enigmatic Jah Nelson, a stick wielding, straight-talking, pious 'Rastafarian sage'¹³⁸ who serves as a community educator to Brixton youths, whether lifelong criminals or petty dealers. The street name makes cryptic reference to Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson who lost an eye in Corsica, and was also noted for his inspirational leadership. Jah Nelson first appears in *Brixton Rock*, 'decked in African-type robes... squinting out of his one good eye'.¹³⁹ In the scene he admonishes the novel's antagonist Terry Flynn, nemesis of Wheatle's protagonist, Brenton Brown. Flynn is waxing lyrical to a cohort of Brixton gangsters, denouncing the White man and threatening to rob them if they tried to enter blues dances. When he speaks on behalf of the Black community, Jah Nelson shocks the room by asking Flynn 'if you're for your own people why do you rob dem?'¹⁴⁰ A later passage reads,

Flynn's veins became visible in his throat. His lips thinned and his cheek tightened. It would be easy to just take his knife and wet the dread. But cut Jah Nelson? Every ghetto yout' respected him. Jah Nelson wasn't a man of violence.¹⁴¹

Jah Nelson eventually denies Flynn the pleasure of confrontation, walking out of the room and the novel to make no further appearance. He returns in Wheatle's second

¹³⁸ Fatima Kelleher, 'Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in the 1990's Britain', in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sessay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 247.

¹³⁹ Alex Wheatle, 'Terror's Lair', in *Brixton Rock*, Seventh (London: Black Amber, 2010), p. 190.

¹⁴⁰ Wheatle, p. 191.

¹⁴¹ Wheatle, p. 192.

novel, *East of Acre Lane*, 'greying locks falling over a large forehead,' and approaches Biscuit on Brixton's Front Line under the guise of buying marijuana.¹⁴²

In a seemingly contradictory about-face, the Rastafarian warns Biscuit that he is too young to be engaged in such trade. When the youth insists he is a man, Jah Nelson tells him he will only buy on the condition that they make the transaction in his home. They arrive, only for Biscuit to find the Rastafarian's council flat is unlike any he has seen before:

Jah Nelson looked at Biscuit's wonderment and smiled, then led the way to his front room. On entering, Biscuit thought to himself that the dread should rename it a library. There were books everywhere: upon shelves, covering the home-made coffee table, beside the hi-fi and on a table where Biscuit thought a telly should have been.

Nelson told him to sit down in an armchair while he went to ignite an incense stick jutting out of a vase that was resting on another home-made table in the corner of the room. Biscuit made himself comfortable and began to study the walls. In front of him, hanging over a gas heater, was a large painting of an African woman breastfeeding her child. Scanning clockwise, he saw a smaller sketched drawing of a slave ship crossing the Atlantic. In the corner of the room was a painting that depicted the selling of slaves in a Western market, while staring from an adjacent wall was a photo of Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion, and beside that was a portrait of Malcolm X. Biscuit looked behind him and a huge map of ancient Africa filled his sight. He felt as if he had stepped into a different world.¹⁴³

In this passage, the symbolism integral to Pan-African thought is abundant. The library of books, an evocation of Fanon's 'passionate research', the incense used to cleanse the air.¹⁴⁴ The paintings of an African woman feeding her child – representative of the nurturing role the 'Motherland' plays for diaspora children, if they are willing. The brutal history of the slave trade, the oceanic crossing and its horrific results, producing Hall's, 'identity grounded [...] in the retelling of the past.'¹⁴⁵ The photos of ancestral heroes, predominantly in the guise of black men who fought white oppression, actual

¹⁴² Wheatle, p. 42.

¹⁴³ Alex Wheatle, 'The Front Line', in *East of Acre Lane*, Third (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 45.

¹⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sixth (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 169.

¹⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Black Literature and Culture (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 212.

or figuratively. The absence of heroic women is notable. Immogen reveals evidence of an ‘association of women with guilt’¹⁴⁶ in Wheatle’s novels, that can be ‘easily be traced’¹⁴⁷ to the author’s fraught relationship with his own mother, who entered him into the care system as a child. Wheatle ends his account of Jah Nelson’s living space with an image of Africa itself, not contemporary but ‘ancient’; perhaps harking to a time before colonisation, the dissection of the continent for European gain and the drawing of tribal lines.

Biscuit’s feeling of having entered a different world speaks of the delineation between the life he has lived, and the possible life Jah Nelson has introduced. But Wheatle is a shrewd novelist, even this early on in his career. He knows far better than to have Biscuit accept Jah Nelson’s teachings; greater dramatic conflict can be achieved if he rejects them. When the Rastafarian makes his unwilling student perform an embarrassing task before purchasing his marijuana, and launches into an afrocentric lecture to clarify his Pan-African position, he is ‘disappointed by the lack of interest Biscuit took in his sermon.’¹⁴⁸

Over time, the two men strike up a friendship. Biscuit makes regular visits to Jah Nelson’s home, and even begins to rely on his countenance. Despite this, and his growing realisation that his peers visit Jah Nelson for much the same reason, Biscuit continues to make light of the Rastafarian’s teachings,

Biscuit couldn’t remember the last books he had read, and he thought that if Nelson expected to take him on as a student, then he might be disappointed. It’s alright for Nelson, he told himself. He can spend all the time he wants on his books, because he don’t have to worry about no one but himself.¹⁴⁹

By the novel’s end Biscuit becomes embroiled in a tussle with the villain Nunchaks, who has become romantically involved with his younger sister Denise. The feud between the gangster and the young man results in Denise being kidnapped, and Biscuit almost losing his life after Nunchaks throws him from a tower block. Central to this

¹⁴⁶ Johanna Immogen, ‘Brixton Experience: Black Britishness in the Novels of Alex Wheatle’, in *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, Autumn/Winter (London: UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, 2007), p. 104.

¹⁴⁷ Immogen, p. 102.

¹⁴⁸ Alex Wheatle, ‘The Front Line’, in *East of Acre Lane*, Third (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 48.

¹⁴⁹ Wheatle, p. 165.

narrative is Wheatle's account of the 1981 Brixton Uprising, the details of which span some twenty-five pages.

Through Biscuit's story, Wheatle alludes that the act of distancing himself from a positive reclamation of African history and culture leads to Biscuit becoming complicit in his own demise. Twenty years and four novels later in *The Dirty South*, Biscuit's son Dennis also becomes involved in street life, drug dealing, and a violent feud with a gangster. After his best friend Noel is murdered by a criminal Muslim gang and Dennis is hospitalised, he lies to the police to pave the way for his own revenge assassination. A warped justification for his behaviour is given when his father Biscuit, now a librarian, implores Dennis to tell the police everything he knows:

Paps picked up his walking stick, glared at me for half a minute and then limped out of the room. He slammed the door behind him in disgust. I didn't care. I had to merk Courtney Thompson. Anyway, back in 1981 Paps and his crew dupped a Bricky crime lord. He didn't go to the Feds when Auntie Denise was kidnapped... So *burn* Paps and his hypocrisy.¹⁵⁰ [his italics]

The reverberations of bad choices can last generations, Wheatle tells his readers, and results in a father unable to turn his son away from the street life he once led. Even though Biscuit has lived a crime free existence since 1981, his actions as a youth provide an ineffective, negative example of how to be a man. The novel ends as it began, with Dennis incarcerated in Pentonville prison, vowing to live his life the right way, acknowledging that his turn from education led to such an unconstructive turn of affairs.

This perceived lack of choice is compounded by the ghostly presence of Jah Nelson, spoken about but never seen. By 2006, Wheatle seems to say, Rastafarian community figures are no more. Robbie Shilliam agrees, arguing; 'It would not be unfair to say that in Britain RasTafari has largely been apprehended as either a colourful curiosity or a corrosive cult.'¹⁵¹ Dennis recalls leaving school at sixteen despite his father's condemnation, leading to, 'Paps introducing me to this one-eyed rastaman. Jah Nelson his name was [...] I can't remember what he taught me, but I definitely

¹⁵⁰ Alex Wheatle, 'Stakeout', in *The Dirty South* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2008), p. 193.

¹⁵¹ Robbie Shilliam, 'Focus: When Britain Loved Rastafari', *Discover Society*, 10, 2014 <<http://discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/focus-when-britain-loved-rastafari/>> [accessed 18 June 2015].

remember his face scaring the fuck out of me.’¹⁵² Dennis’ girlfriend Akeisha also knows Jah Nelson; during their conversation it’s revealed that he has repatriated from Brixton to Africa. Before he left, Jah Nelson gave Akeisha’s mother a wooden bracelet carved with ‘the head of a lion, a pyramid, a bird with a long tail, and the word ‘love.’’¹⁵³ When Akeisha grew older, her mother passed the gift on to her. Sometime afterwards she loses the bracelet while taking part in athletics training. Unbeknown to her, Dennis was smitten with her long before they met, watching her run from afar. He spied the bracelet drop from her wrist, and took her gift as a keepsake.

Rastafarianism and Community

The presence, or contemporary lack, of a Jah Nelson figure is reflective of a communal ideology of Pan-Africanism that was pervasive throughout Black Britain during the 1980s. In that time numerous ‘Jah Nelson’s’, men and women who converted to ‘the youth symbols of Rastafari and reggae,’ passed on ‘knowledge of an African history often left buried.’^{154,155} These living vessels overflowed with Du Bois’ long memory of the African Diaspora. Most importantly, Pan-African thought was not confined to texts, or the people that read them. It was also conveyed via inanimate objects, imagery (as seen in the posters, pictures and portraits in Jah Nelson’s home) or the lyrics of prominent artists of the time, which ‘all fed into roots reggae sound, ideology and politics.’¹⁵⁶

From Wheatle’s point of view, this long memory has become irrelevant for a certain section of Black British youth culture for whom, ‘*badmanism* would emerge in the vacuum between political “independence” and socio-economic and cultural freedom’¹⁵⁷ [his italics]. Therefore, radical culture is lost. Akeisha’s bracelet serves as both an example of an inanimate object imbued with a second generation’s ideal of Pan-Africanism, and an illustration of where such Pan-Africanism stands for

¹⁵² Alex Wheatle, ‘Bricky’, in *The Dirty South* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁵³ Wheatle, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Claire Alexander, ‘Home’, in *The Art of Being Black* (London: Oxford, 1996), p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ Fatima Kelleher, ‘Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in the 1990’s Britain’, in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sessay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 248.

¹⁵⁶ Louis Chude-Sokei, ‘Roots, Diaspora and Possible Africas’, in *Global Reggae* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012), p. 225.

¹⁵⁷ Chude-Sokei, p. 222.

contemporary Black British youth; lost by the third generation's daughter, treated as a mere trinket by Dennis, the son. Fearful of what Akeisha might say if she discovers he took the bracelet, Dennis wishes that she forget about it, and banishes the bracelet from sight. Like Jah Nelson, it is never seen again.

Throughout his novels Wheatle makes consistent reference to objects and adornments symbolising Rastafarian Pan-African cultural engagement. From 'red, gold and green belts and scarves' to a 'Nyabinghi drum' and 'Nefertiti earrings,' the deliberate use of inanimate objects as communicators of Rastafarian tenets further Wheatle's New African Diasporic intent.^{158,159,160} Also at play is the folkloric and educational nature of popular songs of the time. Wheatle quotes artists and their lyrics, makes use of song titles as chapter headings, and contextualises their impact on the youths that formed the listening audience. In a chapter entitled 'Catch a Fire' from *Brixton Rock*, named after Bob Marley's 1973 fifth studio album, Floyd, a close friend of Biscuit and Brenton Brown, who becomes progressively politically engaged throughout each novel, is already set on a path towards Rastafari:

His mind was a sponge that absorbed the lyrics of the militant roots music being played. The songs reflected the struggle for black freedom and the persecution of the black race throughout history [...] He listened more fervently, and especially liked one song that was about the Rastafarian religion and the connections this faith had with the Good Book.¹⁶¹

1980's reggae sound systems toured the nation, playing primarily 'roots' or 'dub' music of the kind Wheatle describes as the music of choice for Floyd and his friends. Largely run by Rastafarian 'soundmen', the systems and artists whose records were promoted consciously or otherwise spread a message of Black Diaspora resistance. Louis Chude-Sokei notes this message encompassed, 'Ethopianism, pan-Africanism, Negritude, Black Power, civil rights and Negrismo.'¹⁶² While Chude-Sokei is sceptical about the 'exaggerated notions of resistance, subversion and revolution' found in Pan-

¹⁵⁸ Alex Wheatle, 'Ring the Alarm', in *Brixton Rock, Seventh* (London: Black Amber, 2010), p. 136.

¹⁵⁹ Alex Wheatle, 'Chapter Thirteen', in *Island Songs* (London: Allison and Busby, 2005), p. 223.

¹⁶⁰ Alex Wheatle, 'It's All Red on the Night', in *Brenton Brown* (London: Black Amber, 2011), p. 258.

¹⁶¹ Alex Wheatle, 'Catch a Fire', in *Brixton Rock, Seventh* (London: Black Amber, 2010), p. 23.

¹⁶² Louis Chude-Sokei, 'Roots, Diaspora and Possible Africas', in *Global Reggae* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012), p. 224.

Africanism, Erna Brodner argues that as early as 1961, reggae taught a youthful Jamaican middle class to ‘stick close to their black cultural understanding of the world, and follow the path of righteousness, so they could have an exercise great power over others.’^{163,164}

Brodner describes reggae as a ‘black space,’ a conduit of Pan-African connections that include Haile Selassie, Marcus Garvey and the civil right struggles of Little Rock, Arkansas. For her, the black space was ‘an incubator for a kind of knowledge that needed to work its way out of the ground and into the minds of the young.’¹⁶⁵ Gilroy too makes note of how a music form with specific seeming Jamaican origins spread further afield to provide Black Britons with a ‘consolidation of diaspora awareness,’ paying particular attention to ‘the popular pan-Africanist and Ethiopionist visions inherent in reggae [that were] carried to all corners of the world.’^{166,167} There is little doubt that these seeds of revolution and resistance influenced the minds of those who took part in ‘several modern “slave” uprisings’ which occurred in British cities during that decade.¹⁶⁸ The ‘black space’ provided by reggae enabled a diaspora perspective, causing young Black Britons of the time to ‘think about the issue of racial commonality outside of constricting binary frameworks.’¹⁶⁹ It was a unification of experience that helped form a community who actively fought oppression of the Black mind, and the Black body.

Of great interest, indeed, is the growing awareness that many of New African Diaspora Aesthetics minor aesthetics are literary responses to musical genres that evolved as part of the African’s post-slavery, post-colonial condition. There are very few, if any, instances where African diaspora literary aesthetics preceded these musical genres. Of the minor comparative aesthetics, a handful of which have undergone academic analysis, there is; the Blues aesthetic, the Reggae Aesthetic, the Jazz Aesthetic, the Hip Hop aesthetic, and there may even be argument for a Calypso aesthetic, as evidenced in the work of Trinidadian Earl Lovelace.

¹⁶³ Chude-Sokei, ‘Roots, Diaspora and Possible Africas’, p.225.

¹⁶⁴ Erna Brodner, ‘Reggae as Black Space’, in *Global Reggae* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012), p. 30.

¹⁶⁵ Brodner, p. 35.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Gilroy, ‘One Nation Under a Groove’, in *Small Acts* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), p. 43.

¹⁶⁷ Gilroy, p.43

¹⁶⁸ Amon Saba Saakana, ‘The Impact of Jamaica Music in Britain’, in *Global Reggae* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012), p. 62.

¹⁶⁹ Paul Gilroy, ‘Du Bois, Germany and the Politics of (Dis)Placement’, in *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 120.

These minor aesthetics can be influenced by two or more musical genres, as in Afro-Futurism. The science and speculative fiction reinterpretation of Pan-Africanism for a future age is diasporic not only by way of its authors, which include Nigerian-American Nnedi Okanfor, Caribbean-British Pete Kalu, American Octavia Butler, and Ghanaian Biram Mboob, but the genres of music encompassed by the aesthetic. Musical influences range as widely as ‘Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland*... intergalactic big-band jazz... Dr Seussian Astrofunk... dub reggae...’¹⁷⁰ Electronica also informs this minor aesthetic, exemplified by the work of Steven ‘Flying Lotus’ Ellison, nephew of jazz composer Alice Coltrane, who was the wife of jazz legend John Coltrane. Ellison samples Alice Coltrane’s work extensively in his digital music, and is a huge figure within the contemporary Afrofuturist aesthetic.

The Long Song

Du Bois’ long memory is also the dominant emphasis of Wheatle’s only transnational novel to date, *Island Songs*. The novel not only makes mention of the origins of reggae alongside the political and social circumstances that helped form the music, but charts the generational journey of one family, the Rodney’s, from enslaved Africans, to Jamaican underclass, before eventually becoming members of the Black British working class. Again, Wheatle underpins his narrative with latent Pan-African motifs: the Rodney’s are named after Walter Rodney, the Trinidadian founder of the 1901 Pan-African Conference in London. Rodney became a hero to Rastafarians, before and after being assassinated.¹⁷¹

Mainly, the story traces the fortunes of Jenny and Hortense Rodney, sisters who yearn to make their fortunes and adventure in the ‘outside world’. Hortense dreams of returning to Jamaica with her husband Cilbert as a wealthy family. Jenny, secretly in love with Cilbert, only wishes to follow in her footsteps and marries a man she doesn’t love; Jacob, who establishes the first Black church in South London. *Island Songs* is in many ways a familiar diaspora story, yet the novel’s originality comes through its articulation of the migrant experience as a transnational tradition with a direct connection to Black and British identity, tracing the lineage between then and now.

¹⁷⁰ Dery, p.182.

¹⁷¹ Alex Wheatle, ‘By Email’, 18 June 2015.

This, as Gilroy states 'is a tradition in ceaseless motion.'¹⁷² To track the generational transformation of identities is Wheatle's ultimate goal. Throughout, 'black cultural understanding' informs and enriches the lives of the characters as an expression of historical struggle against adversity, giving contextual 'meaning to their suffering.'¹⁷³

Island Songs is rich in living vessels who act as a conduit for Wheatle's Pan-African vision. Of prominence are the father of the Rodney sisters', Joseph, a descendant of Maroons, the Africans who fought enslavement and won their freedom; the Rastafarian Levi, who made his home in the hillside bush of Claremont and secretly counsels Joseph's son, David on African cultural history; and Levi's father Neville, a staunch Christian who disowns his son when he joins Rastafari, but resorts to African spiritual practices forbidden by the community in times of tribulation. Wheatle makes mention of African cultural links practiced amongst the Claremontian rural community, and the emergence of Rastafari 'led by a self-proclaimed prophet named Leonard Howell'¹⁷⁴ as a religion of choice for young people such as David, which often led to persecution and even death, as is the tragic case for Wheatle's fledgling Rastafarian character.

Although the novel is primarily concerned with the story of Hortense and Jenny, Joseph's narrative highlights the importance of history and an acceptance of a traumatic past. David leaves Claremont to live in the city and become a Rastafarian, only to be beaten and killed by the police, who see him as a heathen. When he learns of his son's death, Joseph leaves his wife and family for many years without any knowledge of where he has gone. Upon his return, Joseph is accepted by his family without question, and 'a hundred and fifty adults' gather around a nocturnal fire to hear his story, an event that makes reference to African oral storytelling tradition.¹⁷⁵ Joseph recites the tale of his Coromanty ancestor Kofi, a free Maroon who falls in love with an enslaved girl on a plantation. When it's discovered they are communicating, the girl is hobbled, a practice used by the plantocracy that involved the severing of the foot. Kofi and his Maroon compatriots wage war on the plantation owners and their staff in revenge, killing them all and freeing the disabled girl. The two marry, and she becomes Joseph's great-great grandmother, 'Firefoot'.

¹⁷² Paul Gilroy, 'Du Bois, Germany and the Politics of (Dis)Placement', in *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 122.

¹⁷³ Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', p.100.

¹⁷⁴ Alex Wheatle, 'Chapter Six', in *Island Songs* (London: Allison and Busby, 2005), p. 98.

¹⁷⁵ Wheatle, p. 160.

During his two years away, Joseph, who it's revealed is actually called Kojo, tells his listeners that his father banned any talk of Maroons from the house. Joseph's Coromanty lineage came from his mother, Panceta, who could 'trace her roots back to the Akan districts of Ghana.'¹⁷⁶ Being forced to tell Kofi's story to Joseph and the rest of her family in secret contributes to a rift between father and son that eventually forces Joseph to leave his ancestral home and sire his own family in the parish of Claremont. It's no accident that this parish is the birthplace of staunch Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. Reconciling his past and accepting the violence of his history helps Joseph to make peace with the grief of his present struggle, the murder of his son at the hands of the police. When the tale is over,

Neville, sitting beside Joseph, took a pound note from his pants. He held it aloft theatrically so everybody could see before slamming it against Joseph's forehead – an African tradition that meant Joseph had told the story well.¹⁷⁷

This is not the only instance Neville reverts to the cultural practices of his African heritage. The first occurs after the arrival of David's mutilated body from Kingston. He takes to the bush,

Accompanied only by his Bible. Angry with God, he resorted to his grandfather's secret custom that he had observed as a child. Neville, checking that nobody was spying on him, sacrificed a chicken, held it aloft to the heavens and as the blood ran down over his hands and arms, prayed to the west African river Gods to protect any future males of his family that might come into the world.¹⁷⁸

In this novel and others, Wheatle uses music as another means of demonstrating the Pan-African history and cultural links commonplace on the islands, particularly Jamaica. He re-examines this long-standing tradition in *Island Songs*, when on Harvest Sunday, the songs of praise heard in the valley are not hymns, but mento, an early blues-like precursor to reggae which involved 'quick-witted lyrics of country life and rural proverbs,' such as the cautionary tale of Mama Jeebah.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Alex Wheatle, 'Chapter Eight', in *Island Songs* (London: Allison and Busby, 2005), p. 166.

¹⁷⁷ Wheatle, p. 165.

¹⁷⁸ Wheatle, p. 93.

¹⁷⁹ Alex Wheatle, 'Chapter Four', in *Island Songs* (London: Allison and Busby, 2005), p. 65.

Mama Jeebah is older than the spine of Jamaica
She even know de old pirate Captain Morgan an' where him hide him
treasure
She was ah good girl very kind to her mudder
Her father run away from him brutal slave master
She used to speak with the same tongue as her African ancestor
Some say her family come from the de Gold Coast or it coulda be Ghana
But one day she skip church go ah forest full ah wonder
*Nuh even the Maroons or Anancy would step inna adventure*¹⁸⁰

The methodology of infusing music and song lyrics with knowledge believed essential for an African's well being in a colonial, or post-slavery world, is a popular ongoing tradition all over the Diaspora. African culture never adhered to a belief in the dissection between art and politics, news, or even stories of the day. This was exemplified during slavery, where many adapted hymns, known as Negro Spirituals, were used as a means of communicating messages between slaves, or plantations. Post-slavery the tradition continued, in the form of Mento in Jamaica, which became Ska, and in turn became Reggae. On other islands Calypso and Soca was the preferred means. Years later, musicians used this tradition to convey Pan-African political thought across the diaspora. Examples include Fela Kuti's *Gentleman*, in which Kuti sings of Africans who wear suits in Lagos heat and adopt a colonial mindset, saying; 'I no be gentleman at all O; I be Africa man, original,' and Peter Tosh's *African*, where he lectures:¹⁸¹

Don't care where you come from
 As long as you're a black man, you're an African
 No mind your nationality
 You have got the identity of an African.

'Cause if you come from Clarendon
 (You are an African)
 And if you come from Portland

¹⁸⁰ Wheatle, p. 66.

¹⁸¹ Fela Kuti, *Gentleman*, Gentleman (EMI, 1973).

(You are an African)

And if you come from Westmoreland, you're an African.¹⁸²

Wheatle consciously echoes this tradition throughout his novels, both as an acknowledgement of the political nature of the songs that framed his youth, and a means of consolidating his New African Diaspora intentions. It is an overt intertextual device that makes plain the New African Diasporic's inherent fluidity between art forms; as they have no perception of divisions between what occurs in the wider community and the artistic community, there are none between artistic disciplines. To use one example of Wheatle's command of this practice, the title of the aforementioned Brixton Rock chapter 'Catch a Fire,' in which Floyd begins his journey towards self-awareness and political agency, is taken from a Bob Marley album containing the song *Slave Driver*. The lyrics read:

Every time I 'ear di crack of di whip my blood runs cold,
I remember on di slave ship how dey brutalise your very soul,
Today dey say that we are free,
Only to be jailed in poverty.¹⁸³

By referencing this album, the songs contained within it, and reggae music as a whole, Wheatle widens the scope of his Pan-African vision, much as Rastafarian culture broadened theirs by infusing their cultural message within songs, visual art, fashion (such as t-shirts and jewellery), and of course poetry and literature.

Kwame Dawes states, 'Reggae music has an intense sense of groundedness in the historical experience of oppressed people, and more specifically, the Black people of the world [...] the connection between Africa and the history of Africa rests at the centre of its identity.'¹⁸⁴ By primarily using this music as much of the framework, and indeed the content of his novels, Wheatle harnesses the inherent Diaspora awareness contained therein to further his message; that knowledge of the 'black space' and self-education is a means of rising from an oppressive past, and present.

¹⁸² Peter Tosh, *African*, Equal Rights (London: Universal Music, 1977).

¹⁸³ Bob Marley, *Slave Driver*, *Catch a Fire* (Jamaica: Island Records, 1973).

¹⁸⁴ Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Reggae and Caribbean Poetics* (London: British Academy, 2015) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=77&v=790Yts6n7tQ>> [accessed 18 June 2015].

Conclusion

Despite the centrality of African identity, and Wheatle's usage in his fiction, Pan-African thought in music, of course, is not confined to reggae, or Rastafarian culture. The chapter headings in this thesis include songs that are examples of the wealth of musical genres across the diaspora which function according to this aspect of the New African Diaspora aesthetic, one of being 'sympathetically alert to contemporary ways of life,'¹⁸⁵, or historical ways of life. Genres hail from Jazz, to Afrobeat, to Reggae, to Electronica; but there are many more including the Blues, and Hip Hop. The pervasiveness of this methodology and contrasting critical lack is a great loss to Black British cultural studies and literary studies, and a loss to cultural and literary studies as a whole.

Alex Wheatle's fiction has proven gravitas, exemplified by the prolific nature of his output, his numerous awards, and a clear New African Diaspora Aesthetic vision. He has written works for stage and screen, and become an ambassador for Black British literature who not only nurtures and mentors Black writers, but provides a role model for working class members of the UK's diverse communities. The re-evaluation of his work in the wake of a resurgent Black Lives Matter movement and the feature film of his life as part of Steve McQueen's Small Axe series, *Alex Wheatle* (2020), begins the necessary work of delving beyond his obvious accuracy: not only to uncover more about his artistic intentions, but to validate an aesthetic long ignored. Alex Wheatle is singular in his dedication to a Caribbean influenced diaspora aesthetic that not only marks his works, but has arguably influenced a succession of writers who came after him, such as the Jamaican Curdella Forbes, and British-Jamaican Jacqueline Crooks. As such, he embodies the notion of a Pan African Aesthetic that exists across a diverse body of writers. In the next chapter, I turn to a very different writer – Helen Oyeyemi – to examine the rich complexity, and in some ways contradictory, nature of contemporary Pan African Diasporic writing.

¹⁸⁵V. R. Arana, 'Introduction'.

3. Helen Oyeyemi's New African Diaspora Aesthetic: Identity, Diaspora and Self

Helen Oyeyemi's New African Diaspora Aesthetic is an intertextual exploration of Pan-African myth and folklore set within a framework of European fairytales, legends, and Gothic texts. It's a unique, personal style Oyeyemi has cultivated ever since her debut *The Icarus Girl* (2005), and honed over time into the sharp vision driving her most recent novel, *Gingerbread* (2019). In between there have been four further works; *The Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011), and *What is Yours is Not Yours* (2015). While each novel wears its traditional European influences boldly, from titles to contents, and has been received with acclaim from the literary establishment, each bears conscious reference to the African Diaspora. It would be unreasonable to suggest that, as with Alex Wheatle, academics and critics ignore Oyeyemi's thematic and cultural intertextualities. Helen Cousins, Jessica Porter and Jane Bryce have written brilliant theses dissecting the use of transnational Yoruba motifs in her work, namely *Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's The Opposite House, Helen Oyeyemi and the Yoruba Gothic: White is for Witching, and Half and Half Children: Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel*. Correspondingly, Oyeyemi's blend of European and African myths is a central theme for many of her literary critics.

This chapter will discuss the complex nature of Oyeyemi's Pan-African vision, one in which a practical articulation of Pan-African thought is represented as complicated by a dominant Euro-centric culture that negates, consciously or otherwise, such articulation in favour of assimilation. Oyeyemi's fiction approaches this assimilation in the context of an engagement with notions of selfhood, her conscious engagement with the New African Diaspora Aesthetic advancing diasporic multiplicity and intellectual transgression of predetermined cultural norms to allow the possibility of harmonious intersections between European and African traditions.

Telling it Slant: A Pan-African Outsiders' Perspective

Oyeyemi's focus on the exploration African heterogeneity via a perspective of lost or disrupted cultural narratives echoes Stuart Hall's 'critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute "what we really are" or rather [...] "What we have become,"'¹⁸⁶ Hall is keen to stress that this position qualifies, but does not replace, a complimentary position of oneness at the centre of a Pan-African political vision.¹⁸⁷ This vision is in line, as seen previously, with Alex Wheatle's representational strategy.¹⁸⁸ Oyeyemi shares with Wheatle the location of her work in a transnational and/or Black Atlantic context that Hall defines as the 'awareness of the black [British] experience as a diaspora experience, and the consequences this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and "cut and mix."¹⁸⁹

An investigation of Oyeyemi's work, as Wheatle's, must begin with Hall's 'enunciated' location. Adoption of this methodology makes it necessary to recognise the biographical aspects of her fiction. Raised on a council estate in Deptford, she 'alternated between "quiet" and "rebellious"' at school.¹⁹⁰ She suffered depression and tried to commit suicide by an overdose of pills at 15. Her mother worked for London Underground and her father as a supply teacher. At Cambridge University, weakened by her struggles with depression, she developed an interest in the lives of Catholic saints. After gaining a second class honours degree in political and social sciences, Oyeyemi moved to Paarl, just outside of Cape Town, and spent five months volunteering at a centre for children born with HIV. It was there that she was inspired to write *White is for Witching*.

Nadine O'Regan admits prospective readers might find 'the darkness from the old days bleeding through her work.'¹⁹¹ Indeed, depression forms a dominant theme

¹⁸⁶ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 212.

¹⁸⁷ Hall, p. 212.

¹⁸⁸ Hall, p. 211.

¹⁸⁹ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 170.

¹⁹⁰ Nadine O'Regan, 'Helen Oyeyemi SBP Interview', *Tut.Silk. Tut*, 2009

<<http://nadineoregan.wordpress.com/2009/06/09/helen-oyeyemi-sbp-interview/>> [accessed 2 December 2014].

¹⁹¹ O'Regan.

throughout Oyeyemi's novels, from Jessamy's tantrums, to Maya's hysteria and Miranda's struggle with the eating disorder pica. This reflection on complex psychologies is intertwined with representation of Black British identity, to present a complex, troubled vision in which notions of home and belonging are frequently problematised.

In a 2011 interview, Oyeyemi confessed that during her Deptford childhood she believed she would 'never get out of there' and 'hated, hated, hated' London when growing up: although she felt retrospectively fond of the city since publication and self-imposed exile. She spoke of the city's gentrification in glowing terms, expressing delight that Deptford has become more 'Shoreditchy.'¹⁹² The urge to spread her wings clearly fuels her transnational output; she has lived for brief stints in New York, Paris, Toronto, Kenya, Berlin, the Czech Republic, and Washington. At the time of writing, she resides in Prague, where she has lived for the last six years.

Oyeyemi's previous nomadic lifestyle and curiosity contributes to the exploration of syncretism that transforms African cultures through a shared, migratory in some cases, cultural framework. She seems particularly drawn to manifestations of cultural and spiritual Pan-Africanism outside of Britain, such as her exploration of links between the African-Cuban religion Santeria and Nigerian cosmology in *The Opposite House*, and her consistent use of African myths and legends in her debut *The Icarus Girl*, and also *White is for Witching*, *Mr Fox*, and *Boy, Snow, Bird*. These and certain other works often serve the dual purpose of exploring the outsider's position in cultures or with characters where dominant views of Blackness prevail: a mixed heritage Nigerian-English girl in Africa, a Nigerian heritage student in Dover, an Afro-Cuban family in London, or a pale-skinned family of African Americans passing for White.

These concerns often cause Oyeyemi's characters to suffer from a resulting trauma they struggle to overcome during the course of her fiction. Quite often, mental illness becomes a thematic device in the work, which further complicates these African reference points. In particular, 'magical realist' elements in the novels, often manifestations of Pan-African, or African cultural practice, become entwined with psychological discourses that problematises their legitimacy and value. Characters who express an overt display of connectivity with Africa, for better or for worse, are

¹⁹² Alexandra Masters, 'Helen Oyeyemi: Free Spirit', *Newbooksmag.Com*, 2011 <<http://www.newbooksmag.com/left-menu/author-coverage/helen-oyeyemi-big-interview.php>> [accessed 3 December 2014].

frequently seen as mentally ill, even by those who are themselves of African heritage. Jess from *The Icarus Girl*, is sent to a child psychiatrist when she's possessed by TillyTilly. Her Grandfather Gbenga attempts to bring her before a traditional medicine woman only to cause a violent argument with Jess's father, who calls him 'insane.'¹⁹³ Sade, Miranda Silver's Nigerian housekeeper in *White is for Witching* is an unfathomable ghost-like presence whose 'madness' is never described in full, only alluded in furtive movements and whispered, riddle-like advice: she is an enigmatic Juju conjurer one moment, proud Nigerian immigrant the next. Chabella, Maja's mother in *The Opposite House*, worships Santeria gods at her self-made alter, but is chastised by her husband who labels them 'historical artefacts.'¹⁹⁴ He breaks the alter,¹⁹⁵ accusing her of trying to poison him¹⁹⁶ when she tries to treat his pain with traditional herbal medicine; after ingesting it, he vomits for almost half an hour.¹⁹⁷

Like many of her characters, Oyeyemi wrestles personally with this complexity of being of African heritage in primarily Western context, a struggle expressed by her fusion of European myths, legends and literary traditions with their African counterparts. This is most obviously seen in *White is For Witching*, placed as it is 'amongst a long line of Gothic tales' and *Mr Fox*, which 'jumbles together variations on the Bluebeard myth.'^{198, 199} Even so, this fusion is a pervasive intent of style at play in all of her work, and could be taken to reflect the dominance of Eurocentric fairy tales and culture for the wider African diaspora, and how difficult it is to be taken 'seriously' as an author without making reference to them. Generally European myths are centralised in Oyeyemi's stories, as Jessica Porter notes with reference to *White is for Witching*, saying Oyememi 'allows European witchcraft to prevail... situating the novel more than ever as part of European Gothic tradition.'²⁰⁰ Both in the texts themselves and more recently in interviewed discussions of *What is Yours is Not Yours* and

¹⁹³ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Ill', in *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 313.

¹⁹⁴ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Mama Proserpine and Her Aspects', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 36.

¹⁹⁵ Oyeyemi, p. 23.

¹⁹⁶ Oyeyemi, p. 41.

¹⁹⁷ Oyeyemi, p. 43.

¹⁹⁸ Jessica Porter, 'Of Witches, Vampires and Fairy Tales: Transatlantic Gothic Hybridity in Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching*' (2012).

¹⁹⁹ Justine Jordan, 'Mr Fox by Helen Oyeyemi – Review', *The Guardian* (London, 11 June 2011), Online edition, section Culture <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/11/mr-fox-helen-oyeyemi-review>> [accessed 26 April 2021].

²⁰⁰ Jessica Porter, 'Of Witches, Vampires and Fairy Tales: Transatlantic Gothic Hybridity in Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching*' (2012).

Gingerbread, Oyeyemi expresses a certain distancing from the clear and distinct diaspora aesthetic fusion she was credited for in the beginning of her career, in favour of one in which Western literary traditions are further privileged.

In a 2016 *Good Reads* interview Oyeyemi says that she's 'getting closer to the type of writing I had hoped to do', speaking fondly of the European cities that inspired the story collection, Paris and Prague, as 'so old!' Her literary influences include *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and her late Spanish publisher, who never read the collection. When asked whether she has any connections with Nigeria and its literature or folktales Oyeyemi says simply, 'No, no connection.'²⁰¹ In discussion of her latest novel *Gingerbread*, she talks of using an Emily Dickenson recipe to make the biscuits, citing the places in London she misses as the 'cultural gems'; the RA, the Wellcome Collection, the Tate, the VA.²⁰² Nowhere does she express a connection with any aspect of her African cultural heritage, even though it is a compelling and key feature of her earlier works.

Although this might seem somewhat contradictory for a novelist famed for work 'rooted in Yoruba cosmology,' as noted earlier in this thesis, it is a perspective commonplace within some aspects of Black British literature and its peoples.²⁰³ As Jayne Bryce notes, writers such as Oyeyemi 'are aware of the extent to which class determines perspective.'²⁰⁴ This awareness is found distinctly in the Pan-African aesthetic Oyeyemi espouses in her early work, where a constant tectonic rubbing of two cultural plates is very obviously at play. Of course, the perspective Oyeyemi writes from is both fluid and individual, changing over time and quite particular to personal experience. It can, and will, differ vastly from one writer to another even if they possess shared similar experiences. Still, it is quite possible that, as estranged from her adopted city of London and hometown of Deptford as Oyeyemi became, particularly after attending Cambridge at such a young age, immersed in the magic of classical literature and the supposed promise of freedom it held, Oyeyemi has sought to move closer

²⁰¹ Anderson Tepper, 'Interview with Helen Oyeyemi', *Goodreads.Com*, 2016
<https://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/1111.Helen_Oyeyemi> [accessed 26 April 2021].

²⁰² Akbar Arifa, 'Helen Oyeyemi: "I Had Such a Lovely Time Dating Different Cities"', *The Guardian* (London, 2 March 2019), Online edition, section Culture
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-gingerbread-interview>> [accessed 26 April 2021].

²⁰³ Jane Bryce, "'Half and Half Children': Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel", *Project Muse*, 39.2 (2008), p. 53 <muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/summary/v039/39.2.bryce.html>.

²⁰⁴ Bryce, p.57 <muse.jhu.edu/journals/ral/summary/v039/39.2.bryce.html>.

towards the locations and cultural references that made her feel she belonged. Without a deeper knowledge of the author personally, it's difficult to say.

However, it is interesting to note that despite these disavowals, in each of her earlier novels Oyeyemi chooses not to negate the necessity of Pan-African cultural practices: 'if you forget your ancestors you forget yourself,' Maja's Grandmother tells her Aunt.²⁰⁵ Instead, she examines the difficulty of keeping these cultural practices, and by extension a connection with Africa relative and alive, when they are besieged by negative forces from outside the culture and within. As Cousins suggests, such representations serve as a warning that an exclusive approach to African diaspora cultures by measuring, rather than celebrating, difference 'erodes the ability of non-white and/or immigrant populations to stand against oppressive forces by insinuating otherness into the black community.'²⁰⁶

This problematic relationship between culture and self-made identity manifests in Oyeyemi's characters repeatedly occurs in her novels. Fractured identities are central to Oyeyemi's oeuvre, particularly the clash of cultures arising from a 'complex heritage.'²⁰⁷ A clear interplay of European and African diaspora cultural practice, its convergences and divergences, is inherent in her work, which uses African heritage dialect (particularly Black British) and makes overt diasporic references, from Fela Kuti and NWA, to Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Ade.^{208, 209, 210} However, this knowledge of European cultural practice is rarely interrogated by her exclusively female protagonists; they are familiar with Kipling, Lorca, and Jung, yet know comparatively little about African diaspora literature; very few authors are read, or even mentioned. Though her characters seem mostly unaware of these gaps in their knowledge, others like Jess's grandfather Gbenga have Achebe and Soyinka on their shelves; and a subtle distinction is made.²¹¹ Oyeyemi's African descended protagonists are steeped in European tradition, identifying as British, English, or American. They are often unable to speak African languages or the patois of their communities, or recognise significant

²⁰⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Mama Proserpine and Her Aspects', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 38.

²⁰⁶ Helen Cousins, 'Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*', *Postcolonial Text*, 7.3 (2012), p.7.

²⁰⁷ Cousins, p.1.

²⁰⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Mama Proserpine and Her Aspects', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 40.

²⁰⁹ Helen Oyeyemi, '17', in *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 226.

²¹⁰ Oyeyemi, '17', p. 227.

²¹¹ Oyeyemi, p. 49.

African diaspora cultural practices. Many are uneasy when faced with these practices, and experience difficulties reconciling them against the overwhelming pressure of an 'opposite culture'. Such unease can be found in Oyeyemi's characters Ore, Brown, and Maja.

Ore, the university friend and lover of protagonist Miranda Silver, is introduced to the beverage Supermalt by Sade. Nigerian by heritage, English by birth, and adopted by English parents, Ore has never tasted the drink, even though it's consumption is a diaspora cultural practice almost as commonplace as drinking Coca Cola. When she tries the malt, Sade guesses from her response that she'd prefer a Guinness, while Ore thinks it 'tasted of sugared vomit.'²¹² Earlier in the novel, Ore refuses to join her university's Nigerian Society mailing list when asked. Being identified as Nigerian upsets her, but she readily signs up for Union membership because 'Ben and Jerry's sold at the Union at cheaper prices than Sainbury's'.²¹³ Afterwards, Miranda asks; 'Don't you care where you come from?' to which the girl replies, 'Er, no not really.'²¹⁴

Oyeyemi tries not to create a one-dimensional caricature, and has Ore express some interest in diaspora myths that do not form her direct heritage. Her adoptive mother, who long feared she might miss the stories her birth mother told her, gifts Ore a book of Caribbean legends that she already has, but didn't bring to university. Ore re-reads her favourite, the tale of the soucouyant who flies from her body at will and consumes the souls of others, but the story, given and not sought out, is the only diaspora myth she knows. In contrast, she is well versed in European gothic fairy tales, reads critical essays on *Dracula*, and notes the gothic novels on Miranda's bookshelf as 'quite good – Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. Perrault, Anderson, LeFanu, Wilkie Collins, M.T.A Hoffman'.²¹⁵ Her knowledge of ancient English tribes even surpasses that of Miranda and her twin brother Eliot:

Eliot shrugged. 'Ancient distinctions, man. Ever since the Angles and the Saxons...'
'What happened to them,' Miranda sighed. 'The Angles and the Saxons, and the Druids and the Celts and the Picts and the... who else?'
'Jutes,' I supplied, bored.

²¹² Helen Oyeyemi, 'The Midnight', in *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 209.

²¹³ Oyeyemi, p. 149.

²¹⁴ Oyeyemi, p. 183.

²¹⁵ Oyeyemi, p.160.

Miranda's question was rhetorical, but Sade came in and answered with a great deal of satisfaction: 'They died out oh.'²¹⁶

Helen Cousins' asserts that Ore's cultural positioning represents a refusal to be forced into a Black identity that might call her Englishness into question.²¹⁷ This may be true, but it's also of note that Englishness (and sometimes White identity in general) and Black identities are often referred to as mutually exclusive, self-defined choices in this and other works. Sade knows as much about the Jutes as Ore. She has a new British passport, but wears tribal scars on her cheeks, and is surprised when Ore doesn't know Supermalt. Despite where she has made her home, her knowledge of English history and recent passport, Sade identifies exclusively as Nigerian. She does not display any rejection of her cultural identity. Instead, she speaks of ancestors and uses traditional *aje* witchcraft to ward off evil spirits. Ore, by comparison, is even reluctant to embrace her Nigerian heritage in her presence, putting her hands over her ears when the housekeeper reveals the Yoruba meaning of her name - 'friend'.²¹⁸

Nevertheless, she cannot block out the knowledge, hearing what Sade says in spite of herself, a dramatic action that emphasises her reluctance to allow a binary identity, one that will encompass the English and the African. Likewise Sade, despite citizenship, claims a singular identity, a large part of which is formed by an awareness of how the host country views her. Sade makes regular trips to the Immigration Removal centre, protesting on behalf of those who have not had her good fortune.²¹⁹ She believes she cannot be British, because British society will not allow it. The fraught nature of diaspora experience is disruptive for both women.

In *Mr Fox*, a chapter that could be read a stand-alone short story, *like this*, the author introduces a Yoruba woman known only as Brown, who is in love with an English man. After an encounter with a woman called Blue, who claims to be her man's true love, Brown sits before a desk, hands full of fountain pens and tries to write. But she can't. A piece of paper is pushed under her door. It says '*write the stories*'. Brown tries to write *once upon a time*, but can't go further. More notes are pushed under the door, emphasising the same order. Money and food is given until a man called

²¹⁶ Oyeyemi, p. 208.

²¹⁷ Helen Cousins, 'Helen Oyeyemi and the Yoruba Gothic: White Is for Witching', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.1 (2012), 54.

²¹⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, 'And Curiouser', in *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 211.

²¹⁹ Oyeyemi, 'Jennifer Silver', p.106.

Reynardine appears, scaring her rigid, and says she can have what her heart desires, if she will just write the stories. Reynardine's voice changes into an accent she recognises as familiar, and then she can see and feel people all around, 'crowding her':²²⁰

Faces she recognised from family photo albums, some she had never seen before, old ones leaning on walking sticks. They were all familiar. They all knew her, and she knew them. Then they relented and faded away.

'We're here,' they said through Reynardine's lips.

'What do you want?'

'You are Yoruba.'

'Am I?'

'So you think your accent fools us?'

'But I can't even speak Yoruba!'

'That doesn't fool us either.'

'All right,' she said. 'I know, but look – I'm in Paris at the moment.'²²¹

Brown's ancestors want her stories. She refuses to do it. 'It doesn't matter what language they're in, or what they're about; they belong to us,' the elders tell her.²²² Again, Oyeyemi blends traditional African ancestral myth, a common literary diaspora aesthetic, and similar English legends. The ballad of Reynardine travelled throughout the European diaspora in much the same way as African tales, across the Atlantic Ocean. The creature is traditionally known as a Victorian era werefox who attracts beautiful women so he can take them to his castle. Folklorist Stephen Winck cites Herbert Hughs' claim that an old woman told him, 'Reynardine was a fae'ry in Ireland who turns into the shape of a fox.'²²³ Winck explains that Reynardine's morphological roots 'should mean "fox-like", or "little fox"'.²²⁴

Oyeyemi's Reynardine is a wide-eyed, white-haired trickster figure. The trickster is a reoccurring mythical character in African Diaspora narratives, appearing in traditional folk tales as Brer Rabbit for African Americans, Anansi for Caribbeans, and Elegba for Nigerians: another example of Oyeyemi's blend of African diaspora and

²²⁰ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Like This', in *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 89.

²²¹ Oyeyemi, p.89.

²²² Oyeyemi, p. 90.

²²³ Stephen Winck, 'A. L. Lloyd and Reynardine: Authenticity and Authorship in the Afterlife of a British Broadside Ballad', *Folklore* 115, 2004, p.291.

²²⁴ Winck, p.297.

European mythic intertextuality. The aesthetic device of the trickster, a prevalent one for African diaspora literature, illustrates the connections between two seemingly opposed, or incompatible traditions. The author herself performs a ‘trickster’ role for readers. While characters are often unable to connect ‘being with self’ and ‘being with other’, the double consciousness that is a product of hybrid identity, her novels reconcile those identities by examining and reconnecting shared cultural links in literary form.

Maya, Oyeyemi’s narrator in *The Opposite House*, is described by Cousins as, ‘unplaced by, or outside the black discourses of the novel.’²²⁵ Maya searches fruitlessly for a means of articulating a simple ‘Black’ identity, free of compartmentalized subject positions which seek to limit and ‘box in’ her identity choices. For Maya, Black equals the freedom to be whoever she wants, even if she doesn’t quite know what that is. She wishes to recognise and find herself simultaneously, not be restrained by others, most keenly the host population, who dictate a response to immigrants gleaned from their position as a former colonial power. But stark race hierarchy is also determined by other immigrants; at school, Maja is told she is favoured by the African girls over Dominique, whose parents are Trinidadian, because Maja is Cuban. Still, she realises that they are both seen as distinct from the other girls because they ‘were the slave girls.’²²⁶

This episode places emphasis on the fracture that occurs in the diaspora as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, an opposition to the inherent unity of a Pan-Africanist political stance. As Maya’s Grandmother said, they have forgotten their ancestors and forgotten themselves, in as much as they are ignorant of their own unified pasts as descendants of African heritage. Here, Oyeyemi’s demonstrates Hall’s ‘difference and rupture,’ a dominant feature of Pan-African experience, particularly in the Caribbean, by which:²²⁷

Each [island] has negotiated its economic, political, and cultural dependency differently. And this “difference”, whether we like it or not, is already inscribed in our cultural identities.²²⁸

²²⁵ Cousins, ‘Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Opposite House*’, p.1.

²²⁶ Helen Oyeyemi, ‘Henry s. Foote’, in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 97.

²²⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, p.213.

²²⁸ Hall, p. 214.

Maya not only feels invasion from the outside. She is ‘invaded and displaced’ by her pregnancy.²²⁹ Her feelings about the child inside her grows into something akin to the Nigerian belief in *abiku* – the evil child spirit of Yoruba cosmology that takes food for itself and fellow spirits, causing its host to die. Oyeyemi explores this theme in *The Icarus Girl*, but in Maya the possession seems more questionable. When Jess interacts with TillyTilly these interactions have a marked affect on people in the real world, like her father, who is made ill by the spirit and Siobhan, who asks to meet Jess’ friend and *feels* rather than sees her, sensing badness.²³⁰ At the books end, Jess vows to *get* TillyTilly like the spirit has *got* the people she cares about, leaping into its unyielding flesh and ‘back into herself. Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up.’²³¹ With each encounter, despite the efforts of adults to try and prove contrary, Oyeyemi alludes that TillyTilly’s possession of Jess is real.

With Maya, however, no such allusion occurs, and Oyeyemi is careful to balance between the known and unknown. When her child demands ‘seeds and fresh fruit and oily fish and folic acid and carefulness and stuff,’ is it perhaps the normal function of any embryonic child, or something more sinister?²³² A figment of Maya’s imagination, or evidence of spiritual possession? In the opening chapter Maya confesses to being overtaken by hysteria on occasion, which is a window into her psychological perspective. Maya fights for possession of her body and also her mind, but the ambiguity of her position; one in which, as Cousins maintains ‘cultural atrophy is inevitable under circumstances where assimilation is expected from immigrant communities,’ is not hers alone, but is shared by the majority of Oyeyemi’s characters.²³³ There is very little evidence of assimilation being forced on them. These are self-determined choices, formed either by engagement with the dominant culture as explored in *White is For Witching*, or the different and ruptured identities of people from the African diaspora, as explored in *The Opposite House*.

Helen Oyeyemi’s New Diaspora Aesthetic

²²⁹ Cousins, ‘Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Opposite House*’.

²³⁰ Helen Oyeyemi, ‘20’, in *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 260.

²³¹ Oyeyemi, p. 322.

²³² Oyeyemi, p. 8.

²³³ Helen Cousins, ‘Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Opposite House*’, *Postcolonial Text*, 7.3 (2012), 3.

Each of Oyeyemi's works investigates the intersections between African heritage cultural practice and European cultural practice, and the issues brought to bear from 'importing a foreign culture', while being inextricably formed by the 'indigenous' culture wherever that may exist; tracing the fault lines and meeting points of an increasingly recognisable landscape for a new generation of Black British contemporary writers and readers.

Due to this recognition, it does not, as John McLeod suggests, do a 'disservice to their achievements' to recognise such works as Black British texts because of an ability to address 'transcultural consciousness.'^{234,235} This argument strays too close to the 'warning' in Oyeyemi's work implicitly addressed by Cousins. Black British experience is complex enough to incorporate transcultural consciousness as integral to its articulation, whether localised or globalised. Such consciousness is an essential component of a New African Diaspora Aesthetic. Works are Black British *and* transcultural because of a focal African heritage experience in existence whether works turn their gaze outwards towards Africa, Europe, America or the Caribbean, or inwards to form a 'settler's' experience - a vision centred on Britain, bringing the traditions, cultures, and cosmologies of the continents and islands to a new home.

Homi K. Bhabha asserts:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.²³⁶

²³⁴ John McLeod, 'Fantasy Relationships', in *A Black British Canon?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 95.

²³⁵ McLeod, p.95.

²³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction', in *The Location of Culture*, Eleventh (London: Routledge, 2010), p.3.

Oyeyemi's works are actively engaged in this process of negation and authorization; as such, they interrogate Black diaspora experience in order to gain understanding of what Hall describes as the 'truly traumatic character' of *on-going* colonial experience.²³⁷

Traditionally, diaspora aesthetics that are celebrated within the community often tend to focus on aspects of cohesion regarding this trauma, rather than loss. It is painful yes, confusing also. But the results are often successful, and ultimately highlight the outstanding ability of the postcolonial subject to *survive*. The colonial experience was not one that was asked for or warranted, and yet still we persist. Diaspora aesthetics that mostly achieve mainstream success outside of the community tend to concentrate on aspects of loss or cultural confusion. Both perspectives, of course, are valid. But it is the dominance of the second over the first that becomes most troubling, as that dominance misrepresents and contradicts the truth contained within the celebratory logic that underpins discussions of hybridity undertaken by Hall, Gilroy, and so many others. In this respect, Oyeyemi's examination of hybrid identity differs somewhat from texts that perform according to a traditional diaspora aesthetic, principally by its awareness of the cultures, beliefs and modes of representation that are lost to assimilation, or maintained despite efforts to deny their existence, and the ability of her work to unify Pan-African values with European sensibilities: both of which display a clear indication of Oyeyemi's New African Diaspora Aesthetic.

Two episodes in *The Opposite House* make this evident. The first is a scene where Tomas, Maya's brother, who trains as a runner, smears his face with white paint in order to run. When Maya first sees him run like this she doesn't recognise him, and thinks 'the boy is in front, his face laced on one side with a frothy comma of white paint, [he] is leaping far ahead.'²³⁸ Later, Maya sees him applying the face paint. When he offers her some, she notes; 'It scares me, the thought of him choosing his armour already.'²³⁹ However, when he explains to his sister, 'I run almost twice as fast with this stuff on you know. I run like no one can hold me,' she allows him to apply the paint on her, and 'watches her face disappear.'²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 213.

²³⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Mama Proserpine and Her Aspects', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 53.

²³⁹ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Floods Served to Us in Bowls', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 209.

²⁴⁰ Oyeyemi, p.209.

The symbolism is suggestive of Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952); Maya is aware of her brother's, and her own, loss of self, and how dangerous it is for their self-esteem. Yet she is unable to argue against Tomas' equating his speed with the paint that masks his real identity, or to stop applying it herself. She already knows that Tomas first wore the paint after having an argument with a Columbian boy at school who questioned his Cuban authenticity. The remaining boys in his class leap to his defence as they have watched *Roots* in History class the previous week, booing the Columbian and telling him not to pick on a slave's son.²⁴¹ Learning this contributes to Maya's feeling of being placeless, without roots or even a notion of blackness as a communal refuge, as her childhood memories of Cuba grow fragmentary and unreliable.

The second episode is an abstract representation of this unreliable relationship with her homeland, denoting her disconnection with her past, and involves a chapters of dual narrative interspersed with Maja's story. In these, the goddess Yemaya (note the similarity to Maya) an Orisha of the Cuban Santeria faith, has travelled from Yoruba land to Cuba and finds herself in the somewherehouse, a metaphorical diaspora abode. Here, doors lead off between Lagos, London and Cuba. Other Orisha leave the somewhere house to go to London, but once they arrive, they do not know who they are. Earlier in the novel, Yemaya, now called Aya, cannot recognise her family members of gods and goddesses, and she 'did not know them by name.'²⁴² Aya finds Tayo, but when she tries two names, Tayo and Elegua, he rejects them, before answering to the name Echun and breaking down in tears.

Aya learns that 'the Lagos door is nailed shut.'²⁴³ She cannot go back, her connection to the place she came from is lost; even her name has changed. The powers of the Orishas fade. Eventually, Aya burns down the somewherehouse. The Orishas' failure to move from the African continent to the African diaspora is coupled with an enactment of Gayatri Spivak's 'epistemic violence,' channelled as Fanon describes, not from outside but inside 'black skin', symbolised by Aya's burning of the somewherehouse.²⁴⁴ This more literal violence is another example of Oyeyemi's examination of the inability to reconcile diaspora culture and traditions with a lived reality as immigrants and the descendants of immigrants. The conflict for her characters

²⁴¹ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Unto the Little', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 56.

²⁴² Oyeyemi, p. 114.

²⁴³ Oyeyemi, p. 250.

²⁴⁴ Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grosberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 280.

comes when an intellectual knowledge of their heritage is set against the application of that knowledge in the real world, where dominant culture places such heritage outside the rubric of what it means to be 'normal'. With the internalisation of self as other, it becomes unnecessary to police assimilation from the outside. Aya burns down the somewherehouse by her own violation. There are no overt opposing forces that make her carry out this act.

This 'cultural atrophy' leads Oyeyemi's characters, while professing self-knowledge, to be faced with disconcerting cultural blind-spots.²⁴⁵ Ore, Brown and Maya forgo, or find it difficult to form in Maya's case, connections with their roots, precipitating a process of assimilation in which they *choose* to leave notions of diaspora and belonging behind. 'This expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms,' Hall suggests.²⁴⁶ Deformation occurs when a people are subjected to the ideology that they are subversions of the norm, and respond with a rejection of the idea of cultural affinity, or 'oneness', in an attempt to be part of the host culture. To forge connections between differing aspects of diaspora identity is seen as implausible, limiting and un-conducive to the goal of assimilation necessary to be viewed by a wider society, or even by themselves, as British.

And yet, in key places Oyeyemi posits that assimilation, the forgetting of one's past willingly or otherwise, is not beneficial, and only reconnection brings her characters rewards. When Jess leaps into TillyTilly, it 'hurt them both burningly,' and yet Jess, in forcing connection with even this negative aspect of her heritage, wakes herself, perhaps banishing the depression she possessed long before TillyTilly possessed her.²⁴⁷ Tomas runs a final race wearing his white face paint, only to stumble and ends in fifth place.²⁴⁸ Afterwards, Maya stands before Chabella's repaired Santaria altar, wondering how much of her grandmother's blood is in her.²⁴⁹ Brown writes the stories of her ancestors, things she 'didn't know she knew' and wins back her husband.²⁵⁰ Ore escapes from the malevolent racist force in Miranda Silver's house by encountering Sade, who offers simple instructions for her freedom.²⁵¹ Each character

²⁴⁵ Cousins, 'Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*'.

²⁴⁶ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation'.

²⁴⁷ Oyeyemi, 'Ill', p.322.

²⁴⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Ventured All (upon a Throw)', in *The Opposite House* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 257.

²⁴⁹ Oyeyemi p. 258.

²⁵⁰ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Like This', in *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 91.

²⁵¹ Helen Oyeyemi, 'Who Do You Believe?', *White Is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 231.

ends their narrative journey by reconnecting with their heritage, however benign that connection may be. Rejection often results in disillusion, failure, or an outburst of negative actions, such as Aya's burning of the somewherehouse.

Nowhere is this ethos more apparent, or well realised, than Oyeyemi's novel, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). At first glance, the novel could be read much as Oyeyemi's previous books, inventive contemporary reworks of European fairy tale traditions. Snow White's tale is immediately re-enacted with the opening line - 'Nobody warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy' – a reference to the magic mirror the evil step-mother gazes into as a means of gauging her beauty.²⁵² The narrator, Boy, is also beautiful, but the victim of an abusive father. When she runs away from New York City to the small town of Flax Hill, she marries a widower, Arturo Whitman, who has one daughter, Snow. Boy, like the rest of Flax Hill, is beguiled by Snow until she has a child for Arturo with dark skin – Bird. The Whitman family are light-skinned Blacks who have been passing as White for two generations. To protect Bird and perhaps make up for the previous wrongdoings of the family, Boy sends Snow away to live with her dark-skinned Aunt, Clara Baxter, who was exiled by the Whitmans' as a young woman.

The wicked step-mother/mother theme reoccurs in several guises. Boy takes on the role when she sends Snow into exile with the Baxters. Towards the end of the novel it's discovered Boy's abusive father was a transgender woman who fell pregnant with Boy after she was raped at college. And yet Oyeyemi again makes careful use of her fairytale themes and motifs to convey the complex mechanics of race politics. In this novel, legalised American apartheid, Jim Crow segregation, and the historical race phenomena of 'passing'.

Sending Snow into exile is the only way for Boy to deal with her horror and growing realisation that 'it's not whiteness that sets Them against Us, but the worship of Whiteness.'²⁵³ She's always known African Americans were subject to lesser treatment, but never considered this might affect anyone close to her, let alone her daughter. Terrified, she banishes her step-daughter in the belief that her biological Black daughter can only avoid the psychological damage of being with other if there is mastery, that is to say a comfort, of being with self.

²⁵² Helen Oyeyemi, 'One Two Three', in *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 3.

²⁵³ Oyeyemi, p. 275.

Even with her best intentions, the White supremacist ideology of the day causes Boy to make assumptions based on internal fears. She mistakes a young man who is teaching a parakeet to say *Fuck whitey* with Kazim, a child who regularly visits the bookstore where she works, despite knowing him well.²⁵⁴ Boy cannot tell the boys apart, and when she learns of her mistake comments; ‘What can I do for my daughter? One day soon a wall will come up between us and I won’t be able to follow her behind it.’²⁵⁵ She concludes, ‘we beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship.’²⁵⁶ Her rejection of White supremacist ideology is empathised by the act of sending her step-daughter to live with her Aunt, and yet everywhere Snow goes, including the Baxter’s home, she is worshipped. Snow, recognising this, submits both to her exile and the truth of her African heritage.

Oyeyemi subtly writes an African American society that bears all the heterogeneous traits of a diaspora community, even in its segregated, post-slavery past. Sidonie, another teenager who visits the bookstore, is said to have a mother so beautiful that she inspired a painting on the side of a fighter jets flown by African-American pilots - ‘Sidonie, whose coloured father had taken just one look at her Caribbean mother and fallen in love?’²⁵⁷ Reference is made to ancestral African American sporting and literary heroes Jesse Owens, Frederick Douglas and Langston Hughes. This inclusion of diaspora communities, an American history of Jim Crow segregation and the most infamous men in African-American history all conform to Morrison’s criteria of what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor, as does Oyeyemi’s choice to tell a story which is not directly influenced by her own heritage. The awareness of diaspora heterogeneity and overt presence of the ancestors are consistent throughout Oyeyemi’s works, and are defining traits of the New African Diaspora Aesthetic.

Oyeyemi seems particularly keen to compare this momentous period of African-American history with contemporary times, saying; ‘I feel as if we’re still in that era. There are still many ways in which it is horrific not to be the norm.’²⁵⁸ Her observation is not confined to the US, and seems driven, in part, by her own experiences

²⁵⁴ Oyeyemi, p. 88.

²⁵⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, ‘One Two Three’, in *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 139.

²⁵⁶ Oyeyemi, ‘One Two Three’ p.139.

²⁵⁷ Oyeyemi, ‘One Two Three’, p. 75.

²⁵⁸ Annalisa Quinn, ‘The Professionally Haunted Life Of Helen Oyeyemi’, *NPR Books*, 2014

<<http://www.npr.org/2014/03/07/282065410/the-professionally-haunted-life-of-helen-oyeyemi>> [accessed 16 December 2014].

of race, but also the aesthetics of beauty as defined by race. In 'The Professionally Haunted Life of Helen Oyeyemi,' special mention is again made of her suicidal teenage thoughts, in that she carries 'the wounds of her teenage years' today.²⁵⁹ She speaks of boys calling her 'ugly' on the bus home from school, and of how she would cry until she began to wonder why it mattered so much.²⁶⁰ Her belief in the power of storytelling to define or reinforce the reader's worldview is apparent when she speaks of a Czech fairytale where a princess is courted by a magician. When she refuses him, the magician turns her into a black woman. She tells how the story made her cry, because 'the worst thing the teller of the tale could imagine was being black.'²⁶¹

When seen in this regard, Oyeyemi's use of mirrors as a motif pertains not only to the fairy-tale Snow White, but also includes an ambivalent self-image common in many post-slavery diaspora identities, one which is predicated on skin colour, or hierarchy of skin tone, perhaps even the writer's own. Bird's affliction, to not be seen by mirrors seems literal enough, though her reality is one of being a Black teenager in a family of African-Americans light enough to pass as White. The allegory can be seen in the passage:

Sometimes mirrors can't find me. I'll go into a room with a mirror in it and look around, and I'm not there. Not all the time, not most of the time, but often enough. Sometimes people are there, but nobody ever notices that my reflection's a no show. Or maybe they decide not to notice because it's too weird.²⁶²

Bird's inability to see her reflection brings her place in society into stark focus. She is destined to become an adult whose primary function is to be invisible; indeed, her familial situation means she is already partially avoided, unseen. Racism is the root cause of this 'unseeing', not only within the interpersonal relationships of the host culture, but in books, films, television, theatre, and advertising. This was even more prevalent in the segregated South, where being Black necessitated that African-Americans make themselves unseen, or face the risk of abject violence. Oyeyemi uses the segregation of the past to make commentary on the modern day, when three quarters

²⁵⁹ Quinn.

²⁶⁰ Quinn.

²⁶¹ Quinn.

²⁶² Helen Oyeyemi, 'One Two Three', in *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 156.

of White people in the US claim not to have any Black friends, and 90% of Whites in the UK say they have few or no Black friends.^{263,264} The invisibility of African heritage people in majority White spaces goes beyond the personal, as detailed above. Oyeyemi provides a solution by depicting characters that combat this deficit by sheer strength of will, and the recognition of their struggle by others.

Snow, in a letter to Bird, speaks of their Great-Aunt Effie, a dark-skinned relation she has met while in exile:

She thinks there are treasures that were within her reach, but her skin stole them from her. She thinks she could have been somebody. But she is somebody. Somebody who chased bullies away with brooms, somebody who saved for years so Aunt Clara could go to nursing school without having to ask her mother for the money. [...] A woman like Effie Whitman thinking she could have been somebody... that pushes icicles all the way down my spine.²⁶⁵

Here, Oyeyemi implores her readers to witness the unseen injury that segregation and racism doles out to those whose skin happens to be Black, and has done for centuries. Simultaneously, she makes a strong assertion for Effie Whitman's humanity. Perhaps, in turn, she is asking us to witness her own dark skin, herself. The humanity to be found within her and others like her. This passage examines how oppression and a lack of self-knowledge can lead to hateful ideals concerning skin hierarchy being internalised, leaving many without adequate validation of their place in the world, even while Effie's validity as a human lays in plain sight, to Bird's. Oyeyemi urges the reader to see this humanity through Bird's eyes, so they might become aware of the power of such lies and perhaps work harder to expose their untruths, thus robbing them of strength. It's a burden that Bird wishes her Great Aunt never had to carry and yet to lose it requires great effort, a change of perspective, and another way of seeing. So, after the initial surprise upon reading this work, it's interesting to see the author distance herself from similar pronouncements on race and being human in the stories that she has written

²⁶³ Vikram Dodd, '90% of Whites Have Few or No Black Friends', *The Guardian* (London, 19 July 2004) <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/jul/19/race.world>> [accessed 23 June 2015].

²⁶⁴ Christopher Ingraham, 'Three Quarters of Whites Don't Have Any Non-White Friends', *Washington Post* (Washington DC, 24 August 2014), Online edition, section Wonkblog <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends/>> [accessed 23 June 2015].

²⁶⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, 'One Two Three', in *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 215.

since, almost as if by expressing this notion she uttered a magic spell that freed her from the confines of similar racial oppression and entrapment: once said, it is needed no more.

Conclusion

Helen Oyeyemi's works focus on the raw emotional consequences of diasporic trauma; 'being with other'; and examine how the 'othering' of transnational post-slavery descendants often leads to external or internal conflict, the effort to realign identities with the reality of diaspora existence. Although Oyeyemi's personal experience of migration is vital to her work, a New African Diaspora Aesthetic is apparent in the retelling of African and European myths previously thought incompatible, to construct a hybrid sense of 'being with self', not focused on fragmentation or loss, but the ability to build fresh identities informed by past history and traditions.

These *identities* make plain the heterogeneity of diaspora Blackness, or Africaness, its richness and diversity, difference in social status and countries of origin. As such, Oyeyemi's New African Diaspora Aesthetic engages in the important work of counteracting a narrative of 'alien-nations' to offer something uniquely modern, perhaps more in line with the race politics of the day: a Pan-Africanism steeped in the diversity of contemporary diaspora experience, fully aware of its intersections, and ultimate compatibility, with the European cultural traditions which inform its growth.

Conclusion

My people don't be misled
My people think wise instead
Come along
My people don't be misled... children

Here we are singing and dancing
Together like one family
We all know, we all know
We all know what it is to be free

Dennis Brown, 'Emmanuel (God is with Us)'²⁶⁶

In the contemporary world of literature today, published Black British writers either build on a sense of cultural reinforcement and resistance handed down by predecessors branded as postcolonial, or are marginalised by the limitations inherent in such branding, and as a result receive much less critical attention, often neglecting the cultural wealth of their cross-cultural reference points and symbolism. Rather than adhering to a postcolonial exoticism which limits the appreciation of contemporary Black British writers' diversity, identifying Pan-African perspectives allows for a heterogeneous rendering of Black British experience that includes postcolonial framings. This inclusivity is a by-product of sociological circumstance outlined by Avtar Brah, who says; 'all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we"'.²⁶⁷

This thesis has explored the potential of a Pan-African diasporic aesthetic through discussion of two starkly contrasting writers, in the context of a wider field of Black British literary production. By placing these two writers in conversation, I have aimed to expose the shared aesthetics that are often obscured in existing criticism, and

²⁶⁶ Dennis Brown, *Emmanuel (God Is with Us)*, Wolves and Leopards (UK: D.E.B. Music, 1977).

²⁶⁷ Avtar Brah, 'Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities', in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 184.

also to advance a model that extends beyond these writers to a wider field of literary production.

As a literary examination of New Diaspora Aesthetic, the creative element of this research project, the story collection *Cosmogramma*, implements ideas encompassed therein via a Pan-African focused sub-genre of science fiction, Afrofuturism. The collection came out of a need to explore what it means to be Black British with imagination, insight and nuance. Afrofuturism, with its root in the wider sub-genre of speculative fiction, precisely serves this aim. It is a speculation of Blackness that has taken root on the margins of an umbrella genre that traditionally excludes African diaspora writers and their stories. Although the authors who make up most traditional and contemporary examples of the ‘parent genre’ science fiction are most often white, and usually men, speculative fiction proves more fertile ground. Andre M. Carrington defines the genre as it pertains to Blackness by four specific examples of work: Afrofuturism, surrealism, Otherhood, and haunting.²⁶⁸

While these examples are not exhaustive and can include horror, fantasy, Steampunk and a variety of other sub genres, they cover a wide range of works by writers who express the urge to write of cosmology, myths and legends, the afterlife and spirituality from an African derived perspective. Artists as diverse as four-time Hugo award-winner N.K. Jemesin, screen director Mati Diop with her acclaimed feature film *Atlantics* (2019), and Grammy Award winning singer-songwriter Janelle Monae all work in this space, from varying disciplines. Since the box office smash Marvel comic adaptation *Black Panther* (2018) brought Afrofuturism to mainstream attention, it has become wildly popular, perhaps as never before.

Cosmogramma could also be called a work Africanfuturism, though both terminologies are valid. Nigerian-American writer and academic Nnedi Okanfor, who claims to have coined the term, expresses ambivalence with Afrofuturism as some of its definitions do not match the work she does.²⁶⁹ Although she doesn’t clarify what those definitions are, the work in this creative project, much like Okanfor’s, is not centred on the African American experience. The thematic intention that drives *Cosmogramma* is to connect the futurism of Africa, to that of the Caribbean, America,

²⁶⁸ Andre M Carrington, ‘The Speculative Fiction of Blackness’, in *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Science Fiction*, First (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 22.

²⁶⁹ Nnedi Okanfor, ‘Africanfuturism Defined’, 2019
<<http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>> [accessed 9 March 2021].

and Europe, from a distinctly British lens. Thus, rather than privileging African-American myths, legends, cultures and histories, it concentrates on the African and Caribbean cosmologies that make up a large part of Black British experience. Hope Wabuke writes: ‘No matter what we call it, however, it is understood that the impetus of Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and Black Speculative Literature is to centre African and African diasporic culture, thought, mythos, philosophy, and worldviews.’²⁷⁰

The literary form of a single-authored short story collection suits the aim of exploring a range of perspectives, via fourteen various stories rather than one, each reflecting a differing style, use of language and form, therefore able to embody varied aspects of African diaspora experience, in accordance with points one and two of the New African Diaspora Aesthetic. In some, the race of characters is referenced explicitly, others barely at all. Themes of identity are not ignored, the stories simply concern themselves with the unsaid, or take the struggle to define what Blackness in Britain means as given. This collection is written from a position that the characters’ already know their complex and myriad identities. The question beyond that is how does this make characters feel, and in turn, what actions does it force them to make. Sometimes their race is inconsequential to the stories, though not always. Blackness and its opposite number anti-Blackness do not need to be overstated. For the most part there is no urge to declare who we are: how we act is considered far more interesting. Stories do not perform for a white audience, or centralise white questions or misunderstandings. At the same time, it does not view Blackness in parochial terms, drawing from influences that include Western speculative fiction; John Wyndham, Robert Sheckley, E.M. Forester, Shirley Jackson, Stephen Millhauser and Daphne Du Maurier.

The first stories came as an urge to escape racial boundaries: a straightforward modern horror tale, more or less a haunting, drives the narrative of ‘Scarecrow’. Here, the horror of a psychopathic boyfriend is matched by a return to archaic gender roles for the female protagonist, a mirror of the horror outside their flat, in the world, populated as it is by murderous revenants. There’s only one reference to the characters’

²⁷⁰ Hope Wabuke, ‘Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature’, *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (Los Angeles, 27 August 2020), Online edition <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

Blackness, the mention of her braids: overall, it's not particularly important to the story that all three main characters are Black.

Likewise, 'Cirrostratus', 'Percepi', 'You Meets You', and the title story 'Cosmogramma', all 'neutralise' the characters' race, to borrow a term from Zadie Smith; they are neutral to themselves; from their point of view, they are the norm. This is just one method of using a centralised approach to writing the African Diaspora experience, though numerous methods exist. 'You meets You' and 'Percepi' are both more experimental in style, influenced as they are by the work of Percival Everett and Stephen Millhauser, both bold visionaries of the short story form. Written in second person and first person plural respectively, each story serves to complicate the 'Hero's Journey' narrative arc espoused by Joseph Campbell, while displacing the ideal of a central narrator who performs according to the moral dictates of the audience, asking the question instead 'Who is the hero?' 'Who is the villain?' Are they who we perceive them to be, or someone else?

Other stories play more overtly with African cosmology and the tenets of Africanfuturism, in accordance with points 3 and 4 of the New African Diaspora Aesthetic. 'Nommo' and 'Nocturne' reference Dogon mythology. Dogons, a West African people, are believed to have had ancient knowledge of Sirius B, a white dwarf star invisible to the naked eye. Although certain anthropological scholars contest this knowledge, Dogon myths became a great source of inspiration for African Diaspora writing, even referenced by Eugene B. Redmond in his introduction to proto-Afrofuturist Henry Dumas' story collection *Ark of Bones* (1969/1974).²⁷¹ 'Nommo' is also transnational in its undertaking, being that it concerns Black British characters in a Caribbean location, who interact with an African cosmological belief system. All characters in the story are aware of this myth, even if some don't believe. By the story's end, it is posited as an opportunity for growth and healing.

'Buck' references point four of the Aesthetic, in that it draws inspiration from the trauma of the African Holocaust (Maafa, or the Transatlantic Slave Trade), using the allegory of aliens that once enslaved humans of all races, but now has a somewhat benevolent, 'postcolonial' relationship with their subjects. The story examines what it means to have made a home somewhere that is not perceived to belong to you. This

²⁷¹ Eugene B. Redmond, 'Introduction', in *Ark of Bones*, First (New York: Random House, 1974), p. xiii.

unbelonging torments some characters, while others try to make peace with it, and yet all face trauma from the encounter, to a greater or lesser degree.

‘The Sankofa Principle’ and ‘Dark Matters’ are thematically Afrofuturist, in that they are ‘defined by retaining space for the Western or white gaze,’ something Wakube deems acceptable and is an important aspect of the diasporic experience, provided it is not over privileged.²⁷² ‘Dark Matters’ is written very much from within Black British youth culture and the community in adherence to points 7 and 8, very much centring it and making a case for its relevance, not just as a hotbed of crime, council estate and music, but a pervasive force made up of complex and diverse human beings: as does ‘Link’. As cannot be stated enough, any proposed diaspora aesthetic must be inclusive of the myriad ways of being Black that exist. Although this collection by no means covers them all, it attempts to hint at a plurality of experiences and cultures that make the whole, and the possibilities for a wealth of stories to be told.

Every story in this collection has been written with the aim of exploring the cultural wealth of the African Diaspora through the perspective lens of Black British culture, in a manner which is not didactic, overt or clichéd, but instead aimed at exploring new territories that centre the Diaspora, being-with-self, and the rich array of experience that exists for Black British people, our literature, and our myriad connections further afield.

Engaged in this inclusion as it is, New African Diaspora Aesthetic is one that is alive and constantly evolving. To borrow C.L.R. James’ allegory for revolution, it is a ceaseless accumulation of volcanic activity, bubbling and erupting into ‘meteoric flares and flights.’²⁷³ This molten flow of substance, almost impossible to examine while hot, cools over time into something more discernible, forming areas of new territory that are bare and untouched, or which blossom into life. Such is the way of revolution in the eyes of James’, an early Pan-African in Britain, and such is the way of literary revolutions, often birthed at a time ‘when society is at boiling point and therefore fluid.’²⁷⁴

The necessity of locating Black British literature within a transnational framework that bears witness to its connections, indeed its *communication* with the indigenous literatures it exists alongside, and the literatures of the African diaspora, has

²⁷² Wakube.

²⁷³ C.L.R. James, ‘Preface to the First Edition’, in *The Black Jacobins* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xix.

²⁷⁴ James, p. xix

been voiced by critics with increasing regularity. If diaspora literature exists, they seem to be saying, so might its aesthetics, but they remain unsure of exactly what it is doing, and how. Any attempts to examine the literature more closely is often met by frames of reference long declared defunct, a reluctance to venture beyond previous paradigms, or even to critique works by authors who are actively publishing, but have not been analysed with any strict rigour. While an awareness of the missing links does exist with regard to contemporary Black British writers' aesthetic intent, there seems a lack of articulation as to precisely how these aesthetics might be composed, or even whether there might be the possibility of a uniform, shared intent on their part.

For Alison Donnell, 'it is the really fascinating horizontal connections across the 'spatially constricted' terrain of Britain that have received far less attention.'²⁷⁵ Donnell believes a more unified outlook 'would be immensely instructive to our ways of theorising black British identities and the connections, rather than separations, between nationality and transnationality.'²⁷⁶ Oyedeji declares that the shackles of postcolonialism have slipped loose and such theoretical framework is an insufficient means of dealing with Black Britain's most recent writers, 'far less the future Black writers of British shores.'²⁷⁷ The New African Diaspora Aesthetic provides connections where there was once separation, sufficiency where there was none. It is an aesthetic long voiced by African heritage writers, from James, to Lamming, to Wheatle, Oyeyemi and countless others, one consistently overlooked. Chris Von Gargen emphasises it as:

A perpetuation or reinvention of Caribbean traditions – not so much in the form of strict traditionalism or in the search for African roots (for the authors prove to be sceptical towards any exclusivist identity) but rather faithful to the principles of creolization – combining cultural elements of different origin thus creating cultural variation. It is a continuity that allows for, and even encourages change.²⁷⁸

The writing produced by Black writers in Britain continues to confound expectations and the demands of those outside the African heritage community. Though it often

²⁷⁵ Alison Donnell, 'Afterword: In Praise of a Black British Canon', in *A Black British Canon*, ed. by G Low and M Wynne Davis (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 195.

²⁷⁶ Donnell, p.195.

²⁷⁷ Koye Oyedeji, 'Prelude to a Brand New Purchase on Black Political Identity: A Reading of Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* and Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black*', in *Write Black, Write British*, First (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 371.

²⁷⁸ Chris Von Gargen, *Disillusioned with Europe*, 2001.

struggles to find recognition it resists homogenous definitions in the artistic quest for plurality of voice. The New African Diaspora Aesthetic is a conscious means of unifying diverse forms by their inherent need to be viewed as individual parts of a continual whole, one in which change is not only natural, and necessary, but inevitable. It is this cyclical search for new uncharted terrain that makes Black British writing so exciting, and will assure its longevity, and success.

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COSMOGRAMMA

In some far off place
Many light years in space
I'll wait for you.
Where human feet have never trod,
Where human eyes have never seen.
I'll build a world of abstract dreams
And wait for you.

Sun Ra

*For Brook Stephenson, who gave the inspiration.
And Flylo, who gave the music.*

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PERCEPI

We saw it after dinner, nationwide on a weeknight. Between the celebrity dance competition and hit US soap *The Lanes*. Everybody had been buzzing for months, the rumour mills were in overdrive and when the media promised the Buddy 3000 would be unveiled that very evening, the whole town was talking. We all wanted to see what came next, and so we made sure we were in front of the VS when the first ads aired.

They said the Buddy was the best of its kind, a new generation. That science had made the final leap and harnessed creation's power, there was nothing they couldn't grasp, the future was limitless. They were mostly Seneca supporters of course, usually the ones who stood to gain. Employees, the CEO, the Mayor. Others said mankind was heading for the fall, that playing God would only lead to death and destruction, but no one listened to them. They were the poor or the religious, which in our town pretty much amounted to the same thing. There were leaflets printed on flimsy paper you could see your hand through proclaiming man's inhumanity, the final days. There were panel discussions and news items and petitions but nothing was going to stop Seneca from launching the Buddy, they must have known that.

We sat in the almost dark for some reason, the flicker of VS light crossing our faces and we waited. The screen went blank for a long time, but we could still see because the eyes of our long-suffering 1250i were bright enough to bathe the room in a soft, golden glow, as though we'd been submerged in honey. It stood between the sofa and wall, facing the screen like the rest of us, silent apart from the hum of its workings. We ignored it, consumed by our wait for the most part, though we could feel it even then, the uncomfortable way in which we turned our backs, our collective guilt.

Brightness from the VS, blinding light. Celestial music. We covered our eyes. When the light grew piercing enough to feel on the back of our hands it faded and was replaced by the Seneca logo. We nudged each other, lowered arms. The logo became superimposed onto an image of green grass, a cliff edge, blue skies and white clouds. There was a figure, a man standing by the edge of the cliff, arms by his sides, looking out to sea. The camera, which had approached rapidly from high above and behind him, swooped just above the perfect grass, zoomed towards the man and when it got close, circled, rose and hovered.

Piercing blue eyes, high cheekbones, tousled blonde hair and a cleft chin. Tall and slim, beige slacks, blue shirt, sensible brown shoes. The man was tanned and unsmiling, rugged and good-looking, ignoring the camera and even us, the viewers watching nationwide, to look up into the sky at some distant place he perhaps hoped to travel one day. We held our breath.

Welcome, a female voiceover said, *to the world of Seneca, the world of the future, now. Welcome to the Buddy 3000.*

We couldn't believe it. We leant forward in our seats, jumped from the sofa, crowded the viewscreen. The man placed both hands on his hips, raised his chin. The celestial music reached a crescendo. We gasped, laughed, doubted.

A head and shoulders shot of Daniel Millhauser, Seneca president. We relaxed. That couldn't have been the Buddy, we reasoned, what a terrible ad. Very confusing. Some strained to hear what the president was saying over loud voices of denial. Someone turned the volume up. Millhauser was sitting in an austere leather chair talking to camera. He seemed matter of fact, as though he was explaining the company's financial position in the global economy via stock and shares. He spoke of the company's past innovations as if we didn't know them, as if we lived on the Outer Limits; its humble beginnings as a manufacturer of calculators and digital watches, his great grandfather Arthur Millhauser assembling circuit boards by hand until he made enough to buy his first shop. Subsequent Millhausers' handing over the business like a relay baton. Green screen desktop computers, carryalls with video streaming, 1000 gigs of memory in your hand. The Seneca robotics division creating machines that rolled and served, machines that crawled like a spider and served, machines that eventually walked, haltingly at first and were unable to climb stairs, but soon even that innovation was past memory. The Seneca Communications Robot, a crowning glory; the 500, 1000, 1250, 1500, 2000. SCR's provided as standard with every house sold, more affluent families buying another, one to take care of the kids, one for them. Millhauser explaining just what made the Buddy so special - the ergonomic design - here, the company president allowed a wry smile. *More human than humankind*, he said. Greater intellectual capacity, the SNS-8748, a patented chip designed to collate and articulate cultural differences so the Buddy could function anywhere from New York to Papua New Guinea. Stronger, safer, more efficiency, the ability to self-repair, longer battery life, shorter charge time. Easy to assemble, the option to have the Buddy custom built by a tech for more credits. A child lock so the young couldn't order Buddy to do harm,

even as much as swear. Additional teaching modules sold as downloadable content, thousands of subjects for the family who preferred home schooling. The Buddy could dive to 100 metres, climb to 50, 000 feet and was already in service above our heads, on space stations and satellites and dry dock launch platforms.

And while Millhauser pitched his miracle product to our houses, the nation, we sat forwards, listening. We swallowed every word as the camera tracked ever so slowly to the right, imperceptibly at first, until we realized the Seneca president's head was leaving the shot. We second-guessed ourselves. It was the shot leaving *Millhauser*. The camera kept tracking, first revealing nothing but a window overlooking clear green grass, a blue sky. The cliff, it was the same cliff! Then the edge of a large, tidy desk, pads and pens, a Manchester United coffee mug, the corner of a wafer thin viewscreen, a nameplate - *Daniel Millhauser, President* - and finally Millhauser behind the desk wearing a distant smile, the quiet trickster sat with his hands clasped.

And we jumped. Nationwide, probably the world over, we jumped at the realization. Millhauser got to his feet, placed a hand on his doppelganger's shoulder. He smiled at the Buddy and the Buddy smiled at him, though it was impossible to tell one from the other, and then, even though they both looked pretty jovial it became difficult to tell what was meant by such dubious humour, or who had told the actual joke.

They looked straight into camera, spoke as one.

The Buddy 3000, they repeated. *The world of the future, now.*

The Seneca logo, the Buddy 3000 logo, a black screen with details in white, the price, specifications, small print that outlined monthly repayments of 15% APR. 10 seconds or less and the information was gone. Dark screen. Opening credits of *The Lanes*.

Uproar in front rooms, houses, streets, towns and cities. The hit US soap discarded like a used battery. The next morning queues were a block long outside Seneca Showrooms all over the world, but there were no Buddies. There was TV interviews and chat show appearances by Seneca CEO Ravindra Mehta, more handsome and skilled in PR than his reclusive president. There were web trailers and Mall openings with men on stilts dressed in Buddy suits, a public appearance with the Prime Minister and no sign of a single Buddy. Speculation was rife. Mehta waved his hands a great deal, smiled with perfect white teeth and spoke of fine-tuning.

One night we went to bed and when we woke, emerging from the warm cocoons of our homes to leave for work, or school, they were stencilled everywhere, a numerical infestation on walls and street lights, road signs, pavements and curbs, bollards, billboards, even some vehicles. Three paired numbers. A date, we soon realised. 12.10.84.

There was outrage in government circles over what was essentially vandalism. Seneca claimed no responsibility for the appearance of the numbers. Mehta went on live television to rubbish claims of an international graffiti campaign while confirming that yes, this was the official launch date. It must have leaked somehow, he smiled. We nodded, disbelieving, accepting his lies. We expected no better and that was the issue. It became easy to ignore what they did, to pretend it didn't matter.

It must have been the same everywhere, but in our town the Buddy was all anyone could speak about. It seemed to relate to any given subject. The battle for *Montes Pyrenaeus*, still raging, the dubious economy, the huge cost and fallout, both literal and figurative, of interstellar travel. The rising temperature of the Earth, unemployment, immigration. We debated and disagreed and our raised voices filled the night in coffee shops, bars and restaurants, in pool halls, after hours clubs and back alleys, in factories and playgrounds and public spaces where people of all ages gathered in excitement, faces bright with the promise of a new age. It was our happiest time, we owed Seneca that much. They presented us with a dream made real, a figment of imagination made flesh and bone. We were elated at the chance to become hopeful, the opportunity to be something more than we were, the gift of idealism. After all, this could change everything. VS channel programmers, both cable and terrestrial, sensing this new hunger, this hope, began to screen old movies from the last century and more recent productions under the collective titles 'Android Week', or 'AI Night', or 'Cyborg Season'. There was a vast appetite for the films until people began to realize many of the plotlines came to pessimistic endings no one had dared think about, let alone speak of. It was rumoured Seneca stepped in at that point, and no one was conclusive about what happened, but one by one the run of movies were cancelled, leaving us with a vague sense of disquiet no one dared to articulate.

The months passed without warning. The ads intensified, while the posters and online spots became unavoidable. Seneca threw a huge launch event, screened for free on all channels, attended by the world's biggest movie stars, models, singers, royalty, presidents and Prime Ministers. Our town, like many others, threw a street party with images of the launch projected onto a whitewashed wall. Everyone came. We watched a live news report where BBC anchorwoman Leticia Daley took us deep into Seneca's distribution centre to witness thousands of human-sized boxes rolling along interlinked conveyer belts resembling miniature highways, some dystopian automotive future, before being loaded into HGV's by 2000's with the gaze of the blind. We commented on her hushed delivery, her unflinching gaze to camera, how the whites of her eyes matched the pallor of her skin, the loss of her flirtatious smile. Then it was back to the launch, the celebrities and music, back to CEO Ravi Mehta's his own smile and Leticia Daley was forgotten.

We imagined a scenario replayed in homes worldwide, that what we experienced was reflected a million times, like a Seneca warehouse constructed of mirrors as tall as the moon shuttle. Buddy boxes wheeled into front doors by 2000's wearing specially designed khaki uniforms, families standing aside in awe, unable to keep excitement from their faces. The boxes drilled open, peeled like the husk of unworldly fruit to reveal a soft, translucent bubble, milk clouds floating above a sea of grey, a surface fluid as water yet able to hold its ovoid shape; the mass trembling, even before the 2000's produced cutting blades from the ends of claw-like fingers. The medical workers amongst us, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, could not fail to notice the ovoid resembled an amniotic sack. Some told our partners. Others kept their silence and simply watched the robots cleave into thick flesh, egg white jelly easing free and the mass collapsing to reveal our Buddies, naked apart from the minimal underwear to protect their modesty. No one thought to ask why machines needed modesty in the first place.

And as simply as that, the new age dawned. The premier generation of Buddies went far beyond anything Seneca had promised, and within the first few weeks it was common to see machines everywhere. Though it was difficult to tell them from afar, especially when they were at rest, you always knew an android when you saw them up close. It was something in their eyes, their facial expressions. There was no emotions, no life, no *feeling*. It was like staring into the face of someone in a coma. They were warm to the touch, could laugh or cry, even bled if their skins were cut, but they

responded to the world as though they were weary beyond measure, had lived a thousand years and grown attached to nothing at all.

There were problems, of course. Much like any new technology, there was failure, accident, human error. A batch of originals shipped to Melbourne developed a fault also found in Shanghai, Valencia, Cologne. The machines mysteriously shut down, and had to be recalled. Another batch shorted out and caught fire, levelling buildings in Bridgetown, Mumbai and Orange County. The owners sued Seneca, winning a hefty sum, and those who were insured claimed replacements. A machine was mistaken for a woman who'd had an affair with a human's husband, and was gunned down late one night walking through a park. The wife was arrested, later released without charge. Though machines were forbidden from harming humans there was no such law for us and even if there were, we knew it would be broken. The wife went back to her husband, who resumed his affairs within months. She followed him to a hotel on the outskirts of the town, kicked down the door, and shot the husband plus his girlfriend. She was given two consecutive counts of life.

For the most part Buddy owners had no complaints. The originals were trustworthy and strong, highly intelligent but docile. Buddies saved humans from car accidents, repaired broken machinery and stopped potential suicide victims from leaping in front of trains, even as violent crime hit a sharp decline. Nationwide, productivity was said to have risen by 40%. Daniel Millhauser was awarded the Nobel Prize. It was rumoured he'd used company profits to buy 400 acres on *Mare Frigoris*, the sea of cold, thousands of miles north of the troubles. The media claimed he planned to build a Seneca base to help strengthen the strike for Mars. Millhauser wouldn't grace the subject with an answer.

Affluent, middle-class consumers packed their varied SCR's into boxes, in some cases shipping them back to Seneca, or selling them to poorer families. We kept ours in the garage, just beyond the bonnet of our car, next to the lawnmower and a rusting tool cabinet, orange growth creeping its hinges. Within a few weeks the soft, golden glow of the SCR's eyes was no longer seen. It became commonplace to hear the high whine of inner mechanisms, to see Buddies stepping with a jerky, knee high, marionette tread that would have been painful for humans. On the streets, in parks and shopping malls, it was normal to see men and women with Buddy companions in tow

like faithful dogs. Even those who protested against the androids fell into silence when they saw them, stopped waving placards and chanting. There was something in the way the machines would regard the demonstrations that made it all seem wrong. No emotion, and yet maybe there was a flicker of something, an awareness that they were being spoken of, categorized maybe – that they were outside the boundaries of what it meant to be *us*.

Our tenuous peace shattered by news of a moon base bomb attack. We breathed easier. Things had been going too well for too long. 127 killed, 31 injured, much needed supplies and arms raided. A relatively small band of workers, recent descendants of the first lunar miners, had protested against unfair working conditions and absconded to the moon's dark side 5 years ago. For the last 24 months, led by a woman the authorities knew as Mika Cole, miners had attacked government interests, from the mines, to supply ships, to the communications networks, though it was unclear which particular government they were fighting against, or what their demands might be. The base on *Crater Goclenius* had been the home and workplace of Terraformers, those charged with transforming the harsh landscape from white rocks and dust into something more uniform, suitable for human habitation. They had been protected by two marine platoons who lived on the base, but many of the miners had been marine trained too, long before they were contracted to the moon, and taught their sons and daughters well. The fact that Mika Cole and her followers had survived 5 years of constant darkness spoke volumes about their resourcefulness. Even though the media wouldn't admit, it also made them all the more fearful.

We could see it coming. Some debated the morality. Others said it would never happen. Three weeks of silence, of nothing but media images of survivors wrapped in bloody rags being transported to Earth, of the shattered and bomb-blasted moon base X-2100, a spider-shaped construction with a vast hole in its abdomen, leaking valuable air into space. A plume like the exhaled breath of a whale, white continuous steam. Mika Cole's ID photo, black pitted eyes and blonde hair, the six-figure price on her head. The pinched, furious expression of a Coalition delegate reading the damage report as if it were a eulogy; which in some ways, for them, it was. Live reports from the permanent boundary between night and day, Letitia Daley in a bulky spacesuit, even more sombre than the delegate before her, exposing the world below to the thin line no

human had ever dared to cross before the miners, a stark exchange between the established and the unfathomable.

The silence was ended by a hurried, almost embarrassed announcement. Launch dates for 2nd Generation Buddies had been brought forward, the latest, much improved version enlisted to fight lunar terrorism, sent to the moon to test their capabilities against trained human soldiers. They would be rocketed three days and approximately 239, 000 miles to perform a job most believed they were built for. Those first seeds of scepticism were sewn on furrowed ground.

Night after night for the next 18 months, we came home to harrowing pictures on our viewscreens, of war and death and atrocities far worse. At first the casualties were all human, the victims all terrorists we were told. Maimed, blackened limbs like chargrilled meat. Cauterized stumps, gouged and missing eyes, flesh torn to reveal the glistening inner workings of the body. The War Buddies, as they had become unofficially known on Earth, were instructed to recover the dead and injured alike. Sometimes it was as difficult to tell one from the other as it was to tell an android from twenty feet. POW's were displayed like flesh and blood trophies, while a baby-faced Marine sergeant gave an emotionless progress report. The enemy was a worthy opponent, he said, and yet they were falling. The Buddies were fighting alongside humans and doing a commendable job.

We sent children to their rooms, watched the screens through our fingers. We sat forwards like when it all started, disgusted, wanting to know. Soon, we realized, as the nights went on to become weeks and months, that the cameras were catching glimpses of strange casualties and injuries we were unaccustomed to.

One night, a woman on a gurney, clutching below her knee. The camera moved on, bumped some unseen object, inadvertently dropped and filmed the severed leg. Jagged, black meat, the result of a bomb it seemed; the foot deleted, sagging tendons, muscles and pumping blood, gleaming metal protruding from the midst of all that flesh.

What stayed with us, what people repeated after that one, accidental image that would herald the most monumental change in world history since humans migrated from Africa, was the look on that android's face. The way she regarded her missing foot, with disbelief and horrified regret. Her screams of pain. We hadn't imagined machines felt anything - in fact, thinking back, we were pretty sure the 1st Generation *didn't*. This was something new, something we'd hardly dared to consider. We wandered into back gardens and front lawns, stared out of windows and through

telescopes at the chalk white satellite above our heads, thinking of all the things we hadn't known.

When Mika Cole and her followers faced heavy losses, they retreated into the mountains and caves of the lunar dark side. These vast, unmapped territories became their battleground. Coalition losses began to mount. Small, difficult to track teams sent raiding parties to government settlements, gathering supplies such as power lamps and generators, food, battlewear, weapons and ammunition. Terrorist sympathizers began to construct or buy their own ships, hide them well and blast off from the Earth's most desolate places; deserts, woodlands, jungles, arctic fields. At first, no one on space stations did anything. They were not the army, weren't authorized to kill. Thousands of ships went on their way to the moon's dark side to support the terrorists. Many died making the journey, at many stages; ships would implode on take-off, burn up in the atmosphere; navigation systems failed and they would strike a communications satellite, or their equipment would mysteriously die halfway, freezing the occupants to death, their ship a slow spinning mausoleum grasped in cold orbit. Some would come in too fast, crash against the powder grey surface. Even so, others made it. What became of them little is known. It's assumed they must have succeeded, because the violence began to intensify, earthbound politicians began to grow worried, and the effort to quell a minor insurrection, something that shouldn't have taken three months by governmental reckoning, started to look as though it wasn't going to end.

No one knew how, but Mika Cole was brought in alive. Rumours said the Coalition gained a lock of her hair, isolated the DNA and paid Seneca a vast sum to develop an android clone, much like the mechanical Millhauser who beguiled us from the beginning. The cloned Mika infiltrated dark side mountains, sent raiding teams on false missions, sewed dissention, captured the terrorist leader and brought her to the Coalition. The intention was apparently to have her returned to Earth to stand trial, although predictably enough some said, she never made it. Media reports claimed she took her own life, poisoning herself in her cell.

A new terrorist leader, who referred to their self only as Liberty and sent a digitally recorded message via a reprogrammed SCR, said Surita would never have done such a thing, that she was murdered. They told the Coalition the war would not be over until every last one of them was dead, or the lunar terrorists killed the government

workers and army in retaliation, whichever came first. They named themselves – *Esse Percepi* - to be is to be perceived. To this day, the battle goes on.

Yet as far as the Coalition, Seneca and the media were concerned, the war was over. They'd won. They held press conferences, broadcasted VS spots, and even brought back the street parties to celebrate. Very few attended. The psychological fallout of the war, unintentional though it had been, was that nobody trusted the 'unholy Trinity' as they'd been dubbed. The physiological fallout was the 2nd Generation Buddies return to Earth, recalled from a conflict many thought they shouldn't have been involved in. Public opinion swayed against the Buddies. We had seen what they could do to the human body, sometimes intimately. We had seen their pain, frustration and anger, human failings that caused the war to blossom in the first place. We had seen them built to resemble people, had been taken with the thought, but when we heard that power was used to forfeit our moral code, to take life, we considered the consequences. The almost empty street parties, long trestle tables packed with food, streamers and balloons, viewscreens and more machines than people, the adults drawing their young away from androids with open fear, was the worst advertising the world had ever known. The problem was this wasn't some faulty inanimate object that could be recalled from retailing shelves. These were powerful, highly intelligent beings with scars on their skin and the vision of an alien landscape in their eyes.

The 'android problem', as it was often referred to, was discussed in many circles but no one in power came up with any solutions. Some government ministers campaigned to scrap the Buddies, an idea that of course Seneca was highly against. Others said they should be kept busy, put to work. Human Rights groups were faced with a quandary. If the machines were made of flesh and blood, had nerves and DNA and analytical thought, how could one justify their mistreatment? The original protestors, the church groups, the unions and anti-A.I. campaigners renewed their zeal, taking to the streets and parliament once more. And the machines watched. Said nothing. The 1st Gens remained inscrutable, though it was possible to detect a curl in the lips of the 2nd Gens, if we ever caught sight of them.

For they had mostly relegated themselves to the night. Perhaps feeling an affinity with darkness, perhaps fearing the light, 2nd Gens were rarely seen, preferring to keep themselves apart. They frequented the after-hours bars, the strip clubs and casinos. They slept in empty warehouses on the edge of towns and cities, abandoned houses, or the few run down hotels that would take them. It quickly became apparent

that no provisions had been made for their welfare. After all, they were only machines. When they appeared in daylight it was often to speak of their war experiences at Human Rights rallies, where they would maintain a neutral, quiet tone. They would cry. Few of the injured machines had been repaired, as the cost was deemed too expensive, and they displayed the full range of their horrific injuries. One who had repaired himself, replacing his facsimile arms with the claws of an SCR 2000, became a spokesmachine of some kind. The gifted orator, who told the world his name was X, was a poster boy for campaigners. He would not cry, repeatedly saying all he wanted was fair treatment. The liberals amongst us remarked that X sounded pretty much like the *Esse Percepi*.

Those of us on the streets in early dawn, or coming home at that time, or those who were creatures of the night would see them. Small, huddled groups massed in the darkest corners as if for warmth; heads down, bodies close, sometimes shifting from foot to foot, most of the time impossibly still. An immobile state we could never hope to attain, all life departed. There would be talking from somewhere, someone, we could never tell who, but there was always one voice, a call and response, a deep murmur from the group like the throbbing hum of an idling motor. We'd draw closer and see the gatherings were entirely made up of machines. The one voice would fall silent, the hum recede into nothing. We would try and talk with 1st and 2nd Gens only for them to move away, marionette steps jostling against a smooth, almost human glide, leaving us sighing white clouds of breath into a space once occupied, alone in the darkness. We became afraid.

When the police tried to break up the gatherings, the machines ran. Often they were caught, arrested, kept in the cells until morning and released. 1st Gens were asked to produce papers and ID that detailed who had purchased them, but of course, no one had purchased 2nd Gens. After months of being arrested, beaten even, one 2nd Gen fought back. His name was Titus and he hospitalized the police officer. The National Guard was called. Titus went underground. Ravindra Mehta appeared on VS, appealing for calm, side by side with X, who told the world machines meant humans no harm. The National Guard, perhaps afraid, perhaps a little over zealous, went after the 2nd Gens a mite harder than necessary. There were fierce battles. The machines began to break into armouries, route enemy attacks. Machines were destroyed. Brave men and women with families were killed. Titus was destroyed. The National Guard appealed for calm and still the machines fought on. There were sightings of larger android meetings, hundreds, thousands in one place. Soon our 1st Gens were gone when we

woke in the mornings, and they returned with no explanation as to where they had been, what they had been doing. They were calm, logical in the face of our hysteria. The next night they were gone again. After a while, they never came back.

In their wake, the machines left an undecipherable message, much like Seneca's stencilled numbers back when we could hardly remember. Like the numerals, they appeared everywhere overnight. Our walls and houses, shopping malls and parks. No one knew what it meant, even Ravi Mehta was dumbfounded. It wasn't so much a word as a simple, common symbol:

@

Our governments declared Martial Law, but it was too late. The army flooded our towns and cities like dam water. A nine pm curfew was imposed on humans and machines alike. Tanks and armoured vehicles rumbled along high streets, but the machines were gone. Were silent. We watched the media and prayed. Human Rights campaigners appealed to our governments for a peaceful strategy to end the stalemate, but their efforts were not helped by X's disappearance with his machine brethren. Daniel Millhauser made a rare speech, a 15 minute recording where he quietly lamented all that had happened, telling us Seneca would do everything in its power to uphold peace, that they had no quarrel with humans or machines alike. We felt it sounded like an appeal for his life rather than calm, although it was confirmed he was holed up in his fully functional moon base, far from earthbound troubles, even though the lunar war was still as bitter and cold as solar winds.

Army scouts caught intelligence reports of a gathering deep in the countryside, close to 10, 000 machines camped in a disused war bunker. They bombed them. Thousands were destroyed. The machines called it 'The Lancombe Massacre.' They waited seven days, and in the dead of night, they attacked.

We felt the ground shudder as bombs fell, and could see them bring light to dark skies. During the day we would go about our business, timid, scurrying from place to place like mice. The army assured us they had everything under control, but the images on the VS said different. They were sustaining heavy casualties, the list of dead and wounded growing. In some countries, those too poor to have any real technological army, humans were forced to flee, giving machines the advantage. We saw it on the pirate channels, how they invaded the streets and houses, set up camps and fortified

roads with cars, tanks, sandbags. In our town, some would wake to strange noises and wander our homes, weapons in hand, to see the machines foraging through possessions, mostly from garages and workshops. If they saw us they would raise their guns, back away into the night. Shops were easy targets. The machines' stealth became legendary. We began to reboot our SCR's in an attempt to use them as guards, and although they were largely unsuccessful, they made us feel safe.

A security man in a home improvements warehouse disturbed a gang of machines while on night watch. He opened fire and was killed. Two days later a man was murdered when he discovered 2 machines ransacking his house. His wife, who survived, claimed she was raped. She said the machines had taunted her. They had no need to replicate; they just wanted to see how it felt. She'd heard them discuss their disillusion with X and his 'rules', justifying their crime as a legitimate rendering of what the machines had called for, the true meaning behind the symbol @.

Anarchy.

We humans rose to the challenge. People were upset, grief stricken, understandably. The army sent to protect us was questionable, barbaric. We took matters into our own hands. There were many among us who disagreed, pointing out that the machines had treated us as targets for the most part, uniformly expressing no regret for the deaths, or abuse of ordinary citizens, aside from X, now known as Xavier, who sent recordings steeped in dismay. Some argued that his sympathies seemed hollow, insincere. Their voices were drowned by those who said the machines were simply doing what had been done to them. How were they supposed to respond? Their lives, if you could call them that, had been threatened. We barricaded doors and windows, installed SCR's with weapons protocol, bought, created, traded guns and ammunition.

The foolhardy went on national VS and bragged of what they intended to do if the machines entered their homes. They were usually masked and armed, holding weapons above their heads like victory flags, like the war was over, had already been won. The cautious amongst us kept silent, had the good sense to weep as the night became alive with explosions and needle-sharp tracers. We knew what we had to do, what the true cost would be. We left our homes in search of rumoured android camps, rebels if you will, we crossed fields and entered forests and abandoned industrial estates, waving white flags even as corpses began to appear on our streets. The

messages from our governments and Seneca came less frequently and eventually ceased. We wept harder because the foolhardy would die.

We cannot say what took place within those camps. Suffice to say they accepted our solidarity. Although this account serves as a record of events and the stance we took, theoretically we are still at war so we omit details. Let it be known we are proud to have stood for the oppressed in a time of revolution, but we do not denigrate the humans or machines who stand against us. Any lost lives are lives worth grieving. Sacrifice is a part of any revolution and there is no revolution without bloodshed.

Prior to the Great Emancipation, the sight of shuttles piercing clouds became as commonplace as the sound of heavy artillery. Tickets were costly. Many did as the lunar freedom fighters had, buying or building their own craft. New materials were in short supply. People who owned ships were reluctant to sell in case they were needed. Predictably enough, people fought.

That final night the sky lit up as though the sun had changed its mind and returned. They might have been fooled into thinking they were witnessing an early dawn had the light not come from the west. It burned for hours, a burst blood orange on the horizon and they came onto the streets, soldiers, civilians and SCR's alike. From then until the actual dawn, the darker side of the sky was drawn with the furious scribbles of hasty departure. Even when the sun rose, throbbing, sore with anger, the roar of rockets and engines, the rattling of windows, was constant accompaniment to all that we did.

We arrived in daylight, picking our way through litter and fresh dog excrement. Thousands of 1st and 2nd Gens, more than anyone had seen. Us, armed humans, walking alongside. People were mowed down indiscriminately. The old, legs foal-weak, women clutching babies attempting to shield them from gunfire, infant children, sandals flapping against their feet. The rules had changed with that temporary dawn. They ran from truth, filled with a desperate self-preservation that caused vile acts we never would have imagined, let alone carried out. Husbands pushed wives into the line of fire, leaving them for dead. Friends stole weapons from the weak, rummaged in the pockets of broken bodies for ammunition, credits, food, anything they might need. The horrors we saw fuelled our justification, veiling our eyes until our expressions became as stoic as 1st Gens, and yet we were more alive than ever. They entered sewers and underground tunnels, war bunkers and maintenance systems. We followed, attempting

to slow our body's vibrations so we might become machines, like those we fought beside.

CIRROSTRATUS

In the old days they were labelled freaks, outcasts. Made to roam cities and towns in cautious night, segregated and gazed at with aversion, maybe even fear. Now they were celebrated, heroes. Alask promised himself they'd never forget, and better still, that they would never grow complacent.

The sky was a purple bruise beyond dark hills. Hedges and bushes whispered as they drove. The truck was cruising, rocking Alask against Celayn, making him smile in the darkness, reminded of how soft she felt. She was sleeping of course. Always was, mouth open, head bobbing, her snores like the baritone throb of the truck engine, her pulse steady, dress high on her thighs. Although it was dark, it still made him feel warm to think about her, to feel her. The ancient CD deck whirred and played soft music, pitched low, Orpheus hunched over the wide steering wheel, bouncing with jolts and bumps. Alask leaned over Celayn, checking the wing mirror, no need to but it made him feel good to see dipping lights and know everything was well. He put his knees on the dash, yawned and threw his head back. He wanted to sleep, knew he wouldn't.

Alask was awake when they approached the building hours later, greeted by dark shapes beneath destitute streetlight. He clambered over Celayn, prising the door open and jumping from the truck while it moved, door slamming as he leapt; his little trick, always impressed the punters. The tarmac glittered with moisture. He almost slipped when he landed, but held his arms out and managed to right himself. A hum of wonder came from the shadows. He strolled over.

'Howdy.'

'Hi.' A tall man detached himself from the group, offering an outstretched hand. He smelt of cologne and sweat, of musty clothes. 'Walter Minsk.'

'Walter. Alask Barron. Pleased to meet you at last.'

'Likewise.' Walter was as tall and thin as the streetlight above, his back and shoulders bent the same way. 'This is my wife, son. Grace and Jimmy.'

The faceless shadows moved what looked like limbs. Alask held a hand palm upwards in their direction.

'Howdy.'

‘And this is the space,’ Walter said, gesturing towards the hulk of the block behind him. ‘Take a look?’

‘That’s what we’re here for.’

He turned to watch the convoy, a row of vehicles snaking into the car park, shuddering into silence, darkening.

They set up, slept in a hotel not far from the venue, spent the next day wandering town signing autographs and posing for pictures. It was a routine they were used to, not bored of yet. Celayn was mobbed by adoring men. Orpheus was followed by school kids, coaxing a spooky song from empty soda cans. Meimo caught the attention of huddled teenagers smoking cigarettes beneath an underpass. The Palmer twins kept to themselves and all four of the Brants stayed at the venue, saying they wanted to watch the equipment and check the scaffolding rig. Alask knew they’d hang back. He even offered to stay. As Ringmaster, it was his duty. Everyone agreed that since he never visited any of the towns where they stopped, he should see the sights. What little there were.

It was a strange place, small enough not to constitute a city, even though it was at least partially urban, not rural enough to constitute a village, although it barely topped 20,000 residents. There was the town centre, roughly half an hour’s walk from the venue, a high street of chains, coffee shops and drinking houses, boutiques and children’s clothing stores. Everything else was motorway lanes, churches, farmhouses overrun by weeds, vast, empty spaces. Green fields and livestock, crops and hay bales, stiffened bodies of dry-haired scarecrows, dormant farm vehicles, empty stys. The smell of dehydrated cow dung, a distant hum of traffic. Silence, as though nobody was left.

The Brants were sleeping when they came back, and there was no sign of Walter Minsk, or his family. Alask climbed into the empty trailer where the scaffolding had been housed, sat with his back against the cool wall and smoked a cigarette. There was nothing more to be done. They were so familiar with each others’ routine this part of the day had become the unspoken norm, each of them disappearing into separate spaces; a shed, a lonely back room, a field of tall grass, a building roof. If they found each other, they would nod silently and walk on, find somewhere else. These were the last moments before dawn, the silence before birdsong, the touch of light on the horizon.

He closed his eyes, smoked. He'd seen his first ever show as a child, way too young to understand what was happening. He had run away from his mother, from the traditional side of the fair, entranced by the call of the strange flutes and horns, a tribal song some might have said. It stirred something deep within, something like memory and he ran, not hearing her shouts, not hearing anything but the music and the voice of the Barker. *Come one, come all...* He was saying... *Come one, come all...* Tiny Alask pushed his way around people, wound his way through legs, walking sticks and shopping bags and scuffed pointed shoes, until he saw him, the Barker, a squat, muscular man wearing a top hat, a button-up vest with no shirt, the vest left open so Alask could see his bare, glistening chest, his egg-like belly, bright and smooth; and then he noticed the best thing, the thing that stuck in his mind ever since, the thing that made him what he was, had made them all; the Barker raised his thick, muscled arm, pointing his stick at the embossed sign which said Dr Magnesium's Augmented Circus. Alask saw a box embedded in the arm, and the box was filled with pale blue water, yet the box was actually a tank, and there were golden fish inside it, and the fish tank was there, in his arm, for all to see.

He smiled, remembering his shock. How his mother had grasped his arm and pulled. Bright pain. He remembered how he'd dragged his feet, and she had only pulled harder, how he'd shouted, and how people looked, the Barker's grin. His mother was a good woman, gone now, but she hadn't understood; or rather she had, but thought she could change his mind. The Barker listened to the boy scream, caught his eye and grinned because he had known what was coming. He listened to the hoarse wail and heard something that pleased him.

In the evening, as the light began to dip into darkness, they had their last dress rehearsal. Walter's son Jimmy sat in the middle seats with his mother, and though Alask couldn't see them as the lights were too bright, he could hear the soft patter of their applause after each act, their gasps and laughter, their excitement. It was going to be a good show. He could feel it. When they were finished, Celayn held his hand, hugged him. Her heart was beating fast, and she smelt of rose water. Orpheus eyed them, sullen, said nothing. The beauty and his second-in-command were more off than on these days, but it still bothered the big guy. Alask promised himself he'd keep an eye on things; during long tours, such a small group confined to limited space, relationships of all kinds took on bigger meaning, grew out of hand. They could sometimes end in tragedy.

And the people came. While they waited backstage, punters trickled, stopped, changed direction like halting sweat, found seats, read programmes, discussed what they might see, what they had heard, their last show. The murmured hum. The expectation. The rise in temperature, the loud beat of his heart. He was always nervous. Thousands of shows later, since he first raised his hat to the rafters and proclaimed their name, his heart still thumped in his chest, and he still paced the room, muttered lines, gave obvious advice to anyone he bumped into. The Brants joked amongst themselves, costumes sparkling like constellations. Orpheus moved his hands over his instruments, metal plates and mechanic's tools, testing for sound. Celayn danced to music from the radio, and sang. Meimo cut his toenails, which always disgusted everyone, and sharpened his knives while the Palmer twins kept apart from everyone. Alask checked the buttons on his shiny red and blue suit.

It was time. He put on his hat, moved out of the back room and jogged into the auditorium. The murmured hum fell into a hush. He raised his arms wide.

'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I bid you all good evening and welcome to the Stelarc Nation Circus, the most talented group of individuals you'll ever see this side of Montrayn West Side, or anywhere else for that matter!' A brief halt for applause, look at everyone but no one in particular, smile into the lights. 'I am your Ringmaster for the evening, Alask Barron, and I promise *you* what you're about to see is the most spectacular display of skill, judgement and augmentation the world has ever known! There is speed, there is athleticism, there is wondrous mental ability, there is the impossible made real, there is strength and courage, all in one night! Please prepare yourselves for a glorious evening of entertainment! Before we begin, I would like to ask you, yes you madam, to lift my sleeves and tell our audience what you see...'

He stepped forwards, arms outstretched towards her, palms upward, seeing her better beyond the glaring lights. A brown haired woman, timid as a stray, retracting even as he walked closer, spying the person to her right; a young boy, no more than 12, similar lank brown hair, freckles on his cheeks. And then Alask saw. For a moment he was stunned, almost stopped in his tracks and forgot his next line, what he had to do. It was as though he was back in the fair years ago, mouth open, staring, mesmerised. The boy looked into his eyes like the Barker once had, comprehending all. Alask was a child again, staring at his feet, reading patterns in sawdust. The spell was broken. Alask kept going, stopped before the woman, thrust his arms at her.

'Madam, if you please.'

The crowd was silent. She rolled the first sleeve towards his elbow, carefully, almost in expectation, and it was revealed. She smiled, saying ‘*Aaah*,’ like they always did. The people next to her laughed and clapped, applause spread, cameras beamed the picture to a screen at the rear of the auditorium. Everyone cheered. Alask walked to his original place, showing the audience. It was his ears. He’d had two extra ears grown genetically on his forearms. They were his first augmentation, created in homage to the father of genetic modification, Stelarc the great, and still his favourites.

‘Would you like to see more?!’

He waved his forearms, the ears, at the crowd, as if to hear better; a good joke, one that always got a laugh.

‘Yeah!’ The crowd yelled back.

So he did his next trick; unbuttoning his coattails to reveal the perfect nose on his chest. He even made it twitch. The noise was deafening.

‘And now, on with the show!’ he roared.

He introduced the first act, Celayn and Meimo, who performed the knife-throwing routine that proved so popular over the years, and stood offstage, thinking about what he had seen. The boy. The wonderful boy. Celayn and Meimo held the audience in the palm of their augmented hands; he was an expert with the knife, able to skewer and slice fruit, balloons, even split cardboard with a precision honed by cyborg fingers, usually gloved, but revealed for the purposes of the show. They were light, waterproof, and could even be removed and operated by remote control, which always drew gasps of amazement.

Celayn, the beautiful assistant, provided targets for Meimo’s knives, holding them steady until it was time for her to climb aboard the spinning wheel. Meimo unfastened his hands and placed them on a specially prepared metal stand, throwing by remote thought. Each missed by inches until the last four, which hit Celayn in the chest, stomach and legs. The crowd were stunned. Silence fell. Meimo began to cry, fall to his feet, convulse. Someone screamed.

Celayn leapt from the board and pulled the knives from her, displaying her own augmentation; toughened skin, impervious to damage. She placed her arms through rings of fire, stuck needles in her torso, and stood on a bed of hot coals. She joked the only problem with impervious skin was that she could never get a tattoo.

Alask introduced the next act, the Palmer Twins, and went backstage to sit in a corner, brood. The others guessed something had gone wrong, despite all evidence to

the contrary. Not wanting to upset him or their performances, they left him alone, got on with their preparations.

The Twins had augmented brain implants, which meant they could read each other's minds, and when they were connected with a computer, transmit their thoughts onscreen. Members of the audience came onstage and had their own thoughts projected so everyone could see. The twins were followed by Orpheus, with implants placed on his fingertips so he could vibrate any metal object and create music. Finally, there were the Brants, who ran onstage, teal costumes glittering, and jumped on the rigged scaffolding, performing spins, twists and dives, catching each other by the hands, throwing themselves between gaps in the metal poles. They were always the highlight of the show, saved for last, two parents, the boy and girl aged 14 and 10, all with rubber arms and shock absorber legs so they could jump like fleas, flip on a dime, hang from the roof and drop to the floor without injury.

The audience roared. One lucky boy was taken from the crowd, thrust upwards to the roof, and gently swung down via the scaffolding, which clearly made his night. After that, Alask brought them all out for the final outro speech, and they took their bow. Even then he couldn't stop himself looking at the boy. The innovation. His perfection. The others saw the direction of his gaze and finally knew the reason for his distraction. They watched the boy leave with the other townspeople, talking about what they'd seen with his mother, standing a good two feet above her, cyborg legs whirring, servos clunking as lead her to the exits.

He sat on the dumpster outside the building in darkness, alone again, cigarette smouldering. All four ears heard him coming, and the second nose pinpointed who it was, even though he could hardly see. Musty old clothes. Stale sweat. Walter. The thin man came over, sat beside him. There was a scratch, orange light, the pungent smell of another cigarette.

'Good show?'

Alask smiled into darkness.

'Yep. One of the best.'

'Grace said it was pretty damn good.'

He turned towards Walter's hunched shadow. There was a faint tap of moths against the streetlight. He inhaled, blew the smoke from his second nose, squinted, waited.

'I heard you were quite taken with the McClusky boy.'

A sudden frown, unseen.

'That's a good guess.'

'Grace said you couldn't stop looking.'

He promised himself he'd never underestimate small town folk again. Alask took another drag, but the cigarette was done. He threw it onto the tarmac, crushed it.

'There was a farming accident. Lost both legs and arms, got cut up real bad. Terrible shame.'

He nodded, head low.

'Father's gone, just him and the mother. He's all she's got.'

'So the money better be right.'

'Otherwise no point asking.'

They sat in silence, watching moths dance in soft, amber light. Far away an owl cried twice, but there was nothing more.

On the last day he borrowed a car and drove to the farm. There was no hurry. The boy wasn't going anywhere. The circus, on the other hand, would leave the next morning. Even as he manoeuvred along narrow lanes and scared birds from bush hideaways, Orpheus manned the get out, lowering scaffolding, helping the team pack props, making sure nothing was left behind. It wasn't what Orph was used to, but that didn't worry Alask. He trusted his friend.

It was fine to be without them, the venue far behind, the smell of lush green fields, the rustle of the trees, a rising, falling hiss. Alask tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, whistled between his teeth. He didn't intend to cajole the boy or his mother; he never had to before. They would accept his offer, or not. It was a good thing he was doing. He was nervous again.

He made good time. Soon the lane widened into a gravel expanse that crackled like frying oil. The main farm building was small, low roofed, dwarfed by the silos and barn to the rear. It looked patched and worn, in disrepair. He parked beside another vehicle, a three-litre Egan a little more dishevelled than the car he was driving. As he

stepped out, slamming the door, the woman came out of the farmhouse, looking back at the doorway behind her, face flushed. He approached her, beaming.

‘Mr Barron...’

‘Mrs McClusky; how do you do?’

Her face brightened. She looked at her feet.

‘Actually, it’s Ms Sutton. I’m a widower; I used to be McClusky, but I took my maiden name.’

‘So sorry,’ he said, and clasped her hand in his. It was small and soft as a child’s. She seemed surprised, yet held on.

‘No I am,’ she said. ‘For being a bit of a cliché.’

‘Not at all, you’re a survivor Ms Sutton; a noble survivor,’ he said, taking the hand in both of his.

Her lank hair fell around thin shoulders, and the austere blue dress was buttoned to the neck. Her cheeks wore a fresh apple blush; she hardly looked at him. The widow smelt of warm milk, sweet, and her heart beat was strong. He liked her. Alask bowed his head.

‘Sorry to call unannounced. I didn’t have your number.’

‘The computer doesn’t work, hasn’t for a long time. No connection. Come in,’ she said, leading him into the farmhouse.

Inside was dark, though lights were on. They were in a low-roofed kitchen. A round-edged rectangle server-bot chopped vegetables, ignoring him. Sutton pulled a chair from beneath the kitchen table. He sat.

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Just tea thanks. Any kind.’

‘I have fresh mint.’

‘Perfect,’ Alask said, watching the server-bot as she busied herself with the mint, running water into a pot, lighting the stove. ‘I could fix it.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Sutton turned, limp leaves in hand.

‘I could fix your connection. It wouldn’t take long.’

‘Thank you.’ She smiled. ‘That’s very kind Mr Barron.’

‘Call me Alask.’

‘Only if you call me Reno.’

He grinned. ‘Then I will.’

She boiled the water, poured it into mugs, and dunked the mint leaves. They sat in the dining room, which was larger than he'd imagined outside, at a long table that could have sat twenty, a large wood-burning fireplace opposite, roaring, windows on either side of the room that looked into the gravel car park and back garden. She seemed more confident in her home than at the show, although she held the mug in both hands, staring at its contents while she spoke. He asked her about the show, what she had enjoyed, about the farm, how long they had been there and what they produced. She asked him about his home town, the tour, how he found living on the road, his circus family, what they did when they were not performing. All through, Alask heard the steady thump of chopped vegetables. It warmed him, somehow.

'We bed down for the winter mostly. We have an old mansion house in Lepeag, plenty of room for all, lots of food. We rest mostly, hone our skills, try to live normal lives. Surf the net, watch movies, stuff ourselves silly, that type of thing.'

'Sounds nice,' she said. 'The good kind of life.' Her eyes were round and brown, soft, expansive. Gentle.

'There are downsides. Local kids who want to run away with the circus know exactly where to find us. The mansion floorboards tend to creak. Meimo cuts his toenails in company. And Orpheus has pretty bad wind.'

She giggled, one hand against her mouth, young again.

'Don't all men suffer that?'

'Oh, you haven't seen anything like Orph. Or smelt it. I pray you never will.'

Reno laughed harder, stopped. She grew serious. Alask watched her expression change and gripped his warm mug. Readied himself.

'Why have you come?' She frowned at herself. 'You're welcome of course, but you still haven't said...'

He took a deep breath, plunged.

'It's your son. I'd like to talk about making him an offer. To join my circus I mean.'

Reno nodded, hair veiling her face. He only saw her crown.

'You knew?'

'No other reason a man like you would be here.'

'Would that be something he'd like?' he whispered, soft as he could, alarmed when a tear splashed against the hard wood dining table. A tiny drop landed on his

hand. He stared at the pattern it left, the magnified contours of his skin like smooth earth. Reno lifted her head.

‘He’d love it. There’s nothing here besides animals, fields and dual carriageways.’

Alask watched her for an expanded moment. Saw it all. He’d felt the same. Even surrounded by the others, he knew.

‘What about you? What would you love?’ he asked, reaching over the table to caress her knuckles. At first she was startled. So much so he thought he’d guessed incorrectly. She blinked, gave a look of gratitude, ran her fingers up his arm to his ear, rubbed the lobe, lifted his hand and kissed it. She closed her eyes, nuzzling her cheek against his knuckles.

The son, Tibold, spent his days in the fields. The season called for harvest, so much as the kitchen server-bot, he chopped and collected, sitting atop the massive combine, up and down acres of field planted that spring. Reno showed Alask severed stalks of grain that had been so tall only weeks ago. The sun had begun its descent. The wind blew like soft breath. A distant rumble hummed beneath his feet, while petrol and freshly cut produce was rich in the air, ready to be collected and ground into fine dust, bagged for market.

Tibold was immersed, two farmyard server-bots beside him, the three clunking and loading bundles onto trucks which steered themselves back to the farmhouse. The vehicles were brand new, glistening, and made the bots, the combine, even Tibold look used and dull. He stood up, the contradiction between his youthful face and height all the more noticeable in the open field, the fading light.

‘Hi,’ the boy said. His expression was blank, not looking at Alask, just his mother.

‘This is Mr Barron,’ she said, from some way back. Alask shot her a look; he’d been worried about her being too sensitive to do this, but now she seemed too coarse.

‘Alask,’ he said, reaching for the boy’s hand. It was difficult not to wince when he shook it.

‘You’ve come pretty far out,’ Tibold said, unsmiling.

Reno turned away, quick and hunched.

‘I came to talk with you. I have something to ask. A proposition.’

Server-bots bent and lifted. It was difficult for Alask not to look at the boy's augmentation when he spoke; power metal legs, clawed feet, huge grey metallic arms; galvanised rubber suspension pads, wiring that acted much as tendons, ball-bearing joints. The boy could have opted for synthetic flesh at little extra cost, but kept his improvements displayed, on show. It said much of his response to what had happened, and would do wonders for the tour. Alask averted his eyes, looking into the boy's.

'I'd like to offer you a place in our circus. I happen to think you'd make a great young Strong-Man. You could tour with us, come home in the winter or stay if you like. We'd pay enough to hire someone to run this place, or you could expand your server-bot staff. Either way, we'd love to have you.'

The boy said nothing. He chewed on something unseen, jaw writhing. He turned to his mother.

'He told you this?'

'Yes he did.'

'You didn't call him?'

She gasped, wrapping her arms around herself.

'Course not!'

She wanted to say more, Alask could tell, but she faltered and the words got trapped behind her teeth. She shivered, arms tight around her body. It wasn't cold. Tibold held those huge metal hands palms up, towards her.

'And you're OK with this?'

She nodded, her mouth beginning to tremble. Alask studied his shoes. The server-bots worked on, lights blinking. Tibold sighed.

'I don't know...'

He turned away, walking across the shallow tide of cut stalks, gears whining, crunching. Alask touched Reno's arm, tipping his head towards her son. He followed.

'Tibold?'

The boy stopped, holding his head. Alask kept a few paces back. He could smell concentrated salt behind him. Hear the rapid thud of the boy's heart. The wind blew dust and particles of grain.

'Tell me the problem.'

'I want to.'

'OK... But?'

'My mother.'

‘Well...’ he put his hands in his pockets, thought. He heard a sound, harsh rustling, frenetic. Smelt damp, sour fur. A dark shape flew from a pile of grain stalks, running beneath the truck tyres. A mouse. He followed until it was gone. ‘We could do a trial run, three months or so. And if all goes well.... We could send for her...’

The boy turned. His eyes were bright. He wiped them.

‘Would you?’

‘Providing we’re all happy with the arrangement, yes. She could be a great help on the road, I’m sure.’

Tibold held his eye, more serious than ever. Alask stood perfectly still, waiting. Quieting his face. At last, the boy nodded.

‘That’s a good compromise. Thank you.’

‘It’s a pleasure.’

They shook hands once again. Alask knew he should be happy, so he tried to block what his senses picked up behind him; the unwilling accusation of Reno’s grief, and quiet evidence of her tears.

He drove back as night was growing. The show would be up late and the others would be wondering where he was but the boy was worth it. He’d even fixed the net connection as promised. If he couldn’t do that, neither the boy nor his mother would trust him to stick to his most important oath.

There were urgent jobs to attend to once they’d completed the get out. Let the others know there was a new team member. Book an extra room for the rest of the tour. Plot how long it would take to get to the next town from the isolated farmhouse after they picked up the boy the following day. He felt better than he had in years, nothing was too taxing. He could see the headlines, the revamped posters – *Tibold the Great: Augmented Strong-Man* - could hear the gasps of excitement, screams, brilliant delight in thousands of eyes. He steered the car through darkening lanes thinking of Tibold’s strength, Reno’s soft eyes, of the next town.

SCARECROW

The winter days are growing short so this morning I wake up early, dress in simple clothes and sit on the front steps. The air's cloying and smells of far-away bonfires. The flats around me are empty now, most of them anyway, and I don't worry about my neighbours. I light a cigarette, keeping an eye out for strangers. There aren't many, but I watch anyway.

When my cigarette is done and the sun is high I push from the dew-damp steps, walk to the shops. At first they seem closed, which is unusual. I steel myself, taking quick looks over my shoulder and bang on the wood that covers the doors, the windows. The streets are bare. Black tar and white lines glisten. Silence makes me jittery, I just want to go. I bang harder. I know the risk I'm taking but none of us want to starve.

After a long time a slat of wood is removed. I can see an eye. It is black-ringed, tired. I gulp back what I really want to say, raise my voice.

'Hi... It's Nicole... From Iffley Road. Do you have eggs? 12?'

The eye blinks, disappears. One of the kids I suppose. The adult Tsoi's know me well, although you never can be sure. Personally I think they're crazy to let them answer my knocks, but that's their business I suppose. Maybe they're scared. Maybe something's happened. I stamp my feet on the ground, blow into my hands. My own breath dances before me. The eye returns and the kid pushes a brown paper bag through the hole in the slats. I swap it for six batteries, grasp the bag tight. No boxes. If they break, no breakfast.

'Thanks... Uh... Is everything OK?'

A quick nod, the slat scrapes closed. I stand there, frowning, remember. None of my business. I make my way back down the main road and see the man. He's standing not far from The Goldhawk pub, on the same side of the road as me but far enough so I can't see his features, just a vague shape. He might not even be a man at all, but he's tall and big so I go with my assumption. He's wearing a duffel coat with the hood up, which is even worse. He's not doing anything, just looking in my direction and he might have seen me, might not, so I turn on my heel, start to walk, briskly without looking back. I strain my ears to check if he's following, because it's so quiet these days you can practically hear for miles, but there's no sound. When I get on the back roads that lead towards Hammersmith I look over my shoulder. He's not there. I

jog then, all the way, holding the paper bag away from me. Danny's at the front steps with the gun, eyes full moons, even more when he sees me. I slow down, gasping.

'What happened?'

'Nothing,' I'm panting. 'I just saw someone by the shops, a man I think. He didn't follow me but I ran anyway.'

He lowers the gun. His face looks pale in the grey of morning, drained.

'Are you nuts, going off like that?'

He's crying. Guilt shoots through me like cramp. I climb the steps, throwing my arms around him. I shiver when he hugs me and feel his head turn, him raise the gun, just in case we get jumped. This is what we have come to. This is who we have become.

'Let's go inside,' he says.

We take a final look over our shoulders, go up the steps, enter. The passageway is dark as oil, so is the living room, as we have done as the Tsoi's, boarded up windows and doors. There is lamplight, candlelight, which tends to be nicer than the bulbs. I pull off my hoodie and start looking for pots. Danny stands behind me, sniffing, hands by his side. He comes closer, stops me.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'For snapping at you.'

'It's OK,' I smile and I mean it. I would have done the same, I think he knows.

'What did you get?'

'Eggs.'

He puffs out a huge breath, catches himself. I know what he's thinking. Small, non-essential items. Not worth dying for. But we need to eat.

'What are you making?'

'Eggs Florentine.'

He shoots me a glance. We burst out laughing.

'Do you need help?'

'Nah, not really. You relax.'

I continue my work. Run water in the pan, set it on the hob, ignite flame, break eggs. Simple, mundane things. I'm humming. When I turn around Danny hasn't moved. He raises an eyebrow at me.

'I'll go and check the scarecrow,' he says. And he is gone.

I poach the eggs, boil the spinach and make Hollandaise sauce as best as I can with only a whisk and a teaspoon of white wine vinegar. There's not much on the radio but I turn it on at low volume to find the local station is still on air, probably

broadcasting from one of those tower blocks Danny says, as they'd be fools to advertise themselves from a maisonette council flat, or anything on the ground like we were. We'd debated that for weeks, whether we should move to higher ground, there were pros and cons and even the pros were negligible. Danny had wanted to go, I said we should stay, and we went at it for ages, arguing back and forth right up until Sherwin came home. Of course, that changed everything. Danny said the obvious, if he'd found us it was easy for others to. I countered that by saying it wasn't such a big deal, he just remembered didn't he? I couldn't run the risk of him being a Symp and all, I couldn't run off and leave him like so many others did to family, lovers and friends. I wasn't built that way. And Danny loves me so much he understood. He let us all stay in the building, together.

I'm singing to Jazz on the radio, swaying my hips when Danny comes down from the roof. He looks serious. I slide the eggs onto my homemade muffins, turn.

'What's up?'

'I think I saw that guy.'

I stop singing and put down the pan.

'He was walking along the street. Didn't look up, but he was searching for someone. Maybe you, maybe someone else. I don't know.'

'I'm sorry,' I whisper. I'm looking at my trainers.

'It's OK,' he says, and kisses my forehead. I'm grateful for that. 'We'll just have to be a bit careful when we go down.'

'Sorry,' I say again. He nods and gets out the plastic cutlery.

I dish everything up and put on the crowbar. Danny's managed to tie a piece of rope to each end so I can carry it across my back like a samurai sword. We're desperately short of weapons, some knives, a baseball bat, his gun, but we're too wary to forage outside of the streets we know, and the Tsoi's won't sell the weapons they have, they need everything they can get. If there's anyone else left they're holing themselves up better than we are. We probably wouldn't trust them anyway.

We're ready. Danny goes over to the window and removes one of the slats. He looks up and down, left and right.

'All clear,' he mutters.

We leave the flat, Danny first, holding one plate and the gun, me behind him with two, one in each hand. God forbid we see anyone who has their own gun, but we've never mentioned that. I push the thought to the back of my mind three times

daily, every time we do this. We go down the stairs into the basement and that's the tricky bit, the one where I'm most scared, as Danny has to put down the plate to open the flat with a key. Even though he still has the gun, his back is turned and my hands are full. That would be the perfect time to jump us if any kill parties were watching. Or that man. We can't see what's going on above us, and the streets are so quiet, but even that's not reassuring; it could just mean someone's trying to sneak up on us. I wait, and listen, and realise even the birds have stopped singing. I wonder when that happened. I've never noticed it before, and it makes me even more afraid. I start crying until I hear the basement door creak open. I wipe my eyes with my sleeve, go inside.

The flat smells of musk, bodily waste, imprisoned air. The pipes emit a monotone hum. I keep swiping at my eyes, but this is just an excuse to cover my nose without Sherwin noticing. It's a studio flat, the front door leading to the open plan living room, which goes into a bedroom on the right of the alcove that houses the kitchenette. The bathroom is at the rear, hardly used. Sherwin's tied by his wrists to the black leather business chair in the centre of the room. His head is bowed. He's either asleep, or comatose.

I put down the plates, go over, shake him and call his name. He raises his head. His eyes are dim even in half-light, blank like a soft toy. The smell of urine is stronger. I step back, seeing the dark patch around his crotch. He catches my grimace.

'I couldn't wait...'

My hand is pushed into my mouth, forcing it all back. I don't know how it got there. I catch him watching me. The hand falls, my fingers spasm by my thighs. Danny touches my shoulder.

'I'll get the bowl,' he whispers, and he's gone. Sherwin's head cranes to follow. His eyes are fire. I don't want to know.

'Let's get these off you then,' I say in the most cheerful voice I can manage, hearing myself sound like a nurse. I bend in front of him. His odour is thick, soupy, but I unbutton his jeans, grab the elastic of his boxers, pull both past his hips, Sherwin lifting in order to help, then all the way down to his ankles, over his socks and into a sodden, acrid heap in my hands. He watches me all the way, even though *I'm* bowing my head now, it's as though he can see what I'm feeling, the way I'm trying not to notice his penis, or the rope around his wrists, though it must be pretty obvious because I don't lift my head from the clothes and even when I stand I simply ball them up and

put them in the dirty clothes bag. I pull the drawstring and face the bathroom where I can hear Danny running water. I wonder what's taking him so long.

'Can't even look at me then?'

I'm startled, and then I have to.

'No...' My smile doesn't last. 'Just waiting...'

'Nicki. You know this is wrong. Let me go.'

'No Sherwin...' I step towards him, stop. 'You know I can't.'

'I won't...' he says, and the water stops running. He shuts his mouth, lets his head fall. His bare legs are dark tree roots. I take two steps away from him, and then Danny is coming down the small passage, legs bent like a cowboy, holding the bowl. Water slops from either side.

Danny puts the bowl down in front of Sherwin, between his feet. There's a cloth floating beneath the bubbles, which I take and begin to wash him with, not avoiding his penis, instead telling myself it's another part of him, knees or toes. Steam rises like dry ice. He forces a grim smile at the floor while this is happening, not looking at me. It must be embarrassing for him too. Danny sits with his back against the sofa, opposite us, pointing the gun. I snake the sweatshirt over Sherwin's head, wash his chest, beneath his arms, his upper back and shoulders. I drop the washcloth into the bowl and push it away, take the crowbar from my back and place it beside me, untie the ropes. While he flexes his limbs, I pick up the crowbar and join Danny on the sofa.

He eats standing, on his side of the room. This is usual, he knows the rules; standing is allowed, walking is not. He paces on the spot, lifting one knee and the next, putting his fork down to swing an arm, swap his plate to the opposite hand, swing the other. The food's cold but this is also usual, for one reason or another; the weather, strangers outside our building, Sherwin needing to be changed. We eat in silence, rapidly, both hungry, both wary it seems, yet Sherwin seems in good spirits, or better than he was. Before, when he first arrived, he complained, cajoled, shouted for hours. Danny had to go down when he started screaming in the night, took the gun and didn't tell me what he'd said, but it stopped. Ever since Sherwin looks at Danny with flames in his eyes. It's to be expected I suppose, still scary.

'That's nice,' Sherwin says. 'Best muffins you've made. Not hunger talking either.'

'Thanks,' I mutter, head down. I'm holding the gun while Danny takes his turn to eat.

‘So how long do you intend to keep this up? Out of interest?’

Danny looks up from his plate.

‘Until someone comes,’ he says.

Sherwin eyes him for a long time. Danny holds the stare until he sees me looking, ducks his head to shovel up the last of the muffin and alabaster sauce mixed with yolk. Sherwin keeps watching, points his plastic fork at me.

‘You can’t be serious. No one’s coming.’

‘Radio says-’

‘No one’s coming. No police, no army. No one. They’ll bomb the place and leave it at that.’

Danny shoots me a glance. We’ve had this conversation. I try not to hear the whining scrape of his fork against the plate.

‘They won’t. It won’t solve the problem.’

‘Then what else?’

I open my mouth, shrug, and for a moment the gun’s pointing at the boarded up windows. Sherwin steps forward.

‘Nicole-’

Danny sucks in a sharp breath. I jump and point the gun at Sherwin, a brutal jerk of my wrist. Sherwin stops. Forces his bitter smile at the floor again, holds up his hands.

‘Alright. Alright.’

He backs off and I’m glad. He drops to the floor, does his stretches; touches toes, grabs each ankle and forces his heel to his thigh, leans to the right and his left, one arm over his head. Then he goes through his exercise routine. Push ups, sit ups, squat thrusts, jogging on the spot. It takes roughly twenty minutes. In all that time he never takes his eyes from us, and we don’t say a word, not to each other or him. When he’s done he sits back in the leather seat, hands on the armrest.

‘You can tie me up now,’ he says.

‘Don’t you want to use the toilet?’

‘No,’ he says. He wants to punish me, have me clean him again. He wants to make a point. I could argue, but I know better. I can’t very well make him. Cross that bridge when we get there.

Danny gets up and reties his wrists. I point the gun, eyes damp, mouth shut firm, trying not to cry too hard. I’m making my arm shake and it’s not good for my aim.

When Danny tightens the last knot Sherwin gasps and gives him such a look I feel as though I've swallowed a frozen pebble. Danny walks back studying his feet. I stand beside him.

'Good luck,' Sherwin says.

Outside, I lock the door quietly. The sky looks like the inside of a seashell, pink and blue and glistening grey. Danny covers me. The stance he takes, both hands on the gun, head twisting with stiff jerks, would be ludicrous if I wasn't so frightened. He goes up the stairs first, and on the ground floor we swap. I put down the plates, unlock the door to our flat, pick up the plates and go inside. It's a slow, laborious business but after what happened to the woman at 64 we take our time. No sense hurrying to lose your life.

I let myself into our flat, noticing Danny hang back. I frown.

'I was thinking, maybe I should work.'

'What, now?'

'Before it gets dark.'

'But it's not even 12.'

'Yeah, but the later it gets the more difficult it'll be. It is winter.'

There's logic in his argument, I can see that. I don't want it though; I want tea, hugs, conversation. I don't want him out there again.

'You could go tomorrow. Early.'

Danny says nothing. I don't even make sense to myself.

'We're running low.'

'Of what?'

I know full well what he means.

'Everything. It's only the house. I'll be back before dark.'

'OK, if you say so.'

He comes over, holds me close, kisses the top of my head, between the centre parting of my braids.

'I'll be OK. Promise.'

'Take this,' I say, and duck beneath the cold embrace of the crowbar, lifting it from my shoulders and over my head. He puts it on his back. After, I give him the keys.

'Don't answer the door to anyone who knocks, anytime. Not even me,' he says. 'Promise?'

'I promise.'

‘Back soon. Love you.’

‘I love you too.’

The door shakes when it slams. I stand there for a long time, hoping he changes his mind. I wonder what Sherwin’s thinking.

Inside, the door double-locked behind me, I make tea and sit by the window, one slat removed, watching 64. I shouldn’t really expose us but I need more sunlight. I don’t want to see the house but its right in front of me, there’s nothing else to do but look. I don’t want to remember what I saw but its there in my head. It was three weeks afterwards, early Sunday morning. We’d made love, lay in bed shivering and not talking about Sherwin, when we heard screams coming from the street. Danny got up, the gun tight between his fingers and removed the slat very carefully. It was the young woman. I didn’t know her name, but she lived alone, had ever since I moved in. She had her shopping trolley with her, had been on her way to the Tsoi’s maybe, when a small kill party must have caught sight of her, only four men. They surrounded the woman and were pushing her from one to the other like bullies, laughing loud, whooping, using each push to tear clothing, punch or kick her, rip the trolley from her hands and throw it into someone’s basement. The woman was screaming; an odd, breathy sound that reminded me of when I’d punctured the hose of my vacuum cleaner. It was difficult to see what weapons they had, but there must have been a knife because after one big push she clutched her stomach, and the laughter got louder, and her cream dress grew red with blood, and she stumbled and dropped to her knees, and that’s when they fell on her, punching, kicking and stabbing until she lay still in the middle of the road. One of them dragged her body all the way down the road by the ankle, until they were out of sight, the rest still kicking at her. God knows what they did afterwards, as if that wasn’t enough. And we watched. We sat inside our house and watched, didn’t do a fucking thing. Danny put the slat back as carefully as he’d removed it, and much later, he went to work as normal.

I finish my tea and replace the slat. Wander around the flat. We have leftover sausages and I can mash the few potatoes we have left for tonight’s dinner. I hope Danny comes back with meat. His parents’ house is just past Ravenscourt Park, a twenty minute walk. The first time he went he stayed for almost a week, scared me so much he promised he’d never do it again. They’re dead of course. His parents. Danny made sure of that. He goes over every few days and gets most of our food from there, raiding their massive freezer. It won’t last forever, we know that. Then he’ll have to

forage elsewhere. Danny calls it work and I let him because men need purpose in life, plus it gives us a sense of normality. Before this I worked too, real work, but foraging isn't a job either of us want me to do. I play the traditional role now. Truth is, I don't mind. Better than being out there.

I need a cigarette. Danny doesn't smoke, which means I have to go onto the roof. I gather my smoking paraphernalia, lock our flat, open the door to old Mr Fallon's flat, cover my nose against the slaughterhouse stench, go into the attic and up the metal ladder, pull myself onto the roof, into fresh air. There. Needed that too.

The roof is flat, open. When the wind blows hard enough dust circles like a hungry pet. There's a rusting barbecue in the corner, a threadbare sofa that stinks of cat piss, and of course, the scarecrow. He's roped to a sun lounger and it's only then that irony strikes me; Sherwin and old Mr Fallon, both tied up, both dead. I want to laugh and can't, even when I force it. I avoid the scarecrow and sit on the edge of the sofa, light my cigarette.

By week four we'd realised we hadn't heard anything from old Mr Fallon and we began to get scared right away. What should we do? What would he return as, Symp or Syke? The Government statement the radio man read told us it took three days. We put our heads against the wall and listened for a sound. We reasoned that he'd left the flat without us noticing. Slipped away, not into a quiet, old man's death, but into cold winter night.

Later we heard movement from downstairs, the flat. We looked at each other. It was him.

Danny went to check. Said he might have to 'do' Mr Fallon like he did his parents and I shouldn't come down under any circumstances. The silence made me want to scream and then I heard banging, a shot. When I went downstairs old Mr Fallon was dead for good, a hole right between his eyes like the radio man told us we should. I wouldn't have had the guts. Danny was breathing hard, eyes darting, angry. I don't think he wanted me to see him that way.

Somehow, using nothing more than rope and brute strength, Danny hauled the body into the attic and further up the metal ladder onto the roof. I helped as best as I could, holding Fallon's legs and pushing when he pulled, but I was pretty useless. Danny put a puffy winter coat on old Mr Fallon, a Halloween mask he'd found somewhere to cover his face, flipped the hood and tied him to the sun lounger, wrapping rope around his waist. He went to work that night, the only time he'd gone out so late,

and came back with his father's replica pistol, something that couldn't be used against us but might deter a kill party from trying to break in and murder us. Of course, the scarecrow could draw unwanted attention, although it seemed to have worked for now. From what little I could tell, Sykes are pretty cowardly. Danny says they only pick on humans who can't fight.

I smoke my cigarette and think. I watch streetlights and for the thousandth time I wonder when they'll come on. That's when we'll know we've truly won. That's when we'll know our lives have returned. I wait for that moment every dusk, and though I breathe a sigh of frustration when they stay dark, I can't help thinking I'm one day closer to the evening they all light up again.

'Hey! Heeeey!'

I fall, slumping onto the floor, roll on my back and stub the cigarette out in three quick thumps. What was I *thinking*? Danny will kill me. I'm lying there, breathing in dust, trying not to sneeze or cough.

'I know you're up there! I can see smoke!'

I swear; a whispered curse.

'I'm not gonna hurt you! You're with the girl aren't you? The girl I saw at the shops!'

His voice is raw with shouting. I can barely hear him, wouldn't be able to if it wasn't for the silence.

'I'm just trying to help! I'm alive!' There's nothing for a long while, and I'm kneeling, almost getting to my feet when he starts again. I duck even though he can't see me. 'Stay away from the Tsoi's alright? They've got a Syke! She'll kill them all!'

I wait for him to say more, heart pounding, and don't hear anything for ages. There's a rush of rapidly moving feet, like someone's slapping tarmac, the noise echoing from walls and paving slabs. I get to my feet and climb downstairs into old Mr Fallon's flat, into the communal corridor and into our flat, snicking the door shut. Sherwin's calling for help in a desperate, raw voice. I couldn't tell from the roof but in my flat it's loud, obvious. There's shuffling on the steps outside my window. Sherwin hears it too, because he stops calling. A minute later the front door opens and shuts, the flat door opens and shuts, and Danny's home.

'What's going on?' he says, face pale, eyes bright. He's holding a white plastic bag.

‘Nothing...’ I know I won’t get away with that, put a hand to my head, and play with my hair. ‘I went for a smoke and that guy from this morning, I think he saw me. He was shouting...’

Danny mouths something harsh, shakes his head.

‘So now he knows we’re here.’

‘He doesn’t. He didn’t see anything.’

‘He saw me.’

I push my lips together, he has a point. Danny hisses between his teeth and pulls something from the plastic bag. For a moment I swear it’s a human limb and then I realise it’s not, it’s just a joint of meat. The sides shine in the candlelight. He slams it on the kitchen counter. I wince.

‘Dunno whether we should have it for dinner or use it for self-defence.’

I laugh on cue. He’s looking at the meat, not smiling.

‘Beef?’ I say, going over to the counter.

‘Lamb,’ he replies. ‘You know we have to do Sherwin right?’

He has no expression. I don’t either, I know because I’m holding it in like my basement tears. The hum of the pipes is louder than ever.

‘Why?’

‘He’s gonna get us killed. Shouting like that. There’s kill parties everywhere, if they hear him it’s over.’

‘I’ll talk to him.’

‘He won’t listen.’

‘He will, if I tell him we’re serious. You can’t, not now. After all this time.’

Danny sighs, looks away. I grasp his hand, I know what that means.

‘It’s not like I want to.’

‘I know.’

‘It’s just I don’t want to lose you.’

‘Me neither,’ I say. I kiss him, feeling his cold lips against mine.

‘It’s freezing out,’ he says, watching me.

‘Well, we only have to go downstairs.’

I make the mash, re-heat the sausages and have a late lunch. We eat upstairs first and take it down after; I figure that’s better, Danny doesn’t have to stay as long, won’t get agitated. Sherwin doesn’t say anything about his yelling, or the fact we’ve already eaten, and neither do I. His eyes are soft, pleading. He’s soiled himself like I

knew he would and I have to clean it all up and change him, but that's better than the permanent alternative we all know it. We creep upstairs, ever on the look-out for the guy from the shops, or anyone else, and as soon as we're inside I'm boiling water for soup. Danny's chops beside me, throws vegetables into the pot and we let it all bubble while I read a novel and he listens to music. His eyes are closed. His foot taps out constant rhythm and I'm trying to concentrate on the words on my page, but I keep getting distracted by Danny. What he said. As much as I try to ignore it, force it to the back of my mind like everything else over the last two months, I can't. I just can't.

The soup's a gorgeous smelling mush. We turn off the heat, dish it into bowls and take it down. This time Sherwin is clean, and when he eats with a plastic spoon his eyes are grateful. Danny ignores him, mouth a solid, dark streak. The atmosphere is thick as my soup. Sherwin eats like there was little or no lunch, performs his exercises and asks to use the toilet. We try not to listen, don't talk while he's gone. When he comes back and sits down he winks, giving me a tiny smile.

'Thanks sis,' he says.

Danny and I maintain our silence until we're back upstairs. He flops on the bed and lies with his hands behind his head, eyes closed. I remain standing, listening to noises from the street. Dustbins falling. The shuffle of riffled contents. Either dogs, foxes, or people.

'So? What do you think?'

He lifts his head, chin tucked into his chest, hands still clasped. I can hardly see his eyes.

'Better,' he says. 'Much better.'

We make love, fall asleep. In what feels like an instant I'm there, at the beginning. I see people that died returning three days later, coming back to lovers and families, knocking on doors and windows, not in a zombie, arms outstretched kind of way, but really back to life, with memories and feelings, just like me and you. Thousands in London, millions all over the world, old, young, fresh and unspoiled as the day they were born, bodies cold and hearts still, otherwise normal, at first.

I hear news reports saying these dead people, the 'reverts', are violent. They attack without provocation, kill in some cases, seemingly enjoy the harm and panic they cause. I see open battles on streets, feel the body-shaking rattle of bombs, the police and army overwhelmed, the National Guard beaten, thousands of psychotic returnees, 'Sykes' as they become nicknamed, fighting bitter battles and winning. I listen to the

radio when the TV becomes inactive, Government statements telling us that authorities have learned there are two factions, the dead who love to kill and the dead who do not, psychotic and sympathetic, Sykes and Symps, and as it's difficult to tell who is who they are evacuating the city.

I see empty streets, neighbours wishing us well and leaving, silence in their wake, us packing to go when the knock comes, and when we lift the slat my brother is there in his blood splattered army uniform, waiting patiently, head low. There's shouting, Danny waving the gun even though that part didn't happen like that. Sherwin is being lead into the empty flat downstairs, and Danny kicks off the door (which really did happen), and then it's all threats, and rope, and though in reality Sherwin simply looked at me, pleading with his eyes for me to make Danny stop, in the dream he is screaming, tears rolling down his cheeks, him saying, 'Save me Nicki, save me,' and I feel a wrench in my gut, and wake to feel the crushing pressure of night, and I know Danny's going to kill my brother.

I slide out of bed. Danny's snoring on his back. I pick the crowbar up from where I always leave it, next to my bed, grab my dressing gown, keys and creep to the flat door, let myself out. The night's mild, the moon high and bright. The air is filled with moisture. I loved nights like these not long ago. A fox spies me, eyes gleaming, and runs.

I go down the stairs with my crowbar raised, letting myself in with Danny's keys. Sherwin is sleeping, chin tucked into his chest, dribbling. I shake his arm. He jerks, looks around, mumbles.

'Ssssh...'

'What you doing?' he's hissing.

'Go,' I say. 'Get out of here, now. We'll meet at the evac point on Wormwood Scrubbs.'

He's unsure, snakes himself free anyway. I hug him tight, the first time I've done it since he came back to find me and it's like holding a block of ice. He's uncomfortable. He pulls away.

'I better go then.'

'OK. Go.'

He heads for the open door. I see orange light stream inside the flat, his silhouette. I take a last look and leave. Sherwin's limping up the concrete stairs. I

follow, seeing something from the corner of my eye. Sherwin stops, raises his hands slow, palms up.

‘Thought so,’ Danny says from our flat door, gun pointing at Sherwin. ‘He’ll kill us both Nicole, you don’t see it.’

I scream, hearing my own voice echo from bare streets. There’s a shot and Sherwin falls onto me, holding his shoulder. Danny’s fighting with someone. It’s the man, the one who followed me. They’re fighting for the gun.

Sherwin has recovered, is leaping the stairs, running. I want to go with him but instead I jump the steps and throw myself at the man, wrenching at limbs, hair, even eyes. He falters. Danny takes the opportunity, pushing him away, firing three times. The man falls, shock forever cast on his face. Danny elbows me aside and I stumble against the brick, nearly go over into the basement. He runs to the centre of the road, standing with his legs wide apart, waits, fires. I hear a mute thud. *Sherwin*, I want to say and I can’t. I scream, louder and longer.

When I open my eyes I’m huddled against the cold steps and they’re still there. The dead man. Danny motionless in the centre of the road as though his feet are stuck. He looks at me and his eyes are like tarmac. He comes back to the building steps, looming over me. I flinch. His face crumples.

‘Nicki, I’m sorry babe. I’ll take care of you. I love you.’

I’m crying too much to say anything. He reaches out a hand, and I have to take it. His fingers are cold as the concrete steps, making me cry even harder. He lifts me to my feet. It’s only us now.

COSMOGRAMMA

She thought the doctor had kind eyes, but his face shifted somehow, and like dusk into night there was something that frightened her. Layla backed away, even as Heminol swivelled his chair, exposing tiny chips of white teeth. Her stomach clenched. Sweat dotted her temples. In a matter of seconds the moment was gone. She settled in her seat, unsure of what she'd seen, eying his tall, bony frame.

'It's OK,' Mother said, leaning towards her. 'He's trying to help. Don't be scared.'

'That's right. He'll make it better,' Father added, and his fluty voice soothed her.

'In your own time,' Doctor Heminol said. He smiled wider. 'When you're ready.'

She lowered her head, took a step away from his desk, gathered herself and began to sing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. Her voice was strong, slightly hoarse, fluty like her father's. She saw him through quick glances as he closed his eyes, his jaw clenched, and almost stopped singing. Her mother watched from the edge of her seat, fingers clasped, nodding as though someone had asked her a very serious question. The doctor's pen touched his upper lip.

The room began to shift as if it was held between a giant's fingers and turned ever so slightly to the right. Though the rheumy yellow ceiling lights were on, it grew dark. Above their heads a fissure appeared in the ceiling and through it seeped thick colour, vibrant mauve, tumbling onto itself like the crest of a wave. The colour collapsed, became deep desert red, collapsed once more and became royal blue. When Layla finished the song the colours roiled away and the room lightened. Her mother cried silent tears. The doctor, once again, bared teeth. Her father regarded her, face solid.

'Remarkable,' Heminol said, making scratchy notes. 'She must come in for observation.'

'What kind?' her father asked.

'A simple physical, cranial scans...' Heminol murmured, still writing. 'You are aware that this condition is classified?'

'Cosmogramma,' her mother said, Layla detecting pride.

‘Clinically known as Ellison’s Syndrome, but yes,’ Heminol said. ‘You’ve done your research.’

‘Some,’ her father breathed, one clearly defined note, fingers stroking and feeling for knots in his beard he wouldn’t find because he brushed it at least three times daily, possibly more. ‘We’re willing to learn.’

‘Well,’ Heminol said, sitting straighter, unfolding long legs. ‘We don’t know much, just that some people – adversely or otherwise – seem affected by changes in gravity, atmospheric pressure, oxygen make-up – we don’t know which, or even whether they’re all contributory factors – so their genetic configuration, or mutated brain structure, enable them to affect subtle changes on our, the viewers and their own that is, ability to perceive light refraction on a universal scale. While these people, mostly children, though as you know there are adult cases, by no means make up the majority, the percentage of the affected population is high enough to warrant mild concern, or at least the need for further study.’

Her mother’s eyes danced, flitting left to right.

‘That’s what we thought,’ she said.

Her father almost smiled.

‘Where will these studies be undertaken?’

‘The children’s ward of St Monmouth’s, no more than a day’s observation.’

‘We’ll have to take time off,’ her mother realised.

‘Oh no, we’ll come to your block and pick Layla up, bring her back when we’re done. Absolutely no need.’

‘Bring her back?’

‘Absolutely your choice. No obligation.’

Silence. Layla examined patterns in the wood beneath her feet, tracing repetition. Dark, thick, straight lines like a word underlined many times over. The Naadassa tree, like all trees on Kepler, had squares inside the trunk, not rings. Not that she’d ever seen a tree with rings.

‘We should know what’s wrong,’ her father said.

‘Yes, it’s such a worry.’

‘I totally understand. And we’d be honoured to help. If you could just fill in these forms. Sign here... And here.’

She lifted her head to watch her parents' write their names on the doctor's palm computer, lowered it when they were done. A few clicks and a beep. Heminol made a satisfied hum. She felt a warm hand on her back, and didn't know whose.

The Amicilli metro had finished construction just before she was born, so her parents said. Layla was always amazed by the new car scent, the way surfaces around her gleamed. She held her mother's hand as they bought tickets, watched passengers come in and out, smiling as the barriers swung open to receive them, clutching her mother's fingers as they descended on the escalator. The transports themselves were bright silver bullets, more like star-crafts than any track-bound vehicle, and she was thrilled to enter the hissing doors to sit by the large window, elbows leant on the sill. While her parents talked about what the doctor had said and what they had done, Layla watched the tunnel walls race by, hardly able to tell. The baggage rack shook, and they were rocked from side to side. Layla loved it. She smiled, although it went unseen, her parents too distracted to notice.

Up the escalator, out of the barriers, a short walk home and there they were, Gillie and Marshan, waiting for the ball to return to them, poised, arms open, chins raised, so they didn't even see her. A duo of open doors at the end of short pathways lined their rectangle block, 375y7, glowing with the interior lights of their houses. Layla searched her parents' faces, saying 'Please, please,' until they smiled and said 'Of course,' and her mother let go of her hand so she could run to her friends, still waiting for the ball to land, tracking its slow descent, and it only met Gillie's arms as she reached them. It was all *hi's* and hugs after that, Layla cackling upwards, chin raised into the crimson sky above, school friends dancing around her. Layla's parents looked on, pleased to see her happy, and went inside.

They played ball until the night met fresh terra-formed earth, and before they were called inside the children ran into the woodland beyond their block. Much of Kepler's forests had been cleared to make way for towns and cities, but some were left standing. They were lucky to have a hectare of untouched land to the west of their street, a forest of 200 feet tall Naadassas, creeping White Betullah vines, an army of squat toad lotus as high as their waists, flooding the landscape with colours. And all around them roses and lilies and petunias reared from Earth exported seeds which had grown in abundance. The children ran along paths forged generations before, to stop in a

clearing that led to the foot of the largest Naadassa, its trunk four times the size of any normal tree, its leaves blocking the artificial light cast by humans.

The boy lay in the shadow formed by the canopy of branches. He didn't look up as they came closer. He was four years older, a lifetime by their reckoning. He chewed on the end of bullgrass, head propped by thick roots, shoulder length locks much like the Naadassa's tangled limbs. Layla hid her smile. The boy was Lanameade.

'Hey Meade, how is it?' Gillie was first to ask. Layla couldn't help but watch. Gillie was more womanly than any of the girls on their block. Lanameade hadn't noticed, but one day he would.

'Not bad,' he said, chewing. 'You lot been allowed out?'

'We ran,' Layla blurted, and when his dark eyes fell on her she felt her stomach fly and couldn't breathe.

'Bad kids,' he grinned, making the others laugh. 'Don't suppose you got any cane?'

A duo of shaking heads. Marshan drew a thick stalk of sea-cane from his pocket. Layla drew hers. They held them while the others grew quiet.

'Where did you get yours from?' Marshan asked her. Before she could answer Gillie was talking loud, trying to impress Meade, it was obvious.

'Her mum and dad went to the clinic, didn't they?'

Layla's eyes rested on bullgrass, tiny red daisies, weeds. She kept them low.

'Don't worry, it's just a check-up and a scan and after that, you'll get more cane,' Meade told her. It was the gentlest she'd heard him speak ever. 'It's painless, trust me. I know. Want to sing?'

She looked up, checking with Marshan, who nodded and smiled. Marshan knew how much she liked the older boy.

'Let's,' he said, and put away his cane.

There weren't many songs all three liked, but everyone knew *Solar Rhapsody*, or as it had become known *The Song of Earth*, the unofficial planetary anthem that overrode Queens, country and government, sung in schools, universities, mosques, temples and churches, in business meetings, parties, at celebrations and funerals. It was only the Cosmogrammas at first, Meade, Marshan and Layla, but when the canopy above seemed to gently split and the colours came rolling through, Layla's mauves, reds and blues merging with Marshan's greens, yellow and pinks and Meade's earthy

tans, oranges and browns, the rest couldn't help themselves, singing the chorus, falling silent when they reached the verses. Colours danced just below the leafy canopy, merging and tumbling to create new spectrums and tones, encouraging the children to sing with more passion, forming new colours in turn. When they ended the song Gillie said they should sing another, and so they did, loud as they could until they heard their parents call from the forest edge. As one, they all ran home, except for Meade, who stayed to watch the colours shred into fine mist, and dissolve.

Layla ate dinner warmed on the Earth-fashioned stove. She'd thought her parents would be cross, but they smiled and said they'd heard them. The songs were beautiful her mother told her. Meade had such a fine voice, he could easily sing with the best. She was smiling when she said this. Father kept his nose buried in his tablet as Layla blushed.

After they had eaten, they sat in front of the holoscreen. Father liked to watch the news while Mother read a novel. The glow warmed her face, and she smiled to herself often, sometimes laughed. Layla played on her visor, snatching quick glances at the screen. Something about the rumblings of a war on Meccanoa. A bomb blast on the neighbouring moon. A call for ES-residents to be vigilant about possible terrorist activities on their own planets. It didn't seem to matter to Father that the news from other worlds was delayed, sometimes by as little as decades if he was lucky. It only mattered that he be 'brought up to speed,' in his own words. Layla imagined him sprinting to keep up with news, a blurred streak of black, racing just ahead.

And then it was time for bed, too soon as always. She brushed her teeth, kissed her mother and trotted to her room, climbed in. When her father had finished reading Layla a story from her tablet and leaned over to kiss her goodnight, she couldn't help but ask.

'Daddy, what's an ES-resident?'

He smiled, stroking his beard.

'That's us, Layla. Extra-Solar residents. That's who we are.'

He told her the things she knew, about his father and his father before who made the journey to Kepler from Earth years before. He spoke of the hardships of the unstable atmosphere, the new life-forms and the changes the planet made to their forbearers. He said Layla was a pioneer, not of this world but from it, for her to be proud of the person

it made her into. And he told her that the Cosmogramma was a gift from a benevolent ancestor who saw fit to bless her with a power she could share with the world. That she, Meade and Marshan had been granted the ability to become great, universally known, of that he was sure.

He kissed her forehead twice, pulled the covers tight and left the room in darkness. Immediately, Layla slept.

The dusky van came two days later. It parked at the vehicular turning point, a red square of tarmac not far from the path to the woods. Two dusky uniformed attendants fetched the children and brought them back to the van, one after another. Layla was amazed to climb the steps and see the small, pale faces of a dozen children she had never seen, and two she recognised, Meade and Marshan. She rushed along the aisle to where they were seated.

‘Hi, what are you doing here?’ she smiled, thrown from her usual caution by the rush of surprise. They both shrugged.

‘Those men came, got us,’ Marshan said, staring out the window.

‘My dad didn’t want me to go, but they insisted,’ Meade complained. Neither boy was smiling.

‘Oh,’ Layla said, and sat opposite them. No one said anything else, not even the other children. She’d never seen this many young so quiet. Marshan chewed on his sea-cane, bending his head to squeeze juice from tough flesh. The stalk was frayed at one end like a paintbrush.

There were no more passengers it seemed. After the attendants checked their palm computer and conferred, the engine started and they began the journey. The vehicle turned and then they could see their parents, standing on the pavements in a small huddle, talking with their heads down until the dusky van went past. Almost in unison, the adults glanced up at the windows, breaking into sudden smiles, waving. The 375y7 children waved back, but her father’s expression was something Layla never forgot; still, expressionless, his eyes damp; and made her sit back in her seat, feeling tears burn the back of her throat without knowing why.

They drove through the buzzing streets and markets of their township, and on to the quiet, scattered villages on the outskirts of their borough, where the people wore long robes and rode huge lumbering Scaramonds that were short, squat, and red as the

barren deserts to the east, where they roamed in prides of hundreds. Still the dusky van kept going, into the land where there was nothing but land, further than most of the children had gone it seemed, and though there was chatter amongst the dozen, no one spoke to anyone they didn't know, and the talking was low, as if they were in a place of worship. The attendants paid them no more interest, whispering amongst themselves. Meade, Layla and Marshan played *Running 7* on their visors. When Layla grew sleepy, she swapped places, took off her visor and dozed on Meade's shoulder.

She woke to find they had stopped. One of the children, a youngster no older than 6 was wailing from the front seats, face ablaze, calling for his mother. The ceiling above them was churning with a seething black mass, flashes of bull grass green. One of the attendants had grabbed the boy, and was trying to lift him, but he kept fighting, and it took both attendants to do it, passing the boy to another man behind them, this one black suited, tall, masked. A Kepler soldier. Why would they need soldiers? Layla turned towards Meade. Over his shoulder, outside the van, was a huge transport, bigger than she'd ever seen. Only this one wasn't silver. It was red like the earth beneath its wheels, the tracks it had been placed upon.

'What's going on?' she whispered.

'Don't know. We pulled up here and now they want us to get out,' Meade said. Marshan's eyes grew wide. Now most of the children had been herded from the van, an attendant was walking down the aisle towards them. Meade stood full height. He was tall as his father, would possibly become taller. The attendant backed away, and one of the black suited men stepped forwards. Meade's shoulders hunched. He edged out from the cover of the seats, not looking at the others. Layla took his hand and together, the three of them left.

It was hot outside, windy. Red dust swirled at their feet. The sides of the transport were missing, and there was a step ladder that led to the darkness inside. Layla refused to look into the impassive masks of the soldiers, staring only at Meade's back, her right hand clasping his fingers, her left tight around Marshan's. None of the soldiers spoke. It was obvious where they had to go. They climbed the steps, into the transport.

At the top, they found their fellow passengers from the dusky van and others, men, women and children, too many for space. There was the Cosmogramma girl band who sang on Saturday night holo shows. The weighty Opera singer her mother loved. The man who opened the Planetary games, bringing colour and shapes tumbling over

the heads of a stadium filled with thousands. Even a baby who wailed as the block 375y7 children entered, the air above her crackling with infant rage.

The transport doors closed, one diometer at a time. Someone began to yell at in that direction, and soon, as Layla watched, they were all doing the same, as the light changed from a broad window, to a narrow beam, to a sliver, and was gone. The transport shuddered, began to move. Mede's voice cracked beside her, repeating words she could hardly hear. Their shouts echoed in the darkness, rebounding from metal walls. Layla found herself standing, feeling her own spit against her lips, realising somehow she could see. The others were leaning forwards, hurling curses at bare walls. She looked up. A thunderstorm of colours raged like boiling water, one churning into another, clashing, rebounding, and she stopped her screaming to watch them merge as a strange vibration hummed from the transport floor.

A sharp crack above their heads made her ears ring. They fell at once, many covering their heads, but Layla kept her eyes upwards so she saw what they didn't; the colours sweeping into one central point at the centre of the ceiling, thrusting like the tail of a cyclone towards the transport door, blowing it from the hinges, a sheet of paper on the wind, off and away. Light poured in. They got to their feet, surging towards their escape point. There was another crack, louder this time, and the transport roared, trembling as it was pounded from outside. She could see. They could all see, a multitude of heads craned upwards, bright sunlight flooding their eyes. There was vast sky and somewhere far from them, something black flapped and spun like a dark coin, catching the sun as it went higher, and higher. The roof. The transport roof.

A painful squeal of protesting metal. The carriage rocked like metro trains. She was thrown against Meade's shoulder hard, hearing the thud of connection and seeing more colours, this time inside her head. Silence. All around Layla nobody dared to say anything or even move for fear of what came next. There were faint moans, almost chants, but no one spoke a word. Heat fell on their backs, pushing them to the floor. She heard a familiar noise and saw Marshan crying on his knees, covering his head. She bent down, whispered into his ear, saying what she'd seen. She pulled him to his feet and took Meade by the hand. Leading both, she walked to the red open space where the transport door had been.

Every soldier was dead, or dying. Bodies gouged with circular holes through their torsos, organs trailed behind them in the dirt like the tentacles of jellyfish. Bloody red circles where their eyes should have been, hands on guns. Skin pale, dark with burn

marks, bloodless. Further along the segments of transport carriages, Cosmogrammas jumped down in groups of threes and fours, helping the less able with a hand, looking up at the darkening sky with hands on hips, inspecting the fallen remains of dead men. Meade touched the lump on Layla's head gently, and when she forced a smile, hugged her tight. She held on, squeezing him breathless. Her eyes began to burn and she shuddered against him, gasping for breath.

They released each other, leaping carefully down from the carriage one by one. Dust played tag around their feet. The silent land seemed infinite as they walked to join the others.

BUCK

Tem'ondri lined the horizon as he walked onto the front porch, bringing distant thunder, a cloud of dust. Ula stumbled, his Baa'draskin boots scraping dry wood, a broomstick limp between his fingers. It would take the riders over twenty minutes to draw close enough to count. He checked the door was fully shut, leant the broomstick against a wall and sat on the bottom step, eyes narrowed against a fading red sun.

The rumble of their approach shook the ground. There were three, each riding Mita Dragons, which he recalled but hadn't seen since he was a boy, their rippling scales shimmering green and scarlet. The Dragons' loping, side-winding movement meant death for humans, who couldn't ride, but the Tem'ondri could. The gargantuan insects tore through the wasteland dirt and rocks as if they were nothing but air. Ula was glad they hadn't crossed the cane fields or he might have lost many crops.

They stopped just beyond his perimeter fence, Dragons rearing, exposing writhing legs, antennae waving against orange sky. He rose to greet them. The *Mi'owa*, a half-registered weight on his ankle, gave him a slight limp.

'*Kulaz.*'

'*Kulaz,*' said the largest, pulling reins. Her compound eyes were pink and glittered in dying light. The others remained silent.

'You have travelled?' Ula asked the large one.

'*Daar Orr,*' she said. Ula's eyebrows rose. 'We apologise for our abruptness. I am Vrawn. These are my companions, Vrax and Goll.'

The remaining Tem'ondri crossed spiny forearms over their chests. Ula did likewise, bowing towards them. The one called Vrax was blue-eyed and thin. Goll was beetle round, and her eyes were red. The Tem'ondri climbed from their Dragons and tied the reins to his fence, where there were long troughs filled with dew. The Mita drank noisily while their riders entered the perimeter.

'We have herb,' Vrawn said, raising a bag in his secondary left fist.

'Then we will drink,' Ula said without a smile. 'Please, follow.'

He led them up the porch steps and into the farmhouse, which was open-roofed to allow the wasteland heat to escape. Birds fluttered as they entered, making his guests crane their heads towards the thatched roof, point. T'Shawn was preparing the evening meal with their son. They were both so busy seasoning Baa'dra they didn't notice anyone until Ula cleared his throat. T'Shawn faced him, smiling, but jumped when she saw the Tem'ondri. Her lips fell into a straight line. She gathered herself, came into the living room, crossing her arms over her chest, bowing. Vrawn hummed, her mandibles clattering like hard nails drumming against a wooden table.

'*Kulaz maadram*, good lady.'

'*Kulaz madam*.'

She bowed to Vrax and Goll. Vrawn turned to Ula.

'A fine mate.'

'She is,' Ula said, clearing his throat.

T'Shawn's eyes widened. She'd been so enthralled by her guests she'd forgotten Makkani, who was at the kitchen counter, rubbing spices into the meat, oblivious. She hissed, three times, until he looked over his shoulder. The boy stiffened when he saw them.

'Come *here!*'

He ran to his mother's side, head down. The Tem'ondri laughed.

'Really, no need,' Vrawn said, and the others chattered, *no need, no need*.

'He must learn,' T'Shawn told them. Ula felt his eyes narrow. 'Go on then.'

The boy crossed his arms, bowing. The rapid click of mandibles filled the room. Their whispers were loud; *learn, learn*.

'A fine spawn,' Vrax said, nodding. 'Two segments, yes?'

'Nearly three,' Ula said, and he turned to his wife. 'This is Vrawn, Vrax and Goll. They've come from *Daar Orr*. They've brought herb.'

'Oh, good,' T'shawn said, her voice dew neutral. She took the offered bag. 'We'll boil a pot. You can all make yourselves comfortable.'

His wife and son went into the kitchen to make tea. Ula guided their visitors to the seats, where they sat, arranging their lower limbs into positions of comfort. Ula took his own seat, shifting. The dip in his hard backed chair, shaped to cater for the overly large abdomen of the host species was awkward, but they were all made that way. The Temon'dri were Arthropods, as it was said in Earthspeak, Mon'dra's dominant life form. Everything on the planet was created for their needs. Sofas, houses, even humans.

Vrawn sat forwards, gesturing at the large living space.

‘You have done well. Your farm is looking fine. How do things fare with the crops and cattle?’

‘*Grell, grell,*’ Ula said, against a soft clatter of mandibles, quiet appreciation for his use of their language. ‘The landcane harvest was better than last term, and we sold a record amount of Baa’dra produce.’

‘Your success has brought you fame,’ Groll said, speaking at last. ‘Your name is heard far over the mountains.’

‘We’re a simple operation; we simply try,’ Ula told them. The soft clatter returned.

T’Shawn and Makkani entered with a pot of tea surrounded by five cups balanced on a tray. Their son poured for the visitors while his wife joined Ula on a hard back chair beside him.

‘Now go and play,’ T’Shawn told the boy as he filled the last cup. Ula caught her eye, saw fear.

‘But mum-’

‘You heard me.’

‘Do as your mother tells you,’ Ula said. Makkani bowed to the Anthropods, his parents, and ran upstairs, his *Mi’owa* clattering with every step.

‘Fine, fine spawn....’ Vrawn said. T’Shawn forced a smile, while Ula felt himself flinch. ‘You must be wondering why we are here?’

‘We are curious,’ T’Shawn said, and looked at Ula. ‘Aren’t we?’

‘Very.’

‘We have come to request your help.’ Vrawn said, four palms open, glistening. ‘My sister Vrax has a Breeder for impregnating. She is healthy, six segments high, of very fine nature, amenable, and will bear many spawn we believe.’

Ula risked a look. T’Shawn had paled.

‘What happened to her last Buck?’

‘This will be her first insemination,’ Vrawn said. Vrax leaned forward.

‘You would be doing me a tremendous duty. I have given my Breeder much land, a fine nest, all the comforts she could wish for, much as my sister has given you. A union would not only bring powerful spawn, but would elevate your status.’

‘We would be honoured,’ Vrawn added. ‘If you could do us this service.’

Ula stood, bowing to each guest in turn.

‘Thank you for your request. You must be tired from your ride and we’ll have a long journey back to *Daar Orr* in the morning. I have guest rooms just behind this building. We’d be honoured if you would stay.’

Stay, stay, they whispered, getting to their feet. Ula’s back faced his wife but he could feel her distaste, even in silence.

‘I’ll show you to your rooms,’ he said, and led them into the night.

When the guests were settled and his son was put to bed, Ula checked on the cattle. Low winds had brought the temperature down a good few degrees. The night was broken only by a distant chatter of nocturnal creatures. The moons rose slowly above dark mountains. He walked the perimeter, and when everything was secure, he activated the energy field surrounding his land. His last task done, he retired for the night.

In the bedroom he undressed, silent as the evening. He could feel T’Shawn’s stare, continuing to ignore her. When he climbed into bed she was entranced by the ceiling. Ula closed his eyes, drifted.

‘What time will you leave?’

He was almost asleep. He opened his eyes.

‘First light. I’ll need to saddle up.’

‘Will you come back?’

Ula rolled his head to the right. ‘Of course I will.’

‘I knew she’d come. Since our wedding, I knew she’d come.’

‘They always do.’

‘I’m scared.’

Her jaw was set, eyes fierce. She didn’t seem scared.

‘So am I. But you have to remember, it’s there and back. Plenty of people have done it.’

‘Not us.’

‘No. Not us.’

They kissed and held each other.

The animals were watered and fed. They said their goodbyes to T'Shawn and Makkani, who stood on the porch, arms wrapped around each other. Goll worked on Ula's *Mi'owa*, adjusting the radius so he could make the journey without unfortunate side effects. Ula hadn't seen one kill a person, but he had heard they could, and guessed the silent Tem'ondri was a bodyguard for hire. Goll forced a low grunt, rising when she'd finished. She walked away without a word.

The red sun was no more than chink in the sky when they left the farmhouse, the Tem'ondri riding Mita Dragons, Ula his best equine. Horses were imported generations ago, had grown to an average size of 25 hands, 3 and a half-hands bigger than the largest recorded Earth horse. Although they were strong and nimble, Mon'dra horses were still no match for Dragons, who were ten feet of muscle and twenty pairs of legs stronger, formidable close up. Their bodies were thick bands of segmented power, their legs hardened talons that could shatter rock. The Tem'ondri kept pace for the first few miles, raising a subdued patter and little dust, but soon the beasts were surging forwards. Vrawn said they would meet at the rendezvous point, just before they were gone in a fine purple mist that caused Ula to veer to one side. For the rest of the journey he was alone, watching the cloud move closer to the horizon and beyond. He kicked his heels against the horse's flank, leaning forwards.

That afternoon Ula stopped for lunch beside a dew stream. A dark shape had grown on the edge of barren land. He would arrive in *Daar Orr* by nightfall.

Lights were everywhere, his horse bathed in sweat when he reached the city outskirts. The darkness was thin, the silence of the wasteland beaten into retreat. He steered towards the rendezvous point, a bar and eatery, to find the Tem'ondri drinking fermented dew, finishing a lavish dinner. They insisted that he eat. When he'd finished a rich broth of bugs, grasses and hot peppers bought and paid for by the hosts, it was agreed they should catch a taxi carriage for the rest of their journey to let their beasts rest. The Tem'ondri made the arrangements with the bar owner. Ula closed his eyes, lips tingling from the chilli, thinking of T'Shawn, Makkani, of home. He was tired before he'd reached his destination.

He slept for most of the ride, beside Vrawn and Vrax in the hollowed shell of the carriage, Goll in front with the driver. Sometimes he fell against their hard, bristled bodies, which immediately woke him. He caught random glances of *Daar Orr* between half-closed eyes. The bustling night market, filled with waving antennae. The heaped mud towers of domed homes, or nests, multiple lit windows several stories high. Mita

Dragons writhing beyond his window, carrying as many as five riders. The rare, *Mi'owa* tagged human, five steps behind their owner. And everywhere, arthropods that walked, that crawled, some that flew. It had been years since he had left his modest farm, and yet he could not keep his eyes open for long, so for everything he saw, Ula missed even more.

He awakened. The bright lights had been left far behind. Around them it was almost as dark as his farmland after dusk; before them was the glitter of illumination. A building. The Tem'ondri leant forwards, the driver pulling up before huge gates made from Mita Dragon scales, Ula thought, wiping his eyes. They were the colour of dusk sky, curved and pointed at the tips. The art was popular in this part of the land. The Temo'ndri made instruments, sculptures, and cooking utensils out of Dragon scales. They even used the powder as a clothing dye.

The taxi rode to the foot of huge steps. There was a silhouette at the top, a smaller shadow created by fierce light, a glow from the open doors of the nest. The Tem'ondri exited, paying the driver. Ula climbed free, attention diverted by the nest, his neck craned upwards in an attempt to see it all.

It was the biggest he'd ever seen. Towers upon towers of compacted mud, chewed and digested and defecated into place, moulded and hand-shaped by thousands of Tem'ondri workers. Some were made with modern building equipment, especially in the city, but there was only one way to attain the roughened texture and glittering finish Ula saw everywhere, from the steps, to the door frame, to the inner tunnels; that was to have the mud pass through the bodies of Mita Dragons, as the Tem'ondri once passed it through their own. Claw-marked streaks lined the walls creating sharp ridges, like spines. The nest reminded Ula of the Earthbound castles he'd imagined when he father read to him as a child, tucked up in bed, a candle his solitary night light. Unlike those stone-hewn castles, the nests looked as though they were grown from the ground itself, nurtured like land cane, each level sprouting from the next in humped mounds until they rose into the night, even blocking the light of the moons.

The shadow in the open doorway was Tem'ondra, a stubby worker three segments shorter than his leaner counterparts, the unyielding features betraying nervousness, Ula wasn't sure how. He'd led them from the reception and down tunnelled corridors until they stood in the dining hall, a massive area that looked like the interior of a cave. Curved ceilings, soft overhead lights, a library alcove and an empty trestle table in the heart of the room, places for twenty. The Tem'ondra stood to

one side, head lowered, mandibles still, claws twitching. The hunters ignored her, as was the custom towards lower members of their own hierarchy, moving forwards in unison towards a figure who approached. A human, Ula saw as she stepped from the shadows.

‘*Kaluz maadram...*’

‘*Kaluz ballamor...*’

The greeting was repeated by the Tem’ondri, who held her hands and bowed. Her response was the same to each. Ula followed their lead, taking her hand, bowing even as he caught sight of her eyes, even as he was struck by her long, scarlet dress, the obviousness of her beauty.

‘*Kaluz maadram...*’

‘*Kaluz ballamor...*’

Her hands were still in his. She’d greeted them in the traditional manner and her Mon’draan was impeccable. He raised his head. She was his equal in height, long dark hair, blue eyes he recalled from distant memory and books, skin like the clouds both planets shared. Her hand were soft as his son’s had been, years ago, when he was an infant, long before he worked the fields. Her fingers were long, slim, painted translucent pink. Not many ancestors of this type had made the journey centuries ago, but there had been some, the poorest. Ula saw their descendants every once in a while, whenever he travelled to the big cities to trade, but he hadn’t been this close to such humans in an age.

The woman relaxed her hands, smiling faintly. The Tem’ondri watched, silent. Their tension was clear.

‘You’re shocked?’ she said.

‘A little. There aren’t many of your kind.’

There was no shame in his admittance. Her question betrayed understanding.

‘My people are from *Daar Quen*, the east. Many ancestors settled there during the migration.’

‘Ah, yes. My father told me. He said the people of *Daar Quen* are very beautiful.’

Her smile grew. She blushed. Ula heard a whispered chorus, *beautiful, beautiful*. He shivered.

‘As are the people of the north,’ she said.

‘Excellent,’ Vrawn said from across the room. ‘You accept each other.’

‘It is better than I had hoped,’ Vrax chattered. ‘We will leave you to paint yourselves.’

‘You mean acquaint themselves, surely?’ Vrawn broke in, turning to the humans when her sister fell silent. ‘We struggle with the language.’

‘We understand,’ the woman said.

‘It’s fine,’ Ula agreed. His hands were growing warm, but he didn’t let go.

The Tem’ondri left. The maid, they discovered, was already gone. The woman led Ula by the hand, into the tunnel the females had taken and he thought they would be following, but as they walked into relative darkness they were alone. The arthropods disappeared as quickly as ants. The tunnel was cramped, hot, and seemed to trail upwards. There were lights embedded in the walls; electric, Ula was glad to note. The mansion wasn’t as traditional as it seemed. Every so often the tunnel crossed into what seemed like hallways, and Ula could see the doors of other rooms, but the woman kept tugging, the pull of her fingers like the almost imperceptible rise of the tunnel, until they passed through an arched, open doorway, which led into a gigantic space twice the size of the hall, the room strangely empty. A bed, a rack of clothes. A set table by a bay window that stretched the entire length of one wall, darkness beyond. A huge travel chest, hers he guessed, made of planetary wood, gleaming and red. The dipped oval of a traditional Tem’ondri bath, a hole dug into the floor itself, at the foot of the immense bed. And nothing more, just bare space. Ula could have used the room to graze at least forty cattle for a number of weeks, could have grown hundreds of cane. He stopped, looking at nothing. The woman let his fingers go.

‘The Tem’ondri thrive on extravagance.’

He glanced at her.

‘It has been said.’

‘Not by you.’

Ula shrugged, turning, trying not to marvel at the space.

‘Saying it won’t change their urge.’

‘It would place the urge in context. And your place within it.’

She was leant on the edge of the bed, bare feet touching the rim of the bath. *Paar-Ull*. The traditional way. Only the richest of the rich could afford to have them dug. She watched him.

‘The context won’t change the fact.’

She laughed, the sharp sound echoing. She knelt by the side of the bath, pressing buttons that caused water to flow. Steam rose.

‘Still the same Ula,’ she said, pressing another button. Blue liquid escaped from a thin faucet, into the tub. He walked a few steps towards her.

‘So it is you.’

She fought disappointment, lost. Her lips were a thin line. Her eyes darted.

‘I thought you’d recognised me. Thought you’d made up a lie. I was proud.’

‘It was the truth.’

‘Of course. You haven’t changed.’

She slipped from the dress, her naked body bright, soft as he remembered. He didn’t know what to say. She placed her clothing on the bed and let herself fall gently into the bath. Ula came closer. She was covered by bubbles up to her ribs, small breasts exposed. She wouldn’t look at him now. She hadn’t changed either. He was glad.

‘How did you bring me here?’

‘I didn’t. They brought me weeks ago, told me your name. It had to be you. The region, name, occupation. I thought I’d never see you again.’

He knelt next to the hole on his haunches. She was balancing on the palms of her hands, watching her toes. Ignoring him. Or trying.

‘Fellucia. Listen to me. You’re going to get us killed.’

‘Only if they find out.’

Those eyes. Earth sky, snatched from the very air. They held him. He remembered the first time.

‘I have a family.’

‘I know. Which is why we have to do this. You must take *Paar Ull*.’

Ula nodded, standing. Shrugged off his clothes, threw them onto the bed. He slid into the water much as Fellucia had, and it was hot but he didn’t make a sound or register discomfort. The bubbles were soft against him. Her skin met his. The rich spice of blue liquid made his limbs tingle like blood rushing through his veins, but after the initial surprise, it was pleasant. Ula hadn’t taken *Paar Ull* since the night he married T’Shawn, five Earth years and seven and a half Mon’dra years ago.

They washed each other as was the custom. Rubbing soft cloth against her body, using traditional herb soaps. Ula was scared by what he remembered, what was the same. Her skin, much softened by previous baths taken since she’d reached maturity. The tiny dots and blemishes, the birthmark on her left shoulder blade, which fascinated

him before. What scared him most was the anticipation he felt as he drew the cloth towards the places she liked most; the knob of bone at the base of her spine, the crevice between her breasts; the round curve of her hips, and of course, the flesh between her legs. He was trembling when he finished, almost too much to acknowledge the fact she was washing him in much the same way, with full knowledge of what would please him, and when she asked him to turn and face her he couldn't help touching her, and she dropped the cloth into the water, and she held him, and they kissed and it was everything he remembered, nothing unknown.

He dreamt and woke to see Fellucia hadn't slept. She was staring, caressing his arm, eyes far away. She spoke as though she was continuing a conversation they'd shared hours ago.

'Your skin,' she said. 'I've never forgotten. It's like the land that grows cane. It's beautiful.'

He couldn't help thinking of the darkened feed store, the danger. With Fellucia there had always been danger.

'In the world we're from, that land is everywhere, like us. It gave our world its name.'

'And here?'

'Here, that land is a rare. A commodity. There it's taken for granted; here it is worshipped.'

'Don't you mean exploited? Tended by slaves?'

Her fingers scratched his skin. Her eyebrows were knitted. He remembered this well. His heart began to beat harder. He'd relished that feeling in the past, but she was wrong. He had changed. It wasn't as it felt as a boy.

'Here you're prized and kept in luxury,' he told her, soft in case he caused offence. 'Here you're something you wouldn't be on the home world. Royalty, or something close.'

She hissed, removing her hand. Although there was nothing to replace it, he felt the weight of something cold where warmth had once been. Almost a physical force.

'I hate the ancestors.'

Ula pulled his covers closer.

'They came for a better life. To discover. They came to make things better.'

She peered at him, threw an arm out, behind herself, indicating the room.

‘And you find this better? This nest is like their planet. Big, empty, nothing for us.’

‘I have a life. I have family.’

Her arm fell. She turned to the huge bay windows. Ula couldn’t see her face. When he looked in that direction there was nothing, pure darkness. He thought of outer space, that vast expanse, the cold. He tried to imagine the journey and could not.

Fellucia slid naked from the bed. She walked to the opposite end of the room, and bent in front of the red wood chest, threw it open. For a long time there was nothing other than the shuffle of movement. Ula closed his eyes. He must have fallen asleep, for when he opened them she was standing over him, close enough to see raised bumps on her skin. She was holding something small and metal, about the size of an index finger. A slim silver object, hooked at the end. Ula looked from the object, to Fellucia. Sat up.

‘Where did you get that?’

‘It was given.’

‘By who?’

‘My Breeder.’

He waited a moment, digesting that.

‘They told me I was your first.’

‘You were.’

‘You know what I mean.’

Fellucia blushed, deeper.

‘We never lay together. He had two. He gave me this and used the other. He escaped and was caught.’

Ula couldn’t look at her.

‘That was the city,’ she said, like a bedtime story. ‘It was easy. The wilderness is vast.’

‘And what about my family?’

‘You can go back. They’re too valuable to kill. There are many of us in the jungles of the far west. You can find help, bring them to safety.’

She gave him the key. It was light, almost weightless. He brought his knees to his chest, pushing it into his *Mi’owa*. It fit easily. He turned it towards the window and they heard a tiny click, a beep. A thin seam appeared. The *Mi’owa* halved and fell onto

the bed with a soft thud. Ula looked at his bare ankle, the separate halves. He massaged the tendons, ignoring her eyes.

‘What about you?’

‘I’ll take the key. Stay. When the opportunity arrives, I’ll escape.’

He shook his head, feeling the violence. ‘They’ll find the key.’

‘I’ll hide it inside me. It worked before. You escaped by yourself, that’s what I’ll tell them.’

‘Again?’

Fellucia stared. He shut his mouth, reaching for the separate halves of the tag and picked them up, connecting the circle around his ankle, pushing them together. That click was louder. A light turned green and pulsed steadily for two minutes, died. He took her soft hands, nothing like his wife’s, or son’s.

‘I can’t risk my family. You.’

‘You must.’

‘I can’t.’

‘It’s your choice, but you must. I waited. I could’ve run, but I waited. You can run in my place.’

Her eyes glistened. Warmth, softness, heady perfume. They hugged. Ula let her go and saw the key was still in his palm. He tossed the thin metal from his right hand to left. A small, bloodless imprint, temporarily branded into his flesh. He stared at the ghost of what had once been.

‘It’s your choice,’ Fellucia repeated, and he couldn’t stand to see her for fear of betraying everything, their past and his future.

When Fellucia could no longer stay awake, Ula slipped from the bed and her cavernous room. He entered the tunnel outside the door not knowing where he was going, only that he should journey downwards and so he did, back the way they’d come, sometimes stumbling in darkness, others unable to slow himself as the incline was steep. He felt along sharp-ridged refuse. The warmth was comforting. Their walls retained the heat of the day, pushing it outwards during the night. Only in the largest rooms did humans actually feel the chilled outside temperature. The cold-blooded Tem’ondri felt nothing.

Soon, a door. When he pushed it swung outwards easily, letting in cool air. A few hours until dawn, and the heat was already rising. Ula stepped into the night,

smelling long grass, and found he could see better than he'd hoped. He walked without knowing the terrain, what was out there. There could be snakes, wild cats, maybe the occasional bear. All bigger than anything found on Earth.

Ula wasn't afraid. He'd never been fearful of the land. It's mine, he thought, as he walked across solid, compacted rock. It's mine as much as theirs.

He found a jagged formation, something like the looming nest on a smaller scale, fashioned by wind and rain rather than Tem'ondri claws. He grasped the rock and began to climb, tentative at first, but when he realised there was easy purchase, with more vigour, until he was ripping at handholds, tearing flesh from his fingertips, scrabbling with his feet when they slipped. Outcrops sometimes housed smaller beasts, poisonous creatures that bit and stung, but he kept going, arms and legs moving in unison, higher until he was level with the lights of the nest, and still he kept going until he could climb no further. He pulled himself onto a section of the rock large enough to perch, if not sit. He gazed at the land half crouched, the light of the glowing sky. He rested his cheek against rock.

Ula saw his son running at full speed to greet the gathered Tem'ondri. The worry in his wife's eyes. The glittering scales of the Mita Dragon as it writhed. He felt the *Mi'owa* key in his pocket, firm against his thigh, cool where the flesh was hot.

The sun rose. He climbed from the rock, backwards until he felt warm ground against the soles of his feet. He watched the growing dawn until the sun prickled his cheeks and then returned to the nest, to Fellucia.

CONTROL

He woke up to hear some weird noise, a scratching close in his ear that made him jerk like a sleeping dog, eyes open, seeing nothing. He stared into darkness. He rolled over and so did Michael, curling into a ball as he did it, and that's when Danny guessed what had happened; his brother had pushed a finger into his ear, probably in his sleep. Michael always did stuff like that. Lashing out and hitting Danny in the face, giggling at something funny in his dreams, sometimes even talking out loud. That morning he didn't wake up, course not, just lay on his side soft-snoring, the soles of his tiny feet pressed flat against Danny's thighs, water bottle warm. That was nice. Danny kept still and straight, breathing shallow air through his nose, blinking at fading night. The birds were tweeting quiet half songs, sleepy beginnings. The smell of Michael's nappy was regular as the kitchen clock. A siren called blocks away before it shut up, said nothing more, leaving a faint hum of dawn.

He tried to pull at the covers when his arms erupted in braille goose bumps, but Michael wouldn't let go. Eyes stinging, heavy, Danny heard something else outside his bedroom window, a louder version of the sound that forced him awake. Rustles like the sliding, gentle shush of pulling his pyjama top over his head, or Mum's hand stroking his hair at bedtime. Soothing. He closed his eyes, thought it would stop, but when it grew louder he opened them. Michael was mumbling next to him, telling some dream person to stop. He waited for his brother to quiet. When he'd been silent for a count of ten, Danny got out of bed, careful so he wouldn't wake him. For that he had to roll sideways, knees bent, sit up and gently push himself onto his feet. He crept towards the bedroom window.

Their curtains were thin, bleeding daylight. He peeled one back as far as his nose, left eye squinting against sun. The window looked onto their back garden and those of the neighbours, rectangular slices of green, brown and grey. Fallen toys, extra-terrestrial barbecue racks, lonely swings, flashes of pink and red bushes, rickety, leaning sheds. And them. Scattered over grass, mud and concrete. Black forms moving sure as lice. For a moment he thought the gardens had become infested with those creatures of his terrified dreams, produced by a searing itch that made his mother bring the shrunken comb and A4 paper, dark forms falling from his hair, pattering onto the white sheet like rain, dying legs writhing. He gasped at the sight of the black dots outside his window, believing his nightmares real, blinking horror, and saw they weren't lice but ICO. Loads. Crawling through gardens. Leant against warped, wind-blown fences. Lining the alleyway that ran

like a spine between the garden rows. Gathered in a bunched fist by the gate opposite theirs, the one that led to Mr Sharmake's garden. Mo's.

He knew then, remembered the billboard. Dad's red, bloated face, Uncle Rick's clenched jaw. The spinning glass on the tiled floor like the stunted red hand of the kitchen clock, only faster. Much faster. He felt his heart throb, solid against his ribs and he couldn't breathe quietly without holding his mouth wide open.

The ICO pressed hands against their ears. They did things with their fingers like sign language, but choppy. One kicked down the gate and then they all poured forwards like blackcurrant juice from a tipped cup, down the garden, over the neighbouring fences, meeting and pushing against the back door until it gave with a loud crack, rushing into the house. And it was silent. So silent, Danny almost believed nothing had happened. They flooded inside until there was no trace of them but the movement of the upstairs white nets, the crash of a plate, a bark of pain, that fast language he couldn't describe and the cries of a child, probably Fahima. Danny waited. Shot a look back at his brother, flat on his back, gaping. Listened for his parents' voices. Nothing. Everything calm, outside and in. His fingers grew white, the curtain bunched between them.

Mo's nets danced, stiff and random as silent wind chimes, and he was there, framed against the dark background of the bedroom. Danny saw the brightness of his eyes from where he watched. The boy's head turned left, right, and he threw himself down, landing on the old coal shed with a shrill cry that made Danny draw in a sharp breath. He bounced up like a tennis ball, hit the garden path and ran towards the loose, broken gate. He was limping. He must have hurt himself. A man in black appeared at the window but there were none in any of neighbouring gardens, or by the gate, or even on the bone-white central path. Mo didn't slow down despite his limp, he just ran, leaning on his right leg, grimacing, one hand flat on that thigh. Danny felt his nails sharp in his own palms, heard himself whisper; '*Go Mo. Go.*' By the time the other officers burst from the back door and ran down the alley it was as though he had willed it. Mo disappeared.

He let the curtain fall, ran to the pile of clothes at the end of their bed, squirming inside. He checked on his brother who had rolled onto his chest, nappy raised high, face buried in pillow. He grabbed his orange paper round bag and left. His parents' door was shut tight, but Danny still tiptoed. He trotted downstairs as quickly as he could in the darkness, keeping to the edge of each step, wincing at every creak. On the ground floor he moved faster, along the passage into the kitchen, grabbing whatever he saw; apples, crisps, fruit bars, a pack of chocolate biscuits, a box of grapes, the last of the samosas, pushing

them all inside his paper round bag. In the passage, he stifled the tinkling chatter of keys as best as he could, unlocking the front door with one hand on the bunch, the other doing the important work, entering and twisting, before he slid them down in his pocket and snaked into dawn.

Baking bread from the Hovis factory half a mile away made him hungry for huge bites of air. His stomach rolled like a grumbling complaint. The cars glittered with frost, much like the paper white sky. Danny lay his hand against the smooth plastic of his bag and walked, head raised, trying not to look either way. He ignored his parents' bedroom window too, thinking of Lot's wife. On the pavement, he turned a robotic left.

The first transport was parked at the end of his road. Headstone grey, ICT stencilled on the sides. Empty driver and passenger seats, St George's flag hung across the back wall of the cab, a statue of the blonde saint killing a black dragon on the dashboard. He turned his eyes to the road, slowing, but a scream made him jump, and they were there, five in black, close enough to see ICO stencilled on their chests, the letters bright and smooth as a scar. They were struggling, swamping a hunched figure, and it was only when they reached the transport and one man opened the back door that he could see who it was. An old woman, it had to be Mrs Sharmake, although she never left the house without her burka so he wasn't sure. She was wailing, attempting to get away but the men wouldn't let her. Her face was raised to the sky, mouth open, morning breeze making her gown swell like a kite. Her cheeks a glistening sheen, throaty cries making Danny shiver. Her feet bare, the toenails white seashells. She was leaning back, pulling against the men, tendons rigid, feet planted on the dark road, and as big as they were she managed to free one arm to beat her palm against her head, the sound flat, mute, echoing across the empty street. They wrestled with her, grunting and puffing tiny clouds into morning air, grabbed her beating arm, wrenching it behind her back.

Mrs Sharmake yelped once, stopped wailing. She whimpered in pain but did no more. They pushed her into the yawning mouth of the transport and the door clanged like an oven, but louder. A man wearing something like a gas mask made of gleaming black metal looked at Danny and said, 'Fuck off.'

He walked until the end of the road, turning left. On the corner there it was. The billboard. GO OR BE SENT. A pair of cuffs, two masked ICO, blank eyes threatening their street, the world. The dark, smoky background, the red flowing river. Danny spat on the ground, walking faster. He would have spat on the poster but Dad said they'd swab his DNA and he'd be arrested, so he couldn't. He hated that billboard. It was the billboard that

made Uncle Rick mouth off in front of Dad about dodgy neighbours, the billboard that made Dad's fist connect with Rick's jaw and caused him to fall, knocking over his glass of lager and Michael's cup of blackcurrant juice. If the billboard hadn't gone up Rick wouldn't have screamed like he was crying, or swore he'd make ICO get the lot, pakis, blackies, all of them. If it hadn't been for that billboard Dad wouldn't have gone over to the Sharmake's and said whatever he'd told them, or start crying late in the night, Danny's mum whispering quick and trying to shush him while they thought the boys were asleep. If it wasn't for the billboard his family would be a family.

He passed the central alley behind their house and heard screaming. He looked at the floor, focused on his trainers, and tried to block it out. He murmured a song from the radio, concentrating on the words so hard he didn't see the ICO by the alley entrance.

'Oi.'

He looked up, breath caught. The officer was tall and bloated, a thick double chin hanging over his collar. He leant against a wall, picking his teeth with a thin bit of wood.

'Don't look at me like that, runt. Wha you doin out so early?'

'Paper round.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

The screams climbed to a higher pitch. A man in so much pain he sounded like a girl. Like Rick. He heard laughter, a cackled group of whoops like a party. Dad was probably awake. Sitting up in bed, trying not to listen. Maybe looking for him.

'What, can I go now? Gonna be late f'my round.'

The screams, the thin scratch of wood against enamel. His pulse, a dull drum in his head.

'Go on then, piss off.'

He bit his tongue and walked fast, muttering swear words at the pavement. A slab of van shot past, screeching to a stop. Raised voices and calls to battle, the clatter of feet on concrete, but Danny never looked back. He walked to the end of the road, opposite the park gates, turning left. At the end of the block he turned left again.

The Spotted Dog had been derelict for as long as they could remember. Wood slat windows, dotted metal doors, a security firm's mobile number on the walls beside the silhouette logo of a man walking a dog. Everyone knew that was crap, especially the Youngers. There was no security for *The Spotted Dog*. Dad said they were going to turn it into flats for the posh lot, or another supermarket even though there were two down the

road. He and Danny went out every Saturday, knocking on doors and handing out leaflets, Dad talking about the old days when he met Mum in the beer garden and they'd stand on varied doorsteps for ages, telling that story and others until Danny got bored and cold and Dad would pull him close. Most houses had posters up saying *SAVE THE SPOTTED DOG* because of them. It was a secret the adults pretended to keep to themselves, like their kids. Everyone knew it too. They couldn't save anything, let alone an old pub.

He walked around the back, through what had been the car park, leaping knee high weeds until he came to cracked cellar boards. None of the kids knew who'd made the opening; it was broken in generations ago, had always been that way. He checked his surroundings, slid into mildewed darkness, onto the waiting barstool and the concrete floor, mostly feeling his way to the stairs, using what little light the opening gave. And then there was nothing. That had scared him as an Infant, but by then it was normal. He used his phone torch to find the stairs, climbing into what they always said must have been the pub, although nothing remained but a blank, empty space, mattresses spotted with dark patches, red cushions smeared bare and shiny that probably belonged to long forgotten stools, or chairs. Painful-looking blisters hung above his head. Danny had seen them burst before, showering grey water on some unlucky kid. Forcing them to walk home with their arms held away from their sides like a zombie, sniffling and bedraggled to face beats, or at least grounding.

The boy was hunched in a corner. Knees bent, eying him. A glint in his hand reflecting torchlight. Danny heard the Youngers say Mo carried, although he'd never seen it himself so he'd forgotten. Sheet lightning metal flashed. He turned off his phone.

'It's OK. It's me. Danny Kearns, from 32. Simon's my Dad. He knows yours.'

He dug into the orange bag, fingers closing around the first thing he touched, freed it. An apple. He held it towards Mo. The boy's eyes were bright, even in shadow. Danny stepped forwards.

'You're hungry, right?'

Edging closer and closer until his shadow covered Mo's. His dark eyes glittered like tarmac.

'Take it. I got loads. And other stuff. It's for you.'

He knelt beside Mo. The boy had been crying. He couldn't see much, but he could hear it in Mo's breathing, could smell the salt of his tears.

'Take it, honest.'

Warm fingers touched his. Danny jumped. That made Mo twitch as well, but he

steadied himself and pushed the apple back until Mo took it. The knife clattered against the wooden floor. He heard a satisfying crunch. The stilted rhythm of chewing. His eyes stung, and Danny lay his head against the wall. Closed them. Mo started to shake. He wanted to put his arms around him but that would have seemed a bit weird. He ducked beneath his bag strap, pushing it towards Mo.

‘There’s more in there. I gotta go, but I’ll be back with some other stuff, in’shallah.’

The boy flinched. He wondered if he’d said it wrong but it was too late. He couldn’t take it back.

‘Don’t move, yeah? My Dad’ll find out what happened to your family. I’ll come back.’

He got up. Walking towards the stairs, Danny heard it. Rasping like the scrape of his brother’s finger, raw with grief.

‘Later.’

Turning, lifting a palm at Mo’s shadow.

‘Fuck Immigration Control.’

Mo stared. His eyes precious stone, defiant.

‘Yeah man. Fuck ‘em.’

Danny nodded.

Outside the air was cold, the skies brighter, bluer. The clouds had moved elsewhere. He lifted himself from the cellar into the car park. He ducked through a hole in the fence and headed home, hands in pockets, head down, looking at nothing; not billboards, cars, or people.

He crossed as an ICT rolled by, heavy and monotonous. It stopped behind him. Danny winced, trying not to tense. The whine of reversal set his teeth on edge. He wanted to run, made himself step at a regular pace. The transport appeared at his left shoulder, kept reversing, coming to a stop some yards beyond. They waited until he drew close, the driver leaning from his window. It was the one from the alley, double chin and dough-ball features.

‘Alright kid?’

He had to stop, face him, much as he didn’t want to.

‘Yep.’

‘Finished yuh paper round?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then where’s yuh bag?’

That was the passenger, leaning over his mate. Square crew cut, black hair, red path

of razor bumps trailing around his throat. Danny saw dark eyes, avoided them and cursed. He might as well have screamed it out loud. He focused on the end of his block, bit his lip. He tried to blank his eyes from what he saw but it was tough. His Dad looked tall in his pale grey tracksuit. He was talking with a neighbour, one hand running through his hair, the other moving up and down, frantic. Ice flooded Danny's veins. The neighbour said something that made him turn and see him. Dad's face paled. He started to walk quickly, like the ladies in the park just after the gates were unlocked, when Danny really came home from his round.

Transport doors opened, shut. He was surrounded by figures in black. When he squinted upwards, their eyes were blank as the pub cellar, way more terrifying. He couldn't understand their words because they came at once, a solid force until one got louder than the others repeating 'how'd you get dust on your clothes?' and 'tell us where the dust came from sonny,' until they released him from their pushing bodies, pointing at the place he didn't dare to look, over his shoulder, and he saw others with their hands on ears, barking numbers and coded names, running to the concrete grey transport, doors swinging open and crunching closed like breaking bones. The engine roared, wheels spun, smoke stinging his nose, screaming tires making his ears ring. The loudness, the fading. Danny wheeled to see them stop outside *The Spotted Dog*, and there was another surge of men, stiff guns and batons, screaming as they ripped at wooden boards, smashed glass with their boots, entered the pub.

He tried to run, do something, but arms around his chest held him in place even as he writhed, screaming Mo's name, twisting his neck to escape his Dad's voice saying, *shush son, calm down*. Danny refused to hear, yet couldn't close his ears against him, or the retort of gunfire, final as slamming doors, sharp as a whisper, causing birds to take to the pale sky cawing at no one. They rose over the park, wings moving in lazy stretches. He imagined they were waving goodbye.

YOU MEETS YOU

The last dream, the one that takes place before you wake and in some ways is the most vivid, thrusts you back into that first adult classroom, surrounded by easels and paint pots and huge tubes that remind you of oversized toothpaste, by colours like Ivory Black and Cadmium Yellow Light. Sunshine falls from the window, one broad diagonal stroke, yet your space in the corner of the room is dark. Hidden. You are holding the paintbrush, unsure what might happen next, or indeed, how to make anything happen at all. You are looking at the canvas as though it might give a sign, or else extract the vision you have inside your head, that beautiful construction of light, angles, and vision, that formless thing that so very much wants to take shape. One look around the classroom rewards you with what you have long feared. At home, lying in bed, lost in your high. On the twenty minute pod journey to the institute, looking out of the window at the incessant city beyond. Alone in the institute's dining area, eating tuna and cucumber on brown. In the classroom, people are already dipping the thin fibres of their brush into mixtures of paints and water, working on their own interior images; painting, no less. People hunched over their desks, people glaring at the cracked ceiling in thought, people smiling to themselves, people flicking the brush against the canvas while the tutor, a stout, robust man in a blue shirt and brown slacks, walks between the flimsy maze of easels, nodding, stopping to speak with a student, moving on. And you? Well, the more the vision dances the more difficult it becomes to move the muscles of your arm, to daub paint onto the blank surface. And the more difficult it becomes, the more you wish the colours inside your head would communicate with the tubes beside your seat, and before you know it you're reminded of the mouse who became a magician, the buckets and mops he commanded that sprung to life, that distant childhood memory, and the paints begin to twitch and rise, swaying from pinched corner to corner, and the music starts, faint at first though growing louder, and you look to see who has noticed but everyone is gone; the tutor, the students, no one is there.

When you turn, there are dancing paint tubes moving in complete synchronisation, first single file and then side by side, coming closer. Their caps fly into the air every so often, land perfectly. They dance with more abandon, joined by

the brushes, who swing stiff, glistening legs and waddle towards you, and the scratch of their feet against the wooden desk begin to tear at your nerves, and you back away, arms raised in front of your face, crying out in terror.

The room is hard to make out, even with lights. You squint to make sure it's yours, panic a few more seconds, eyes darting, for a long time you are not sure. The mattress is uneven beneath your spine, sharp needles of pain bite random places; waist, lower back, shoulder blade, neck. This is familiar, reassuring. A flat screen perched on wooden boxes a metre and a half beyond your left ear, rope strung across the furthest end of the room, four metres from where your feet protrude on the bed - from this, clothes hang like withered bodies. The walls are bare unless you count the forked lightning cracks. A single, old chair is hunched in a corner opposite the bed. An assortment of objects lay on the exposed concrete floor, too numerous to mention, and although you cannot see them their presence is felt, and this too brings comfort. You relax against the flat, non-existent pillow, breathe a lengthy sigh of relief, close your eyes and count yourself lucky. You are home.

A wave of nausea follows; your body remembers. It surges and recedes like a strong tide, and your bed is the raft, the scattered objects at its foot, everywhere, bobbing flotsam. Your head begins to pound and there's a heavy feeling in your gut and you know what is doing this to you, what you have done to yourself. It is the scrap on your tongue. It is your tongue's connection with the glittering silver and black scrap in the plastic bag. It is the scrap that looked like sparkling ashes and felt as you imagined grit might, when the sharp taste of pharmaceutical alchemy filled your mouth and dissolved on your lifeless tongue.

It was. It is.

You are trying to sit up, but the drug has become a gravitational force. The light in the room sways with movement. You have bumped something, probably the lamp. You try to raise yourself again, to prove something, and eventually after some struggle you make it. Somehow, some deep instinct, a part of you, already knows. That something is urging you to rise into a sitting position, pause, push with the balls of your feet, stand, rock forth and back, steady yourself, eyes closed tight, wait for the ebbing to pass.

It doesn't, although it lessens. There is a stumbling journey out of the dark room, hands reaching, palming cold, damp walls, always on the verge of collapse, into the only remaining space you call your own, the kitchen. Of course you have a bathroom,

but it doesn't count. That's out in the corridor, is filthy even when it is clean, and is shared. You are taking two steps and falling, sometimes with a thud, pushing yourself to your feet and creating momentum, taking two more. There is a smell that jars something, a remembrance maybe, but once noted it is gone, and you raise your head, try to recapture the trail. You are hearing something, some rustling and a maddening silence that follows, even as you frown to yourself, strain to hear better, enter the kitchen searching brown, stained cupboards and the counter caked with spilled food, breadcrumbs, the illegible scrawl of tea-trails. Learning nothing, you turn to the dull concrete floor with unfocused, blood-reddened eyes.

There. It is there, though you hardly believe it. The huddled, whimpering figure of a boy crouched with his knees up, head bowed, his face obscured. He's trembling. He wears simple jeans with large holes in the knees, a worn yellow T-shirt, Cadmium Yellow Light you think, before bringing your mind back to matters at hand. His hair is brown with dust, clumped together, and the smell you already encountered in the bedroom is a mixture of rainwater and rot. The clothes are bruised and shadowed with use, a street kid you think, who broke into your home, there are thousands in the city, willing to rape, rob, murder. You are desperate for the boy to leave, scared he might possess a weapon. You reach for the reassurance of the blade while your head reels and the tide pushes, pulls, and you feel your body rock with motion.

'Hey,' you bark, '*Hey!* Get outta here!'

The boy digs his head deeper into the dark pit between his leg and arm. He snivels louder now, and his shaking is more noticeable. You produce the blade from your back pocket, point.

'Hey!' You call, louder. 'Get the fuck out! Now! Or I'll chuck you, and you won't like it!'

Deeper, until all you see is the two-toned, matted hair, dark black and chocolate brown, as if the dusting were a lightly sprinkled garnish.

'C'mon,' you say. Adrenaline helps you find strength. You step forwards, one hand outstretched, to grab him.

The boy looks up. He screams much louder than you can shout. A pounding, intense wall of sound, louder than anything you believe you have ever heard. The scream makes your ears ring, your head reverberate pain, and there is nothing you can do but stop, attempting to withstand the onslaught, a man walking into rushing wind,

and you are caught in place, power washing over you. The scream lasts a few seconds, five at most, before coming to a random, complete and nearly as surprising end.

But that isn't what makes you stop.

What makes you stop is the face. And the expression on the face, terror and indecision that's for sure, but also the face itself. Large brown eyes, fleshy cheeks. Thin eyebrows, no more than a smear. A faint scar beneath the chin where you have grown a beard partly to disguise the injury when you were hit by a cricket bat aged nine (separating drops of blood flying beyond your field of vision like summer insects on that terrible day). Thin lips, dry, flaking, constantly bitten by protruding teeth, a habit that returns when withdrawal kicks in. The face reminds you, of you. The face resembles you back then. The face not only looks like you, awareness says in that quick instance, when silence tumbles into the space once occupied by the loudest sound you ever heard.

The face *is* you.

There is no uncertainty. No question. You are staring face to face with your eleven year old self. And now, it is your turn to scream.

Your eleven year old face does nothing. Simply looks. Your scream, although loud enough to cause an ache in your chest, is hardly strong enough to be heard outside your dishevelled room. When you realise the only person affected by what you are doing is the you that is actually screaming, you stop. The eleven year old face seems amused. It makes you ill to admit this, but that is the truth, is obvious, because the boy smiles.

'Go!' You hiss, yet the adrenaline is gone. Your skin feels like a washcloth left overnight on the side of the rusting tub, and your hands shake, and what's worse, you're still unsteady on your feet. The boy stares at you. Perhaps he has realised, you think. Perhaps he can see.

It would seem so, because instead of doing what you have asked, he does the opposite, and comes closer. You will soon learn this is something the boy cannot help, this unconscious disobedience embedded in his DNA; right now you are repelled by his refusal to follow a simple, hissed order, and you back away despite the blade, create the distance there was. The boy's smile stays exactly as it was, no more, no less. When you bump against the wooden doorframe that separates the bedroom from the kitchen,

the distance between you and you is closed. You fall to the floor. There is nowhere further to go.

The boy is still coming towards you. He's walking half-crouched, perhaps fearing what might happen when he gets too close, unable to stop. You take in scabbed skin, bruises. Streaks of dirt like strange animal markings, the smell. Wide eyes, bright and dancing with curiosity in a way you had forgotten until you are faced with the self you had once been, long ago. You are caught in appreciation, moved by the beauty of wonder, juxtaposed with deep pain. There is nothing else in that moment but two of you, face to face. You put away the blade.

'Your name?' The boy says. His voice is husky like the rasp of a thousand cigarettes. You remember enough to know that wasn't the case. At eleven, although you had been abused in a majority of ways, drugs weren't part of your life. Thinking about that, it takes a while to hear what he has said, let alone say anything in return.

'David,' you say, and gulp, looking around the cluttered room. 'Young.'

'That's me,' he says, and you feel your stomach plunge.

'I know.'

'I'm you an you're me! Funny innit?' The boy grins, exposing white teeth, jumbled together in a mouth too small to house them. You cannot see the cause of his amusement.

'How... ' Another huge gulp, the rasp of your dry throat. 'How did this happen?'

The boy shrugs, and saunters into the bedroom, head down so you can see the protruding knob at the base of his neck. He's looking at the littered objects on your floor. He stops, picks up random things. A broken mug, a lone, chipped marble, the cracked face of a small red and white clock. Watching the child, you suppress the urge to leap across the room, and fall on him, strike that knob, knock the boy to the floor. You are consumed by a hate so overwhelming it makes your hands shake with the force of keeping them still by your side. You are surprised by this, ashamed. You heard of the aftershock that follows the drugs effect on your body, but it is the first time you have taken scrap, and you have never experienced the shakes. You have seen what this withdrawal can do on the streets every day, where scrap is consumed in abundance. In the abandoned building where you pushed your face into the plastic bag of crushed and powdered chemicals there were hundreds of scrap addicts willing to do anything to retain that temporary high.

The boy, having finished his curious search of the bedroom floor, has now climbed onto the bed and lies curled up with his hand between his knees like you still do. He is watching you, but the wariness, the fear, has gone. Calm has replaced it. Trust.

‘Get off my bed.’

You try to force power into your voice; a surge of nausea emerges. The attempt to stand is feeble, eventually you do, but fumbling for the wall and a number of failed efforts go before it. On your feet, you turn towards the child.

‘I’ll call the Yard.’

The boy blinks.

‘You’re high,’ he says. ‘They’d nick you first.’

‘Just... Fuckin... *Leave!*’ You say, and this demand is your most powerful, if only a little louder than a whisper. It takes everything out of you, and you fall to the floor once again, back sliding against the doorframe, causing a sibilant defeat that sounds, to your drug-fuelled brain, as if the room itself shushing you, demanding you become quieter still.

‘No,’ the boy says, simplicity itself, and you almost moan aloud with irritation, the knowledge that you can do nothing.

You begin to cry. A blurring, pain-wracked explosion of tears, and mucus, and canine whimpering that is even more shameful than anything before it. And you don’t know what’s worse, that you’re doing this in front of the boy who is essentially you, granting a nightmare view of who he will become; or that the boy has nothing to do with the reason you’re crying. It’s the pain, the withdrawal, the need to replenish your body with the drug. It’s the truth that you would, in all probability, murder yourself for a taste.

Logic dictates one thing follows another; actions have consequences; force applied in one direction causes equal and opposite force. And so you come to the conclusion, by a lengthy, brain-numbing process of elimination that the only thing you have done differently in the last twelve to twenty-four hours is take scrap. There is no other conclusion. You let the drug dissolve on your tongue and stumbled the few blocks home, fell asleep on your bed, dreamed your outlandish dream and woke to a reality even more impossible than anything your subconscious mind could project. You accept that as given. And if that thought is followed to its obvious ending, this would mean

any appeasement of that inner urge, this must have now, the need to climb your own mental walls, could quite possibly reproduce the impossible once more; yourself, faced with another younger self. David Young sitting in a room with a pair of David Youngs. How old would the next be? Twenty? Thirty? Or would the newly reproduced Young be younger than the first; sixteen maybe? Fourteen? Eight?

The best, most obvious thing for you is never to find out. To stay away from scrap until you work out whether you are right, whether the drug caused the occurrence, or if there is an alternative reason.

But that would be to completely disregard, or indeed hope you can undermine the proven notion of Class A addiction. The trouble is the drug claimed as addictive from the first taste has proven to be just that. You have seen it with your own eyes. Known it to be true. You feel it in your veins now, the way your blood begins to fizz, the sweat that leaks from open pores, the blurred vision, dry tongue, and of course, those perpetual shakes. This is no media-fuelled twentieth century myth, the type more intellectual users laugh about in the darkness of low-ceiling squats, and sometimes concoct using old, yellowed books for nostalgias sake, serving boiled elixirs to gathered friends and punters, eyes temporarily half-closed, jaws hung open, wallowing in the results; crack, heroin, ice, PCP. The old ways have fallen into disuse. The drugs ceased to affect its users the way they had, and so their stranglehold loosened, and they fell into an abyss of forgetfulness, ever disappearing until they were nothing more than a glint of light, then nothingness itself. New compounds were experimented with, new synthetics created to replace lost highs, new pills, powders and liquids concentrated to work on users for whom generations of drug-consumption had altered their bodies until, in some ways, mostly in the deep recesses of the brain, they were hardly human at all. These new recreational preparations embodied myths written centuries ago, did what the ancient chemicals claimed. Addiction was no longer something that happened over time. It was immediate, overwhelming, and it hurt.

And so you crouch in the corner, and sit on the floor, and when that becomes impossible you stretch yourself out on the cold concrete and feel soothed in comparison with the heat of your body, which has risen by one degree and become unbearable. There are irregular spasms, which make your limbs twitch as though shocked by an electric current, and while the boy sits on your bed and watches curiously, you come to the conclusion, during a random window of lucidity, that what you might need is your

regular drug. Not scrap, but the hadion you usually consume, your normal, daily addiction.

The decision bolsters you with the strength needed to push yourself upwards, limbs still shaking, to your feet. The boy sits up at once, the whites of his eyes luminous. You cross the room for the door, ignore him.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Out,’ you respond, and hear yourself, not now, but years before, spitting the word at your social trainer; the sound is sheet lightning and gone, leaving your hand on the palm reader a moment longer than needed. The door slides open. You are assailed with the smell of the building; a mixed odour of feet, sweat, the farts of ravaged men. From behind other doors there are voices, television, a hacking cough.

‘I’m coming,’ the boy says, taking advantage of your stalling. Again you ignore him, and step into the corridor on stiff legs, slam your hand on the outer reader, walk stiltedly towards the lift as your door slides shut.

In the lift, you are both silent, muted voices and stench of the building seeping into the confined space. The boy’s head turns constantly. He is seeing everything for the first time. He touches surfaces like a baby, reaching for the lift walls until you grab his hand, push it away.

‘It’s not clean,’ you tell him. ‘They spit on the walls.’

He nods as though this makes sense, studies the globs on dimpled walls even closer, nose almost touching the thick, gloopy substance. You continue to ignore him. The lift doors open and you are deposited into the lobby, where the security man lounges in a back room, sometimes glued to a flat screen, others drinking with a woman for hire, although this, you admit, mostly happens later at night. Now he is sleeping, feet on a desk, and the reception counter, where he is meant to be, is empty. You pass all of this, the boy trailing, craning his neck to watch the sleeping man. Bulletproof plastic doors slide open as you draw close. In another moment, you are on the street.

In your post-intoxicated state, it is impossible not to be assaulted by noise. Taxis and private hoverpods roar by, their blue-lit undersides illuminating rough tarmac. Somewhere further down the block, behind you, they are destroying a dilapidated building. The growl of machinery is loud, jarring your senses. Your ears ring and tremors are felt underfoot. Across the wide main street, in the porch of another tenement much like yours, this one filled with victims of alcohol abuse you know, there is a loud argument that will no doubt turn into a fight. Two red-faced men push at each other,

are held back by friends who do not possess the required enthusiasm for the task. Like everyone else you turn away. Further along the block there are lights, music, open shops selling food and drink that debilitates rather than sustains, women and men, sometimes even children, who sell themselves. At the far end of the block, not the furthest in sight, but at a point that seems like miles in your decrepit, withdrawn state, there is a whole building of darkness, the unseen hum of people and the steady bass of louder music. This is where you must go.

You begin to make your way, dwarfed shadow by your side, ogling everything. When you look down on him it very nearly brings a smile to your face; but it is snatched away by the pain of putting one foot before another, the difficulty of going far enough to grasp a streetlamp, wrap your thin body around it like electric wire, hang for a second, panting, until the pain recedes and your vision clears. Then you continue, the boy's head swivelling, and if you only had strength you would slap him to release the pressure, make him feel what you feel, but it is all you can do just to turn your head. You step painfully on, tickled by the eyes of the criminals, prostitutes, pimps, and the residents forced to live beside them, all watching your laboured progress, no doubt guessing what you have taken, probably believing the boy is yours for one night only, and disgust sweeps you. It is a long time since you have felt shame, and so when the boy slips an arm around you in order to help your progress, perhaps noticing the stares of the people he is staring at, you shove him away violently, causing a hiss of condemnation, although thank God they do nothing. It would only bring more trouble to use the blade, and you are not even sure if you could lift it.

The boy looks at you, sullen, lips pushed out, hands in pockets. He walks five steps in front of you with his head down, kicking rubbish.

At the dark, noisy building, you push through gathered people. The boy hangs back, grasping the rear of your shirt as you climb the building steps. No one takes any notice. They are either high or negotiating future deals. Either way, they are consumed. Huge doors stand before you, barred and chained and boarded with planks of wood, and yet they are open. Inside, where some would expect light, there is none. Simply the chatter of more people, formless in cavernous gloom, firefly pinpricks of cigarettes and pipes, and while you walk through the cluster without stopping, the boy is turning and looking at everything once again, stumbling on what he cannot see, and his grip on the back of your shirt loosens a little, before he leaps the space between you, hurtles into

your back as you pause by the stairwell. You turn and glare, but its dark and even he cannot see this, although he can feel your eyes.

Up the dusky stairwell, the thump of music louder, beneath a pale green light cast from dull fluorescents that once marked fire exits, but now illuminates dealers. There is a perpetual whisper, the hawking of wares, and there is curiosity on the boy's face again as you stumble up and further up, serenaded by calls of *mistan*, *peripy*, *loana*, *crystal stars*, *arcacia*, *median grey*. You do not look at the warped and broken features of the lost; you would only see a mirror of your own. You do not look at walls christened with graffiti, shit and blood in equal measure, or down at your feet where the crunch of glass and plastic grows louder with each step, like distant, sporadic applause. You ignore the touch of many fingers all over your body, the promise of favours in exchange for credit, which would be exchanged for drugs. You ignore everything and push onwards, upwards, while your younger self takes it all in and his green-tinged eyes grow wide in the darkness, although of course, you do not see this either.

Out, through another set of thickened doors, into a massive hall. Strobe lights rain white flashes over a Bible dark mass that writhe in synchronised time. You think, Ivory Black. There's the smell of alcohol, the fog of burning drugs, a floating canopy. There are hands that wave in the air, and the calls of ecstatic people, and horns, and whistles hardly heard. Some users are naked, in the middle of the crowd or in corners. The walls are lined with human bodies, smoking, dancing, drinking, making love. You could count over a thousand heads if you were interested. The frantic music is larger than everything.

You walk around the edge of the crowd towards dull light, red as spilt blood, a hump of figures gathered by open space. There is some kind of awning, a raised shutter. You stumble over someone sprawled on the floor, almost collapse. The figures lean over the counter to catch you.

'Hey,' one of them says, like somebody would normally say *hi*, before another man lifts you.

'Young?' The new figure questions. 'Round two?'

You push yourself upright, look into his eyes. Skinny frame, long face, bugged out eyes, no hair apart from his eyebrows. Regan.

'Yes,' is all you can manage, and he's pulling you to your feet, questioning with his eyes. You nod. Follow him away from the crowds, away from the others awaiting their own customers, into the back room where users lay everywhere like corpses. A

young girl of about nineteen, eyes closed tight, drooling, head crooked to the left. An old man who has clearly soiled himself, the damp patch resembling a shadowed halo. A muscular, yet pot-bellied youth who mutters to himself, though you cannot catch what he's saying and he stares through you both.

Regan pushes the users aside like nothing more than misplaced furniture, making space for you to sit. It is then, looking behind you, that you notice there's no tug at your shirttails. The feeling had grown so familiar you hardly registered its absence. The boy is not behind you. He is gone. There is a quick moment of joy – *you have lost him* – followed by a momentary ache – *why did he leave?* – but the sad truth of the matter is it's all overpowered by the urge that hits when you turn back to Regan and see him sitting cross-legged, noting he has laid small scrap packages – doses really, you admit – on a small piece of wood placed across his lap, each bigger than the last.

You forget the boy in one quick instance, join Regan, try to forget the gun protruding from his fist, a precaution you know.

'Scrap, right?' Regan says, and something inside you lurches. *Yes.*

'No – no,' you respond, forcing the voice back. 'Hadion.' You clear your throat loudly. 'Just hadion.'

Regan's forehead wrinkles. 'That won't do.'

'Please.'

'You'll be back again.'

'Please.'

He sighs and wipes the packets of scrap from his board, a magician laying cards in reverse. You shiver, want to cry *stop*, do not. He digs inside his jacket with one hand, gun pointing with the other. Slaps down a single, smaller package.

'Fifty-five,' he says. 'But you're makin a mistake.'

'Sure,' you say, wanting to tell him you have already made it, keeping your mouth shut. You key credit into your wrist tag and press the tag against his. Both machines emit beeps. A light on Regan's turns green. He nods and puts the gun away.

'Cheers,' he says.

You nod, pick up the hadion. A lump the size of an eraser wrapped in thin plastic. You put it to your nose. It smells of burnt metal.

'Take your time,' Regan tells you, before he leaves. You unwrap the hadion. It can be injected but you prefer to smoke. You break the dull orange crystal into your

pipe, light up. By the second pull, it works. You manoeuvre yourself until you lay against the body of the young girl. Your heads touch. Her hair is soft cotton. You drift.

There is no passage of time in these moments. You are high, and then you are less so. Soon, you will not feel the drug at all, although its residue will remain. You stand, kiss the young girl's temple, leave. At the awning Regan is not there. You walk into the thumping hall. You dance like a fallen angel, smoke more. You are approached by someone but do not see who. There might be sex but you cannot tell and do not remember. At some point you leave the hall, walk down green-tinged stairs, through the dark entrance and emerge into the comparative quiet of the street. It is morning. Sunlight makes your eyes smart. You squint, and see the bright t-shirt, Cadmium Yellow Light. The words resound in your head.

It is him. Collapsed against a lamppost, torn jeans soiled around the crotch, head crooked to one side. The boy.

Something tells you to leave him, but you can't. Closer, you notice ash-like traces around his nose and mouth. You curse aloud. The surrounding people take no notice. They're used to this.

Scrap. Someone gave the boy scrap. In exchange for what, you do not want to know.

He cannot walk, so you are forced to carry him to the flat draped over one shoulder like a summer coat. He is lighter than you imagine. You remember the many nights you went without food, the dregs you were forced to find. You remember the first time you took drugs of any kind, not at his age, not nearly as young, but each generation grows bolder. If you had paid him mind, you tell yourself, you could have stopped him, but you were busy thinking about yourself. Now it has been done. The thing you had feared has happened. There's barely time to muse over inevitability as you climb into the lobby, thumb the lift, ignore the blank stares of washouts like yourself, step inside and choose your floor.

The boy hardly stirs. He bounces against your shoulder when you walk along the corridor, jerks prone when you slap your palm against the outer reader, but is otherwise motionless. You are prepared for what may come, what might be inside, and when you see the figure on the chair you take little notice. You ease the boy onto the

bed, where he flops backwards, arms outstretched, almost sleeping. You face the new arrival.

He is thin, grizzled, a gnarled ancient tree, head, hands, the cracked and exposed skin at his chest and throat. His eyes are black and keen, dull embers, innocence bled. He wears thin patchwork jeans and a faded green vest. His arms are filled with bruises and crevices, tattoos and scratches. The peak of his soiled baseball cap is a curved crescent-moon framing his face. Grimy letters say, NYC. He's looking at you with a thin smile you recognise, have felt on your own face, and you match it for a moment, even lift your hand to feel the shape against your smooth fingertips. It is rigid and foreign, but it is yours.

'Don't blame the boy,' the figure says, his voice rumbling, deep, powerful for such a thin man. 'He had nothing to do with it. That was me.'

'With what?' you say, but you're testing him. The man laughs.

'Good try. Great try,' he admits. 'Some things you can't escape. Some things are meant to be.'

'And some you can,' you respond. 'Otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

The man rubs his fingers across his jaw; the rasp is loud, sandpaper against stone.

'True,' he says. 'Very true.' He looks around the room, continues to rub. 'So you know who I am.'

You nod, sit on the edge of the bed. The boy drifts behind you, so high, eyes fluttering, whispering. The older one laughs harder, shakes his head. He picks at the green vest.

'As you can see, there's not much of us left.'

'No.'

A long silence. Even the hostel is quiet in those hours between retreating night and approaching day. Only the noise of machines clawing at buildings further along the block, a far-away crash of masonry, bricks. You do not look at each other, just the cluttered floor.

'I'm fresh out The House,' the older one continues. 'Seven-year stretch. That's why I'm here I suppose.'

You flinch, gulp back information, your future.

'So what d'you want us to do?'

'Stop,' he tells you, holding your eye. 'The disease gets us. We're raped.'

Although there is no sorrow, although he seems stronger than you could ever be, that makes you look away.

‘There’ll be nothing of us left before long.’

You shake your head, hissing downwards; even as you do there is a bright feeling, a distant stirring, some denial of what you are thinking, are about to utter.

‘*You* said there’s no escape.’

He grins again. The teeth are his most solid thing, the least damaged. You marvel at them. Perhaps, to him, you look like the boy.

‘From *some* things,’ he emphasises, leaning back. ‘The fact is, we control our path. We are where we are because of us. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. Right?’ He gestures, a throw away flick of his fingers. ‘Can I show you?’

‘Yes,’ you say, brightness a deepening sensation. You are leaning forwards, eager. ‘Show me.’

The boy must wake, and so you wait for the high to pass. This takes many hours. It is full night before he comes back to himself. In the meantime, you and the older you talk. He tells you of The House. A blank, shared cell, automated wardens, the echo of pain-wracked voices, the sudden violence of patient men. He tells you of the person you will become, your struggles, the darkened twists and barricades that eventually line your path. He tells you of intent, memories of youth that became nightly recall, the sudden feel of possibility, the whisper of a cellmate in the darkness of lights out, the offer and acceptance of scrap. There is warmth in his voice you cannot deny. A connection evident in each word. And the bright feeling grows, not just in your gut, but in your whole body, and so you listen to it all, everything.

And although, what with his appearance in your tiny room, you have forgotten the urge, it has not forgotten you. The addiction strikes the old one first, forming slowly so the first signs are hardly noticeable. His eyes begin to drift. He bites his lips. He looks around the room, distracted by the tiniest motes on unseen thermals. Soon, he begins to sweat. All through these symptoms he keeps talking and you listen, but the distractions grow. He rubs and scratches at his thin arms, causing you to realise where those faded, dark marks came from. He stutters and loses his way, forgets what he is saying, and speech slips from his grasp. His eyes grow dull. His forehead glistens, becomes wet. His fingers tremor as if they are diseased. And all the while the old one

shoots sideways glances at you, as you bite your own lips, and wipe the sweat from your own head with a trembling hand, try not to succumb to the itching, both of you, face to face with yet another thing you have successfully avoided for so many years.

You get to your feet. There's no room for privacy, no room for shame, but you feel it for the second time and walk to the kitchen. The pipe is in your clothes, as always. You load it with Hadion crumbled between thumb and first finger, light the drug, knowing the old one will smell it, only wanting to hide the pleasure that floods your face. When that has gone, you will go back. You can hear his stark inhalation, and shake your head; there's no point in this pointlessness, yet guilt has forced you. After a few more puffs, you go back.

The old one is obscured by smoke. His pipe grows bright orange, dulls as the cloud swirls around him, dirt grey, until he is only a thin shadow. You sit on the floor, back against the bed, take another puff. And although you cannot see each other, which is better for you both, there is laughter in the gloom. Him first, then you join in. The coughing that follows opens up your lungs. You are high. So is he. You drift together, heads thrown back, pipes lowered, and the glow of your pipes die down, eventually out. The clouds swirl, and buildings crumble beyond your window, and the three of you remain lost in personal voids.

Hadion clears the brain and body sooner than scrap. When you come to, he is sitting up, scanning the room as though he just arrived, wiping drool from his speckled jaw. You clamber to your feet. Help him up with a hand, pull. In the kitchen you throw porridge oats into a pot and run the cold tap to create a stodgy mush. You leave this on the fire until it bubbles, thickens, pour the mixture into bowls. You eat in the bedroom, both in silence, jaws moving simultaneously, quiet and comfortable.

The boy opens his eyes. There is no fear or surprise when he sees the older man, he simply nods and sits on the edge of the bed, peering. The old one gestures him closer. The boy laughs, looks at you, waiting for your nod. When you do he crosses the room to where the old one sits, stumbling, rubbing eyes. The drug clings with sharp claws. He will soon need more, like the old one, like you. The old one gets to his feet, a slim construction of bone and flesh, towering over the boy. In a quick moment that makes you jump, they hug. The boy presses his forehead against the old one's belly, arms clasped tight around him, and though you feel a moment's jealousy, you know this is right. They stand that way for a long time, fiercely hugging. The old one cries, though no tears fall. His eyes simply become soft mirrors. You cannot tell the boy's response.

He leads you from the building. If anyone in the lobby takes notice, they hide it well. You cross the city, block after putrid block, unsure where you are going, following like faithful pets, the boy tightly holding the old one's hand. You are scrambling over broken paving slabs and litter. Occasionally broken human beings. The air is rich with fog and morning. There is the light of a new day, but somewhere beyond, upwards, there is a closer light on the horizon, buildings of a district you barely know. The city beyond your city. It twinkles with reluctance, a rare stone trapped in dull earth. And the old one takes you towards this place, guiding your younger self with a gentle hand, making sure he does not fall, whispering, showing him the way.

There is a wound cut deep into the centre of the metropolis. It is centuries old, bleeding south until it reaches the ocean. Once it was a river, but that was when it brought life, vitality, and later wealth. Now it is stained brown with neglect, the rotting flesh of the dead souring its taste, bringing disease where it once brought prosperity, mortality where there was hope. The stink is like the tepid warren of sewers beneath your feet. The sound is a lazy slosh of water almost too thick to move. The old one brings you closer to the edge of the wound, as close as he can, and stops. On your side there is darkness, humped shadows, a smell of moss, the soft slap of moored boats. On the other side there are lights illuminating a wooden dock, a ladder, steps. There is no need for words, at least between the older of you. For the boy there is confusion, yet he smiles.

‘You will be chased,’ older one says. ‘By a group of boys, right?’

‘Some young men,’ you correct. ‘But mostly boys.’

‘They will chase you here,’ the old one continues. ‘Where they’ll stop, and catch you, and beat you. They’ll make you join them. But you can’t. You have to get away. You have to cross the river.’

The boy stands silent, gazing over the water. You recognise the smell now, that first encounter in your flat. It was him. It was here.

‘Now?’ he says, looking up.

‘Yes. You can make it, you just give up when you get here. You let them catch you. But you can’t. You have to swim.’

You remember it well. The fear, the ache from running, amplified when you saw dark water. You didn’t believe you could. What happened afterwards was a blur, as though you sank beneath the water anyway, only to emerge years later wrinkled by immersion, dripping with experience. You believed the pain of not making it was better

than the pain of trying. The old one's right, you realise. It shaped who you became. You were wrong.

When you look down, the boy has already snaked free of his t-shirt, is pulling down the jeans. He gives you both as though he also sees what will come, providing he makes it. He walks towards the black water and when it touches him he jumps, makes a sound as though it scalds him. The old one chuckles; you flinch. The memory is still raw. This boy is strong, perhaps stronger, and he returns to the water's edge, looks back once, waits for your confirmation, steps forwards again until it reaches his knees, and then his hips, then his chest as he pitches forwards. He is swimming. His strokes are choppy, and he kicks up a cloud of water, but he is moving confidently. The old one puts a matey hand on your shoulder. You allow it.

And the boy moves steadily across the city's wound. Not graceful, not even fast, but a constant, dedicated pace. Soon he is a third of the way. Next, he is half. You are silent, but inside you spur him on. Inside, you are shouting encouragement into the wind. It grows difficult to see his dark head against a dark background in the still of night, and your thoughts drift when all you can make out is the distant cascade of dirty water. You see yourself back in that classroom, faced with the paints and the easels and the vision in your head. You imagine yourself taking a deep breath, steadying nerves. Lifting the brush, dabbing the fibres into the first colour you see in your mind's eye, Cadmium Yellow Light, making a mark on canvas. This pleases you, and so you make another. And another. You wash the brush in a water pot, select another colour. Ivory Black. You trace thick, straight lines. You are smiling. The tutor looks over your shoulder, whispers. You can't hear him. You're lost.

The boy splashes closer to the northern bank. You gasp. He seems to be moving faster. You walk until water caresses your shoes, fingers clenched. You bring them to your mouth, cupped on each side.

'Go on!' You are yelling. *'Go on, you can make it! Go on!'*

And he does. On the other side, a tiny figure drags himself ashore, leaps into the air, cartwheels. You shout congratulations, and although they are lost in the wind, you feel they somehow reach him. You remember the old one, turn back.

'He did it!' You scream. *'He-'*

There is no one. Just the lights of the city, a mass of buildings, the rasping voice of the wind. The old man and the boy are gone. And yet you smile. You turn towards the bank and sit on the mud, and then lie back, oblivious to the cool, slick, wet earth,

lifting your right hand before your eyes. The fingers are still as the night, steady. You breathe.

SEED

1

It had been a good long summer of hot days and balmy evenings, the sky morphing from blue into a haze of orange and red, but the autumn changed it all, bringing dark clouds, continual rain. For the first few weeks of September a storm circled above London, drenching the city in relentless showers lasting whole days. Soon it grew difficult for Dapo to remember long hours in the park hurling bursts of laughter, inhaling newly cut grass. The evenings spent with Charles sipping pints outside the local pub, finding strange comfort in the tawny glow of sash windows. Balmy nights in his garden, a sweet glass of rosette for company, silently toasting his luck. In that fortnight of oyster grey skies it was common to find felled branches littering the streets each morning, and car windshields covered with a mosaic of leaves. Wheelie bins lay on their sides, or were found streets away. Rarely, there was the open-mouthed corpse of a fox.

After the rains the sun returned, albeit with weaker rays, and those who observed the severe weather warnings began to venture outside. Dapo wandered into his back garden to survey the extent of the storm damage and was surprised to find the seeds littering his grass, particularly beneath the pear tree he and his wife had planted ten years ago. They were everywhere, glistening and round, tiny glinting eyes peeking upwards as if from a fringe of green hair. They were purple and bloated, a few split open to reveal a slightly pink, fleshy interior. He picked one up. It resembled a water chestnut, curved inwards at the centre, except it was slightly rough to the touch. The shell was lined with strange, almost tribal patterns, on closer inspection more like whorls. No two seeds were the same. He craned his neck, examining his tree. He guessed they'd grown from there, as the tree had sprouted butterfly wing petals and new, still tender branches, lily pad green, bowed and heavy.

He watched the clear sky, looking over the fences at his neighbours' gardens. The Denton's was treeless, but there was a Rose bush. The Agyeman's had a sizable apple tree; both bore new green, supple branches, shimmering blue and violet petals. All were laden with the fruit. He assumed, but couldn't see, that their grass was full of fallen seeds too. Nothing should have grown that late in the season, let alone so quickly. He rolled the seed between his fingers until he was disquieted by the way the markings

rubbed against his skin, creating a rasp he didn't hear as much as feel. He took it into the kitchen to show Misra.

She was sitting at the kitchen table reading a novel and drinking tea, her usual routine before she went upstairs and began work. Dapo slipped the seed into his pocket and closed the French doors. He made his own cup of lemon and ginger then stood by the sink, sipping from the mug, enjoying the silence of the day. Iye wasn't there. He spent the weekend with his grandparents, Misra's father and mother, who brought him home after nursery on Monday afternoons. The house felt anticipatory without him, the air pregnant with the unknown moment that birthed his arrival, that welcome burst of sound, blurred action.

He appreciated the time Misra's parents afforded. Time to work on individual projects, whatever they might be. Time to make love, or talk over steaming mugs, time to make time for themselves. Many of their fellow parents, their friends, family and neighbours didn't have the luxury of in-laws to take the strain of raising a child. In the old days they would have all lived together in some dusty compound surrounded by hoards of family, intimate or distant, or at least a village, at worst in the same town separated by scant miles. Now, for them, there were only Misra's parents, as Dapo's had returned to Nigeria many years ago. It was difficult to assess if they were better off or otherwise in this new millennial age of globalisation, of families located anywhere they could afford, of betterment.

'What are you thinking?' she said from the kitchen table, putting down the book. A slim volume, not a novel at all he realised - *What Women Want*.

'Nothing useful,' he said. 'Hey, look at what I found in the garden.'

He took the seed from the pocket. She turned it between her fingers like he had before, a faint smile on her lips.

'Where'd you get this?'

'The garden. There's tons. Come and have a look.'

She gave it back and followed him, bending for various seeds of her own, examining each close, holding them high against the light. Thin cloud had returned above, whiter, more expansive. The sun was a bright coin hidden behind muslin. Their pear tree rustled and shook in the breeze. Dapo watched her search the grass, telling himself he was concerned with her response to the purple orbs, but after a while he admitted he liked to watch her move. Misra's body was tiny, wide, curved like the seed. He laughed, admonishing himself.

‘What d’you think?’ he croaked, throat dry. Tea did that sometimes.

‘They’re beautiful. Like little jewels.’

‘They are.’

‘Where d’you think they come from?’

‘The trees I think. They’ve got new branches.’

He pointed in the direction of the pear tree. Misra walked along the central garden path and stood beneath the tree. He joined her. She smelt of sandalwood, the josh sticks she’d burnt that morning.

‘Oh yeah,’ she said. ‘But none on the tree?’

‘No,’ he said, checking to make sure. She was right. All the branches were bare. He wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing the back of her head. They looked up, heads tilted.

‘So pretty.’

‘Yes. Like precious stones.’

She held a seed close to her chest, cupping it with both hands.

‘What are they?’

‘I have no idea. I’ve never seen them before.’

‘You should Google them.’

‘Yes.’

‘I like this one.’

‘I see that.’

She smiled and he kissed her hair again. It was soft, her skin warm as soft earth. She placed the seed gently inside her pocket as if it might break. Dapo did likewise. He squeezed her to him and they went inside. Neither had any idea why they took the seeds, and they didn’t speak about it again. It seemed like the logical thing to do.

In the kitchen, they hardly spoke. Misra continued to sip tea, and later, went upstairs to work. Dapo sat at the kitchen table. He picked up her book, glanced at the back cover, read a few pages, put it down. He got up, paced the kitchen, checked the email on his phone, sat back at the kitchen table. This was always the worst. The in-between. The gaping chasm between what was and what could be. He’d not long finished a solo exhibition, some paintings and sculptures and a video installation focused on the city at night, the prevalent theme of his show, trite but true. He’d long been aware that he wasn’t sure not to do next, there was the usual collection of disparate works which always came when he was working on a big forthcoming collection,

something with purpose and drive, but those fledgling pieces hadn't announced their place in the world, and so he waited like a spider, not tense, or anxious, just hopeful and clear in the knowledge the moment would come. He had to be prepared. For the last few months he'd been capable of finding that inner poise, but the walk down the garden changed things, he could feel it. Those markings, that strange feeling on his fingertips. The pink flesh, almost white like a prawn, the deep calm of purple skin. Those seeds contained the DNA of inspiration. He was restless because they had stirred something, and he didn't know quite what. There was a surge of hormonal anticipation, a rush of endorphins, but it had no end.

He paced the house, listened to Dennis Brown, tried to stay away from Misra because he'd talk senselessly and therefore disturb her, for the remainder of the afternoon. He watched a Culture Show episode on YouTube that concerned Native American art because in some way he felt that he should, even though he'd already seen it. By the time the end credits arrived there was a key in the door, a high pitched excited voice, a stomping of feet and so had Iye. He thundered into the living room, rushing into Dapo's arms, a ball of consistent energy and chatter, warm and solid, black curling hair, bright eyes and teeth, bony knees and laughter. No sooner had he thrown himself at his father then he was gone, feet beating up the stairs to see his mother. Dapo heard slower footsteps, and then came the figure of his in-laws, Anu and Tasmin.

'Hello, hello...'

'Hi there. Tea anyone?'

'Yes please,' Anu rumbled.

'I'd like tea, yes.' Tasmin said, entering.

He hugged both, ushering them into the kitchen. Put the kettle on. They sat at the dining table, lowering their bodies, sighing, stretching legs.

'So how was he; full of energy as usual?'

'Oh, always full from morning to night,' Tasmin said, over the increasing roar of the kettle, getting up again and searching for mugs. 'Up at six he was.'

'We were,' Anu told Dapo. 'Tasmin was still in bed.'

'Anu; I was up at quarter past.'

'Quarter past eight,' he said, with a wink. Dapo smiled as much as he dared.

'So who made breakfast?'

A row of mugs appeared before him. Dapo poured, pinched tea bags between his fingers, dropping them into open maws. He squinted against the sudden heat, the thick rush of steam.

‘Thanks. Sugar?’

‘None for me thanks. You, Tasmin. You made him breakfast.’

‘So what are you talking about? One sugar please. Idiot.’

‘Sorry?’ Dapo turned, kettle in hand, belching steam.

‘Not you,’ Tasmin smiled. She pointed, her nimble body always moving. ‘That idiot.’

Anu laughed deep in his chest, holding up both hands. He was tall and languid, a sweep of grey falling across his forehead, his expression static as a wood carving. Dapo joined him as he continued to pour. More thunder came from the stairs. Misra and Iye joined them.

‘Hi mum, dad.’

Kisses and hugs all around. Iye called for a ‘family hug’ which consisted of him being squeezed from all sides by everyone, crowding him in a circle. He closed his eyes tight and groaned while they did it, his grin wide, turning into pealing giggles.

‘So what did you do today mister?’

‘He won’t tell you,’ Misra warned, tasting her tea.

Iye ignored his father, playing with a half-constructed Lego car on the kitchen floor. They rolled their eyes at each other.

‘He had a good time at nursery with his friends,’ Tasmin said.

‘He had a fight with Hamza.’

‘Anu; he did *not* fight with Hamza. It was an argument.’

‘That’s what I said; an argument. And then we went to the park.’

‘Is that what happened? Did you go to the park darling?’

Misra was kneeling beside him. He’d tuned them out and was making thrumming engine noises, the adult world a faint buzz.

‘Idiot...’

‘Yes we took him to the park. It was amazing. There were these strange seed pods everywhere...’

‘Really?’ Misra got to her feet. ‘What did they look like?’

They’d gained Iye’s attention. He stood with his mother, tugging her from below, a free hand digging into his pocket.

‘Mummy, mummy look at the seed pod I found!’

‘They *are* amazing... So odd looking, but so pretty,’ Tasmin said.

‘That’s weird,’ Dapo walked to the kitchen table, standing over his son. ‘We’ve got them in the garden too.’

‘You have?’ Tasmin swivelled to see him.

‘Oh, they’re everywhere,’ Anu said. ‘We couldn’t even walk across the grass there were so many. It was too difficult. Bad for your feet. We had to stick to the path.’

‘Mummy, mummy, look!’

‘OK baby.’ Misra took Iye’s seed. She studied it closer than hers, frowning, holding it beneath her nose.

‘They’re all over the streets and pavements, everywhere. There’s lots on our road.’

He hovered over Misra, waiting. When she finished, he took Iye’s seed. This one was smaller, no less purple or beautiful. The whorls were finer, sporadic, leaving traces of bare dark skin that shone in the light. It weighed almost nothing, and was scuffed, as though it had been dropped, or kicked.

‘So they didn’t come from a specific tree?’ Dapo asked.

‘No, they don’t seem to. They’re everywhere.’

‘Weirdest thing,’ Misra said to Dapo. They avoided each other’s eyes.

‘There’s got to be an explanation. I’ll Google it.’

‘Yes,’ Tasmin said, distracted by her grandson, who was playing underfoot. Dapo let it go. He’d grown used to that.

His in-laws drank their tea and left in a flurry of hand waves and hugs. There was Cbeebies bedtime hour, a harried dinner, the brushing of teeth and lastly, two stories for Iye. Dapo took the job, lying on the bed with their heads touching, reading a selection of his son’s favourite books while he clutched his blanket close to his chin. When he finished Iye’s nose was twitching, his eyes tinged red, half-closed. Dapo rose, each movement cautious, hands splayed, arms stiff, as if that would help. He was creeping towards the door when he heard a tiny voice.

‘Daddy?’

Gritting his teeth, turning.

‘Yes Iye?’

‘Seed pod is my friend Daddy. He helps me sleep.’

‘Yes it does. You’ll sleep well.’

‘He whispers nice things in my ear.’

‘That’s good. What does it say?’

‘I can’t understand him. But he’s nice. He’s kind. He likes me.’

‘Ah. That’s lovely,’ Dapo said, eyes wandering until they found the seed. It looked even smaller where it had been placed on his son’s chest of drawers, hardly noticeable among the CD’s, half-built Lego improvisations and curled Mr Men books. ‘Now I think it’s time to sleep.’

‘OK Dad. Goodnight.’

‘Night Iye. I love you.’

He was about to leave when he paused. His son lay on his side, facing the window, asleep. The light from his window bathed the room in a soft white glow. He pulled the blinds cautiously, although it would make no difference. Iye was snoring. It had happened in moments. Dapo watched him breathe. The seed was placed beside the headboard, the inward curve turned towards his son. He hadn’t done that, it must have been Iye. Not knowing why he walked to the chest of drawers and picked it up, holding it to his ear like a seashell, cupped in his hand, close enough to touch his lobe. He squinted his right eye, unsure of what he might achieve.

There was a tiny rasping sound, something he couldn’t quite place, not quite a voice, it couldn’t be, but a sound small and actual, furtive as skittering mouse claws. It was guttural, quick, making him gasp and drop the seed from his startled fingers onto the carpet, staring at the bright purple against faint brown, still and accusing as a dead man’s eye. He felt as if he could hear the tiny voice from where he stood, and only resisted the urge to lift his foot and bring his heel down because somewhere inside, somewhere irrational he admitted, he questioned the morality of such an action. worse still, even more stupidly, he was scared. That was it, he was scared. Tons of them, Tasmin had said. Besides, he might wake his son.

He picked up the seed and took it downstairs held before him, pinched between his fingers. Opened the French doors and threw it into his garden. He breathed in the night before he remembered the others, one in his pocket and Misra’s too. He retrieved both seeds and threw them into the darkness. He did not tell his wife.

After dropping Iye at Nursery, Dapo returned with a grande Latte to share. He wanted to find Misra, but instead unlocked the French doors, going into the garden. He'd been trying not to think about the plants. Even though he told himself he'd managed not to, consumed with thoughts of infinite possibilities, his gut was churning with the lie.

He hadn't been back to the garden because he was busy with work. Dapo chuckled to himself – that was at least a half-lie. Inspiration was a surge of energy, ideas tumbling onto paper weighing little or nothing, feather-like sketches, whole and real. Late into the previous night he'd started to paint, simple images, clouds of colour really. When he'd finished he felt pleased. He flossed and cleaned his teeth, flinching at the buzz of his electric toothbrush, undressed in soft half-light, climbed into bed beside Misra. She was soft and unyielding; he pressed against her, smelling almond oil. She said something he couldn't hear, dropped her book. He ran his hand down her back until he was pulling at the thin web of panties, kissing the slight channel of her spine until he reached her hips. He rubbed the curved rise of her body with his palm and he wasn't sure what happened. His vision went dark, but it wasn't troubling, more like peaceful. Warmth caressed his head. He lay on one elbow, mind busy with visual equations. Curved brown hip into dark gleam of chestnut, into darker roundness of smooth plum, soft to the touch, into purple skin and green tinged hair. Whorls craved into smooth surfaces like raised tattoos. Deep purple, immersive as bathwater. Slight fur, soft enough to rub against a cheek. Tickling, tender sensation.

At one point, after some time, he pulled away the covers and leant back on one arm. He didn't know how long he lay there, but when Misra asked if something was wrong he was roused from his meditative state, shocked by his own distraction. He'd been deep inside his own mind, comparing the curve of her hips and buttocks with the rounded shape of the seed. His lips tasted of moist earth. It wasn't actually unpleasant, just unusual. Dapo blinked himself back to the green tinged statue of Ganesh beneath the smiling arc of multi-coloured prayer flags, their books and untidy collage of clothes. He planted kisses around Misra's waist, ignoring her questions, his urgency lost to the dreams.

In the morning, Dapo went downstairs to make Iye's breakfast and poked his head around the reception door to see his previous evening's work. He'd stopped short, rubbing his temple. Canvasses surrounded the room, three on easels like dwarf shrubs, three propped up against the radiator, five on the floor. Each was almost identical, hazy,

formless masses, the green and purple of the seed. He stared, trying to recall lifting the brush, or choosing the paints. He'd shut the door and kept it closed.

Now, even while he walked the stone path that lead to his pear tree, Dapo was rubbing his thumb and forefingers together as if to dislodge stubborn dirt, or grit. He caught himself. He stared at his fingers, lifting them to his nose. They were clean, lavender sweet. He swore, a low whisper half caught in his throat, words trapped until they decomposed.

The ground was marked with tiny purple mounds. The tough skin of the pods was gone. The mounds were especially evident against the low green of the lawn Dapo kept religiously weeded and fed. He'd been proud of his grass, which had taken hours of care to maintain, to weed and trim and feed. Now it was ruined. There were perhaps a hundred raised purple lumps or more, one for each fallen seed he supposed. At the end of the grass, just before his garden shed, stood a cluster of unfeasibly tall saplings; three grouped closely as high as his knee. They were thin and wiry, bearing two or three small, heart-shaped leaves. The stems looked hardy as weeds. He walked across his lawn, bending to inspect them. Although predominately green, the purple tinge along their sides could only be seen when he turned his head right, or left. Thin translucent hairs glistened like silk, covering the stem and leaves. He stood, sighing at the faint click in his knees, raising himself on his tiptoes to look at his neighbours' gardens. He couldn't quite see properly, so he went over to the Denton's fence, lifting himself so wood rested beneath his arms. Two young saplings, side by side in a sea of purple waves, the humps of mounds. Dapo let himself fall, doing the same on the Agyemang's side. Shola was leant over four plants, a clustered group like his.

'Hey,' he called gently, not wanting to startle him. His neighbour turned as if he expected Dapo. He was boyish and slim, much like the saplings he pointed his darkened shears at. His glasses were thin wires, his head bald, gleaming.

'Hey. Interesting right?'

He stood feet apart, looking down on the plants. The immaculate grass, which Dapo had long admired, was dotted purple.

'Very.'

'They've been growing like this for three days. Faster than any weed.'

'Since the storm right?'

'Since the storm.'

'What do you think it is?'

‘I have no idea.’ Glowing light reflected from the lens of his glasses, masking his eyes, making Shola look blind. ‘I tried to look it up but no one knows. Lots of Twitter speculation, no answers.’

‘Figures,’ Dapo pulled himself higher. He was beginning to sweat. ‘And you all picked one up? You, Ikiyoma, the twins?’

His expression flattened. ‘Yes.’

‘Us too. We have three.’

‘Three?’ Shola’s face twisted. He shook his head, almost to himself, sighed loudly. Raised the shears. They studied the plants, swaying in the faint breeze, leaves nodding.

‘I have a good mind to chop them.’

Dapo opened his mouth, closed it. He didn’t know how to say what he felt. It was just a dumb plant. That was all.

‘I was about to when you looked over.’

The breeze rose. Trees rustled a steady whisper. Shola tried to smile, let the shears fall to the grass. They landed point first, trembled. A gull called. Dapo shielded his eyes with his free hand, watching it disappear behind a roof.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘Neither do I.’

‘It feels stupid but my gut says wait. I’m going to try and find out some things. I do, I’ll let you know.’

‘What feels stupid?’

‘I don’t know.’ He wanted to shrug, arms tired, tendons aching. He looked away, searching for the gull. It was gone.

‘Right-O.’

‘Alright mate.’

He lowered himself on the grass, walking back to the saplings. Two at the Denton’s, one for Patty and Charles. A child in university, and another in Australia. Four at the Agyemang’s, Shola, Ikiyoma, Akande and Akoni, all living at home. And three for them. Dapo, Misra, Iye. He felt a breeze against his skin. When he looked down his arm was marked with raised bumps like the purple mounds that littered his garden.

He could not tell Misra. He promised himself as he stepped towards the French doors. I will not tell Misra. His breath felt high in his throat as he stepped inside, closed

the door. He went into the study where she was leant forward, eyes glued to the screen, watching a video. Something for a website perhaps. He ignored her, lifting his laptop from its upright frame. I will not tell Misra. He slid out backwards, trying not to bump her, going down into the living room, wrenching the laptop open. A wait, a password, some clicks until he was rewarded with Google. He typed *puple seed*, deleted the first word, typed again.

He hadn't expected so many entries. Most from the UK, hundreds more all over the world. Forested areas were particularly numerous. Dapo hadn't thought about that, although it made perfect sense. YouTube video after video had been uploaded showing heaped mounds of seeds beneath the giants of the rainforests, Kapoks and Tonka Bean trees, some as big as coconuts. There were plants already as tall as people, stems the width of a small child, shimmering with green and purple leaves. Seeds that had fallen or had been thrown onto concrete, only for the roots to force their way into cracks and crevices, pushing deep and beginning to grow in the most unlikely places; on Trafalgar square, beside the entrance of a low level coffee shop. A gathering of ten outside the Shepherd's Bush Westfields. Fifteen on the red central road outside Buckingham Palace. Plants had been cordoned by councils, protected, or perhaps the public were being protected from them? Dapo wasn't sure.

An American news broadcast told of a boy in Utah whose parents tried burning a plant, only for the boy to scream, writhing with pain. He was admitted to hospital with third degree burns. 'Under no circumstances should you attempt to uprooted, cut down, or destroy the plants in any way,' the anchorwoman said. She warned people not to touch the seeds; too late, Dapo thought. He watched an hour's worth of material until his head ached. He copied the link to the Utah news broadcast, typed *urgent* in the subject box, and emailed it to Shola. He sat back, occasionally puffing air without being aware of it. Every few seconds he shook his head.

He went downstairs, grabbing his house keys from the under stairs cupboard, yelled, 'Going to the shop!' and went out. Their local park, where Iye had been taken days ago, was one block away. He crossed the road and entered the skeletal black gates, mouth half open in wait for the familiar lift in spirits when he crossed the threshold between tarmac and smooth gravel path. The lack of houses, a feeling of space. The uncluttered canvas of sky. When he saw the trees lining the paths and purple mounds like tiny molehills all over the grass, nothing looked as it ever had. The trees seemed darker, larger. They didn't look as straight as they once did; in fact many seemed

hunched, dominating the paths with their wide shadows. Worse still were the numbers of saplings, hundreds erupting from crumbling earth. Some were the huge green tinged tendrils he'd seen in the rainforests, borne of bigger trees maybe, the oaks. Most were small, thick stemmed, glowing with the brightness of youth. Dapo walked fast, trying to count plants. He stopped after a hundred. There were just too many. Then he noticed something else.

There were no members of the public. The park was empty apart from staff wearing green shirts and trousers, too busy cordoning areas with yellow tape or driving electric carts to notice him. No dogs, no joggers, no bike-riders, no skating teenagers or children. Absolutely no one.

7

He emerged from the house, a bottle of red in one hand, shutting the front door. He walked the path checking for plants, his new daily routine, a thick scent of their perfume rich in the evening air, clogging his nose and throat. There were none. He coughed twice, waiting for the reflex to pass, coughed once more. Continued. The gate squeaked as he prised it open, the drawn out cry of hinges making Dapo wince. He never remembered to oil it. Quiet settled afterwards like snowfall.

It was a cool evening, unusually so. Clouds lay in rolling curves of overcast sections, barely a patch of visible sky. The pigeon grey bellies looked unusually like the inward curve of the seed. He grew conscious of his thoughts, replaying his inner monologue, swearing quietly. He tore his eyes away from the sky to the pavement. A sapling of sorts, except it had grown as tall as he, bent and green, erupting from a square patch of earth where there had once been a normal tree, long uprooted. Leaves lay flat against its sides like a cigar; it was as thick as cane. He wanted to look closer but didn't trust himself not to feel disquieted enough to go back inside, lock himself away with Misra and Iye, or do worse; try and damage the plant. He opened the Denton's silent wooden gate, walking the path to stand outside his neighbour's matte blue door. He took a deep breath, knocked.

He heard a voice and perhaps footsteps, though for a long time no one came. A creeping, tingling feeling touched the back of his neck, someone close beside him; 'invading his aura', Misra would have said. He wanted to turn and look at the sapling,

chiding himself. The sensation grew unbearable, a feel of solid warmth next to his. When the door opened it was unexpected, making him flinch. Patty.

She was tanned autumn brown, eyes sharp blue crystals, a bush of brown hair, angular face. Men still melted around her. Twenty years ago Dapo imagined they had pooled at her feet. Charles, her confident and equally attractive husband took it all in his stride. The marriage had long inspired Dapo and Misra, and the Denton's, perhaps realising this, loved to have them over for dinner, drinks, or just to pop in.

'Dapo... Sorry to make you wait. I was giving him dinner.'

She held up a tablespoon. The rounded tip was blood red.

'No trouble at all, I brought wine, hope that's OK.'

'Well it's just us, but...' A kiss on both cheeks, and he was in. The door closed, his shoulders relaxed. He heard himself breathe out. 'I accept. Thank you so much.'

She took the bottle and walked away. He followed, struck by the mirror image layout of their homes, as always; except everything in this house was white and clean and gleaming, the benefit of having older children he guessed. There were grown up furnishings like hallway tables, imitation crystal lampshades, carpeted floors. He thought they'd stop to pick up wine glasses from the kitchen, but Patty went straight upstairs, feet thumping on polished wood, Dapo staring into the younger faces of his neighbours. Their children Julie and Richard, various John and Jill Doe family members framed and immortalised all the way to the landing. Patty turned on herself, standing before the door of the second bedroom, kept for visitors Charles always said. The third bedroom was an office of sorts, although Dapo had heard of the sofa bed the couple bought for grandchildren who came to England once a year, sometimes used by drunken party guests who couldn't make a long drive home.

Patty stood by the half open door. She made the pretence of knocking, a light touch of knuckles against wood.

'Dear? Dear... Dapo's come.'

He crept along the passage until he was beside her.

'I can come back if he's sleeping?'

Patty shook her head without turning.

'Dear? It's Dapo. Are you awake?'

'*Hello?*'

The voice was weak, trembling, nothing like his usual rumble. A rasp that burrowed deep into him. He felt his fingers curl.

‘Can we come in?’ Patty asked.

‘Yes... Yes...’

‘We’d better go in,’ she said as though she hadn’t heard, pushing the door. Dapo closed his eyes tight, counted to five, and went in after her.

Thankfully the lights were dim although the air was stale, a perfume as heady as the plants. He smelt food, something strong and tomato based, and made out the bowl on a bedside cabinet. A lamp was on, thin material thrown over the shade to lessen the glare. There was an old TV near the window perched on a wooden chair, makeshift and temporary. Various medicines clogged the cabinet, bottles of cream and boxes of pills. He felt his eyes adjust, unfortunately not before he bumped the edge of the double bed trying to give Patty space. Charles lay still, his body uncovered by sheets, a solid mass. Dapo couldn’t see any injuries, although he could tell Charles was in pain by the rattling of his breath, the sharp way he inhaled through tightly clenched teeth.

‘Hey mate,’ he said, ‘What you done to yourself eh?’ He rasped something Dapo couldn’t understand. ‘Sorry?’

‘He wants you to sit,’ Patty said. ‘Slowly. Any movement hurts.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Dapo eased himself onto the mattress. Charles was unmoving apart from his head, which rolled to follow him. There was that wheezed intake of breathe.

‘You can come closer. It’s OK. He’d like to see you.’

He didn’t want to know how bad it was, not really, but steeled himself and moved towards the pillow. His eyes adjusted. Patty sat on a chair beside the bed, knees locked together, eyes bright. Charles was shuddering, it had to be with pain. There were bright red marks on his face and chest. His eyes were wide, his hair lank, wild. Dapo tried to smile. It wouldn’t hold, and his head fell. Something touched his hand. Charles. He’d reached for him.

‘Is it alright?’

‘They’re OK.’ Patty said, voice neutral. ‘His left is worst.’

‘OK.’ He took the hand carefully, cupping the fingers in both of his. ‘Look at you, eh? Might as well have told those Brazilians to turn down their music after all. Could have been less dangerous! There’s me telling you leave it alone and look what you did!’

The mattress shook. Dapo’s smile returned.

‘You can do anything now. Might as well. Bungee. Parkour. Breakdancing.’

'Don't... Make...' Charles wheezed, head rocking.

'Sorry mate. You've got to though, haven't you? What are you like?'

'Scared. Just...'

Charles coughed. It wracked his body, shaking the bed harder, making him gasp. Patty reached out, stopping herself, snatching her hand back, muttering beneath her breath. Dapo's eyes moistened. He was glad for the dark.

'Easy...' he said. 'Easy.' The words sounded stupid and useless. Charles swallowed the cough, taking all of his effort. Patty gave him water from a black and white child's beaker marked like a cow.

'Sorry,' he said.

'That's all right,' Patty sang, detached.

'Iye's got one of those.'

'Yes,' she smiled, concentrating on inserting the spout between Charles' lips, his raised head, the gulping, clicking swallows. 'They're all the rage.'

'Everyone's scared Charlie,' Dapo said, keeping his friend in the conversation. 'There's no shame in it. I'm petrified.'

'And Misra?' she still wouldn't look at him.

'Oh she thinks it'll all blow over. You know Misra. If it's organic, it's good. She won't be argued with.'

'She always was sensible.'

'Yes. She is.' He looked at the floor, his unseen loafers. 'You've spoken to your kids right? They know you're OK?'

Charles squeezed his hand.

'And you've seen what they're saying? I notice you've got your telly. They think they've found out what they are.'

'We switched it off,' Patty said, removing the beaker from Charles' lips, placing it on the bedside cabinet. 'It made us nervous.'

'It's either a meteorite shower in the Amazon, or the deep sea probe. They found bacteria in the trenches. The boffins are investigating.'

'They boffins probably started it. So they don't know which?'

'No.'

'Liars.'

'Misra reckons its evolution.'

A soft, rhythmic thud. Charles' head lifted and fell, lifted and fell against the pillow. He struggled to speak. They dipped their heads low, straining, but the words wouldn't leave his lips. Patty leant closer. She put her ear to his mouth, closed her eyes. After a moment she sat up, back straight, hands on her lap. She looked uncomfortable, rigid and still.

'What did he say?' Dapo asked, after the silence was too long.

'Genetics,' Patty said. 'Genetics.'

She entwined her fingers, sighed.

He stayed another half an hour, not saying much, just clutching Charles' hand. When Patty suggested he might have to go, there was a long wheeze. Charles was asleep, probably for the last ten minutes. They crept out of the room, downstairs. Patty waited by the door. He was distressed to see her shoulders trembling.

'It'll be OK,' he whispered. He dug into his pocket for his trusty pack of tissues.

'It's not him,' she said, taking one and wiping at her eyes. 'He'll be OK. I can't help thinking what'll happen if things go wrong.'

'They won't. I promise you they won't.'

He hugged her, and they held hands. The damp of her tears cooled his neck. Her eyes were red. She wouldn't look at him.

'What did the doctor say?'

'Bed rest for two to three weeks. I just want him on his feet. I don't feel safe.'

'Yes, I understand.' Dapo bit his lip. 'Ah – you don't mind if I took a look do you? Out back?'

'Oh.'

'Just quickly. I'd like to know what distressed him that badly.'

'Well, I'm not sure.' She peered, blue eyes steadier. He couldn't tell what she was thinking, but they were strong, piercing. 'Aren't yours exactly the same?'

'That's what I'd like to see. I'll be two minutes, honestly.'

She shook her head like a dog emerging from water, touched his elbow.

'What am I thinking? Of course you can, I don't know what came over me.'

'Like I said, we're all scared.'

'Aren't we just? You won't mind if I stay inside? I can't bear to see them. I didn't even go when the ambulance came.'

‘No problem, really. You lead the way.’

She took him through their kitchen extension, brighter and more modern than the rest of the house, retrieved twin keys from a drawer and unlocked the French doors. Dapo noticed the scent right away. Muggier than his, filling the garden. The perfume of the plant mixed with damp smoky charcoal. He turned to Patty. She’d stepped back, a hand over her mouth and nose.

‘Awful. Vile things,’ she said, voice muffled.

‘Sorry. I’ll shut the door.’

He stepped out, easing the door closed. A three quarter moon had risen into a patch of clear sky. The trees rocked as if to greet him. Just beyond the rose bush were the shadowed stumps of plants, chest high, as wide as modest tree trunks. Dapo always complained the Denton’s garden got more sun; now he wondered if that contributed to the size of their plants. He got closer, the mixed smell of burnt vegetation, petrol and the plant even stronger until he was covering his mouth, stifling a cough. He pulled his phone from a pocket with a free hand, swiping, pointing the torch at the plants.

The plant on the right was a blackened mess. Fire had eaten green and purple flesh, turning it into a gnarled lump. A few feet away he saw the yellow petrol can leaning against the fence. Stupid, he told himself. Charles was too stubborn. Nothing Patty, or anyone else might have said would have stopped him from trying to burn them down.

He aimed his phone left, arm jerking as he recoiled. He stepped back, almost fell, torch beam waving in all directions, righting himself to point the phone back at the plant. White torchlight struck purple flesh. What he’d seen wasn’t a dream, or nightmare.

The plant was Patty’s green haired, purple skinned identical twin, the body curled in an upright foetal position, leafy eyelids closed, stubbed hands clasped under the chin as though in prayer.

The door slammed, making him jump. He stood poised, lowering the heavy travel case with a gasp, head craning towards the upstairs landing. No sound of voices or movement. The house ticked.

‘What was that?’ he called. Waited. He let go of the case, climbing two stairs. Looked further up, listened. ‘What was that?’ he said, voice cracking on the last word, prickles of sweat bursting across his forehead. Mouth open, breathing hard.

‘Just us,’ Misra shouted, ‘have you got the front door open?’

‘Yes, come on, let’s go!’

‘Then it’s just the wind.’

Movement. She stood on the landing, a sleepy Iye held tight. He was curled up, a thumb in his mouth. His pyjamas said; I’M STRONGER THAN I LOOK.

‘Come on Misra, let’s go. I wanna avoid the traffic.’

‘I know, I know,’ she grumbled, coming to join him; then she slipped.

It was only a few steps, but Iye’s weight made her unsteady. She fell back on her heels, him rushing to meet them as the boy tipped forwards, banging his head against his shoulder, Dapo pushing against their combined weight and gravity. He stood there awhile, holding them in place, arms encircled around Misra’s waist, Iye tight between them. Bright tears formed in the boy’s eyes. A trail slipped down his left cheek to land on Dapo’s shoulder. His body shook in silence, mouth closed firm.

‘Everyone OK?’

‘Yes.’ Misra breathed hard.

‘Iye?’

‘Bit my tongue.’

‘Let me see.’

He opened his mouth. Dapo saw blood on his perfect white teeth and lips. He kissed his forehead, hugging them again.

‘You’re alright,’ he said. ‘Worried me man.’

‘See? That’s what happens when we rush.’

He let go, standing back, remembering his fear.

‘Please get in the car. I’ll make sure the back door’s locked. We don’t want to get caught on the roads.’

‘Alright, I’m going.’

She kissed his temple and went outside, Iye wrapped around her neck, leaving the front door open. He walked into the kitchen, digging through cupboard drawers until he found the keys. He was just locking up when he stopped and stood by the French doors. He looked into the night.

The smallest plant, an identical likeness of their son was rooted where the grass met stone patio squares, five feet from where it had grown. The middle-sized plant, his wife's, stood in the centre of the small concrete plain, bare and alone. Dapo's was closest, resting half a foot from the French doors, near enough for the left door to bump the plant if it was opened, or for him to step outside and touch the smooth skin without leaving the house, if he dared. Each had straightened from their hunched embryonic postures to stand at full height, purple arms by their sides, sightlines trained on the middle distance. Or the house. Previously he'd thought their open eyes were blank, unseeing. Now he wondered if what he'd imagined as a sightless, unconscious gaze was innate, unbroken concentration.

'What do you want?' he whispered, anger rising. 'What do you want?'

The likeness between himself and his plant was incredible. The skin was purple, just like the seed, the glistening smoothness of an aubergine. The body hair and nails were green, unnaturally bright; the thought was odd, but they actually seemed to glow in the darkness. The plant had the cropped short back and sides cut he'd favoured since he was a teenager, the jagged scar beneath his eye he'd received from throwing chairs at his cousin in Abuja, aged three. His nose, that strange yet familiar combination of straight and wide, his full lips, even the shapeliness of the mouth Misra always claimed had won her over. It had Dapo's thin oval eyes and thick green lashes, tiny ears and broad shoulders, meaty thighs and bulbous calves. He wasn't sure whether to be cheered or frightened by the absence of genitalia, the neat triangle of translucent green fibres. Apart from that, the plant was identical in every way.

He understood what Charles had felt looking at the unbelievable, their silent threat. The urge to set all three plants alight was real. He stared into its purple eyes. They stared back at his.

'I'll kill you,' he whispered. 'I'll find out how, I promise.'

His tired voice reminded him where he was. He made sure the door was locked, hurrying into the passage to pick up the travel case. Patty stood by his front gate with Misra. He waved, double locking the front door, trundling down the path.

'Got everything?' she said, high-pitched and bright. 'No coming back if you've forgotten your wallet.'

The skin beneath her eyes was grey and heavy. Her strained smile made Dapo tremble, and he couldn't hold back his tears. Misra turned away, her face hidden in her hands. He reached for Patty, pulling her close. They embraced, her slim body shaking.

‘Stop it you,’ she said into his jacket. ‘Stop it. I won’t have any of it.’

‘Just take care of yourselves, OK?’ Dapo heard the offbeat crunch of car doors streets away. He squeezed his eyes tight.

‘You’ve got our address, right?’ Misra said. ‘I texted.’

‘I have. Now go on and don’t be silly you two.’ she let him go, backing off, fanning herself. ‘Look after your lovely son. As soon as Charlie’s well enough, I’ll drive us.’

‘Promise?’ he said, holding her by the elbows.

‘Promise.’ she was looking at something he couldn’t track. It made the moment wrong. Dapo wanted to repeat the word until she held his eye and said it properly. He couldn’t. His hands dropped to his sides.

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘We love you.’

‘We love you too. Go.’

They left her, hefting the last bags into their Honda, climbing in and wrenching doors closed. He tried not to look at the empty space where Shola’s four door Lexus had been parked until last night, that light rectangle or the darker road around it. He started the engine, watching Patty in the review. Misra and Iye turned around, waving. Patty didn’t. She stood by her gate until their car turned the corner.

‘Why’s Auntie Patty crying?’ Iye said, legs kicking.

‘She’s happy,’ Misra said. She opened the glove compartment, moving things around until she found tissues. ‘Sometimes adults cry when they’re happy. She’s glad we’re going to have a good time.’

‘In the night? We’ll have a good time in the night?’

‘Yes, in the night.’

‘Is Uncle Charlie happy too?’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘You know the Petrie’s found those things in the house?’ he said, slipping into westbound traffic. Misra glared at him. ‘What?’

‘You know what.’

‘I’m just saying.’

‘Don’t. Please.’

He shut his mouth and drove. When he looked at Iye he was silent, body swivelled, staring out of the window.

The main road was traffic free, yet when they reached the junction vehicles were backed up one behind the other like they had been for some time. They eased into place. Horns beeped, drivers leaned out of car windows. The streets glistened orange. The air was warm with exhaust fumes and barely contained frustration.

‘Shit,’ he muttered.

‘Dee.’

‘Sorry. Should’ve left earlier.’

‘It’s half two.’

‘Yeah, but still.’

He tapped the wheel, trying to relax. Misra put her hand on his.

‘We did the right thing.’

He feigned a smile. They kissed. She held his chin in her palm, rubbing. He closed his eyes.

‘Alright there trooper?’ he called back.

‘Yes daddy.’

‘Good.’

They moved a few metres, stopped. He turned on the radio, pressing until he found Radio 4. A lively burst of chatter filled the speakers. Misra turned it down. There were three voices as far as Dapo could tell, two men, one woman. They were discussing the government’s response to ‘the issue’ as it was termed. A particularly nasal male voice seemed vocal and more distressed than the others.

‘They don’t even know,’ the nasal voice said. ‘Up until now they don’t even know what happens next, or what people should do.’

‘How would they?’ the woman broke in.

‘How would they not?’

‘This is a particular phenomenon for a particular time and as such, we must wait for the information to gather before making uncertain allegations or placing undue expectations on people who quite frankly are doing their best...’

‘There’s nothing to stop them from conducting a speedier, more thorough investigation. We don’t have time for anything else. At least confirm what we think we know. Don’t leave it to social media and political pundits, armchair loonies the lot of them, left or right. Say what we think we know! After ten days, these things are moving-

‘But that’s obvious... People can see it...’ the woman said.

‘That’s *all* we know, and it’s precisely why people are panicking-’ the second man said, in a tone suggesting he was trying to bring peace.

Misra sat forwards, pressed another button. She gave Dapo a fierce look and sat back.

They moved one car length. Another man was speaking, dreamy and musical, under the influence of something Dapo thought. He wouldn’t have minded something himself. The voice was deep, husky, close to the microphone. It whispered into their ears.

‘See the thing is,’ the phantom said, ‘the thing is we’ve played fast and loose. We’ve besieged this planet with no thought for the consequences, no remorse for our complicity in its current state, and something had to be done. It’s been taken out of our hands. Now I don’t believe in God, never have, but I believe in a higher power, spirituality and I look at those things and I believe retribution’s at hand. What that means, or how we come by it is irrelevant. But whatever happens, I think it will be just, and beautiful, and it will redeem our species, I really do. I believe in the power of the planet to take care of itself, I always have, and if that comes to mean extermination so be it, because I for one-’

Misra switched the radio off. She sat back, her mouth a tight, thin line. Dapo kept his eyes on the bumper in front of him. More beeping horns. Three cars ahead a man got out, peering around a transit van. A woman and child weaved past their bonnet, wheeling a travel bag each.

‘What station was that?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

Dapo tapped the wheel. He muttered and turned the engine off.

It was better sleeping together, even though nobody got much rest and their bodies ached each morning. They’d given Iye the back seat but he woke up scared, so they crammed in with him, huddled like nesting birds. Misra always found sleep easy. Iye was his mother’s son and also slept well, but Dapo suffered from insomnia at the best of times, even in his own bed. Since the last motel he’d been unable to close his eyes without thoughts racing, his fear rising. He decided, unofficially, which meant without

telling his family, that it might be better to keep watch. They were most active in the night people said. He couldn't sleep knowing that might be true.

The rough blanket tickled his chin. He pulled at it. Misra snored and Iye lay across them, feet on Dapo's legs, head on her lap. They had parked near the undergrowth on the far side of the field, illegally perhaps, but they hadn't any choice. Any accommodation had long been taken. Motorways and back roads alike were full of traffic, no matter the time of day or night. They were lucky enough to find an open gate which lead to a path high on muddy hills, the slanted fields and woodland far away from any central roads. The unruly hedgerow seemed large enough to partially consume the Honda and keep it from all but the keenest observers. It wasn't ideal, yet Dapo disliked the idea of sleeping near others. It made them a target, in his eyes.

He was unused to complete silence. Falling like a shroud across bushes and oaks, broken by the sigh of grass whenever the breeze rose. Behind and above their car hills veered heavenwards and a dark mass of trees grew upright despite the ninety degree angle of the earth. The darkness, this far away from streetlights and the illumination of houses, was complete. If he held his breath there was only the sound of his family, an offbeat tick of the engine. A creaking on occasion, possibly crickets. Most of the time there was nothing but the noises of each other. If Dapo could have silenced them, could bear to take that final step, he would. The radio spoke of those who had done such things, preferring murder to the uncertain alternative. There were reports of people who had given up running to touch the plants, and that was it. Over. No one knew what happened next, just they weren't seen again. They were vanished out of existence. And yet the plants, their plant, always remained. Family members who had escaped implored that something was done to find their loved one, through tears mostly. Sometimes, days later, even they disappeared. Much as Dapo appreciated the emotions that brought people to either position, nothing he'd heard allowed him to condone the actions of those who had given up, or able to imagine himself able to performing them. That was too much. If he could not fight he would run, he'd decided; settle, wait it out.

He twitched his nose. This is what he hated most. Incessant itches he couldn't scratch, the unseen moon, blocked by an expanse of leaves above their heads, the cramp in his legs and harsh seat covers against his rear. The smell of their bodies, unwashed for over a week. Hunger. Sticky dryness in his throat. He cried in the darkness, releasing silent pain; he'd become adept at keeping it from them, letting it out at night and

gathering himself for the hour when they rose, bleary and wondering. He heard the hoot of an owl which made him smile, feeling better. Leaves rustled, from its foraging Dapo assumed. He lowered his face against the blanket, scratching his eyelids as he rocked his head back and forth. At least he wasn't alone.

His throat clenched. He almost coughed, swallowing. Another reflex he'd hated over those long nights. When it happened again, stronger this time, he screwed up his face, swallowing harder. An explosive, hacking cough burst from him, making his body jerk. He relaxed against the headrest, eyes closed. Remembered. He raised his head quickly, looking out of the window. Complete darkness. Yet he could smell it. The perfume. The perfume was everywhere.

He turned to his stirring family, rocking with the flood of his returning tears, whining a half-muttered litany. He had tried. God knew he had. The rustling came closer, filling every window. Misra was pushing herself upright, shrieking his name, and Iye was crying, mouth wide, his eyes confused. Dapo blocked them from his mind, trying to see outside. Emotionless faces, alien and familiar appeared at the window, cold breath clouding glass, diminishing. Purple eyes stared. Hard bodies thumped against doors. When they began fumbling for the door handles with unwieldy, stubbed fingers, Dapo threw back his head and wailed.

DARK MATTERS

The world beyond his room had grown mysterious, untrustworthy. He spent whole days alone, his parents' downstairs, lying belly-down on the carpet, sketching and colouring images. At first, during his early years, Max responded to the graffiti everywhere he went, the characters and wild styles and throw ups, the improbable mix of colours that seldom met in the natural world. When he grew older he searched above, up towards the light saturated night sky. His canvas became larger, moving from school notebooks to A3 sheets. He began to conjure nebulae, solar systems, distant dwarf stars that shone pale milk blue, the lifeless glow of dead planets. His parents began to grow worried. To them his pictures were of nothingness, empty, dead space, cold and isolated. His mother complained to Aunt Lina that he'd lock himself away for hours, rarely coming down to eat; and even when he did, he wouldn't speak. His father eyed him with sullen concern, mouth opening and closing, cigarette poised by his lips, grasping for language never caught.

Max knew what he feared most; the foreign looks, that slow creep away, and in strange, laughable contrast, the trailing six steps behind him in every shop, his newfound size met with awe and some distress. The previous summer he felt people thought him charming, possibly lovable. Without warning all that had changed. Now he was a foreign body causing panic. A threat.

He lay stretched on his stomach painting a watercolour cloud of blue in red when Noel knocked for him. His neighbour lived two streets away, so their mothers made sure they walked to school together, hoping to deter rougher neighbourhood youths. When the boys reached their school gates they split like torn paper, staying apart until it was time to go home. Max didn't blame him. He liked Noel. He was short, not self-conscious, confident and popular with girls, boys, and teachers, humorous and knowledgeable without seeming quirky. Once, at lunch, Noel spent ten minutes stabbing every chip on his plate onto a fork with intent precision, while the entire population of the school hall watched, applauding as he crammed the soft-spiked bunch into his mouth.

At the knock, Max half-rolled over, knowing who it was. There was nobody else it could be.

‘Come!’

The door eased open, stopped. Noel’s head appeared.

‘Yes Maximillian!’

‘Bruv. I told you not to call me that.’

Noel pursed his lips in a closed-mouth smile. ‘Yes Max. You good?’

‘Yeah. Come.’

Noel entered. Sagging skinny jeans, fresh black Addidas, a matching t-shirt and black hoodie. Noel always had the manners to remove his snapback when he came in the house, which Max’s mum never stopped going on about. His haircut was barbershop fresh, a day old at the latest, making his small head gleam like a water chestnut. Max, in contrast, had on worn trackies from last year, a fraying polo short, and his Afro hadn’t seen a barbershop in months. His cheeks warmed as Noel looked for somewhere to sit, opting for the single bed. The room was small, barely room enough for the thin bed. A single wooden chair was filled with a pile of folded clean clothes. Posters of street murals, Hubble photographs and rap stars surrounded them.

‘Why you lyin on the floor?’

‘It’s comfortable. Plus it’s the best place to draw.’

‘Don’t you hurt your back an shit?’

‘Sometimes. I haven’t got a desk, so...’

Noel craned his neck, tracking the walls.

‘Man can draw fam.’

‘Thanks. It’s just practice.’

‘Nah, it ain practice. I could practice years and not draw like that.’

‘Everybody’s got their thing innit?’

Noel wrinkled his nose.

‘You reckon?’

‘Blatant.’

A wait, the distance between them more apparent with every second. Downstairs, a clang of kitchen utensils. The aroma of melting coconut oil. Frying onions.

‘Bruv, I see something you know.’

Max rolled onto his back. Noel was staring out of his window. At the underground tracks beyond his garden.

‘What?’

‘I dunno.’

He laughed, stopped. There was a thin shadow of hair along Noel’s jaw Max hadn’t noticed before.

‘You dunno?’

‘Yep.’

‘Where?’

‘The industrial estate. It’s proper mad. As soon as I see it I thought, that’s Max. He’ll know what to do. It’s peak.’

His skin began to tingle. It came from nothing, nowhere. He felt pressure in his veins, the sparkling sensation of a dead arm and realised he was leaning on his elbows. He sat up. The barricade lifted, blood rushed back where it belonged.

‘What is it?’

‘I can’t explain. You gotta come, trust. You’re the only man I’ll let see this ting, believe me. Everyone else’s too stupid. They’ll ruin it.’

‘Is this a joke?’

Noel stared. His eyes were dark marbles.

‘Bruv. Do I joke?’

They held each other’s gaze, and burst into spluttered laughter.

‘Nah, but really,’ Noel said. ‘Do I joke about seriousness?’

He was already on his feet, easing into trainers that were blackened like plantains, a sweatshirt lined with creases and over that, a gilet vomiting cotton from the loose jagged teeth of torn seams.

‘Come then,’ he said, avoiding Noel’s smile.

They rode single file, in silence. Past the small park used by Amberley Aggy more than anyone else, beneath the quiet thunder of the underpass and onto the busy main road that for some reason was called a lane. Even their bikes were nothing alike; Noel’s a gleaming thoroughbred, bright red with thin black tyres, Max’s a lumbering matt black no-name, thick boned with a wide snakeskin tread, rusting and creaking as its wheels turned slow. They cruised at medium pace, Noel seemingly in no hurry, traffic snarled

up this close to rush hour, granting the ability to ride single and double yellows in lieu of bike lanes, ignoring the momentary panic on passenger's faces, unaware of their relaxed, guilt-ridden calm once they were gone. The day was bright, the breeze chilled as the sun began to fall, Max grateful for his mild sweat as he bore down on the pedals. When Noel turned left immediately after the overhead railway bridge, he followed.

Traffic sounds lowered. The rolling shush of car tyres became soothing, momentary. There was even the sound of chattering birds. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation. His tyres whirred beneath him.

The warehouse had once been some kind of factory but that seemed like decades ago. On the upper floors, steps ascended into thin air and crumbling window frames. The only intact ceilings were on floors one and two, which were dark even though the sun was bright, foreboding even from outside. Noel glanced over his shoulder as he wheeled his bike towards the dusty steps; other than that, he hardly noticed Max. He lifted the bike up, towards the blue factory doors. A spider web of tags was etched on wooden boards that replaced the broken glass. Max thought the doors were closed, locked, as both were straight-backed and rigid, but when Noel pushed there was just enough space to squeeze themselves and the bikes through their attentive resistance. Inside, he kicked one semi-closed; it barked splintering protest, stuck. Noel wheeled his bike further inside and so Max left it be, trailing after him.

The ground floor went on forever. He couldn't see the far end, as it was consumed by shadow, the walls disappearing into gloom much as the stairs above their heads evaporated into sky. Everywhere was dust and rubble, as though an earthquake had taken place, leaving the outside untouched. He saw repeated mounds of white plaster embedded with red brick that reminded him of strawberry meringue. Some mounds touched the pocked and cracked white ceiling. Cathedral arch windows beamed stunted blocks of daylight on either side of the boys, but the centre of the hall was dark, difficult to make out.

Max found himself stumbling every few steps; on what, he dared not guess. The smell was of mould, damp earth. It clogged his nose and made his eyes feel heavy. The scrape of their feet caused a sea of dust to foam around their ankles. Every now and then there was a downpour of debris as showers of plaster fell from the floors above, thankfully nowhere near them. He stopped pushing the bike to rub his fingers together; they were rough, powdery, and he could taste a crackle of grit between his teeth. In front of him, the dust fog settled. He could just make out Noel's shadow in the gloom.

He angled his handlebars in that direction and only knew he'd reached him when he bumped the back of his legs.

'Oi,' Noel said, softer than usual.

'Sorry,' Max whispered, following his lead.

'It's sleeping,' Noel said. Max was just about to ask what, but he stepped out from behind him, and saw.

Beyond the boys, there was a small pile of rubble as high as Max's waist. On, or spread across the crumbled plaster, it was difficult to tell which, was nothing. Or rather it was something as far as Max could see, although exactly what he didn't know. A black patch, dark ooze where there should have been sand-like plaster. The absence of light, not above and surrounding them, in the misted air where it should have been, but on the ground before them, a hole-like rip in the earth that led into... An abyss. It was empty space, the substance he'd stared up at night after night. It was the vision before his eyes when the lids were closed. The deepest part of the night when he lay in bed, roused from dreams. To see it where it shouldn't be made Max dizzy with uncertainty and he stepped back with a yelp of surprise. He stumbled on an unseen half brick, which escaped his foot and made him fall, the bike clattering to the dust in a clatter of gears and wheels.

He blanked out for a moment, trying to collect himself. The far away blue sky spun in slow motion. A wisp of cloud travelled on the wind. Noel whispered, 'Shit,' and Max only just heard him, thinking he might be in trouble, so he tried to get up; only when he'd pulled himself into a sitting position, he froze. Everything left him. Body heat, voice, his breath.

The dark ooze had moved. It wasn't spread out on the floor, it was sitting up like him. It wasn't sitting up, it was pushing itself onto hollow haunches. He could see that what he'd first thought of as a random spread of substance was actually man-like – arms, legs, torso, head, all midnight black, all devoid of features. Humanoid. The creature got to its feet, spreading its arms out wide. A man-shaped silhouette three inches taller than he, around six-feet four, a cut out patch of blank shape and inside that, dark void. Max tried to peer into the depths. For a moment there was the glitter of distant stars; galaxies perhaps? The nothing was so deep it almost gave off its own light. Maybe that was what he was seeing? He leant forwards, yearning for more, so captivated he barely registered Noel say; 'See? It's beautiful.'

The being seemed to hear him. It extended a pitch black hand, fingers reaching, strained for contact. It didn't move. Noel stepped forwards.

'No,' Max whispered from the rubble floor.

He ignored him, inching closer, an exhalation of dust at his feet. He touched the darkened fingers and immediately, instead of grasping them, Noel's fingers began to disappear. It was as though they'd been immersed into a glittering pool of thick oil. He made a terrible noise, moaning fear and revulsion, deep throated, growing louder as he fell deeper into the creature's body, the darkness covering more of him, his knuckles, wrist, forearm, his elbow and up one shoulder, Noel's feet beginning to slide closer into the creature, sending roiling dust puffing high, some of which also vanished into the dark form. Half Noel's torso, his leg, his face, which turned towards Max and let out a roaring scream, until it covered his shaven head and the substance filled his mouth, cutting off his voice as though a plug had been pulled inside him.

Max yelled something that wasn't even a word, his throat raw.

It sucked Noel in. Took his whole body until there was only a flailing arm, a bent elbow, fingers writhing like wind-blown leaves, sliding inside the creature with a dull plop. Immersion.

The creature was still. The void became auditory. It turned towards Max, opening its arms.

He picked up his bike, pushing it a metre before him and leapt on, pedalling hard and fast. He only looked behind once, against his will, believing the creature would come after him, but it stood in the same spot, arms wide, turned in his direction. He made it to the graffiti stained doors, jumped from the bike, wrenched the doors open (breaking three nails so his fingers bled), and pushed himself outside without a care for bumps or scrapes, threw himself back onto the bike and sprinted hard. His breathing was a harsh, ragged, quiet scream, ripping his chest like smoke, his expression a wide-eyed mask of shocked fear. He rode so frantically cars veered out of his path to avoid collision, and buses sighed to a stop.

At the small park his muscles could do no more and his legs gave out. He fell onto the grass, bones jarring as they met earth, lucky to have the bike roll away and not collapse on top of him, the whine of his breath like the sawing rasp of an asthma attack, sweat pouring from his face and body, soaking his clothes. Old Man Taylor and Ms Emmes saw him as they returned from the parade of shops, and assumed he'd been

smoking, or possibly injecting, forcing a wide space between themselves and the boy, storing the image of him splayed and panting to recreate for his parents.

Max's chest rose and fell, looking painful, possibly dangerous. By the time it returned to an even pace, daylight had dimmed. The Amberley Road teenagers arrived, sauntering in no clear direction only to pivot on the spot, palms slapping, barking laughter, passing lighters and curses, heads nodding to smart-phone music until they noticed Max; then whispering among themselves as they saw him on his back, motionless. They tried to pretend he wasn't there, yet his presence muted their voices. The strange kid, even stranger now, possibly drugged or the victim of an attack. Unable to tell, they left Max alone. When he rose to his feet some time later, the youngsters were a darting swarm of burning orange sparks. Max lifted his fallen bike and walked it home, ignorant of their hush as he stumbled past, group suspicion clouded by nightfall.

To his room, marching away from the calls of his parents, the shrillness of mum's voice, the not-quite panicked enough to remove their sagging flesh from the television and see if anything was actually wrong. With his bike safely stored in the shed at the bottom of their garden, he tried to treat himself similarly, locking his door, collapsing on the bed, energy spent, head revolving slowly as a park roundabout, throbbing angrily. He was cold, and so he climbed beneath his covers fully clothed, teeth transmitting code for his ears alone, the image of Noel absorbed into the void of the creature returning like a DVD glitch; repeat, repeat.

Beyond his room, the garden and the untidy jungle of overgrown slope beyond his father's greenhouse, the underground tracks that caught Noel's attention; the Central Line to Ealing Broadway or Ruislip going west, Hainault or Epping to the east. Every five minutes there was a mechanical shudder, a rattle and roar of trains, the glow of carriage windows creating a cinema reel of lights, illuminating gloom. Hours passed. The darkness gained depth, thickened. His mother knocked on his bedroom door, tentative, though it was easy to feign sleep, closing his eyes to cement purpose, wait until she went downstairs, the soft thud of her footsteps on carpet matching the pulse of his fear, which although slowed by then was faster than normal, more rapid than at any other time. He opened his eyes only when he felt safe, tracing the patterns of rattling trains on the white screen of his ceiling, absorbing their flow without meaning, lips

moving as though in conversation with himself, or his consumed friend, a whispered dialect that perhaps only they understood.

He tried to imagine himself doing more. Instead of freezing on the spot mute and powerless, reaching for Noel and pulling with all his strength. Picking up a half-shard of brick, pitching it at the creature with all his power. Maybe rushing it with a broad shoulder, forcing it to the floor, away. And yet as much as he tried to conjure images of himself in action, they were solemn fragments, still, unfocused photographic lives at best, patchy and unclear. Whenever he attempted to force them into motion they fell apart, or resisted, so he couldn't see the results. And yet he continued to try, eyes red and stinging, a snail's trail of tears leaking from the corners, running from his temples and onto the pillow as the dark grew stronger, and the cat's eye lights of the trains flickered against his poster-lined four walls, and his body gave in and slept, plunging Max into a subconscious well of nightmares and ether.

Something woke him. He kept his eyes closed. Sound had become rare, outside or inside the house. The trains had stopped, which meant midnight had passed. His parents had gone to bed. Floorboards and walls ticked, creaked. Max felt no physical sensation. His body had seemingly dissipated, leaving nothing physical behind, only spirit, the invisible void.

He heard night workmen, their noisy clink of metal, and with that, sensation returned. He'd seen them sometimes, guiding a battered flat bed carriage along tracks, mustard yellow, mottled with vitiligo rust. He laid still, eyes closed, absorbing sounds, imagining slow progress. High points of conversation caught his ears, snatches of swearing, and the beam of their mounted spotlight flooded the room, turning the dark behind his eyelids red. He opened his eyes.

The thing from the warehouse rose at the foot of his bed, reaching, arms wide, seemingly bigger this close, pure emptiness within. Max tried to scream and nothing came out but a strangled whine. He wanted to move only for his limbs to resist, the thing stretching its arms like dark honey, creeping closer until each encircled the bed, and the thing grew taller, spreading up and out until it was a dark, giant mass above and around him. Max's heart pounded so hard, his skin was so cold, and his fear so paralysing he thought he might die.

And yet inside the body, he saw something. Now he was closer and the creature stretched out like canvas, he could make out a powdered white terrain, the purple glow of something that resembled sky. The curving glow of moons, the shadow of a planet

and on what he assumed was the ground, a series of blocked shapes that looked like plateaus, or cliff tops. There were marks in the sand, a trail of some kind. Curiosity broke paralysis, although a residue of fear still caused him to shake, gasp breath, as he sat up in bed, leaning closer. Yes. Yes, it could be. He knelt before the creature as if he were about to pray, reaching, touching, feeling the ooze creep along his arm, not the sensation of contact he usually associated with touch, but something else, a warmth that transformed his whole body, stilled his heart, and he wasn't afraid he was relieved, filling with joy. He released a monotone groan, understanding *this* was the sound Noel had made upon contact, it was release not resistance, letting it wash over him until that warm feeling was everywhere, seeing nothing more of his bedroom, only the thick absence of light that embraced him.

A temporary floating sensation, the pop of air pressure, soft, hardly noticeable. Solid ground beneath shoeless feet. Warmth against his soles. The glowing white land. A purple sky, closer now, everywhere, the spray of stars and the planet, heavy and low, half dark half red, bursting with its own weight. Beyond that, far-away moons, twin ice crystals, tiny and bright. The trail he'd seen were footprints, climbing from where he stood, a dual pattern on the sand, the reversed imprint of trainer soles. They rose, disappearing behind dunes to reappear further, towards what he'd thought were flat mountaintops from the unimaginable distance of his bedroom, but were actually looming structures, white as the sand. Turrets or towers, Max couldn't tell. He turned to look behind himself. The creature's silhouette; inside the body, a distant view of posters, the dull wooden foot of his bed, the night workmen's spotlight reflecting on his white ceiling. Home.

He relocated the trail of footprints, eyes rising upwards. The structures shimmered in half-light and pierced the velvet atmosphere, blinking silent reprieve.

NOCTURNE

The vast expanse of space is said to be silent. Vacuum crushes the universal voice, renders it mute, a lambent graveyard haunted with distant ghosts of a long dead past. And yet, if ears are attuned, they can hear music. The rings of Saturn cry in falsetto chorus, a choir of millions. Neptune chirps and whistles, a gaseous blue rainforest, gentle baritones cascading underneath like the sea. Earth itself is known to have a voice. It rises and falls, a sombre whale song, calming as such music can be. Further beyond our home planet and solar system, out into the unknown, there is the steady bass of pulsars, the crackle of ice giants, the dying roar of colossal red suns. These are not sounds as we know them but electromagnetic vibrations beyond the limited range of human ears. A song of eternal night.

Seldom, almost never, there is something else. Existing far below the competitive thunder of vaster, larger bodies, this sound is minute, barely audible, only heard when the planets, sun and extended bubble of the heliosphere are escaped and nothing is left but pin-prick stars, the intemperate swirls of galaxies. One such object can be detected now, releasing its monotone wail into the void. At this unimaginable scale it has all the impact of a microbe, and goes ignored by the universe. For those with an interest in human life it holds significance far greater than its size. Other factions make similar sounds. Not the same, but close. There is no need to elaborate on their species, or nature. Being that they are difficult to locate, we remain with what we have; a song composed by human hands. There may never be another to follow.

The origin of this music is 1145 metres in length, almost a mile. Its shape is similar to the air balloons that formed a portion of its ancestry centuries ago, and as far as recent human memory is concerned, do not exist. The metal hull glistens like fish scales, reflecting beams of ancient starlight from every direction. It has light of its own, dull in comparison and few. Windows are found all over, most on either side of the hull, black full stops that make the craft look like it's been pierced by a giant pin, from a certain point of view. There is a glow of bridge windows emanating from deep inside the cockpit. It brightens and fades, brightens and fades, a computer on standby visually breathing for those it protects, the only way it can.

Black letters are stamped behind the bulwarks, widely spaced: *SIGUTOLO*. The ship has a triangular dorsal fin and pectorals close to the aft on either side; otherwise it

is unmarked, seamless. The aft is where light is strongest, its notes loudest, a blinding white river streaming forever into space. For awake and aware humans trapped within the enforced artificial atmosphere, there is a rattling roar from one end to the next, but in space it's drowned by vacuum, apparent silence. Plasma wave instruments tell another story, sensing ripples of electrons in ionized gas translated for mammalian ears. This job has been achieved without flaw for over four hundred years. No one has listened to their findings. The machines blink and whirr, and continue, as do their counterparts in every section of the *Sigutolo*. If men and women did this work, one of their number might grow frustrated, bored, even wearied by the continued failure of their primary mission. As the intelligence is artificial, they do not.

Working hard as the machines do, it's inevitable that they contribute most, practically and aesthetically. Without them, the precious cargo cannot survive. Without them, no music is made. They are the instruments by which the song is performed. The question is, played by whom? The humans who programmed them on the planet left far behind? Or the open door to autonomy that results in machines which play themselves? It's true they are designed to respond to external forces with intricate calculations of their own. To think and make choices, if they can. And yet, if they were originally programmed to do so, does this impetus come from the machines, or humans? Nature or nurture, the eternal dilemma. Even more so in space, said to expand infinitely, as perhaps their mission will.

Malfunctions occur. Irregularly, but they happen. The majority are shutdowns; a circuit comes to the end of its life cycle and shorts, causing the affected area to darken, cease to exist. More severe are the fires; externally harmless, lasting microseconds before cold and vacuum snuffs them like a match between rough fingers, internally they cause havoc. Squat, square firebots cruise empty corridors on anti-gravs. They are unhurried and precise, spraying thick yellow foam, as most on board fires are electrical. Done, they re-house themselves in unobtrusive compartments throughout the ship. A shatterproof glass door shucks closed. They power down, waiting for the next explosive flower to bloom. Much as the cargo, they sleep.

Not long before blast off, some first time crew members found the 'Bots lack of motion control and communication skills troubling. They bumped the rear ends of many, unable to correctly steer after contact, crashing into walls. More experienced astronauts explained that they had been built to exist in a world without people, a barren place of stillness and cold. The humans who experienced this genetic flaw in their

digital DNA cursed the machines, nerves getting the better, ignorant of the fact that their lives would be saved by these simple journeyman creations time and again. The firebots would right themselves, cruising onwards to their destination, wobbling from side to side like a child's play toy.

With luck, nothing will occur that jeopardises the cargo and brings the *Sigutolo's* music to an abrupt end. In four centuries the worst that happened was a frozen outcrop of ceiling fans which cooled the machinery that in turn maintained the Hive, causing the CHB²⁷⁹ to shut down before AMMA²⁸⁰ corrected the malfunction. Nobody heard the sizzling eruption of shorting cables, the crumpled explosion as the board went into overload. The resulting damage caused a spontaneous ejection of thirty pods to shoot into space like slim, silver bullets, whispered fireworks streaking against the backdrop of a midnight canvas. Some might say this was a beautiful occurrence, a joyous interlude in the monotonous, constant rhythm of engines and computers. Others might say such analogies were morbid, unemotional, inhumane.

The pods flew for decades, humming in all directions. Vibrating with the rapid burr of desperate, tiny CPU's doing all they could to correct the inevitable, or shutting down, internal moderators deciding it was all too much, lights fading to nothing, leaving the enclosed human alone in frozen sleep. Pods were struck by screaming, hurtling chunks of ice, the first encounter between mankind and a solidified liquid that existed since before the Earth was flaming, molten rock. Pods drifted seventy years before they were tugged into the orbits of larger planets, sometimes even moons, to float serenely about their host, sparkling with crystalline jewels. Centuries after the initial malfunction, other Pods found themselves beneath the shadow of crafts that would have dwarfed the *Sigutolo*, had they existed in the same space and time. These were swallowed into the vast bellies of alien hangers, their calando undone.

The majority, some eighteen pods that remain, swim through interstellar space unimpeded by objects or gravity, the occupants long dead, each vehicle on a journey of discovery as rewarding as the moment their human cargo first stepped aboard the *Sigutolo* in wide-eyed excitement and possibility. Against all odds, a handful of CPU's still process information from the unknown, even after failing in their main task, to protect the human within. Their clicks and hums contribute to the wider voice of the

²⁷⁹ 'Central Hibernation Board'.

²⁸⁰ 'Automated Mothership Array'.

greater cosmos. They are part of something greater than their origins. If their programming had been advanced enough to be aware of this, the electronic brain would remain emotionless.

The *Sigutolo* continues towards its destination, the Sirius system, AMMA unphased by what she possibly considers a blip in her momentary past. Concepts of death, pain, survival and the afterlife are purely theoretic, aspects of human nature far removed from her kind. She is aware of the myth attributed to the Dogons, and is tasked to maintain a constant scan for the beings they called Nommo, but the relevance of this information is secondary to keeping the craft and its cargo in functioning order. They exist to serve, to carry out a job. If they fail due to unwarranted error, they fail. Events are recorded into AMMA's digital log in remote detail and the computer continues her mission. There is no regret, or sympathy. It is simply another mark in the report.

Inside, along corridors as smooth and white as an eggshell interior, into darkened rooms that form empty galleys, sinks clean and glistening, cupboards of stacked plates, cups and water jugs. Abandoned cabins with neatly made single bunk beds, one corner folded over like the page of a book, a place to remember, posters of women and postcards of lush trees, foaming oceans, hometowns and stars of the screen. The metallic city of the hanger bay, a thousand heaped crates looming like miniature skyscrapers, its dormant trucks and loading vehicles. Closed and silent lifts, unused in generations, opening and closing on AMMA's command to keep dull mechanisms from seizing. The hulking bulk of security 'bots clamped in booths that house them, domed figures long obsolete in the buildings of their designers. High above, in the upper amidships where the Hive is found, lay the vessels true cargo. The crew.

They line the walls and central aisle in horizontal formation far into the distance, which cannot be seen accurately with human eyes. The entire compartment is theirs. One thousand crew members stacked like galley plates into bullet shaped sleeper pods, their metallic cone heads, sides and undersides, their orange reinforced glass so sleeping humans may see when they wake. If they wake. There are so many pods they will squeeze together when they arrive. They will jostle, laugh, make jokes about giving each other breathing space. The air, unused for so long, will taste of metal storage tanks. Many humans will be disabled, unable to walk or lift themselves from the confines of their pods. Relatives will realise pods are missing, that by some quirk of fate their lover, father, daughter, brother, mother, was ejected from the escape hatch to fates unknown.

They will not find out why until later, after the log is read. Others will not wake. Many will not wake.

There is no precedent for this journey. Starships have been assigned the same task in a different quadrant, yet they are all first to travel so far from home. They do because it has become vital. They do because they are fearful. If they did not, they would die anyway.

When they arrive, the voice of *Sigultolo* will become a chorus. It will form a building crescendo stemming from the thrum of heating, the rattle of lift shaft pulleys, the reactivation of 'bots on every deck, a collective tick of CPU's, the shift of a machine army large and small, from standby to functional all over the craft. The final whoosh of rushing wind, the air needed to breathe, before the mechanised, stuttering whine of a thousand pod doors. The hiss, beeps, chatter and wails, the calls of joy or fear. The ship will return to life like Ancient Kemetians once believed they could, yet this belief is not in vain, not with AMMA watching over all, their mechanical God. The *Sigultolo* will exhale like a newborn and burst into a song designed by long dead architects. The brilliant white light of an alien star will flood its windows and align with their music. A new composition will begin.

NOMMO

Blue hurt Ray's eyes. Stung them into submission. She gave up searching clouds to stare at her bare toes instead, their background of glittering sand dulled by her length of shadow. Fari's warmth enveloped her. He smelt of Armani mixed with the tang of Aloe Vera he used after shaving. Just above her shoulder blades, Ray felt the delicate thud of his heart.

'Silly.'

'What?' She craned back for a kiss, leaning deep into his solid weight, touched his ear and brought him close for another.

'Wear your glasses. Okay? The sun's too high.'

'Okay.'

She drew the word out like her stubborn defiance, pulling the sunglasses from between the crevice of her wet suit, one emaciated arm folded against her sports bra. She put them on, but it really wasn't the same. The gentle sea was cast dirt brown just like everything else. The fauna of blue and red parasols, sun loungers stretched beneath them like thick, white roots. The quartet of kids wielding spades hunched around a deepening hole, thin rainbows of sand arcing behind them. A couple strolling on the beach, her blonde hair trailing down to pitching bikini bottoms, him baseball capped, wide bare deltoids, Bermuda shorts, flip flops. The constant ambient white noise, shrieks and clinking bottles, tourists' chatter, a shifting tide and far away treble of Soca giving Ray a sensation of being outside herself, analysing how it felt to revel in the moment. It burnt her worse than reflected light on water. She tasted salt, focused on sand darkened with a tint of brown.

'I wanted to see it with my own eyes.'

Her pout was unconscious. She caught herself, couldn't retract it.

'I know babe. I know.'

The rumble of his voice and the vibration against her skull made Ray close her eyes. She wanted him to scold her petulance, listening to the thought. She was doing it again. She rubbed his hand with the heel of hers, gripped it tight.

'Thank you.'

'Come on. I love you.'

She lifted his hand, eyes still closed, pressing her lips against the knuckles. She could hear that rhythmic growl of the engine grow and chose to ignore it, savouring the tingle of heat against her bare flesh. The thrumming engine cut out. Another voice, fast and lively. She sighed.

‘He’s here.’

‘*Mmmmm.*’

She rubbed herself against Fari, a slow swipe left, right. He chuckled, chest rocking.

‘Behave.’

‘What for? We could go back to bed.’

She was only half joking, and almost smiled.

‘No we can’t. You want to go as much as me.’

His warmth was gone. She opened her eyes and there was Richie, sitting on the motorboat yards from the water’s edge, bobbing on a relaxed tide. Fari motioned with a free hand, loosening his grip, and her palm was empty, cold. She wanted to reach for him. Something told her not to. She watched him splash knee-high into the waves.

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Wisps of question-marked engine smoke curled from the boat, the resort fading, its volume receding with distance. Richie and Fari talked on the prow. Ray kept to herself. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t join them, although she had vague reason. She just felt different today. Inner.

They lowered their heads close like they’d known each other years, hands on the boat to steady themselves against the waves. Richie was heartbreak good-looking and knew it, a bit too podgy for a model, not that it mattered to the various women he met. His eyes were dark brown, sparkling like beach sand. When they were introduced days ago, Ray avoided their brightness. Too pretty, too mesmerising. He knew how to use them. She didn’t want him getting ideas.

She watched in the pretence of listening, actually more interested in her man. He made her proud, partly because he was a reflection of her tastes, mostly because he was unique, so comfortable in his own skin. She’d never met anyone like Fari. For her, he was complete. The height she’d always favoured, tall but not too tall; the physique, slim and muscular toned. A husky voice as though he’d dragged each word over sun-

baked gravel, sensual without even trying. The light brown locks that reached his hips when they weren't wrapped up, his shaven beard daily trimmed, a sculpted work of art. He talked with his whole body, expressing the fine points of statements made by stepping forwards, knee bent, or twisting his body to the left, or pumping his arms in a mimed, exaggerated jog. It made her smile to note the seriousness of Richie's listening, head bent to catch the London accent, dark eyes never leaving the foaming water.

She reached for the cylinder at her feet, cold metal soothing warm fingers. She touched her glasses, remembered that she was wearing them and sighed again, her exhalation drowned by the harsh engine. There were no distractions on the boat. She should really make an effort. He'd been kind, she supposed. Ray angled her legs towards the men.

'So, how it go last night?' she shouted over the roar.

'Huh?' Richie yelled, startled. Fari began to smile, winking at Ray. She leant back on the bench, tilting her head.

'How did it go? With the cute brunette we leave you with?'

'Ah, good man, it good!' Richie beamed, correcting the wheel with tiny, jerky movements. 'Ah goin meet she tonight!'

'It went good ee?'

'Fe true! Yuh set me up with that one real nice.'

'Yuh couldn't miss her! She ave her sights set pon yuh!'

Richie laughed. 'I tank yuh anyway miss!'

'She tank her too,' Fari grinned, clapping Richie's shoulder.

The engine slipped a gear, yielding a deeper tone. The boat slowed and Ray slipped a pink hair band from her finger, using it to tie back her ponytail. Fari began inspecting the equipment. She joined him on her haunches, blowing into regulators, giving the gauges a once over. They looked over their own gear, then each other's. The cloudless sky blazed.

'First one to find baby lobster gets a rum.'

'Easy. I want a shark's egg.'

'Without the shark I hope.'

'I dunno. A small one might be nice.' She looked into the sun poised just above his shoulder, squinting.

'How those glasses treatin you?'

'Fine.' She dropped her chin. 'You're just in front of the sun.'

‘It’ll be better down there.’

‘Yeah.’

They donned their gear in silence. Richie swaggered down the steps, sitting on the sea blue bench, watching.

‘This reef special yuh hear? I don’t bring no one round these part.’

‘We’re honoured,’ she said, beaming wide, and then thinking she’d said something wrong because he didn’t smile back. Richie’s stare made Ray conscious of the tight wetsuit, the weight of her breasts. She zipped the suit to her neck, bending to pull on her fins.

‘It real special fe true.’

‘We can’t wait.’ Fari hadn’t noticed Richie’s expression.

She pulled off her glasses feeling a sting of daylight, and put on the mask, keeping her head down. A wave nearly made her lose balance, but she held out an arm, righted herself.

‘Alright?’ Richie called.

‘My eyes,’ she aimed at her feet.

‘Ah. I forget.’

Ray kept her head low. They climbed onto the rim, sitting with their backs to sea. There was little breeze. She caught far away notes of music gently breaking the silence, perhaps from a nearby boat, and threw back her head, closing her eyes. Fari took her hand. They grinned at each other, kissed once, put their regulators in.

‘Nice couple, de two ah yuh,’ Richie said.

‘Thanks,’ Fari replied, off-hand. They heard it regularly and tried not to pay it much mind. ‘Ready?’

‘Ready. One, two, three...’

They pushed backwards into the water.

Her favourite part. Contact, suddenness. A crash, scattering water. Sharp brine on her lips. The commanding lap of each wave. The heat of her wetsuit meeting cool sea, bright sun pressing the back of her skull like a bully. A strained cry of hopeful birds, the promise of immersion. They paddled from the boat until she gave Fari the thumbs down. He nodded and they exhaled together, releasing air, descending. Cold enveloped her. Silence, apart from the rush of her breath and fizzing shoal of tiny bubbles. She could see into the immediate distance without pain, unclearly perhaps, but the loss of the sting in her head and temples was worth it. Adjusting her B.C.D., the

gradients of blue became darker, Fari's slim, blurred form losing solidity. When she looked up, it was to see his splayed silhouette, a cut out shadow above. Heat grew weak. Stillness wrapped her body. White sand appeared below.

She jerked in shock, her reaction loud in her ears. They should have been seeing schools of confetti bright fish, fields of coral and tubular polyps'. Larger fish nibbling slow waving fronds only to dart away from sudden invasion. The bed had the barren appearance of an underwater desert, undulating and vast. She twisted her neck up towards Fari, framed by sun. Had the reef died? It didn't look so. Ray continued descending feather slow until she was floating above ripples of bare sand. Fari joined her moments later, arms open. They hung side by side, frowning into dim light. He shrugged, his stark eyes pulled tight by the visor. Slim fish wriggled through the plumes of their rising bubbles. There was no reef. The bed was bare in all directions.

She was disappointed, not surprised. Richie had been merely adequate as a guide, taking them to a series of artificial reefs and wrecks, but no real outstanding sites. They bobbed on underwater currents, unsure. Ray pointed into open water. Fari gave thumbs up. Hand in hand they swam, heads raised to search the distant haze, intent on the blurred horizon.

A firm push of warm water, an updraft knocking them upright. The sea bed vanished, only thick darkness below. They started to rise quicker than was safe, probing sunlight finding them. Ray's hand slipped from Fari's. She barked alarm, bubbles exploding, let him go to adjust her buoyancy, trusting him to do likewise, kicking as she plunged. Guiding herself backwards to the stark demarcation of bright sand, she lowered, exhaling a relieved cloud as her fin touched the sea bed, Fari floating beside her.

They swapped jerky thumbs up and hugged, entwining their fingers tight. Panicked speech bubbles erupted, spiralling above their heads. The ridge where they stood was eighteen metres down. Before them was the deep. Who knew how far it went, but from the solid darkness Ray guessed it plunged for hundreds of metres. She shivered, swaying with the current, holding Fari tight. She wanted to feel anger at Richie, up on the boat probably with a cold beer and a smoke, but more irrationally at the stark depths before her. She even tried to conjure more upset, yet failed; she could only feel joy that they were safe, that the current had pushed instead of pulled. She didn't want to imagine it might have felt like to be hauled down into the gloom.

Fari spasmed with the muscular thrust of an eel. His eyes were wide, fearful and he exploded into action, kicking from the ridge as fear pierced her again. This time she went with him, holding his fingers, looking in the direction he was staring, unable to see. And then she made out something. A vague, distant shadow. Drawing closer, growing larger, coming towards them. So quick she couldn't react before they were there.

At first Ray thought they were huge fish. Sharks, dolphins maybe. Swimming side by side, difficult to catch in the misty light, but when they flipped their bodies, darting and swooping like kites, she realised the motion wasn't right. They weren't the correct shape. She couldn't see details as the sun blocked their true forms, turning them into twin furiously writhing spectres until they spun and dived, aimed directly for Fari. She shrieked, hearing herself, a fury of bubbles hiding them from view. When the bubbles fluttered upwards, the creatures stood upright before them.

She was breathing too fast, using excess air. Much as Ray tried to stop, she found it impossible. She tried to convince herself she'd seen incorrectly, or even that she was dive drunk, yet every sense that she possessed told her they were solid and real. These animals weren't animals but some form of humanoid. Breathing without diving gear at eighteen metres, sculling like natural law. Beyond the beings fish wriggled, oblivious to their presence. Beams of sunlight, thick and thin, rippled like curtains.

She felt Fari's light touch, not wanting to look in case the creatures did something in response, mainly to him, although she needed his reassurance and risked it. They nodded at each other. *OK? Yes.* Bubbles exploded from his regulator as fast as hers, spinning, wriggling, escaping. Surface bound. The people, for that was undoubtedly what they were Ray decided, floated a metre away, calm and motionless apart from curious expressions, the slight curve of smiles.

They were male and female. Lithe and strong, no excess. Naked, their genitals startlingly hairless. Ray lifted her gaze. The male wore unwrapped locks that waved in the currents and were much longer than Fari's. Shells and glistening strips of what could have been seaweed, although she wasn't sure, were tied around each one. His cheekbones were strong, his face serene, beautiful. The female was almost bald, her skull ridged and angular. Eyes cut glass, bright with intelligence, lips full. Ray was stung by needle-thin aggression, unable to stop admiring her, knowing Fari was too. Both had blemishes all over their bodies; thin, random scars and wider, dark swathes that might have been birthmarks. The female's ran from the tip of her left shoulder,

across the breast, curving past her belly button to end at her hip. The male's was a black streak starting at his temple, cast across his eyes like a mask, winding around his head and neck to spiral down his chest, stomach, hips and penis before ending at his ankle.

Each faction stared, as curious as the other. Bubbles emerged slower, with wider gaps. As Ray thought they should try to communicate, the female reached a hand towards her. Against her wiser judgement, she took it.

The fingers were slightly furred like a petal. It was a strange to the touch, not unpleasant. They felt, in fact, as though they were covered in similar translucent tiny hairs, but Ray didn't dare look. She felt Fari's eyes and refused to look at him either. He was always chiding Ray about her lack of trust and still this felt comfortable. Right. The female smiled without restraint, teeth glittering like coral. She gave a gentle pull, as beside her, the male reached for Fari. Ray allowed herself to be lifted, softly kicking. Over her shoulder, Fari did likewise. She rose, relaxing until she was horizontal. Led by her humanoid buddy, they scissor kicked in slow rhythm towards the edge of the ridge.

They swam into the darkness slow for enough the white line of the cliff edge to creep closer, giving her trepidation time to return. She didn't trust the deep. The beings did. She tried to relax, not to panic, but unbidden thoughts of cold, pressure and the void made her body stiff. The female curved to face Ray, though she kept swimming, albeit slower, caressing Ray's hand, trying to soothe her. While she appreciated the obvious concern, all her knowledge and training told Ray she would die if she attempted to scale the ridge. There were twenty, possibly twenty-five metres before they hit recreational diving limits. The three hundred metre record wasn't reassuring, as neither she nor Fari had ever gone deeper than forty. If the beings breathed without regulators they were undoubtedly used to distances way beyond those meagre depths. More worryingly perhaps, was the issue of air. Her gauge said she had ten minutes. Depending how far their destination was, or if the humanoids weren't as friendly as they seemed, there was every possibility they wouldn't return.

She tried to indicate this by tugging the female's fingers. When it curved to face Ray again, she tapped the gauge, showing her. The female nodded, bubbles spilling from her lips and ears. Close up she looked younger than she'd first appeared, less human. Her skin tinged green, her eyes elongated and the colourless fur more apparent. A tiny flap of skin below each cheekbone. Gills? She peered at Ray's watch while Ray stared, nodding with frantic, docile enthusiasm. Gave her thumbs up, and pointed at the

ridge with her free hand, turning the thumb upside down. Ray's head spun light. She didn't know what to make of that gesture, or even whether she'd been understood.

Fari drifted past, towed easily by his male counterpart. He placed one hand on her shoulder, shrugged lightly and allowed himself to be led into the gloom. Her anger flared. Always so trusting. Trust had got them into this situation.

The male pulsed two strong kicks and was over the ridge. Fari relaxed, looking back, gesturing. *Come. Come.* The female stared into Ray's face, eyes narrowed. Sympathy? Or her own simple, human interpretation? She seemed to acknowledge Ray's upset, stroking her brow and her arm, emitting a mewl that might have been crooning. Pulling gently. Her boyfriend was a dark smear, shrouded in darkness. Soon he would be gone. Tears slipped into Ray's mask. She had to follow. She let herself be led.

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They descended, keeping to the rocky sides. Ray felt wet against her nose, inside her mask, tried to keep her emotions in check. Every time she saw Fari below them, fins scissoring slow rhythm, her jaw trembled and fresh tears emerged. The female held her fingers in a light touch, still leading, her slim body arrowed head-first into the deep, waist continuously undulating, free arm flat against her side, trailing Ray. She copied her posture, resting her left arm against her hip. At any moment it was possible to let go, float effortlessly up to eighteen metres and beyond. It was. She gritted her regulator with her teeth, taking conscious, long breaths. Sometimes her body shuddered. She wasn't sure if it was cold or fear.

The ridge was a cragged, pale yellow cliff. Thin lime green weeds, little else. It went on forever, although she couldn't tell whether that was another human interpretation. As they reached thirty metres she noticed something else. Crevices or alcoves arched like darkened church windows. Lower down, they had protruding, slightly curved half metre lips. Small caves big enough to hold one or two people at best. Possibly two water beings.

Darkness seeped like dusk. She swallowed hard, clearing her ears. Her chest tightened. It was tougher to kick. When Ray looked down, she saw nothing. She stiffened again, and for the first time the female gripped more firmly. Was she mistaken,

or had a thumb caressed her knuckle? Was she being reassured, or was it the touch of cold water? There was no light, no way of telling. How could she know?

Ray chose to believe.

Had they changed direction? Were they horizontal, not diagonal? For a long while she knew nothing apart from her awareness that the pressure on her chest and temples had eased. The fingers on her hand were gone, it shocked her to realise this. How long had they let her go? Where was she? Ray floated in the abyss, in silence. She gasped, trying to see, head twisting, bubbles tickling her cheeks and ears, flailing, telling herself not to panic only find the female, suppressing her scream and feeling it rise anyway, before hands were on her hips, cold and strange but undoubtedly soft alien fingers. Another cold feeling on her upper chest. A palm? Possibly? Was she being righted? And then her feet touched solid hardness and she was standing, yes she was, the soles of her feet resting against something cold and firm for a moment, ground maybe, before she felt herself lifted upwards again, the furred fingers holding hers, and she made herself calm her breathing, conserve her air.

They walked, or at least feigned the motion. Floating above whatever surface she'd been made to tread. Holding onto cold fingers tighter, grateful, thinking don't let go. Please don't let go. She squinted. Something ahead. Light. It was light. Her cheeks lifted in a smile, she felt her collected tears. There was light.

Moving towards the source, treading water, a robotic walk. Something touched her arm, her shoulder and then her face, a membrane with give. Before she could register the sensation, or lack of pressure on her arm and hand, she was on the other side. She stumbled, dropping an inch or so. The enveloping force of water was gone. She could hear as though she was on dry land, nothing tangible, the soft hum of normality loud above the clanging ring of water. She raised her chin, looking right and left. Where they stood was as dark as the depths.

'Come.'

The voice was a whispered sigh, hardly apparent. She flinched, searching for the origin. The fingers returned. This time they did not pull. Ray stepped towards the glow.

It was tunnel, she realised, as they crossed the threshold where shadow met light, the defining line between each. The glow came from rusting brass lamps hung two to three metres apart, complete with wicks and a pale liquid Ray guessed was oil. The flame was ovoid and steady. There was no breeze, and she wondered if she needed

air. Her gauge was dangerously low. She had three minutes at best, which meant there was no way back if she couldn't find oxygen. The yellow walls of the tunnel were damp, glistening, and the ground slick. She stumbled on occasion, her fins making it even more difficult, but the female held her upright. There was a larger glow before them, a familiar hum of a sound that took Ray a moment to place. Then she knew what they were. Voices.

They stepped into what Ray later thought of as a cavern, though its size defied the word. It was a vast, empty space, stretching high and above her head and deep beneath her feet, complete with hundreds more tunnels in neat circular rows; to her left, she saw their own also had siblings, dark arched mouths in a single file circle lining the space. There were steps and inclines cut into rock to ascend or descend by and scaffold-like ladders, although those were few. The glitter of candle lamps was starlight, conversations loud. Everywhere she looked there were water beings, emerging from tunnels, climbing stairs, gathered in various places. She stood on a rocky yellow surface, not unlike the ridge. It could have been the same rock. A thoroughfare of some kind.

Creatures strolled hand in hand, whether male or female. They stared until her companion snapped in a brittle, quick language and they turned away, laughing quietly.

Her female's eyes were downcast, almost shy, although she couldn't help a smile of what seemed like pride. She approached Ray, stood before her. Gently, she reached out, pulling at her regulator. And the odd thing was, Ray let her. It emerged from her lips, fell to her chest. She inhaled. Salt, a faint smell of fish and underwater plants, the musk of damp rock. Distant fire.

'Welcome to Hanoa,' the female whispered, her husked voice like a song. 'This is our central hall.'

'Hanoa?'

Ray shivered, the hairs all over her body prickling, heart thumping. Laughter tickled her chest. She felt her grin and caught herself, biting it back, but even her suspicions tickled her. Was this Martini? All of it? Much as her surroundings felt real, her inner cynic said she was more than likely suffering from raptures of the deep, nitrogen narcosis. Ray the dive gas drunkard. She giggled, rocking on her heels. It made perfect sense. The female peered at Ray, half-smiling with her.

'Yes. Our home.'

'You can't be serious. You can't be saying you live here.'

‘Why?’ The female’s smile never faltered. Ray tried to find an answer, couldn’t. Her certainty grew tenuous. Somewhere else, raised exclamations in the creature’s language caught her ear and she looked up.

‘Eraynor!’

Fari, diving gear limp in one hand, the male grinning at his exuberance, walking fast towards her. More water beings gathered, talking with lowered heads, pointing, openly staring. Her brow tightened.

‘We can breathe!’ he grinned, saw her face. His smile vanished. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘You left me,’ she said, low so they couldn’t be heard. The female winced, walked a few steps away from them and placing her palm against the male’s forearm, stopping him, exposing Ray’s failure. Good hearing, it seemed. Fari’s shoulders drooped, limp as their gear.

‘I thought you wanted to come.’

She hadn’t, not at all, and yet now they were surrounded by water beings and lamplight, that former upset seemed difficult to recall. She looked at her ridged fins, the veined rock. She pulled off the mask, wiping her damp eyes, took off her fins. The ground was cool and damp against her soles, a bit clammy. It felt as though it had give. He waited for her to finish, silent. When she stood up he embraced her, his body solid, familiar. She relaxed. His breath warmed her neck. His lips were soft. He was real.

‘I’m sorry,’ he muffled. Anger flowed down her spine and from her Achilles heels, into cool rock where it belonged. Not that she’d ever let him know it.

‘Please don’t do that again.’

‘I won’t. Ever.’

‘I was really scared. I thought we were going to die.’

‘I’ll never lose you, I promise.’

‘Please don’t.’

‘I hear you babe. I hear you.’

They wrapped their arms around each other until the female returned, smiling at the rock in a vague attempt at discretion. Fari’s male joined her. The water beings made a fluttering noise with their lips that sounded like adulation, breaking into applause. Ray blushed.

‘Perfect. Just perfect.’

She buried her head in Fari's shoulder, relishing his locks against her temple, the scratch of his hair. It felt good. A reminder she was alive.

'I'm Mesi,' the female told them. Ray looked up in time to see the being place a hand on her male counterpart's shoulder. 'This is Okoro. We are your guides.'

'Buddies,' Okoro said, and they all smiled. His voice was rich and deep, bearing quiet power. There was silence before Ray understood they were waiting.

'We're Erayanor, and Fari,' she said, turning to face them, hands shaking. 'This is a fantastic honour. We thank you.'

'We hope to thank you in turn,' Mesi told her. 'We are to take you to Naunet, our mother. She will explain all.'

Of course, Ray thought, what else for a fairy-tale experience than a fairy-tale encounter. If they were there at all. As always she steeled her expression, glancing at Fari to see what he thought, then Mesi. She nodded once, briskly. They followed the water beings.

They were led, down not up as she might have imagined had she thought about it longer, to a wide, glistening incline that wound around the cavern, stopping at various landings, and even more tunnels dug into the rock walls below, before continuing to the next landing, and on again, ever downwards. 'Like ants,' Fari said, head turned. Ray didn't dare answer. Even though she was barefoot and the incline was large enough for at least six people, she tried not to look over the edge, into the depths, which seemed deep as the ridge itself, and from her quick glances, had no end. She pushed one arm beneath Fari's, held him with the other. He smiled at her, glad to be forgiven if only for their safety. Mesi and Okoro allowed them to descend as slow as they liked; if they were frustrated by the air beings' dolly-stepping caution, they didn't say. Both moved with small, considered steps, ignoring the many water beings they passed, the chanting of foreign voices, the whispered gasps of surprise. It was odd for Ray to feel like a minority when she was so entranced by their differences, even more intrigued by their similarities. She grew hot, lightheaded. For most of the journey she kept her eyes on her feet, in fear she might fall.

At last, another central walkway double the size of the one they'd left. Here the beings were seven feet and thick with nubile muscle. They were free of the thick markings that entwined the other humanoids. Instead they bore cloud shaped patches on their chests, legs and arms, lightly shaded, and were tinged blue rather than green. Their heads were bald, one thick lock protruding from the centre, close to the neck.

They held white staffs made from a large, curving bone, possibly a whale. The lamps on this level were modern, unlike those on the upper landing and tunnels; they had plastic bases, electric bulbs, thin wiring escaping to trail into the gloom of the larger caves behind the giants, ending in some kind of generator, or power point Ray surmised. She wondered where they came from.

Mesi approached the giants, speaking in her rapid spiked language again. Okoro stood beside her, head down.

‘Matriarchal,’ Fari whispered. He nudged her, eyes clear.

‘Good.’

She’d been watching him for signs and although he seemed lucid enough, who was to say she was? If this *was* a hallucination brought on by nitrogen in her blood it was the most complete she’d ever had. She rested her head against him.

The giants stood aside, staring through them. They walked into a tunnel as wide as a cave. There were images carved into the walls with intricate detail, each depiction emerging inches thick from the rock, complete with faded colours; crests of waves, modern ships poised on the edges, their bows pointing towards the smoky sky, about to fall into glistening ocean; an incredibly life-like depiction of a group of water-beings engaged in what looked like whale riding; a female creature sat on a large white throne, solemn and expressionless with haunted green eyes; and the last she saw, a starship falling from inky heavens, trailing plumes of fire and smoke, nose pointed at the framing darkness of sea.

A right turn led them into a smaller cavern space guarded by two females, nodding at Mesi and Okoro, letting them pass. Inside, a lengthy wooden table of a wood so dark it gleamed in lamplight, a number of high-backed chairs surrounding it protectively. The table was old, bare, chipped and scratched. Rock carvings lined the walls, formless, abstract, no less colourful or beautiful. Candles were everywhere, making damp rock glitter. Random seafaring items were seemingly on display. A buoy, painted with bright colours so as to resemble a work of modern art. A rust brown anchor leant in a corner, huge, infested with barnacles and other shell creatures. Wrinkled beige shirts and three quarter length trousers pinned on the wall, too huge for any normal human.

At the end of the table sat a thin being that had to be Naunet. Alone, head down, lost in thought. She was slight, hardly any muscle beneath fragile flesh. Her breasts were faint protrusions. Cornrows trailed past her arms, almost as thick as her limbs. As

they entered, her head raised. She smiled, though it was faint. Her eyes were green like the woman in the rock carving, yet Ray knew it wasn't her.

'Mother.'

Okoro bowed, Mesi with him, the two almost touching their webbed toes. Ray attempted to look at the younger beings from the corner of her eye. Although they wore the obvious traits of their kind, they didn't seem at all similar. It was odd to think of them as brother and sister even though they'd just met.

'You brought them,' the thin being spoke without emotion, staring at Ray and Fari. 'They are here.'

No malice, no warmth, or even curiosity flavoured her voice. The mother's stare was flat, detached. It embarrassed Ray, and something urged her to stir a response. Before her brain could stop her she stepped forward, sensing Mesi's alarm, her half-feint to block her, too late.

'Thank you for inviting us Mother Naunet, although with respect we'd really like to know why we're here very soon. We'll be missed soon. We wouldn't want to trouble anyone, or cause them to send a search party.'

Silence. Ray felt displeasure radiate against her back. Naunet's green eyes raked her skin until she clapped her hands once, in delight. Her face erupted into a grin.

'How cute! You are spirited, which means you are right. Please, sit.'

She indicated the chairs they were ushered into, Naunet muttering something Ray didn't understand, which caused Mesi and Okaro to leave. When she was sure they were gone, the mother leant her elbows on the table, palms against her cheeks, watching Fari. The corner of her lip lifted. He fidgeted, bit his lip, tried to hold her gaze, but couldn't. Oddly enough, Naunet's attention didn't worry Ray as much as Mesi's. Was it because this being was older, less attractive? She had been beautiful once, perhaps long ago. With surprise, Ray noticed that the palms of her hands were the same dark colour as the knuckles and backs. Deep lines cut into her cheeks and the corners of her eyes, though elsewhere she was unwrinkled.

'So, so interesting.' Naunet hadn't broken her stare, even though Fari had long been studying his dry and white feet. 'Your wife is correct. We have lots to speak of. I will try to cover your questions, so you must listen and please not interrupt. When I am done, you may leave.'

Mesi and Okaro returned with fogged wine glasses, which they placed before them. Ray lifted hers, caught the heavy smell. Rum. Fari sipped, smacking his lips.

Naunet sniffed with pride, threw it back, swirling the drink on her tongue. Swallowed, closed her eyes.

‘You like?’ Eyes open, waiting for them to nod, beaming when they did. ‘It’s our best, two centuries old, so you should.’

‘Two?’ Fari looked at his glass with greater consideration and took another tentative sip, quietly smacking his lips. Ray took the tiniest amount. Stinging molasses hit her immediately. She put the glass down, sat upright.

‘Much of what we have here is foraged. You’d be amazed at what capsizes, or even worse, what’s thrown down here, left to rot. The fish alone, caught and released dead, are too much for us all.’

‘We’re disgusting,’ Ray heard the dullness of her words, acceptance.

‘Yes, most of you are. But that’s beside the point.’

She tried to be quiet, to listen as instructed, snatching quick glances at Fari. She knew that look. He didn’t drink much, but when he did his choice was brandy or rum. He was attempting to avoid examining his glass, disseminating the burn in his stomach. His eyes were half closed, vague. Rum might make any possible narcosis worse. She couldn’t grow tipsy. She had to be alert.

‘First, the details. I can only tell the basics, the rest will come in time. You must be wondering who or what we are, so let me start with that. We are known as Nommo.’

Ray swallowed rum thickness at the back of her throat, forcing excitement down with it. She leant forwards onto damp wood.

‘That’s a myth.’

The mother threw her head back in silent laughter. Her tiny hand covered her mouth, her thin shoulders shook. She looked like a child.

‘Really? Then I must not exist. Let me say it else way. We are the descendants of Nommo, who survive in us. Please allow me to explain.

‘Millenia ago Earth was visited by creatures from above, the stars as legends tell. In the tradition of the ones who saw them first, the ancients, they were said to be ugly beings that thrived best in water. Only the last statement is true. They were drawn to our world because it is one of the few in this region to possess abundant liquid H₂O. So they landed, and populated the seas, and were sometimes seen by the ancients, especially those who took to ships, sailboats, or swam. They were Nommo, aquatic people of the stars. They were beautiful beyond mortal belief. Once viewed, a human would do anything to spend their life with them. They became known as mer-people,

but were not as they are depicted in the old books either, because why would the old books tell truth? The first writers were voyagers who saw Nommo themselves. They kept their pact to dissuade anyone from finding them. So they tricked readers, giving Nommo tails of fish, and scales, and long yellow hair. The books that followed after only retold those lies. Humans bewitched by Nommo descended into the seas, copulated, of course, and bred offspring, of course, and those offspring surfaced on occasion to meet new humans who did the same, over and over. This went on for thousands of years. A new race, the Nomadians were born. I am of that long evolved people, as is Mesi, Okoro, and all who resemble us. We are human, but not. We are Nommo, but not. We are the evolutionary leap undiscovered by your Darwin, and perhaps might even be your missing link. I do not know. It is my guess.

‘In the first few thousand years we were able to go largely undetected in our foraging of food, the carcasses of human endeavour, of humans themselves. There was a time of mass seafaring, of trade and conquest and war. During this period, a great many ancestors were discarded just like your modern fishermen discard unwanted catch now. Some leapt into the sea of their own accord, though it was commonplace to see ancestors chained in groups, weighted with rocks, plummeting to the ocean bed. We rescued them if we could; this was rare. Much of the time they would not live. After that, two things occurred. Those first ancestors, the ones who looked for us of their own free will, stopped. They began to fear the deep they once loved by our reckoning; again, we do not know. Later ancestors looked in their place, and the majority of these were cruel. They killed various things in various ways, animals, humans, the sea itself, us. If caught, none came back to tell the tale. Thus, the second event occurred. We retreated into the lower depths, kept from the estuaries and rivers, and based our survival on what we could hunt undersea, what drifted down from the surface.

‘This has created a problem. Since inception, our entire existence depends on the intermarriage between our kind and yours. We have a limited gene pool, although our world stretches for thousands of miles, with many countries and districts. The blood is thin. It has become necessary to gain the trust of human emissaries who might communicate our need to regulate the Nommadian bloodline by the promotion of further diversification. Unless we do, we run the risk of genetic disease that could wipe us out entirely. We need sustained human interaction to survive.’

‘You want us to *breed*?’ Fari voice was high, waking Ray from Naunet’s hypnosis. She flinched; fearing Mother’s anger. And yet, when she dared to look,

Naunet seemed sad, bashful. Her mouth moved. For a long time the water mother seemed unable to speak. Ray felt him sit back and without looking, imagined his wilted frame, his expression.

‘Sorry Mother.’

Naunet raised her un-lined hand.

‘No. I made my point. You are more precise in your language than I.’

She felt Fari’s hand on hers, tasting the sting of alcohol on her lips. This time Naunet stared at her. The expression was kind, narrow eyes sympathetic.

‘You squint when you look at light.’

‘Yes. I have an intolerance.’

‘You are blind partially?’

‘No, no. It’s photophobia. I can’t look into bright light.’

‘I understand.’

Naunet shuffled in her seat. She tapped her long fingers on the table, whistled between her teeth. Something in her manner was odd. At first she thought it was the Nommo’s obvious parallels with human behaviour before she realised it wasn’t that. She wasn’t going to try and convince them. Instead, she would be their guide. She knew it was difficult for Ray to live by the light of the sun. She was letting her know a better environment existed under the sea for someone with her affliction. She wanted Ray to come to that conclusion, and there was only one way she could have known.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Ray stalled.

‘Of course. You may.’

‘Are Mesi and Okaro your children?’

Naunet twitched, smiling again. It stretched the skin on her cheeks to tearing point.

‘Oh no. Oh no. You ask because mother means different in English, correct? Here it means,’ she paused, frowning at the ceiling. ‘Queen. I am Nommadia’s leader, they are not my seed. Here the word for mother is *Nay*, although many districts use *Naa*, *Yie Meme*, or others depending where their ancestors hailed.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. You’ll do well to know more whatever your decision.’

‘And this decision,’ Fari said, more steely than Ray ever heard him. ‘Means we have to stay here permanently? Away from everything we know? That’s if we decided to become your curs?’

Ray let go of his hand. When she could bear to catch Naunet's eye, she seemed puzzled. She frowned deeper, as though struggling to catch his accent like Richie.

'I don't know what you mean by *curs*, but no, it would not be permanent. You can stay for a period of two years maximum, leave if you like. The reality is you can leave any time. You will not be prisoners. Every choice will be yours, always, even the very means of insemination, if you stay. Artificial or organic. Leave within days or stay for an indefinite measure. This is a request, not an order. We do not make decrees or threats. We are not human.' She looked at the rock carvings. 'My apologies.'

'It's okay.' Ray heard his frustrated sigh, ignoring it. 'Can we have some time to think?'

'Ah, come on-' he sneered, then stopped.

'Of course.'

'I'd like to think about it. I really would. But I'd like a few days. Two perhaps?'

'You may have two, more if you like.'

'Two's fine.'

'Good. We will come to your beach at two am, in two days time. If you're there, we will take you. If not, we will be dismayed, but will understand.'

'Thank you.' Ray got to her feet, feeling solid, upright. Any possible narcosis had drifted away.

'Thank *you*,' Naunet replied, standing.

It was easy to see why she'd remained seated, her slim body curled over, shoulder blades protruding like duel fins. She was taller than the guards, towering above them, more eight and a half feet in height it seemed. Ray's eyes widened, but she kept her composure and shook the Queen's soft hand; she even bowed. Naunet watched, thin mouth twisted in faint amusement. She wouldn't look at Fari again.

*

They were led along another tunnel, steep and upward, lit by electric lamps. The first was an emergency back entrance into Hanoa, Mesi and Okoro explained along the way, one used for newcomers, or to avoid being discovered. This led directly into open ocean. It was tough going even for Fari and Ray, who trained daily, and when they reached the point where the Nommo rested they were panting hard, rivulets of sweat coursing down their backs. They suited up, stepping past the membrane threshold.

Pressure returned along with the cooling touch of seawater. Their air had been refilled, Mesi told them, but once out of the tunnel they swam quick anyway, taking the necessary pressure stops, upwards in a series of staggered moments until they broke the calm surface.

The moon was bright, the night filled with stars and nebula tendrils. The high ground of the distant island was a glittering mirror image of the sky. Richie's motorboat wasn't far, at rest on soft waves. Okaro placed his hands around his mouth and made a call like a warbling hoot. After some seconds Richie's head appeared, a torch probing the waves.

'He *knew*?' Fari breathed, sculling to face the Nommadians. For the first time Mesi avoided their eyes. Okaro placed a soft hand on Fari's shoulder - feeling his unyielding tension, he let it drop. Behind him, Ray shook her head, unseen. The truth was, she'd already known.

'Richie is a friend. Please don't be upset. He was trying to do good by us both.'

'As your emissary?' Fari spat into the waves. 'Why doesn't he do what your queen wants?'

'Male and female work best. He does not have a wife.'

'So where's your king?'

The Nommo pressed their lips together, staring at the black mirror of water. Ray swam close to Fari, touching his fingers.

'Hey. Come on.'

He relented, though she hadn't expected it. At the motorboat Richie helped them aboard with a strong arm, grunting with the strain. Neither Ray or Fari spoke a word as they wrenched away fins, regulators and masks. Richie was nervous. He paced, waiting, looking into their faces then nodding, walking away. He leant over the side of the boat to speak with the Nommo in their language. After five minutes of conversation, clicks, harsh abrasive phrases and moments that sounded like song, they bobbed up and down, waving at Fari and Ray, making that strange hollow call, falling onto their sides to disappear with a faint splash. Richie watched the sea for what felt like ages before excusing himself and sitting by the prow in silence.

They powered back to the beach, Fari and Ray on opposite sides of the boat. Too soon, the throaty engine voice changed, ceased. They packed their gear into neat piles. Rapid music came from the hotel though it was past midnight.

They were checking the equipment when Richie stepped from the prow. His hands clasped, rubbing, his eyes tired, dull.

‘Lissen. I sorry. But I mek a pact, yuh hear!’

‘You should have found yourself a partner and gone. Not lied Richie.’

Fari scowled at the beach, his back half turned. Richie stammered something, only to stop and rub his hands together slow. The rasp was loud. Ray saw hurt glisten on his face like low tide and wanted to say something, couldn’t.

‘All right Richie.’

Fari climbed into the water and splashed back to the beach. She watched him walk onto mute sand and when it felt like too much, she touched Richie’s elbow.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

He nodded, hardly looking. Ray kissed his grizzled cheek and descended the ladder, following her partner to their hotel.

*

Two days of barely speaking, holidaying apart. Fari remained his normal chilled self, his words low and clear, polite and accommodating as ever, and yet he hired a Mini Moke, leaving in the bright of early morning, not returning until it was fathoms dark. Ray spent time on the beach reading Karen Lord and listening to 90’s R&B. She’d bought the book from a local store to connect with the islands home grown myths. Now she wondered whether the pages held truths. She ate at the hotel, talked with staff, and walked into unforgiving sunlight knowing she must, despite a vague feeling of reluctance, hours spread before her. She walked quiet back streets devoid of tourists and sat with elders cooling themselves outside their houses, talking of that seasons Golden Apples, the approaching Crop Over, the fast girls frequenting Baxter’s Road. She returned to her sun lounger, swimming with tinted goggles until the beach fell into retreat, thinking she might catch sight of them, chiding herself when there was only the relaxed rhythm of the waves, the irritating mosquito buzz of jet skis. She lay on her back, floating on soft waves. On the rare occasions she thought of home it was temporary, cynical. She was an only child whose parents died in her late teens. She’d moved to London to start again, only never quite did. Instead she met Fari, adopting his life and friends, his pastimes and family. Even her love of diving was from him. If she

had anything to lose besides her lover it was the feeling of home. Every street of it, every rented flat, welcoming neighbourhood and multiple family tie was his.

In the fledgling days of dating she and Fari visited old friends from the neighbourhood he'd been raised in, and lived to this day. She'd made herself up eagerly, even though she already wore the tinted glasses, just a touch of dark lipstick and mascara. She'd never been one to use a great deal. They walked the streets hand in hand, bathed in a sunset glow. It was summer and they laughed lots, free of jackets or baggage. First things went well. There'd been spiced food and piles of roti bearing dark birthmarks, roaring laughter and bass heavy music. The woman, a school friend named Anna, was pretty and accommodating, calling Ray 'sweetie' as she hugged her like a cousin. During the course of the party, Anna, Ray, and a small group of people Ray didn't know ended up in a basement room crammed onto a single guest bed, drinking rosette, puffing from a slow orbit of damp, smouldering weed. Then, one by one, everyone left. Anna was the first to go. Ray wasn't sure if it was by design or otherwise, whether she should join or not. Slowly, each person left the room. She hadn't been invited to go by anyone. She thought someone would return, but they didn't. She sat on the bed, her eyes squeezed tight, smoking a tiny butt she'd been passed way back, inhaling smoke and thin paint fumes from the recently coated bare walls. There were no books on shelves, no carpet on the dark floorboards. Music echoed, faint, from above. Ray waited an unsure half hour before eventually going back up. When she arrived the raucous party atmosphere hit her like island heat. Anna, who saw her first, burst into laughter. She slapped the kitchen counter; she'd, 'forgotten she was there.' Others, embarrassed, studied paper plates. A crestfallen Fari didn't say one word.

It wasn't his fault he was popular, Ray thought, buoyant on waves. It wasn't his fault he had a home.

She'd grown so used to being different. It made sense, now she considered herself fully. Once it helped to blend into the background, to shadow a world she had no desire to play a role in. Life grew painful, blinding, each beauty and horror she saw equally overwhelming, equally unwanted. In the beginning she'd isolated herself, it was true, yet habitual silence stole not only her voice, but her will to say anything. Now, in the scant hours since their encounter with the Nommadians, Ray felt she'd suffered some form of inverted narcosis. She'd hauled herself from warm waters to find herself intoxicated on dry land, believing none of the solid world real.

During those remaining evenings they ate together, said nothing. Fari had changed, almost enough to convince her to stay, so she tried not to notice what was happening, a difficult task. Although he kept his back straight and his thoughts intact, physically he'd wilted. His skin was pale, his eyes red. He obviously wasn't sleeping. He spoke in a low monotone, not saying much, and when he did his lips barely moved. Even his hair, loosened and free, fell in a subdued mass, making him seem like a despondent lion, weathered and aged. He picked at his food. The waiting staff, used to his wide grin and excitable nature, turned from Ray, to Fari and back, understanding deep in their eyes. They spoke gently, calling him *brother* or *sir* if they were women, treating him with trained attention as though he were sick. The sight of him keeping upright, attempting to withhold his emotions so she'd feel better about her conclusion, broke Ray's heart.

At night, separated by narrow space, she tried to stifle her tears. He was awake, she knew. It wasn't fair. Nothing made any sense. She'd long dreamt of leaving the city behind, especially of late, yet she had no idea why she felt so strong. Nothing she could hold mentally and decipher, only that urge. To get away. Spiky excitement, nerve endings leaping static. Inexplicable love. Naunet was right about the sun, she decided, eyes heavy, focused on the ceiling, knowing there was more, unable to discern its form.

That second evening, at dinner, dessert plates smeared and empty, Ray's eyes on her Mauby, the liquid brown as tea, Fari sat across the table watching her for the first time in hours.

'So aren't you going to say something?'

'Aren't you?'

'You're the one who's staring.'

'Why shouldn't I? You're the one who's not saying anything.'

'Fari. You've virtually ignored me for two days.'

'I've let go. That's not the same thing.'

'*You've let go?*' That's all you've got to say?'

'What else do you think I should do?' He licked his lips, paused, looked over his shoulder. Faced her again. Saw no answer in her eyes. 'Don't you think I have a right? Don't you think I deserve more?'

'For what? Behaving like this? Like I've done something wrong?'

'You're talking about *my* behaviour? Mine?'

He was slouched, speaking in a rasp, eyes darting to see if they were heard. She grew scared. He was never like this. He was calm, easy going. She sighed, biting her lip.

‘Yes, I am. Look, there’s got to be a better way-’

‘So when were you going to say?’

‘Say what Fari? Jesus, what are you-’

‘Say you’re going,’ he whispered, finding her with a look so naked her cheek prickled. ‘Don’t take me for a joke, that’s why you won’t look at me isn’t it?’

She snatched her eyes from the tablecloth. Their usual waiter, a sweet young man no more than nineteen, bright white eyes, willing expression, cirrus beard and a scattered pattern of shaving bumps on his neck, stood poised, unwilling to move his stringy limbs forwards even though he’d been trained, fingers writhing like anemone. She feigned a tight smile. He stepped back.

‘I haven’t even decided-’

‘*Bullshit!*’ he spat, throwing his napkin at Ray. It hit her in the chest. She gasped, shocked more than hurt. ‘That’s bullshit Eraynor and you know it.’

He got up and left.

Ray took the napkin from her lap, placing it carefully next to her plate. She sat at the table until her heart calmed, her temples cooled. She rose, twitching a smile in the general direction of anyone who might look, aware all the attention in the dining room was hers. She wondered what stories they’d created and left them behind for their room.

Outside their door, Ray stopped. She steeled herself, even when she thought she’d heard him, but dismissed the sounds, maybe callously at that point, about to insert her key card when she saw a stern-faced, pig-tailed maid two doors away, alert. When the woman realised she’d been seen, she ducked her head and entered the room she’d been cleaning. Ray second-guessed, pressing her ear against the door. Fari’s cries were loud, unrestrained. They clawed at her heart. He was beating something, it sounded like the wall.

Ray backed away, leaving the hotel and going to the beach. Where she belonged.

She stayed past dark, looking out to sea. Couples took moonlit walks past her, saying goodnight. She nodded, plastic smiling. She wrapped her arms around her knees and flexed her bare toes, savouring the rub of granules against her skin, listening to the

water. It spoke to her. Always had. Part of her was sorry, mostly she wasn't. She was happy and it had nothing to do with Fari. For the first time, she was.

On the main road a car horn repeated, disturbing her peace. First she ignored it, but when the vehicle pulled up a few yards away she felt a twinge of fear, gazing at the oncoming traffic. If she needed to run, she should go while there was a gap. When she next looked back, a hand waved from the parked driver's side, a head leant out. Richie. She sighed, throwing a desperate look at the glowing hotel sign, the room lights and warmth of her own bed. Her island oasis. But it was no good. She walked to the passenger side door, let herself in.

He drove to the spot where they'd first met, *Cray's*, frequented by men and women who favoured night life, not that Ray had known then. The place had been loud and shadowed, *passa passa* dancehall thumping, jammed with locals and tourists, just what she needed to fill the gaps. Fari was a good travel companion, yet overly calm and measured. His conservatism, her rock back home, seemed out of place. Ray wanted to shake things up, she knew it before they left. He'd gone for their drinks and started a conversation with Richie at the bar, finding him friendly in his understated, drawling way. Before long he'd joined their table. They talked of the ocean and the art of diving, interests shared by all, dividing the conversation three ways until the bar closed. They covered everything; favourite dive spots, hottest clubs, most annoying tourists and loneliest beaches on the island. Every topic exhausted, they spoke of their lives.

The next morning, a tangerine sun rising above the underlined sky, they'd stood on the beach opposite their hotel waiting for the motorboat. It didn't belong to Richie. He'd borrowed it from his workplace, which also rented jet skis, speedboats with inflatable banana trailers and glass-bottomed boats. It also rented Richie, which was why he'd arrived at mid-morning for their final dive instead of their usual dawn start. He'd taken an elderly Italian couple for a tour around the island with a breakfast stop at the raging waters of Bathsheba, coming back to the west coast in time for Ray and Fari. He charged mate's rates, so it made perfect sense to dive according to gaps in his schedule. He seemed like the type of man who talked more than he thought, but he was honest. Fari trusted him completely.

He went to the bar, further surprising Ray, coming back with a pair of tall glasses. Tequila Sunrise. Not her favourite, but a clear indication he wasn't trying to get her drunk so she didn't mind. His eyes still sparkled, though dark thumbprints lay beneath them. They clinked glasses, Ray forgetting to drink, only remembering it was

bad luck when her glass hit the table. She put the straw to her lips. The liquid was thick, artificial. Richie frowned at the orange and red, shrugged and took another sip, smacking loudly, turning the glass from side to side. He looked up, noticed she wasn't drinking.

'Nice?'

'It's alright.' Ray watched his response. 'You don't think so?'

'Tourists love ah Tequila. Thought I'd see why.'

'Not for you?'

'Nah suh. A Cockspur man me.'

'I don't blame you, not at all.'

They listened to the Soca, Ray moving her shoulders despite herself. He didn't say anything else. Something had shifted. He was dredging up courage, his eyes and the way he watched her said it. The way he looked at her before always filled her with unease. Now it made her feel wanted. Nothing like desire, in fact, far from it. It was more reverential. Like a relic he'd dived long and deep for, searching wrecks and unseen places but surfaced without, only to find it washed up on the beach as though the ocean had presented it just for him. She felt washed clean with salt water, scrubbed by brine and rough contact until she was smooth and polished, restored. She smiled at the thought, her body turned from Richie, knees pointed at the wooden dance floor. She sipped hard, grimacing.

'Him alright?'

'Who?'

'Fari.' He frowned. Who else? 'Him say anyting about me?'

'No. But he forgives you.'

'Him say that?'

'No.' Richie's expression collapsed and she felt terrible. Ray sipped again, embarrassed, the straw barking emptiness. 'I know he doesn't blame you. It's me he's angry with. I'm to blame.'

'You not going?'

'Yes. I am.'

His head was down, stirring ice with his straw. She was glad she didn't have to see his eyes.

'Male and female work best. Try convince him.'

'Is that why you never went? Because you don't have a partner?'

He kept stirring, taking test sips, stirring again. Nothing more than melted ice and tequila fumes in his glass. Bass throbbed through her rib cage, warming her insides. She waited, willing herself not to move to the beat.

‘Try convince him, do.’

‘You can tell me. It’s OK.’

His head lifted. His eyes were piercing, bright as sunlight on sea. The hurt was all his, blazing the back of her skull. It made her lose grip. The glass squeaked from her fingers, almost toppling until she strengthened her hold.

‘I caan conceive. I would go otherwise, honestly. I would.’

She held on despite the intensity, seeing him and clutching tighter, feeling cold against her palm, welcome chill. She released the glass, grasped his hand.

‘Richie, I’m sorry.’

He nodded, not stopping, head moving like a marionette, the smile returning after a while.

‘Me know. Otherwise you wouldn’t go, right?’

Ray grinned across the table. Of course not. She hadn’t thought of it like that.

He took her back to the hotel and Ray let herself inside their room. Fari’s body was stiff under the duvet. She brushed her teeth, climbed in. Curled up, closing her eyes. She felt the cover move, heard him turn, and his hands were on her, so she turned to meet him. They pulled each other’s underwear to the floor, made love. They were crying, placing kisses all over each other. ‘They won’t take me on my own,’ she said, and he shook his head, saying they would. They needed women more than men, he was sure. Ray knew it was possible. And if it was, she had to. Afterwards they calmed, on their backs breathing slow, pushing each other away. She tried to sleep. Couldn’t. She got up, dressed, curled on the small sofa bed and closed her eyes. At one forty five she got up, pulling on her shoes. She blew a kiss towards Fari, leaving before her sobs disturbed him even more.

The stillness of the night was comforting. No one to see her guilt. She stifled her cries against the back of her hand, remembering the colour of Naunet’s and the Nommo’s dark palms matching their knuckles. She thought of her children being like that. Amphibious when their mother was not. Shit. She had no equipment. How was she going to reach Hanoa? She hadn’t thought of that. Ray kept going, down the incline of beach, kicking yellow puffs, slipping off her shoes and holding them in hooked fingers. The tide exhaled beyond her. She looked. There were voices, formless and

distant, no one in view. The constellations shimmered amongst the thin veil of Milky Way. She got closer to the water, which had eaten half of the beach, and there they were, rising like modest titans, Mesi and Okaro. They were naked as before, though she hardly noticed she was so happy. Each had diving equipment dangling from their hands, gifted by Richie she realised. She needn't have worried. Obviously they'd think of that. She was smiling, walking faster, splashing seawater.

'Thank God,' Ray said. 'Thank God.'

'*Yewande...*' Okoro greeted, arms wide. He stopped, trouble reaching his dark eyes. They looked over her shoulder, mouths open.

'What's wrong?' she said, even as she knew.

'Fari?' Okoro's tone was light, eyebrows lifted. Ray saw disappointment, felt early jealousy. They didn't care about her. They wanted him.

'He's not here?' Mesi peered behind her as though she was intentionally blocking her view. Ray's heart cried silent pain.

'You must be a couple. Male and female work best.' Okaro eyes were wide. Yes, there was sympathy. He saw her emotion. Yet he shook his head, unwilling. 'We tried before. With one. It doesn't work. We must have two. Two is all.'

The words didn't come. Her head dropped as she tried to think of a reason, or argument. She wasn't good enough, she didn't know how. He would have known. They might not have accepted his argument but Fari would have known what to say. He always did, whereas she... Ray looked up, eyes misty. 'I really-' She stopped, swallowing tears. 'You have no idea how long I've waited, or what I've sacrificed. This is everything I've wished for. I can't imagine going back. I can't. I mean it. I really want to do this. There's got to be a way.'

'Ah,' Mesi said. 'He's here.'

She didn't understand until the words seeped through. She twisted to see him, locks alive and bouncing as he jogged, heels spitting sand, hotel lights surrounding him in aura. He was there, with her. She threw her arms around him, laughed. He squeezed her waist, pulling her into his warmth.

'You're not going anywhere without me. You're not,' he repeated, burying his head in her shoulder, useless words she could hardly hear falling from her mouth.

They released each other. The Nommo were smiling, seawater lapping at their calves, a tame beast.

'The ancestors are pleased.' Okaro said. 'Now we must leave.'

They suited up, made a quick gear check and looked over each other's. Ray kissed Fari roughly, feeling solid teeth behind lips, her head pressed against his chest. The soft pounding made her smile. She squeezed harder.

‘Ready?’

‘We are,’ he told Ray.

They followed the Nommo into high tide. When it reached their chests they threw themselves forwards, going under. Five metres down, Ray took Fari's hand. They made their descent into the blue.

THE SANKOFA PRINCIPLE

Eighty seconds after the prototype WiSP²⁸¹ came online, Mimas 4 blinked out of existence. Saturn probes searched the immediate region for traces of its arrival, macro or subatomic, but found nothing. Ten years would pass before EASN²⁸² finally declared the craft and its entire crew destroyed. What happened afterwards became the greatest singular occurrence in space exploration history.

A cylindrical shape just shy of sixty metres, a curved groove spiralling its length like a giant, headless screw. The surface, black as the expanse between galaxies, betrays equally unfathomable depths. Even when inoperative the drive is forever in motion, much like the human heart when the body is at rest. The WiSP never sleeps. It's programmed to spin clockwise eternally, elegant and pure as a ballerina. The translucent liquid-cooled surface ripples with trapped artificial light. The machinery is practically noiseless until its true purpose is engaged. It's mesmerising to see first-hand, believe me. The WiSP. Mimas's lost soul.

Much of the story behind the WiSP's creation is classified, which makes a detailed examination of its origins supremely difficult. Research undertaken leads to silences, unreturned calls, blanked or destroyed documents, university posts long vacated. Voids, if you will. It's obviously all very apt. There's a beginning, but no end. A call, but no response.

This is what we laypeople know. Since 19__ it had long been postulated that the black hole, for all its magisterial deadliness, could in fact be a source of discovery. Everyone knows the basics. A black hole is a region of spacetime exhibiting such strong gravitational effects, that nothing – not even light – can escape. General relativity predicts that a sufficient compact mass can deform spacetime to form such a hole. The boundary between this region and the area in which normal gravitational rules apply is called the event horizon. The area in which the hole exists, a singularity.

²⁸¹ Wormhole Induced Subatomic Particle

²⁸² Euro-Asian Space Network

Kerr's theory of the Einstein-Rosen bridge predicts that if an object were to fall into a black hole, it might be sucked down a tunnel and through a 'white hole' or 'ring of fire' on the other side, to emerge into a parallel multiverse. Essentially, what this theory suggests is the gravitational forces that exist within the hole could break down matter and remake it anew. That being the case, interstellar space travel utilising the power of such forces began to be seen as a conceivable pursuit.

The observation of gravitational waves emanating from a collision of two black holes by the LIGO²⁸³ collaboration in February 2016 proved that radiation could escape a singularity. A second sighting later that year confirmed it.

Ever since those sightings, a challenge was set. How might we harness the powers of spacetime distortion in order to serve our urge for exploration? Was it even possible? When the adequate technological advances were made nearly eighty years later, we sent probes to Earth's nearest event horizon, Sagittarius A. Not to find out what was on the other side; that was of little interest. But to examine the gravitational processes that cause the breakdown of spacetime as we know it, and the ability to survive them without perceptible change.

Following those probes, scientists were assembled from around the world. They were locked behind high walls that housed enough buildings for a small town, forming closed cities made up of families, lovers and close friends. Still, even they couldn't go beyond the inner sanctum of research buildings where the scientists, engineers and academics worked from sunlight to sundown every day. Each was monitored for every hour of their existence via cameras, voice-recording instruments as delicate as butterfly wings, or implanted DNA chips. Any mention of a wrong word, or strange mannerisms and soldiers turned up at the door flanked by needle thin sec'bots, armaments glistening in mandarin sunset. Sayonara. Or so they said.

It lasted generations. Research, exploration, colonisation, further research, published papers. We made gains, had major setbacks, won back ground. Countries formed coalitions that came and went. The USA had been a player, once. The New Civil War put paid to that, along with much of the Deep South. Only a crater the size of western England to show for their efforts. The UK took part too, but before long they also retreated into the distance like a stationary figure. By the time Leyton, Anis, Bai

²⁸³ Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory

and Emilia were born and came of age they were the best team for the job, and their regions of origin were joint principle players. No warped sense of guilt or history there.

Two hundred and four years from that first discovery, a plume of radiation escaping a half moon sphere. Shorter than the length of time between Newton's 1687 opus *Principia Mathematica* and the grasped ability to free ourselves from gravity's grip, some might have argued.

And they'd be right.

Because in August 2220, after countless trials and deterrents, the scientists finally reached the conclusions they had craved.

A four-person crew. Two women, two men. One couple married, the other common-law. No children. No living parents. EASN made that mandatory, it wasn't a secret. They'd tried separating people from their immediate families for extended time periods. It drove their astronauts mad.

Two women, two men. All *fuego* according to my wife. Neither of us was sure if EASN made that mandatory too, but it certainly helped sustain public interest. Global media being what it was, we knew everything. Where they were born, how they grew up. Where they were educated, how they met. Where they trained and how they did it, what takeaways they liked, what came back up, all being unwell, what time they went to bed. What movies they watched, their favourite songs. Hell, we even knew if they were having regular sex (they weren't – at least not in their own relationships). We knew it all from A to Z and the Network encouraged us. We'd long forgone ideas of privacy. It was the price that came with the future someone had said decades before. We were chipped and monitored and we liked it that way. They were young, we were bored for the most part and it was habitual. There they were, every day. And so were we.

The Mimas 4 crewmembers, in no order of importance, were:

Leyton Shaw: 27, married to Anis Creighton-Shaw; Jamaican-British, 6' 3", Professor of Physics at Trinity College, Cambridge. Keen football player and 21st century film enthusiast. Position: Research Scientist. Rank: Lieutenant.

Anis Creighton-Shaw: 33, married to Leyton Shaw; Ghanaian-British, 5' 11", Professor of Astro-Physics at Trinity College, Cambridge. Former pilot for the Ghanaian

Air Force, Wing Chung 2nd Dan. Position: Research Scientist/Pilot. Rank: Captain.

Bai Liu: 30, common-law husband of Emilia Jonas; Chinese-French, 6' 1", Professor of Engineering, ENS, Paris. Tennis enthusiast with a love of the dramatic and written arts. Position: Chief Engineer. Rank: Lieutenant.

Emilia Jonas: common-law wife of Bai Lau; Euro-German, 6' 0", Professor of Computer Science, ENS Paris. Mountaineering expert, a keen passion for geology. Position: Navigator. Rank: Executive Officer.

These were the brave men and women who carried our thirst for knowledge on their shoulders. They peered into the frontier, looked back at us and whispered. Yes. It's safe.

It's safe.

The Mimas 4 crew were our extensions, in as much as they shared our wonder. Of course they were also our betters but it never showed until that final day, far from Earth, the starcraft a lone vestige of solidity beneath their feet. Leyton was very much the joker. He couldn't help smiling, even when he spoke, and had a favourite string of cowrie shells he took everywhere that were always running through his fingers. Unsurprisingly, he also had very little stress. Anis was way more serious than her husband, only because she cared so much. Often she would look into the tiny camera at the world, frowning at some distant problem, and our hearts would ache with the need to solve it on her behalf. Bai was hyperactive, talked fast and moved even quicker. He and Leyton formed a bond far beyond their years together, while women Earthwide wrote Internet messages proclaiming love for the soft-spoken Frenchman. Emilia was the hippy of the group, delighting in soft electronic music and wading through waist-high grass. She and Anis were often inseparable.

They worked tirelessly over a four-year period until launch day at the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, Kerala, August 25th 2220. We followed them on that final night until they woke at four to prepare for an eleven am launch. It was warm, the sky clear and winds calm, as predicted. Leyton and Anis slept curled together. Bai lay on his back dressed in a faded blue NASA t-shirt and boxers, snoring. The sheets beside him lay flat and empty.

There was a flurry of camera angles and shots as, in a manned studio far away, some maddened production manager screamed at his director to find Emilia Jonas so

the world would know what she was doing the night before world history fragmented from it's known trajectory forever. We screamed at the vid-gel right along with him.

Three long hours. By then, it was two am. An eagle-eyed line manager saw tracks in the sand, tracing them to a beach, the breadcrumbs of discarded hemp trousers, a thin jacket. Satellite imagery zoomed in. The tree. Emilia prone, nightdress billowing in the sea breeze, high on a thick branch, blonde hair trailing like a willow, the curled Gye Nyame tattoo on her right shoulder exposed, dead to the world.

Everyone calmed after security guards were sent to retrieve her body and she jumped awake, alarmed by the lights and the shouting and the dogs tugging their handlers to a stuttered trot. Weapons drawn, pointed in all directions, in search of the unthinkable. She'd been sleeping. Just sleeping. Someone, the line manager perhaps, focused a camera on the empty Kingfisher bottle at the root of the tree. It remained there a full minute. Emilia only wanted one last night by the ocean, to hear the wash and wane of the tide, the call of night birds and chorus of insects. Just like anybody else. Just like us.

Rumours were she'd been taken to task for her negligence, only to take EASN's head off in return. We never knew the truth. The cameras went black for an hour, the longest they'd been on standby in any of our lifetimes, we recalled during that time of dark screens and perplexed faces. What the hell? When they came back clear lines had been drawn. The Mimas 4 crew didn't pay us any more acknowledgements. They stopped looking into cameras and blowing kisses. There were no telltale winks, or thumbs up when they passed us. No more would we catch their whispered asides, or self-conscious, muttered commentary. We were on our own.

And so they kept their focus on the jobs they'd been assigned, becoming the machines EASN programmed for so long. Just when the Network wanted them to display their humanity, they chose to withhold it. Maybe they weren't angry, just nervous. No one will ever know. There's nothing to say they even opened up to each other, let alone us watching from afar. That came later. When it was too late.

By all accounts it was a perfect launch. The equipment performed much like the crew, exactly as it should. The ground crew checked their readouts with typical Indian efficiency and kept banter to a minimum, unsmiling and taut. Lift off occurred practically to the second. Hoses disengaged, scaffolding swung, smoke and fire breathed from engines, and it was up, slowly at first, then it caught hold of the sky, clawing spaceward with more excitement, more vigour. First the size of a cruise ship,

then a building, then a house, then a car, then a bike. Then a scooter, a pencil, a ring. A star.

Mimas 4 became the embodiment of the new world after decades of dark centuries. They promised all was right for the species, asking no more than our adoration, our love. Its disappearance almost sent the world back into the abyss from which we'd barely managed to crawl. We rocked side to side, poised on the edge of exhilaration, one firm push from plummeting into our past.

An open book laid flat. The wings of pages catching sunlight from a window, my dark curtains thrown aside. A beam of light, thick and slanted. Within that half metre or so of space, a multiverse of shifting, spinning motes turning at separate velocities. Some fast, free-falling, dizzying; some slow and feather-like, eternal. Me lying on my back watching flecks of human skin, mostly mine, marvelling not just at what I saw but what I'd read. So vivid, even now. Closing my eyes, imagining. Atoms breaking down from a construction of solid forms to the invisible. Firing like a rocket across unimaginable spaces. Arriving, reassembling.

I was eight years old and that three-page article caught my imagination like a flame. Ten to twenty years time, they wrote. A mere ten to twenty years. We could travel to other planets in the time it took to cross the city. With the right technology we might even travel to far-reaching solar systems and galaxies. Ever since I'd first learnt about the real constraints of space travel, muscle and bone loss, one-way trips to other worlds, the dangers of breaking Earth's atmosphere at the peak of what were essentially huge bombs, I'd been filled with melancholy. Why couldn't we travel to the stars? All the stories I'd read made it seem easy. In those fictional worlds all problems were solved. Part of the reason the memory of that day was so arresting is because I'd finally read a factual article about space travel that was optimistic about exploring the cosmos. There would be a man or woman on Mars, providing the WiSP drive worked. Maybe even a colony. I read other articles in *Space and Time* that summer, but nothing stuck like the knowledge that the WiSP might exist. What I didn't know, but half-guessed in my excitement, was that an article on the drive meant it was close to reality. They were preparing the world, step by step. And it would happen in my lifetime.

At first, like any child-dreamer, I wanted to go. I scoured the zone for details of how to be an astronaut. Spent hours hunched over my keyboard when I should have

been in bed, or doing homework. But it was no good. I was a small child, thin, with bad eyesight and worse asthma. Too much late night reading, my dad said. The air wasn't good, too polluted after the wars. My mum said I could always get corrective surgery as an adult, and my teenage years might take care of the rest. I lived in hope until I reached sixteen. Nothing had changed. I still needed glasses, I was still bamboo thin, and I still used a respirator on the hottest nights. I wasn't sporty, much preferring to solve coding than be on the football field. So that was it. I still had an interest in all things interstellar, but I wasn't going to the stars. Maybe I could find another way.

I studied a bit of astro-physics in college and didn't do badly, but followed my heart and went into media and journalism at uni. I met and fell in love with Juanita during my second year. She was reading geology to keep her parents happy while she lied about her love of 20th century performance poetry. She was small and dark and Cuban, everything I loved. She would come to the flat I shared with two friends to cook us spicy tofu with vegetable rice. I kept my hand in by joining the _____ society while I studied, and also kept a close eye on what was going on with the WiSP. When I graduated it had fallen behind schedule, so society gossip went. During lunch times the drive was the stuff of bad jokes and cryptic discussions. No one really believed it would happen.

I left university and did the right things. Got a flat, a car, moved in with Juanita. That meant I had to get a job too, which I managed with relative ease, landing a junior position in a big online paper, *The Sentinal*. I covered world affairs and politics mostly, but every now and then they'd let me at the space stuff. The Saturn probe launches were good work, and the renewed signals from Voyager One. That boosted the hopes of any interested parties, as the pictures it sent were fantastic. *There* was the initial proof that the universe was in fact a multiverse, made up of myriad galaxies and star systems forming a glistening latticework that had only been speculation until then. By the time I married Juanita the word universe, along with super symmetry, was actually extinct.

We remained without children. Everyone wondered why, especially our parents, and it grew worse after I was promoted to a senior position, but after eight years it became a sore subject they'd rather leave alone. We didn't even know why ourselves, honestly: a generational thing perhaps? Overpopulation was such a big topic, and so much had gone wrong over land, oil and power that later generations seemed to think, what for? To go back where we had once been? It wasn't as if there weren't enough people on the planet, or we hadn't caused enough damage. Environmental

issues were way more important than they'd been for the previous generation, even more so than discrimination. Anyway, what that meant for us, in part, was we hosted quite a lot of parties. Probably two or three a month. We always had an open house; I'd invite people from work and Juanita would bring people from the arts, editors, agents, directors for stage and screen, big time producers and poets from all over the world. She was quite famous by then, travelling, winning prizes and taking residencies in tropical places. The people we invited would often bring friends. Many nights, we had no idea who was there.

It was the winter of 2202 I think, when I got talking with this small, grey haired guy who seemed a bit out on his own. He had the sallow, orange face of a tan that didn't suit, and was munching on a Quorn mince samosa, looking at the loud-talking people as if they were diseased. I went over with the mind to introduce him to someone else, but he seemed so sad and unable to cope with the art of conversation I soon realised that dumping him on anyone would make me a neglectful host. So I got him a cup of wine and steered him out towards the garden, where it was quieter and I could actually hear what he might say.

We found a small bench that thankfully wasn't damp. The night was cold, thick with moisture, our breath stark white. His face was narrow and thin. He kept squinting at unseen objects though he didn't wear glasses or at least didn't have a pair with him. He wore a thin, mustard jacket and a light brown shirt that hung from thin, drooped shoulders. He ate like a mouse, the samosa held between tiny hands, turned clockwise, nibbled, turned again. His legs were so thin the material of his hemp trousers hung from his thighs, leaving flattened material where flesh should have been.

We lived quite close to the airbase. Every so often, a broad-winged plane roared by, lights blinking silent code. After the second, I raised my cup.

'To our moral defenders,' I said. I must admit, I was pretty drunk. The man said nothing, nibbling. His cup sat by his ankle. I tried to keep my eyes away, but it was tough. Mine was almost empty and I wanted more.

'Don't like them much, do you?'

His eyes were grey, I noticed. Grey and watery as the English Channel.

'Not particularly.'

He lowered his head, going back to the samosa. I tried not to sigh aloud. This was getting ridiculous. I sipped the last of my wine and mentally gave up. I was thinking about going back inside when he said:

‘They’re not defending anything.’

I waited to see why. Not that I had anything to say.

‘They’re a security measure. They don’t get involved with our external affairs, what little there are.’

‘Really?’ Shifting sideways on, I put my cup down. Held out a hand. ‘Richard Pearson.’

‘Harry Devonald.’

His fingers were like clay, damp and sticky. I let go.

‘That’s very specific. How’d you know so much?’

‘Up until tonight, I worked there,’ Devonald crooned, a soft lament. I felt my heart stop, my instincts kick. A story perhaps?

‘What happened?’

Grey eyes blinked.

‘They accused me of something I didn’t do. Something I wouldn’t.’

I looked around the garden and half open back door, cracked with light and voices, made sure we were alone. My mouth hung open, breath swirling. He looked at me, weighing me up no doubt. I tried to quiet my breathing.

‘It’s this,’ he said, taking something from his pocket. Square and thin, tiny even in his hands. A circuit board. Soldering glinted in dim light.

‘I thought you said-’

‘I didn’t,’ he interrupted, voice firm for the first time. ‘I didn’t. They came to my desk. It was in my hand and I just...’

Didn’t let go. Dangerous choice.

‘Can you tell me what it does? Should you?’

He sighed a plume into the night, looked up. I didn’t think he would say anything until he did.

‘There’s a project. Decades old, possibly centuries. To build a starcraft-’

‘A starcraft? D’you mean the *WiSP*?’

Devonald whipped around to face me.

‘What?’

He was up, stumbling, one hand on the bench. He kicked over his drink, shook wine from his foot, cried out. I forced myself not to rise.

‘Harry, hold on.’

He hissed something wordless, like exasperation, and ran back into the house, slipping on cold paving slabs. I thought he'd fall, but he held onto the doorframe and was gone.

I relaxed against the bench, swearing to myself. Idiot. So close.

Devonald had met a school friend we also knew at a pub not far away, just hours after being escorted from the airbase. The friend, a huge beast of a man named Alex, spied Devonald nursing a full pint of ale, alone. He'd approached his friend in hope of catching up, only for Devonald to tell him the whole story; how it had been for long years without family or friends after his wife died from spinal cancer, diagnosed not long after they'd been contracted to the base. The trips he'd made to the perimeter wall, the money he slipped to guards who let in local women to take care of lonely men's needs. The quiet, barren rooms formerly used for interviews, one wooden table, three chairs, where it all took place. The banter between himself and the women, nothing remotely classified as far as he could remember, but the chip... Perhaps the chip said different. The shock of guards pulling him from his desk, rough hands at his back, pushing him down aisles. Big as he was, Alex cried when he told us how scared Devonald had looked at that empty table, and how he'd thought that being at a party, amongst people, might have cheered him up. Made him feel less alone. I listened, unaware yet that our chance meeting had reawakened an interest in the WiSP that would last me the rest of my life. Juanita sucked air between her teeth, holding my hand tight. None of us were chipped back then. It wasn't obligatory at that point, thank God. That too, would come later.

Nothing lives on Saturn. As beautiful as it looks, it will always be a dead, cold world. It's atmosphere, composed mainly of ammonia, is gaseous. Its interior silicon rock and liquid hydrogen. This made the sixth planet a perfect target for Mimas 4's maiden journey. Far enough to pose a challenge, close enough to reach with probes, silent enough to register even the faintest subatomic charges and, under the best possible conditions, perhaps rejuvenate a planetary graveyard.

The first probes, launched centuries before, were mere flybys, intersolar tourism so to speak, taking low and eventually high-res photos of the planet and moons for extensive mapping. Later missions were exercises in fact-finding, an exploration of methane lakes, a search for life. When none were discovered Saturn was written off as

a lonely outpost, great for chemists and physicists, bad for biologists. The probes that followed had been nothing more than monitoring stations, early warning systems and the humble beginnings of docking stations for proposed interstellar exploration.

There are four monitoring stations in current operation around the region of space occupied by the ringed planet. One orbits a fixed rotation above the North Hexagon. Another hovers the empty space between two moons, Titan and Rhea. Yet another lies opposite its sibling, an array of sensors and antenna attuned to the furthest reaches of the solar system. The last floats beneath the southern pole, isolated beneath the vast Cronian planet.

The stations secondary mission is to chart chemical and geographic changes on Saturn's surface, moons and rings, while monitoring the surrounding region for rogue meteors, or perhaps even more dangerous, a hostile alien species. The first, and most important, is to monitor the performance of the WiSP. Put basically, the drive is designed to construct an inner wormhole. Radiating outwards, it breaks Mimas 4, and then itself down into subatomic particles, which are fired to a pre-programmed location, where it reassembles both, hopefully without harm. The probes are designed to serve as navigational beacons, tracking every micro-instant of the craft's arrival just beyond Mimas, one of Saturn's 62 moons, from a jump point 0.3 A.U.'s²⁸⁴ from Earth's lone satellite. Four unmanned tests took place, which means there were three previous incarnations of Mimas before the final manned flight. Of the first two, the drive and its computers burnt out hours before each jump. The third sent the craft shy of the asteroid belt, while the last was right on target. Eager to dispel even the slightest chance of failure, EASN prepared their most successful starcraft for the first manned test flight to Saturn.

The crafts design is exceptional in its beauty. Ninety metres from tip to exhaust, twenty-one meters high, with a wingspan of seventy-five meters. Varied TPS²⁸⁵ materials cover the entire craft, one of few sustainable relics from NASA's 20th century shuttle programme, a protection from the heat of re-entry and the cold of space. The bow contains a small flight deck and observational area. The amidships house the airlock, research hot desks and the living quarters of two small cabins, a kitchenette, twin W.C's, and shower facilities. The lifeboat bay, comprising four boats, is in the aft. Behind those is the WiSP, followed by the main rocket engines. TPS materials colour

²⁸⁴ Astronomical Unit

²⁸⁵ Thermal Protection System

the craft honey brown. From the exterior it looks like a poised bird of prey. Mimas is by far the royalty of EASN's starcraft line, treated as such by the governing body and general public alike. No other craft has received as much attention. No space program is funded as richly.

The very real dangers of that maiden flight were rarely addressed, in public at least. Everyone was aware of the risks, the Mimas 4 crewmembers most. Each journey since the dawn of space exploration has come with its own dangers, and yet none were so formidable as this. The possibilities of certain death far outweighed the probability of finding the craft and crew alive. Everyone on earth expected, although no said as much, that the men and women we looked up to wouldn't survive. No one was prepared for what actually happened, that they would disappear from our known multiverse.

In the ten years after Mimas 4 ceased to exist, the program withered in its wake, dying from apathy. The only research done, so they said, was into what had happened to the craft and why. Test simulations were run on a prototype WiSP, though none provided answers. From what little I learned, nine out of ten simulations had Mimas arriving at Saturn as programmed. A tenth showed the anomaly, its disappearance. The computers couldn't tell what caused it, where Mimas went, or for how long. It just happened.

A year after Leyton, Anis, Bai and Emilia were officially declared deceased, EASN's suspended the WiSP program indefinitely. The line was that they never stopped looking, and it might have been the case if they'd known exactly how to. The very idea of trying was impossible, borderline insane, besides being no way to sell a product to countries and governments of the world. Space was too vast, the possibilities endless. Instead they concentrated efforts on sending astronauts to the planets in conventional ways. Rockets, five-mile long generation crafts, cryogenic hibernation. None were entirely successful, or reaped anywhere near the data and commercial rewards they'd hoped, but at least they weren't global adverts against the very possibility of a space program.

Fifteen years after the starcraft blinked out of reality, it had faded from our memories like a dream.

Then, on October 17th 2235, Mimas 4 returned.

The decks and cabins are cold as death. A sustained hum of machinery surrounds us. Our feet echo on metal and the yellow lights above and below are dim, presumably on standby, making distant objects hard to define. Mimas 4 is remarkably like any other starcraft I've seen, in person or on screen. It's so ordinary I keep finding myself wondering why I'm here.

We're escorted by a knot of burly EASN staff, not exactly guards although they perform the same purpose. Possibly picked for height and a distinct lack of emotion, they talk very little and barely make any physical movements or facial expressions. They shepherd us along the confined expanse of corridors, heads low, instructing us to do the same. Every so often there's another generic EASN staffer in a hemp jump suit, standing by a locked door, a rifle in two hands, pointed at the floor. They ignore us, much as we stare. Sometimes I look at the others shuffling beside me, craning their necks in wonder, fingers twitching with an unconscious ache for the camera or touchpad. I feel their pain, although I'm grateful to be here at all, and try not to be too upset by the loss. They can sense it, discomfort leaks from our skin along with our sweat and makes them wary, I can tell. I keep whatever I see on repeat inside my head, a litany for Juanita I tell myself, so I might play it back into my notebook when I'm back in the shuttle, hurtling to Earth. It's my only consolation, and I'm willing to take it. They're going through the motions because they have to. They want us to do our jobs, but they've been warned the fact we've been chosen means that we're the best. And so they should be. After all their attempts to clean up, we might see more than they wish.

The woman beside me is small, elf-like, the collar of her dark coat pulled tight around her ears. Her red hair is cut short and square, her skin is pale. Freckles pattern her nose. She far too serious for talk. She walks fast, trying to keep us with our EASN chaperones. Her name's Roberta Miles.

The man is taller than me, a lot thinner. His face is gaunt from the vegan diet we've endured since the '82 ban. It doesn't do him good. He needs a protein infusion and perhaps a bit more fat. His eyes are too close together, red and drooping. His teeth are large, chattering spontaneously in the cold. From the colour of his blue lips you'd think he's about to faint, if you didn't know they'd been like that on Earth. He's one of those types who are always aware of people. On the ground he gave me a thin smile, now he's trying to keep up with Roberta and I've been forgotten. He said his name's Wade Kennedy.

The only historic event that comes close to what I'm doing is the discovery of the abandoned *Marie Celeste*. Juanita hoped reading about the ship might have prepared me for what I'd see. I felt as much when I researched its history on the zone, but I think she was wrong. Accounts from the crew of the *Del Gratia*, who found the ship midway between the Azores and the coast of Portugal in eighteen seventy two, spoke of missing sails and damaged rigging, ropes hanging limp over the side. Personal items scattered, papers missing. Unlike the *Celeste*, Mimas 4 is launch pad ready, oiled and new. There's an unpleasant odour of fresh hemp leather and clean bed linen. Surfaces gleam, and from what we've been told there's nothing to suggest anything has been taken or is missing, besides the four humans previously on board.

Speaking of the crew, there is one similarity with that derelict nineteenth century vessel. All four lifeboats have been jettisoned. Every single one.

Another hulking EASN staffer, body turned sideways into an open door, pale light flooding his left side. The corridor opens into a wider area. Beyond us, panoramic windows frame the starlit expanse of space and a spilt glitter of stars. A crescent bank of excitedly blinking monitors and computer arrays lie beneath the window. In a left hand corner, I see an enticing peek of the cratered moon. Almost dead centre, the glistening jewel of Earth. We journalists stand in shock, feeling the enormity of distance perhaps for the first time. We huddle, each individual need placed into perspective by the magnitude of what we see.

There are plush high-backed seats made from imitation animal hide, right down to the intensified smell. Roberta gags, a hand over her mouth and nose. Wade's nose wrinkles but he says nothing. Most seats are located under the windows, at computer monitors in four locations around the crescent bank of metal. There are hemp-cloth passenger seats, set aside and behind the empty space of the main deck, four alcoves of three. On the left, nearest the windows, there's a temporary vid-gel set up, the thin black branches of external speakers. We're being guided in this direction and we arrange ourselves, sit. I'm unlucky enough to have the middle position, hunched between the others; still, I really don't mind that either. I've always dreamed of this moment. After years spent imagining what it might be like, I'm on board Mimas 4. I'm not nearly vain enough to believe EASN followed my work on this story, but they were surely informed about my decades of interest, as here I am, an old man with a youngster's curiosity.

Staffers bustle around the vid-gel while we wait, lifting eyebrows at each other. I can smell the toothpaste on Wade's breath, the damp rain smell of Roberta's coat. The

gel is equipped with built in wireless connectors, but they have yet to come online I assume. We've been told nothing about what we are about to see or why we're here, only that we've been invited aboard to report the crafts condition to the world, and that its crewmembers remain missing.

Staffers mutter and move from the vid-gel to the bank of window monitors. I drift, thinking of the drive. Our first stop on Mimas, the huge screw-like mechanism was ghostly, inspiring. Like being in the presence of some alien, Godly creature was to the ancients, had those mythical spirits existed. I felt myself sway as I watched the drive turn. My forehead prickled and my eyes filled with exploding colours. It was like we were communicating, the WiSP and I. The weight of compressed air almost forced me to my knees.

A blonde-haired staffer finally stands, turning towards us. We stiffen. His shoulders are double the size of mine, hair stringy and flat. His cheeks slack, green eyes emotionless.

'Thank you all for agreeing to attend this viewing. We're indebted to you for making the time in your busy working schedules. What you're about to see is the last known recordings on Mimas 4 following the Saturn jump of 26th August 2220, 12pm IST. After your viewing, you may ask any questions. Thank you.'

He steps aside, along with the other staffers. While we mutter and stem our shock, the screen floods with bright colours. The recording begins.

It's the same flight deck. The window of space is smeared white with stars. All four crew members sit at various work stations around the bank of twinkling monitors, Anis dead centre, Bai to her left, Emilia to her right. Leyton's strapped into an alcove of passenger seats and from what I can tell, they're same seats that we're sitting on some fifteen years later. Their backs are facing us, apart from Leyton, who is sideways on. Anis barks information at Bai, and the Frenchman responds with dry certainty. Emilia speaks once in awhile, but mostly scans her monitor. They are feeding each other data that concerns bringing the WiSP online. There's a throbbing hum that grows louder, a rattle and thump of machinery, a whine of metal that strains the black branch speakers. Leyton's eyes close. He looks at peace. His cowries fall into his lap.

The hum, and rattle and thumps are louder, and the camera begins to shake. Anis shouts data over the noise. Emilia's fallen silent. Bai chants numbers and

percentages in a constant stream until the picture shudders like an earthquake. The roar is so loud we can't hear what they're saying. There's a strange noise, an elongated whine like grinding metal and the vid-gel is dark. Finally we notice white numbers at the bottom right corner of the screen. A mission clock, running ever since the recording started, which counts a further fifteen minutes after the blackout before Wade says, 'Are we meant to just sit here watching a dark screen?' One staffer, a young girl newly graduated from tech school perhaps, replies, 'We'd really love you to see the whole thing.' She's blushing, her eyes lowered. Roberta tuts and chews a thumbnail, lips twisted. 'They want to reassure us nothing's been doctored,' I say, the wise elder, and they get it, sitting back. After twenty minutes of dark screen and silence, more young staffers bring orange juices, plates of hot food. Bamboo and sweet potato red curry with sticky rice. 'Tastes organic,' I say. 'Better be,' Wade snorts. The speakers rumble like an aeroplane.

Forty-five minutes pass before the picture's back. It occurs with no fanfare, or even a crash of returning matter. They're just there. Everything looks normal, apart from one thing - they're in the wrong part of space. Earth glows before them. The moon is further in its orbit, but they know she's there. The crew look at each other. They seem confused. They haven't moved. We're not sure if they're aware of how much time has elapsed, or whether they think none has. They check their own bodies, look over monitor readouts. Anis and Bai take some time to report green, while Emilia says nothing. Leyton's eyes remain closed. He's sleeping, the string of white shells light in his fist.

When Anis asks Emilia for a status report, her navigator doesn't answer. She asks again. Still no answer. Emilia's looking frantically from the monitor, to the expanse of stars and back. Anis peers over her shoulder, coming closer. She too falls silent.

'What's wrong?'

Bai's standing. His smile is tiny, receding.

'Wake up Leyton,' Anis says. 'Wake him up and tell him to come and see this.'

He does, and thirty seconds later, her husband joins her. There are howls, cursed disbelief. They double-check their instruments and yet there's no need, all the evidence they can wish for is outside the bridge windows. The obvious is apparent, although, until Emilia voices it, easy for us slow-witted journalists to overlook.

There are no satellites, dead or functional. No EASN dry dock station, or GRIDS²⁸⁶. No space debris, the eighteen million or so hunks of floating rubbish that have orbited our planet for centuries. There's nothing because they don't exist. They haven't been invented.

This takes the crew about an hour to ascertain, and a further hour to confirm. During that time they go from worried, to practically delusional with fear, and truth be told, we do right along with them. It's the most compelling viewing we've ever had privilege to watch, that's for sure. We're leant forwards in our seats, occasionally sipping juices, or whispering for more ice. The crew check everything; all known architecture, the global physical topology (of which they found none), land and oceanic geography, the immediate constellations surrounding Earth. Bai flops back in his seat. His face is red from effort, and he's sweating. The others won't look at him. They know. We all know.

'So where are we?' says Emilia.

He spins in his seat, staring at the emptiness of Earth space and avoids her question.

Much later, after Anis gives the crew an hours grace to deal with the reality of their position, we journalists learn that Mimas 4 has not been fired across space as intended, but time. Their position at the moment of recording was four hundred and twenty six years in Earth's past. Seventeen ninety-four.

What this means dawns on each crewmember separately. There are cameras throughout the craft, forever on standby, made functional by motion and heat sensors, even in the cabins. As above, so below. It's easy to tell Anis and Leyton bear the full impact of their discovery. They don't rest, and pace their cabin, often at opposite ends. Anis spends ten minutes on her bunk staring at their cabin wall. Further camera angles reveal what holds her interest - a strange painting of a black crescent-bird with thin legs, arching its back to reach a beak towards its feathered tail. They type conversation to each other using handhelds, in an effort not to be recorded perhaps. This is useless, they must know. The devices can be tracked through their chips, but it means the cameras don't hear what they say, and so neither do we. Once, they hold each other and cry mute tears.

²⁸⁶ Global Responsive Intersolar Defense System

Bai and Emilia sit on their beds. He looks at the ceiling lights. She bows her head, scratching at the blue tattoo on her shoulder. She throws an object across the room, it's difficult to see what. Bai tracks where it lands, his hands in his pockets. He sighs.

When they meet on the flight deck their body language has changed. Leyton doesn't smile. His posture is stiff, combative. His eyes dart, and he's standing, while the other sit at their positions and don't look at each other. His string of cowries are gone.

'You know what this means? If we're right?'

'We're right.' Anis mutters, 'All the instruments say so.'

'Well?' he says to the others.

'Look, we get it,' Bai says, 'Totally. So what do you propose?'

Leyton doesn't speak, just looks jittery.

'Say it,' Anis orders. An accusation.

'I'm thinking I've got to go down there. I've got to help.'

Emilia swivels away. Bai kicks the metallic bank with a heel. Anis glares at her husband. Her eyes are wet and red.

'That's crazy,' Bai says, and Anis barks sarcastic laughter. 'We're only lifeboat equipped. If something happens on Mimas, you can't come back.'

'I know that.'

'We don't even know how we got here, or what the drive will do.'

'Yes, we talked about this,' Leyton says to his wife. 'But what choice do we have? They're enslaved. Suffering. I could stop that. We could stop that. We've got superior weaponry, we've got this ship.'

'What are you suggesting, we turn the ships weapons on those people?'

Emilia sits forwards, an arm outstretched towards the windows.

'If we have to, or if I don't come back. It's an option.'

'Not for me. Bai?'

He shrugs, runs hand through his hair. '*Merde.*'

'Yeah, exactly. But I can't sit here chewing vegetables and waiting for some miracle to occur that might get us home. My ancestors are down there, dying-'

'They're ours too,' Emilia says, her eyes bright. 'We're still one people, don't let your brain go back as well as your body.'

‘All the more reason,’ Leyton snaps. There’s something in his eyes that’s quite smug, it must be said. He folds his arms and stares Emilia down. ‘How can we allow this to happen when we know better? Would we let this continue during our time?’

‘Of course not.’ And yet Bai’s fidgeting gives away his unease with the question. He swivels half rotations. ‘Anis? What do you think?’

She bites her lip, smoothing the material of her jump suit, a palm surfing her thigh.

‘It’s suicide. We should wait. EASN will send a rescue party-’

‘*How?*’ Leyton explodes, catching himself. Anis waits, tense.

‘They will find us,’ she says, this time to the walls. ‘Besides, there’s no guarantee our weapons are advanced enough to go against several navies. Let alone what changing history will do to our present.’

No one has an answer to that. They retreat into their own thoughts, isolated. The mission clock moves forward one second at a time. We barely breathe.

‘I have to take that risk. You know how many people are dying, right now. If I can stop one slave ship-’

‘You might not be born.’ She lifts her head, taking measure of him. ‘One life saved might mean yours doesn’t occur. Have you thought about that?’

Leyton’s jaw is rigid. His hands clenched, empty.

‘So be it.’

He walks out.

We watch the recording for another two hours. In this time, there’s frantic typing on handhelds, the beeps of received messages. It’s certain Leyton prepares a lifeboat regardless of his crew’s misgivings. We see him wandering from the bay to various supply stations, stocking carry’bots with essentials. What’s less easy to see is what the others make of this, or why they’ve agreed to silence. Video logs are commonplace on short and long haul missions, and yet they act as though they have no intentions of carrying out the necessary protocols. Why? It’s unheard of. Everything else they do is with the strictest adherence to regulations. They know they’re facing the risk of being court martialed when they arrive home. Nevertheless, to a person, they locate themselves in various places. The galley, their cabin, the WiSP drive bay, where they type, far from each other, refusing to log. It’s the damndest thing to watch. None of us can work out why.

Two and a half hours pass until they meet in the lifeboat bay. Emilia, Bai and Leyton suit up, helmets in hand. Anis does not.

They're stiff and formal. They hug, one by one. Anis and Leyton kiss without warmth; it's easy to tell how she feels. Though they don't talk much besides procedural discussions, from the look of things the plan is for Anis to stay aboard, maintain communications, and be ready for a possible pick up if assistance is needed. They attach their helmets, enter the lifeboat. Anis swipes her eyes as if she's angry with her own body. She steps out from the bay and lets the countdown procedure run its course.

A frozen screen. A staffer steps forwards. The thickset blonde, blocking the vid-gel with his body.

'My apologies. The next recording of significance comes after seven days. For some unknown reason at this stage the WiSP drive begins to reboot. It was initially suspected this had been done by Anis, or even possibly Emilia, but there are no records on to support this. The countdown to the drive's re-engagement has a ten-hour window. It would seem from the recordings Anis did everything in her power to stop this from happening, but could not. She finally uses the lifeboat to escape and join her crew. We still don't know how the remaining two boats were jettisoned, as once Mimas returned to our present time, all communications had ended.'

We sit, squeezed together on comfortable seats, staring at the empty deck where all this took place, unable to imagine. The staffer clasps his hands.

'Perhaps you'd like to view the final thirty minutes?'

I really wouldn't and ignore the question. Wade and Roberta say yes. The giant nods to the left. He steps away from the screen.

It's awful, a nightmare. The camera shudders. Thunder makes the speakers hum, our ears ring. For some reason the lights blink on and off in time with the rhythm of a warning klaxon that never occurred during the first jump. Anis is clearly distraught, moving from monitor to terminal trying to work against the craft's motherboard array and failing, her face a sea of tears, cursing, screaming at the ceiling, pounding keys and when that doesn't work, even the screens, but the WiSP will not to be denied. After ten minutes she decides. She runs to the lifeboat bay, suiting up. From what we can tell she had foresight enough to stock the boat for an emergency, either during the ten-hour window or before. She internally primes the locks and starts disengagement. Forty two seconds later her lifeboat blasts from the starcraft's side and Anis Creighton-Shaw, the last surviving member of Mimas 4, is never seen again.

How do I feel about WiSP? As you might imagine, I've been asked that question many times, particularly after the article, the bestseller, and all that followed. It's been quite a whirlwind, not a time of deep contemplation by any means. I've met heads of state and royalty, and dignitaries by the hundreds. I'm sure you'll forgive me. Yet, and perhaps only Juanita has come to know this, there are nights when I relieve my time aboard the starcraft. The hollow thud of feet against the deck and muffled weight of reconstituted air in my nostrils. The chill, dankness of cold seeping through my outerwear, a monotone chorus of machinery. I sometimes shudder, or if I'm asleep I wake gasping, the hum of the drive fading. Or else I'll be in the car and we hit a bump, and I'm reminded of that final thunder before the WiSP brought Mimas 4 back against its crews' will. I find myself wondering, what would I have done? Would I have been as brave?

Rocketing to earth, orange flames licking our shuttle and lighting our windows like sunset, I was struck by jigsaw piece thoughts that made an odd type of picture. I turned them mentally this way and that, peering close, making conclusions even as I gripped my seatbelt and prayed for guidance.

Leyton's cowrie string. Anis mesmerised by her cabin painting; many months later I learned it was actually the Ghanaian symbol Sankofa, which in the Twi language means 'Go back and get it'. Emilia's Gye Nyame tattoo, also Ghanaian, meaning 'except God' or 'only God', high on one pale shoulder. Bai's puzzle piece took more time, yet I eventually found it back on Earth, after many months of research. His family is originally from the Shanxi province, Northern China, an area known not only as a seat of Asian civilisation, but for thirty eight pyramid burial structures, many of which contained the mummified remains of humans. Its speculated those ancient people were African migrants who left their continent over 100, 000 years ago. Though conflicting research exists, the centuries old discovery of shared African and Asian DNA corresponds with a theory I formed on my journey through the fiery atmosphere of my home world.

I've already written of my belief that the WiSP might be actually be guided by something more cosmological than physiological. More spiritual than scientific. That deep within our cells, on some subatomic level, the very blueprints which give rise to instructions that make us who we are, our coded DNA, could be subconsciously

activated in order to command the WiSP to visit the places we intend within the core of our beings, overriding the pre-programmed wishes of board members and committees. The scientific proof underpinning epigenetic inheritance is, like ancient beliefs, centuries old. ‘Cherry blossom’ mice and holocaust suffers alike were both found to have a knowledge of trauma that was passed through their DNA. Could it be that a form of this genetic reshuffling brought about the occurrence on Mimas 4?

When I dared to suggest as much in an amended edition to my bestselling book, *In the Footsteps of Mimas*, EASN, a handful of undocumented WiSP boffins, and my fellow journalists Roberta Miles and Wade Kennedy all admonished me in print. I have never bothered to restate my arguments, or refute theirs. I’m an old man. These days at least, I’ve no heart for a fight.

And yet some nights I find myself in my garden sitting on the very bench where a harried scientist once kicked over a glass of red wine, and ran. My ears sing with the hum of mechanisms. With my eyes open, I dream. I gaze at the moon and imagine where such a power could lead us. Is it right to admit I can’t quite see that far? Would it be allowed? Juanita sometimes comes out with a chilled glass of white, asking me to find the intermittent glow of the Mimas 5 orbital build. I search the heavens with a finger although, as much as I try, one glistening star looks much the same as another.

LINK

Aaron felt it for the first time, a pulsing at the back of his skull, firm pressure between his eyes. A throbbing ache behind his ear, low ringing. He'd made a call the night before, half believing nothing would come of it, only to wake up with sensation invading his head. An answer. There were others. He called again during breakfast, his mum fussing around as usual, and felt three stronger replies from three directions. The back of his skull, between his eyes, behind his right ear. He relaxed into the warm, steady pulsation, chewing until there was nothing left but lonely oat kernels, mum going on about him doing the housework while she was at the hospital, Aaron ignoring every word.

He should have known what to expect before he got there, might have if he'd thought about it harder, but he'd been more concerned with his own nerves alongside the jarring pain of the too-bright, too-loud veneer of normality, a glistening, shifting bubble on all sides. The cheap glow of budget clothing stores. The counterfeit stall selling defrosted E number cakes they claimed were organic and homemade. The row of fruit and veg stalls, the lightweight shack of the CD hut, its walls thin black material, rippling as the masses walked by. People, too many, too fast or slow, darting through gaps in the crowd or halting right in front of him until he swore and sped past the lurching granny sideways on, guilty for subscribing to group consensus. He hated the old centre during the day.

It was almost a relief to swerve into the pissy-oasis of the car park entrance, a small enclave leading to oil-dark steps. He climbed past two olders, hunch necked, puffing a ripe blunt, smoke and urine filling his head making Aaron cough, them stare. He trotted upwards until he met swing doors, pushing into the expanse of the first floor. Breathed deep, tasting exhaust fumes, smog. Sighed. He wandered across concrete, taking the steep incline of driveways instead, up and up until he reached the sixth floor.

They stood by thin railings looking at the streets. The downturned meringue peaks of the bus station awning, the glass underground entrance and panoramic Westfield steps, the six times removed hum of the crowd. There were three of course. Two girls, one boy. It took a moment before he clocked that he knew them. Not well, not to talk with, just from around. Live anywhere your whole life and you're bound to see the same faces, Groundhog Day for real, only less dramatic, more tedious. Crossing

the street to the corner store, standing in line for Maccy D's, sitting rows from each other on the bus. Only one he'd ever wished he could talk to, or thought about longer than the time it took to walk by. But he knew all three as surely as the silent boasts of tags on street signs, or missing digital letters on the countdown. They all belonged to the bits, were all home.

The tall kid wore a school blazer, was lanky and broad with a face like a pinched raisin, the lopsided mini-Afro of a younger. The 'fro looked like a disabled black dorsal fin, making his screw face infantile; a man's aggression beneath a toddler's hairstyle. Aaron stifled a laugh. The girl was short and BRIT award thin, a few years older than himself, blonde hair tied back, falling to her waist, brown leather jacket with bare zips, sensible shirt, trousers and flat shoes, the dark rings of a part-time weed smoker around her eyes. He'd seen her going in and out of the dentist's opposite his GP's surgery for long enough to assume she worked there. She was hard-faced and gaunt, smoking a withering fag, looking more like thirty than the early twenties she really was.

The other girl was a manifestation of dreams. Tall as Aaron, tight storm cloud jeans betraying a curve of hips, snug roll-necked grey top tucked in at the beltless waist, as gorgeous above as below. Aaron saved the best for last, after he'd taken in the rest—deep brown skin, unblinking eyes, lips maintaining a perpetual pout. The slim denim jacket, blue LDN fitted and rare matching Nikes that told the world she was not only down, but prided herself on originality. Normally the type he sneered at inside his head knowing he felt unworthy, except she was here and that made her different from the others, a woman of substance rather than image.

All three lived within a square mile and passed each other randomly at least once a week, possibly more.

He approached, only really seeing her, heart leaping at the odds of her being one of them. The others lost clarity and focus, becoming peripheral. He was smiling, and she noticed, recognition curving her lips upwards, Aaron drawn by the strength of a connection he'd not known existed until now. He almost reached out a hand towards her, managed to stop himself (too soon, way too soon) pushed his glasses up on his nose and widened his grin.

'Oh *hell* nah, not him too, are you lot bloody serious?'

Old Girl, expression wrinkled, shook her head with even more violence than her words, hair whipping her back and shoulders. Tall Kid spat laughter. Dream Girl's

smile didn't exactly grow, but didn't disappear. *Damn it. Skinny bitch.*

He ignored her, stopping before them, eyeing the younger two without saying anything. Actually he didn't know what to say but an older cousin had told him silence often made him look confident if he pulled it off right.

'Are you shittin' me? You lot seriously trying to say that's him?'

They stared him out, daring him to say the real reason he came up to the sixth floor acting like he knew anything. Dream Girl seemed uncertain. Tall Kid's swaying body, hard eyes and clenched fists made him look as though he wanted an excuse to spark him, and would probably enjoy it too.

'They're not saying it's me. I am, because it is. I called you. Last night I said I could feel you, all of you, and I meant it. Now I want to know why.'

He let that sink in, concentrating on the white trail scribbled across blue sky behind their heads, fading into wisps then nothing but molecules, hearing low gasps, mutters, feeling the atmosphere change. Dream Girl and Tall Kid relaxed. Old Girl felt it too, sucking hard enough on the fag to hollow her cheeks and make her eyes bulge, enhancing her death stare, which roamed in all directions until she threw the blazing stub at his feet, where it exploded into a bouncing trail of sparks. Aaron refused to move or acknowledge what she'd done. He stared into her eyes, waited.

'Have fun on yuh play date then. I'm off.'

And she was, brushing his shoulder lightning fast, muttering curses all the way to the fire doors, which clapped sudden thunder after her. He scratched his head, turned to the others.

'What's her problem?'

'She thought you'd be older.'

'How'd she know I'm not?'

Both smirked. He felt himself grow hot and tried to shake it off. Be cool. He had to be cool.

'She thought we'd all be.'

That was better. Tall Kid stepped forward, eclipsing Dream Girl with his broad body. Aaron could see her aura glowing on all sides. He imagined he could even feel her heat. Then the fist was high, up in his face.

'Limo,' Tall Kid said, less hard, practically smiling. Except he couldn't quite do it, could only manage a sneer.

'Huh?'

‘My name. Limo.’

‘Oh cool. I’m Aaron.’

They connected knuckles, Aaron wincing at the force of contact as always, teeth clenched trying to hide it. He never understood why they couldn’t just shake hands, or at least slap fingers.

‘Christie.’

Damn bruv. She was even hotter close up. Teardrop hazel eyes, long, dark lashes, brown skin under lit with red infusion, cute dimples on both cheeks. She smelt of something sweet, consistent. He smiled as much as he dared without foiling his cool, and didn’t know how to greet her so he settled for doing nothing, disappointing himself. It speared him deep inside to think she might have felt the same way. He fought against his insecurities again.

‘She’s not even that much older than us.’

All nodded, conceding defeat. Old Girl’s view had won, right or wrong. She’d left them feeling like the kids she claimed they were.

‘So what now?’ Christie said.

Aaron didn’t even have to think about it. He’d been doing enough last night, nursing that very topic like a sore muscle. His first troublesome thought was their obvious opening question.

‘Show us.’ He pointed at the railings. ‘Down there.’

They walked that way. Bodies bent, they looked at the streets below. The nearest were the hoards waiting by the lights for traffic to slow to a stop so they could cross. Christie went first, seeing as she’d asked. He tried not to snatch a peek at the blue jeans stretched taut against her bum and thighs, to keep his eyes on the roads, but it was tough.

‘Which one?’ Limo propped on his elbows, searching the crowds.

‘Him,’ she said. ‘Bald guy, blue suit.’

‘Don’t point,’ Aaron heard himself, bit his lip. Granddad.

‘Sorry,’ she said, lowering her hand, shooting him a look he felt, not saw. Not malice, regret. It made him like her just that little bit more. She understood he wasn’t being an arse, only cautious.

‘Just so they don’t see us,’ he told her, still feeling bad.

‘Sure.’

‘He’s crossing,’ Limo warned, and then her attention was back. Her threaded

eyebrows lowered.

‘No he’s not,’ she muttered.

The green man was flashing, beside him yellow digital numbers fell from 10. Blue Suit stopped in the middle of the crossing, head pivoting. A small kid bumped him, looked up in shock and went around, dragged by the hand and momentum of a woman who was probably his mother. The surge of pedestrians flowed around Blue Suit like a river around a stone, slowing to a trickle until he was alone. The green man disappeared. The count reached zero. Blue Suit remained in the center of the crossing. Limo sniggered, covering his lips. The red man returned and a BMW revved, leaping forward. Blue Suit looked perplexed but stayed where he was. Horns beeped. Drivers got out of cars. It was all getting too much when Blue Suit did a strange robotic turn and went back to the Mall side of the road where he’d started. A driver made to follow—red in the face, trackie bottoms and XXL t-shirt. Christie grunted surprise, leant forwards. The driver walked back to his car just as purposefully as he’d left, got inside and roared away. Blue Suit blinked into the faces of his fellow commuters as if they could tell him what had gone wrong. Christie backed away from the railings.

‘Classic,’ Limo said, slapping brick with an open palm.

‘Well done,’ Aaron said, meaning it. She gave a teeny smile, something less focused in her eyes. This time he tried to avoid them.

‘My turn,’ the Kid said, a little too eager for Aaron’s liking. He watched him, not the road.

Hunched like a cat, the Kid’s chin rested on the cradle made by his folded arms slowly licking his lips. When he saw what he wanted he rose, stiffening. ‘This’ll be bare joke,’ he grunted through half-closed lips, nearly too low to hear. Aaron saw pure concentration, more focus than Christie.

‘Don’t do that.’ He heard her say. ‘*Don’t.*’ Then she turned away from the street below. Aaron alerted, slipped into the space next to Limo.

A gathering of boys about the kid’s age. Blazers and thick school jumpers, pointing. Work commuters passing, heads turned as if to view an accident, still walking towards the crossing, shaking their heads. A woman, megaphone in one hand, Bible in the other, placard at her feet—JESUS SAVES—calling God’s vengeance, pointing at the homeless man with his arms and legs wrapped around a lamppost, hips moving, slow grinding, rubbing against hard, grubby metal. Peals of laughter reached them. Aaron gritted his teeth, said nothing. When the British Transport Police approached the

homeless guy Limo let him go, bringing him back to face heavy hands on his shoulder, protesting as he was led towards a waiting patrol car.

Limo slapped brick even harder, creating solitary, one-handed applause. Aaron looked back at Christie. She frowned at her box fresh trainers, arms wrapped around her own body.

‘That’s not funny,’ he told him.

‘Is to me.’ Limo towered over Aaron, concrete hard again. ‘Each to his own innit?’

Aaron tried a look that said he was beneath some school kid’s Grime-based posturing, turning back to the railings.

‘Fair enough,’ he said beneath his breath, tuning out Limo’s rigid face and grubby blazer.

The air filled with perfume. Christie had come closer, but he focused on the streets and another homeless dude. This one was sitting by a wall just beyond the totem pole of train station signage, a series of varied transport symbols stacked on top of each other. Behind the dude, who stared into space oblivious to the hoards tramping by him, stood a quartet of bright ATMs.

‘Him,’ Aaron said, tilting his head. He heard their complaints, felt them jostle him on both sides, trying to see past the disgusting Day of the Triffid sculptures the council put up during the Olympics—to hide the old centre from the world many had said. Probably to hide the people too. Now the shimmering yellow and green petals worked in reverse, blocking Westfield and all routes out of Stratford. He silenced the thought. Concentrating, he found his target.

She was a young businesswoman who might have been going home after a long day in the office. Brunette, legs tanned, suit well fitted. Tall and broad-shouldered, possibly Eastern European, but that was just a guess. He made her type in more cash than she needed without a receipt. When the wad spat from the machine he made her take it quick, walk three steps and drop it into homeless dude’s lap, gasps of shock exploding like cloudburst from spectators, then had her sprint towards the bus station as a 25 rounded the corner, pulling up at stop B. Knowing what was good for him, homeless dude shot to his feet as if the ground was electrified. He gathered his dog, loose change and blanket, shuffling off before any spectators fully reacted to his luck, disappearing into the backdrop of commuters. Unable to find him, Aaron let the woman go, turning his back on her wheeling on the spot, heels tap-dancing against the

pavement.

‘*Sick!*’ Christie came closer still, deliciously embracing him, even kissing his cheek. Aaron blushed, shivering at the warmth. ‘Proper sick! I love it!’

‘No problem,’ he said, trying to stare out Limo, who wouldn’t allow it. The Kid was vex no doubt. His bottom lip stuck out, his eyes tracked tarmac. His arms hung, huge fists useless by his side.

‘So what, you lot on a link ting now?’

She let Aaron go. Immediately, he missed her. They stood apart, looking as guilty as people who had actually done something wrong.

‘No.’

‘It ain even about that, Aaron done a good thing. Why you goin on weird?’

‘Yeah, carry on.’ Limo honestly looked hurt, as though Aaron’s actions were an affront to his moral centre, an act that had to be purged in some way, perhaps by the undertaking of more evil. ‘I see how this’ll run. You lot are on some couples vibe, an three ain magic. Catch you later, yeah?’

And he was gone too, arms swinging, leg limping, fire exit doors flapping until they closed. The silence afterwards was awkward, dense, Aaron unsure what he should do next. He didn’t want to say it but the urge was sweet, compelling enough to take the risk.

‘He’s not wrong though is he?’

He turned to face her, seeing that bright, beautiful smile. She sized him up as though he’d pleased her.

‘No, he’s not,’ she said and took Aaron by the arm, leading him towards the swing doors.

They went back to his, seeing as Aaron’s mum was mopping floors and sterilizing hospital surfaces until late that night. He tried not to think about it, the hard work she was forced into just so he could have a painless education. Her only reward a future that saw him comfortable, a good job, wife, house, two good, beautiful kids. Aaron dismissed those vague, misty images with more purpose. Too far, too distant. When he asked Christie where she lived, she pursed her lips, head twisting to follow the exhale of a passing bus, breathed; ‘Not far.’ Aaron smiled. He got it. Enough said by her hand in his, the slip of her arm between his inner bicep and ribs. What more did he want?

They didn’t even run to catch the 25, just let it idle to allow people on, an old

Asian lady struggling on the upward step like a toddler. When they finally got aboard and tapped Oysters, the driver snapped alert, looking from Christie to Aaron as though they were mythical, like he already knew their secret. Aaron bowed his head, hid his grin. He walked her to the raised back seats, radiator hot, thrumming. Christie put her head on his shoulder. It was all he could do not to look each and every passenger in the eye, to ensure that they took note. This was him. With her.

His room was dark and tidy, which always made Aaron wonder why his mother caused such a fuss about housework. He made sure the place looked like his personal space, even cooking on occasion. He was responsible. He owed Mum that much. Christie slow spun, taking in posters, his pinboard, the jammed bookcase and full shelves, his tiny writing desk beneath the window, his DVDs. He sat on the bed, swallowing nerves. When she'd made the whole 360, bending to inspect book covers and cut out newspaper clippings closer, her neat eyebrows were arched in surprise.

'You march?' she said, pointing at the largest poster. A red star superimposed with black letters: LBR—and underneath that, an explanation: London Black Revolutionaries.

'Yeah, course. Not every one,' he said, blushing, chin touching collarbone. 'But sometimes. You?'

'Yeah, course.'

He tried not to show his pleasure. 'I didn't think you'd be political.'

She shrugged, walking over. When she sat, springs gasped and the mattress indented, taking Aaron with it. He moved towards the wall.

'Sorry,' he said. 'It's a bit old.'

'Don't be.'

She took his hand. She was staring in a way that made him feel weird, intense and unblinking, but she was so beautiful he felt himself doing the same.

'Which way you votin?'

'Huh?'

She peered at the poster and he shivered.

'Remain.'

'Course.'

'Course.'

She kept peering downwards, running her hand across his. He wanted to close his eyes, her touch made him sleepy, but was worried that might say more about him

than he wanted her to know. He tried to sit up straight. She was the first girl he'd had up to his room in four years.

'This is nuts.' Half-laughing, coughing to hide it. 'We only just met.'

She slid soft fingers along his bare arm, focused on what she was doing. Her lips shone, parted. She leant forwards until she'd pushed beneath his T-shirt, reached his shoulder.

'Uh huh,' she said. Perfume clouded him. Their lips met.

Nothing but sensation. No sound, no feeling, not even thought. Everything happening on the inside, like closing his eyes in a dark room only to see the delicate, butterfly swirl of phosphenes. Something composed of nothing. Like falling, a feather not rock. Like nothing to push against and nothing to hold, a lightness he'd always felt inhabited his body were it not for bones and liquid and muscle and soft tissue. Were it not for himself. He might have smiled, tried to, but as the feeling glowed and expanded there wasn't the familiar stretch, the noise of separation, a touch of hard teeth against soft lips. Everything had flattened, merged, spread like clay. There was no way to tell what belonged to him, or anything else. There wasn't anything else. Only touch.

He was on the bed, head fuzzy, ceiling spinning. A quick check; he was fully clothed. Another; Christie was gone. He sat up, palms flat against the mattress, checking every dark space and crevice as if the ability to shrink had been added to her powers. He squinted his desk from a formless blob back to its original shape. Found his glasses splayed on the bed, put them on. An open book face down by the empty chair. He checked the spine: *Other Britain, Other British*. No other sign of Christie.

There was nothing left but to put out a call. He did so tentative, a little scared of what he might learn. When the pressure returned between his eyes, a soft migraine, he closed his eyes, lying back. Allowed a smile to touch his lips. He curled on the bed, sensation pulsing at his forehead, and that's how his mother found him when she opened the bedroom door just before 2am. Sleeping fully clothed, a pillow clutched to infinity beneath his nose, still smiling.

He put out a call at breakfast before his morning classes and heard nothing. That didn't faze him. He wolfed down Bran Flakes and left the house before his mum woke for her customary coffee and low energy grumbles. He sailed through his lectures with an enthusiasm that made staff and students alike look twice, wondering if he was the same person they'd seen for almost a full term. In the afternoon, when he powered from the building with secondary school energy, his classes done for the day, a trail of smiles,

head nods, and raised fists bubbled and frothed in his wake.

She leant against the lamppost directly outside his college. Short denim skirt, tights and Tims, slim tank top and bright furred gilet. Hair pulled back and gleaming, frost chip eyes and high cheekbones. Nearly every guy who passed her turned to get a better look, and those who didn't stiffened, walking self-consciously, swag depleted. Christie seemed lost in another world until she saw Aaron and stood to attention, overjoyed at something as mundane as the mere sight of him. Damn. She even had a lollypop, ruby gleaming, which she gave a final lick, crunched into shards and pulled from her lips, dropping the white stick behind her, grinning.

'Hi,' she sang, embracing him. A collective gasp rode the air. Her perfume, a tang of something sensual, something her. Crunching, the scent of flavoured sugar on her breath. The dark of his closed eyes felt good, like the night before. He wallowed.

'How you doing?' he said, letting go to look at her. *Damn.*

'Good.' She was jittery, blushing. 'Thought we could do something. At the polling station? You voted?'

'I haven't.'

She sent a quick image across real time vision. He watched, sightless, nodding. Pretty good idea.

'We can hang out after if you like.' Head ducked towards dark pavement, giving him the zig-zag line of her center parting. 'Maybe go Nando's? My treat?'

Aaron was in love.

The polling station wasn't far, an old church he'd ignored most of his life, signs outside stating its new, temporary persona. A tall woman with thin lips, cornrows and a council ID hanging from a poppy red ribbon smoked and shivered against the damp wall, eyes distant. Christie waited not far from the woman while Aaron made his mark and slid his vote into the ballot box, joining her after. They leant against open church doors, playing sullen eyed teenagers, nothing more on their minds than the time on their hands. They didn't have to do much. Just a simple look in the direction of anyone who passed, a gentle probe inside their heads, a nosey around. If the person was voting their way they left them be. If they were going against their interests, or unsure, a suggestion was planted. Often, when that happened, the person would jerk, frown as if they'd forgotten something and continue on, a little more determination in their step than before.

The Tall Woman went inside after 15 minutes. When she came back an hour

and a half later to see Christie and Aaron still there and a number of people halt, jerk, and look puzzled, she turned towards the teenagers, uncertain suspicion in her eyes.

Aaron didn't see her until Christie nudged him twice. He watched the Tall Woman for a long while, pushed out a command. She jerked too, harder than the others, all scrutiny blinded. Opening her cigarette box she fumbled one to her lips and began to smoke hard, non-stop. Finished it and started another. And another. When they left the polling station around 10pm she was smoking cigarette butts she found on the grass, one after the next. Her colleagues beside her trying to pull at her arms while the woman elbowed them away, kept searching.

They bought a whole lemon and herb chicken and double large fries to share, taking it to the shopping centre where they found a place to sit huddled by closed Holland and Barrett doors. Around them, the swish and clatter of rollerskates and skateboards, white noise beneath Grime pumped by youngsters outside Costa watching their mates with grim, negligent pride. Others with their backs pressed against JD Sports glass, or sat on benches lacing up, speeching fresh-faced teenage girls or staring into space meditating on their next move, carnal or athletic. Afropunks mostly, hair mixtures of blues, reds, oranges and a rainbow of chemically enhanced colours, shaved close or flowering in full bloom, beaded, loxxed, weaved. Straight-haired blondes and brunettes styled much the same, long hair tied thin to avoid accidents. A trio of girls in Khimars, skates rattling trains, rolling west, all laughter and shouts and streaming dark material until they went unseen, trailing ghosts of echoes. Ripped and rolled up jeans, exposing bare knees and glistening ankles, polished Doc Martin's and fresh Tims. A reflected haze of bodies on floor tiles, coloured wheels pulsing like distant landing lights. Some spun on the spot, ballerina slow, trapped in worlds belonging to them alone. Others leapt for harsh ceiling lights, wheels erupting noisy landings, wobbling but upright, expressions betraying they expected no different.

In their midst, pedestrians crossed from one side of Stratford to the other. Late night students, red-eyed workers, young lovers, families pushing bulky buggies, their walking children finding a grip wherever they could. Silver screen aficionados, shambling drug addicts and their alcoholic cousins, pensioners bored to blindness with dull four walls. Skaters wheeling through everybody, unseeing, perhaps uncaring. A handful of high-vis security guards stood to one side, serene as though dreaming white light and ambience. Homeless men and women set up for the night, laying sleeping bags flat, clutching steaming teas. The cinema sized flat screen above the West Mall

showed boy bands and London Met ads on continuous rotation.

Christie motioned at the Nando's bag. He tipped it towards her and she burrowed for fries, stuffing a handful into her mouth. Raised voices barked loud. Stiffened people, looking. There, just beside the lime green lettering of Osbon Pharmacy, they saw him.

'Christie...'

They got to their feet.

'It's him right?'

Craning to see, one hand on his arm. 'Yep.'

'We better go over, in case.'

She seemed reluctant, yet moved with him to the central area where Limo, even taller in huge black skates loomed over a broad man much older than himself. The man had lank black hair plastered to his head, a dusty red hoodie and a rolled up *Metro* in his fist. Both shouted at each other, Limo pointing in his face, the man gesticulating with his paper. Aaron couldn't make out what was going on, caught between the thin girlfriend trying to pull the broad man away and Limo's friends tugging in the opposite direction, the Kid shrugging them off, shouting, 'I didn't touch you though,' louder each time.

In one swift moment the broad man's face changed. Eyes narrowed, his face seeped red until he was spitting; 'Who the *fuck*, d'you think you are eh? *Eh?* Wait until mornin, you'll see, you lot'll be sent back where you come from pronto, d'you hear me? This is *my* country. *My* country.'

Maybe he didn't really mean it. Maybe it was only a counteraction to what the Kid was saying, brought on by the vote and the intensity of the argument, but Limo stopped shouting as though he'd been slapped. His expression lost all animation, blanking until he regarded the man with no more interest than a frayed bootlace.

Christie tensed, Aaron felt it. The broad man turned on a scuffed heel, brushing past his confused girlfriend walking towards the marigold Amazon lockers on the northern end of the mall. He stopped and smashed his head against the metal, again and again, the sound of it like someone beating a tin drum. People screamed. Security guards ran over, trying to grab his arms, one pushed away by the man, falling and skidding across the polished floor on his arse. He got up and tried again with more of his mates and they were all pushed back even harder. The metal lockers banged, rocking steady time, growing dented, smeared red. Limo's friends backed away, their

expressions pale and sick.

And the Kid stood there, focused on the man butting the lockers, a sneering half smile twitching at his lips.

Aaron stepped forward, not even thinking until he felt a hand on his forearm. Christie shook her head, eyes holding his. He frowned, *why not* and she shook her head even harder. A surge of anger swelled in his chest. Why not? When he turned back Limo had seen him, his smile broader, eyes dilated, the whites seemingly larger. He winked at Aaron and let the man fall, unconscious. The watching people gasped, rushing to his side. The man's girlfriend had long fainted, but no one noticed her. Limo spun on the spot, skating away with long graceful strides, the lights in his boots blinking. Aaron watched the glittering red, blue and white. His body grew light, and the spiral ascent opened in his head. The shopping centre faded, returned, faded, and returned. Prickles of rage burned his eyes.

Christie saw his anger, he knew that. She grasped him by the shoulders and led him away from the people and the fallen man. He let her walk him outside, into cold night, towards the bus stop where she pushed him aboard the first 86 to pull up, guiding him to the upper deck. She sat him in the space behind the stairs by the window and leant against him so he could feel her warmth. Aaron saw dull lights, slow walking people. He felt so tired. He wasn't even sure what was wrong; all his energy had left him. Somewhere further along the main road she hauled him down the stairs and onto the pavement, crossing roads until they came to another stop. They climbed aboard the next bus. She sat him down, putting her arms around him to quiet his shivering. He had a vague sense of where he was. He gave up learning more, or perhaps lost interest. His body felt loose and floppy, no bones.

He blanked out completely after that. When awareness came back they were entering a house, hers he guessed. A featureless hallway with one framed picture; an aerial shot of a beach, an orange and red outlined word in a corner: Bantayan. He had a vague memory of two people; a snub-nosed man in a blue-checked lumberjack shirt, red-eyed, tiny brown marks dead center on his lips, sucking on the tiniest roll-up Aaron had ever seen; and a plump woman, lively in a fading way, wearing a little blue apron and regarding him as if his presence was of little importance. There were names, a round of nods before lengthy silence, yet Aaron didn't understand the words. He was tugged upstairs before he had time to ask if they were her parents. He might have even said it, but he didn't remember Christie answering, or even being sure whether he'd

actually voiced the question. The next thing he knew a door was closing. He sat on a sagging single bed mattress pretty much like his own.

The room was dark, very warm. That strange redolence in the air like nothing he'd known, pleasant and enveloping. Like the undercurrent Christie brought whenever she was near him, yet stronger, richer, headier. He tried to see the walls and objects in the room to get a better picture of who she was, but struggled to find anything to hold onto, just vague black forms and a light from the hallway that disappeared when Christie shut the door. He thought she'd flick the switch, waited forever for the click, the quick ache at the back of his eyes, a sudden reimagining of the formerly blank space. He felt a dip then solid warmth beside him.

'We gonna sit in the dark then?' His tongue felt thick. He could barely free the words. She snuggled next to him, hair tickling his ear. It bothered him that he couldn't move. Speaking felt uncomfortable.

'I always wanted to go Philippines.'

She giggled, kissing him beneath his ear. He closed his eyes.

'You're Filipino right?' Mumbling, barely able to free the words.

She did it again, a trail leading to his lips, turning his chin and kissing him fully. Everything inside him relaxed.

He was there again, floating in darkness he remembered, and this time it was better because of anticipation. When the free falling came he let himself stretch and surge, be carried wherever the flow took him. This time he went deeper, a sensation like rich, soft liquid removing every physical sense of who he was until he was enveloped by it and he moved without will. He heard a low creak, similar to crickets only it sounded synthetic. Then something else came, hotter, a little searing. Later, he would think it was like steaming water being poured into a cooling bath, followed by the rapid awareness it wasn't that at all, more like hot water being poured inside himself from the top of his head to his toes. Except there was no head no toes, and the water was scalding, painful, and he tried to open his voiceless, mouthless lips to scream only to find it was impossible; he had to wait until the pain faded into the dark of the room.

The bed. The dark, nothing further. He tried to crawl, to find something solid he recognised by touch. When his fingers brushed objects there were only corners and right angles, rectangles and squares, flat surfaces nothing like household items, or an object someone owned. Even the bed, when he went back, had no legs, just a smooth, cool material akin to plaster reaching from the mattress to the floor. He frowned.

Crawled to the bedroom door. Fright built inside him as he imagined there might not be a handle, he might be trapped, until he eventually found it, opened, could stand.

The passage wreathed in shadows. A blurred arc of light below was enough to see down the stairs. He stepped quietly, trying not to make any noise in case Christie's parents were sleeping. Perhaps she was watching TV or crashed out on the sofa. If the last were true, he'd leave and call in the morning. The television, a sudden loudness, something about the vote that caught his attention; he tried to descend fast without making a sound. At the living room door he stopped, peeking around the frame, self-conscious. He didn't know these people, barely knew Christie. White light flooded the room. Something odd was going on with the sofa, but he ignored that because Farage filled the screen, baring teeth amidst flashing lights and bouts of applause, saying it was Independence Day for England, and he listened, feeling that falling sensation again, only quicker and inside his own body, solid, rooted, causing him to slump against the doorframe.

As his eyes adjusted the sofa became a shape he knew better. Three strange, writhing masses in a row. Not matter, not as he knew it, these were spheres of persistent energy, patterns shifting and swelling on each surface like plasma on the photosphere of a star, waves rippling, tendrils emerging, testing the air every so often before receding into the central mass. Even worse, discarded flesh lay in a draped pile beneath the rounded balls of energy like snakeskin. When he dared to take a step closer he saw fanned hair and glimpses of clothes flopping from sofa cushions onto the carpet, realising the husks were the shed carcasses of *them*—Christie and each of her parents, the skins creased and partly inside out, veined and pale.

The spheres eased into deeper colours, darkening. Somehow, they rotated. The closest ball to Aaron reached out a slow, probing tendril. It curled like smoke, stretching towards him.

He ran. Out of the door and into the street, down the empty, orange lit road. He sprinted across roads, feet slapping pavements wet with morning dew, night buses bathing him in stark light. He didn't stop, and didn't pay any mind. There was no point. They knew where he lived. They also knew where he was *right now*. He and the creatures were forever linked. He'd thought he was smart, the leader, the one who'd called them all, when really, from the start, it was her.

He collapsed against a lamppost, slid to its concrete root and when he could stand again he walked. His lungs burned, his legs weak. The streets were shimmering

lake water. The high road stretched into the distance.

There was nothing else to do but go home, let himself in, and wait. Aaron shivered at the thought of his mother asleep in her room, snoring loud enough to be heard downstairs. He walked, alert to every sound, craning frightened looks over his shoulder whenever he heard a noise. No one was ever there.

In the kitchen he poured cold water and sat at the table, the silence a solid force. The walls ticked and the sporadic creak of floorboards made Aaron wonder if they could teleport. No matter. Not now. There was nowhere he couldn't be found. After an hour he heard shuffling at the back door. A hazy shape formed in frosted glass, blurred as their true form. A series of soft taps against wood. One, two three. He got to his feet. His hands shook as he unlocked the back door.

She looked the same. Just as beautiful, not frightening, or perhaps there was something in her eyes. Not shy, downcast, only steady appraisal. That was it. She studied him without pause, without feeling.

‘Sorry you had to see us.’

He lowered his head, not wanting to remember his panic, heart thudding like pounding escape in his chest.

‘We were going to tell you. You woke sooner than we planned. I knew you were strong from the start.’

Aaron looked at the ground. On another road, not far away, a car changed gears, engine fading.

‘So what now?’

‘You come with us. We’d prefer by choice.’

He released a sigh, his swirling breath.

‘Okay. Okay.’

She said nothing, did nothing, not even nod. Just stepped back to let him pass.

They took the bus. It was dawn, a trickle of commuters seeping through glass station doors and past the shuddering arms of barriers. On the tube, Christie sat next to him, back stiff, face blank. They did not touch or talk. He kept his chin tucked into his chest. She was like a carving, or better yet a mannequin, more anatomically correct, more real. He looked from the corner of his eye to see if she’d react to anything, but she sat motionless, life bled. It was eerie. He wondered if the other commuters noticed. They seemed buried in their papers, and he didn’t want to risk a better look in case she suspected he was up to something, trying to communicate what they were doing, that

he wasn't going along.

At Westminster she stood and he followed. Up escalators, out through barriers, into the streets and the morning crowd. The sun cracked the sky pale orange and red. The clouds were dark-bellied, gloomy. They walked along Whitehall at a rapid pace, Aaron treading fast to keep up, but she kept on and didn't look at him once. Halfway down the long, wide road, they stopped outside black gates. Two policemen stood on either side eyeing them. A sign above their heads said what he'd feared: Downing Street.

'Here?' He stood directly in front of her, a vague challenge, trying to see beyond those deep-water eyes. 'Seriously?'

She turned towards him, her unfeeling expression fathomless. It scared him. He backed away.

'Okay. Okay.'

Someone brushed his shoulder. He started, turned. Limo and Old Girl. Their faces blank, unseeing. Other young people were by their side, equally blind and entranced. They pushed forwards, Aaron following. They walked up to the barrier, all of them, and the policeman guarding the street stepped aside, opened the gate, let them enter.

At Number 10, they did the same thing.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ME AND YOU

The difference begins around midnight when stark light invades his window and the thunder of machinery erupts. Geoff rises and walks across the room. He stands to one side, shielded by musty curtains. There's a routine clang of metal on metal that's shrill as a high-pitched voice, and an equally repetitive thud of helicopter blades. He hears shouts, the raw scrape of tools. Something pounds the earth, making his sash window frame rattle and when light brightens the room in a monochrome glow Geoff steps away, pressing his back against the cool wall. He pushes one hand against his lips so hard it begins to hurt. He realises what he's doing and returns to his desk.

For some time he doesn't know what to do. He plays with the black mouse on its mat. He gnaws loose skin beneath his thumbnail. He throws back his head, sighs deep and swears between clenched teeth. In a fit of anger, he swipes at his phone. One knee bounces. Unlocked, he touches favourites and calls home.

'Mum?' He waits, scowling. 'Hello? Yeah, it's me. I know you know, I'm just saying. You alright? Yes, it's late. No, nothing's wrong it's just... Look, they've started... The wall. Yes. I don't know. Right.'

She doesn't have much to say beyond the platitudes most parents grow used to, especially those who've long drifted from the practice of daily calls with their child. He tries not to get too upset with his mum and dad for their lapses, yet if he's honest the passage of time is beginning to scare him. That relentless creep towards an unseen future of before it happens and who knows after. The realisation he's seeing some measure of his own fate. He's noticed little changes in their manner, a lack of reasoning, the forgetfulness, an inability to move as well as they once did and their shortened tempers, all transmitted by phone or Skype these days, but even when he visits he sees so much he'd rather not. Markers of time. They'd crossed a line back when Geoff lacked full awareness, tipped over an unseen edge into slow decline. He'd seen it coming too late, worrying for scant seconds before replacing the weight, the greying hair and sporadic amnesia with more immediate problems, mainly his own. And now there was this.

‘Don’t worry about it, yeah? I’ll get it sorted. I know they said but there’s got to be a way. I’ll see about it in the morning and let you know when I do. I know. Well, at least you and dad are OK. That’s the main thing.’

He blanks out when she talks of all the things he’s used to, only to realise and snap out of it. What’s he doing? What was he just telling himself? He nods, shuffles his mouse, picks at his jeans.

‘Bye mum,’ he says when she trails off. ‘I’ll call soon OK? Love you.’

He doesn’t wait for her reply and cuts off the phone. Thunder brightens the room. This time, he won’t look.

They’re out there for the rest of the night. Radios playing bland pop, pounding tools that echo across the bare expanse of moist, sodden earth. The fairy tale tinkle of fallen nails and grunts of heavy goods vehicles over a random whirr of drills. The searing noise of a cutting machine makes Geoff start, half rising. He’d dreamt of a circular saw, a fountain of sparks, some tough material or another shorn away, bending like paper. He sits up, drinks his bedside water and stares at drawn curtains. He can ignore the bastards but they won’t go away.

Morning brings relative quiet. Geoff eats granola to a background noise of occasional hammer blows and various mechanical devices, although he also hears birds and the roar of planes. He spoons cereal, chewing thoughtless mouthfuls, pushes the bowl away and stands. He grabs his keys, his ID and leaves the flat. The door slams behind him, shuddering in its frame.

The stairs are dark, the grey walls cold. Faded graffiti is smeared in bleached patches all the way down. He pushes the icy steel bar out of his block and into the bright of day. Altostratus clouds veil the sky. The sun’s mute as if hidden behind ground glass. Geoff pushes his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket, hurrying along the black gravel path, slipping on the odd mud patch. It’s cold and he’s hunched against a growing breeze. The pop music’s louder, irritating. He turns the corner of his block.

Egg-speckled columns somewhat like motorway struts are placed in a single file line, maybe spaced four hundred metres apart, it’s difficult to tell. They stand high, towering over the building that contains his one room flat by at least another half block, perhaps. Geoff understands last night’s need for loud machinery even as he marvels at how this was done. They hike across the shattered remains of the worn town, far into

the greying distance. Between each T shaped strut there's an odd, shimmering trick of the light that reminds him of childhood, the translucent film of bubbles he blew as a boy.

He's stunned to a halt by this seemingly insubstantial barrier. For years they'd threatened to build a wall and eject those who sought to destroy their way of life, to safeguard and protect freedom as if it were a stolen foreign jewel, seen but never touched. They made plans and held referendums, argued for and against although in truth there was never any question. And while London burned and terrorists murdered innocents, people grew ever more fearful. The iron will they were so proud of grew brittle with rust. Only a matter of time before it snapped, fell away. Exposed to the elements, quickly corrupted from outside by political businessmen who barely lived in the city. And so that final vote, to expel not only foreigners but also the less wealthy, had been enough to make it keel and die. Those who'd voted against couldn't imagine how right they were when they said the results might possibly last forever.

He turns away. Not far from where he walks a lumbering group of pre-adolescents test the wall by throwing stones. The transparent material sparks and glimmers with each contact, a hissing snake. Stones chip into pieces and fall to the mud as though they're striking concrete. Geoff wants to give the youths a dirty look, but instead he does his best to ignore them. Idle workmen see what's happening and chase them away.

He over emphasises his strides so he can make headway over loose soil. Gravel scrunching, escaping underfoot, he keeps his hands in his pockets, trying not to fall. He passes workmen in hardhats, their frames squat and shoulders broad, suited men gathered around ATM-sized computer banks analysing dark screens of information, and the inert figures of lifeless machines; diggers, flatbed trucks, others he's never seen. Beyond them, a larger group of people mill, forming a knot of crowd. There's no shimmering film, just open space. Geoff gets close before he sees it's actually two separate groups, easily discernible at that distance. The nearest stand with their backs straight, are dressed alike. Coming behind them as he does, without his glasses, he has to squint before he sees they're the army. The further group are dishevelled and broken. Geoff notes mucky faces, the single file queue. Many are covered in blankets, hunched. Some limp away from the soldiers to gather beside a white bendy bus at the bottom of a grassy incline. Civilians, he tells himself. Rejects.

He circles the soldiers, pushing to the front of the queue. The waiting people shuffle and give him bad looks, but even now they do that typical English thing and remain silent. Three soldiers dressed in fatigues, two men and one woman, stand by a makeshift desk and computer set up scanning ID's and fingerprints against names on the screens, checking them off, sending the relevant person on their way. Geoff begins to smile, forcing it from his face. Be calm, he warns himself. Another four soldiers are poised in varied positions of battle readiness, hands on rifles, scanning the crowd. As Geoff moves closer, the largest steps towards him.

'Can I help?'

He feigns another smile at the giant of a man, all lips, no teeth. The giant looks through him. He imagines the man's thinking of the best place to put a bullet if he makes a sudden move. He's blonde, wide faced, cheeks flecked red.

'I'm alright actually. Just wanted a word with Lieutenant Parks.'

She looks up from the screen. Her eyes widen before she composes herself.

'Mr Morgan. Are you OK?'

'Yes, I am.' He's less sure now, thrown by their need to negotiate the moment as strangers rather than what they are. If anything. 'Is it alright to speak for a minute? Won't take long.'

Parks turns to the giant. She blinks, lips pursed and he steps back into position. Her colleagues try to keep their attention on the civilians. She leaves and Geoff follows, walking down the incline until no one's close, between the bus, the people, the shadow of his block and the closest strut.

'What're you doing?' she's hissing. 'You trying to get us both in trouble?'

'No, I just... I didn't know you'd be here. How would I?'

She softens, more like the woman he knew by lamplight in the empty confines of his local. Her deep eyes are still gaunt and hard, exposed by the tightness of her wrenched back hair, but her shoulders fall. The tiny mole to the left of her lips makes her mouth look like it's pouting when she's really not. She snatches a glance behind her.

'So what do want?' she says, less accusing even though her hands are on her hips. She peers at Geoff like he's a foreigner.

'I need to get home. To my parents. They-'

He can't say it. Instead, he toes crumbling earth. Parks sighs, breath whistling in time with the low wind.

‘Look. We’re getting concessionary passes,’ she says. ‘For when we’re done. Two a man. I’m don’t need them, so...’

She looks at the civilians. She’d told him that night, about the lights out at eight, the shared bedroom and unfeeling care home staff. The waiting for adoptive parents that never arrived. Geoff floods with elation. He barely stops himself from hugging her.

‘Thank you. That’s-’

‘Go home. Stay there. I’ll come round at twenty-three hundred hours.’

She pivots, going back to the desk. Geoff tries not to stare at her rear, the twin curves easily visible beneath her loose fatigues. He moves away.

A woman he’s never seen before leans face forwards against his block wall, arms covering her head, body trembling and bent. A limp hoodie falls halfway down her back. He sees the peach strap of her vest, the black bra strap beneath. Her skin’s pale, her deltoids ridged, although small. She’s a sorrowful void against rough walls.

He can’t very well ignore her, not after Park’s kindness. Geoff trots down the incline onto the path, standing beside her for a series of useless moments.

‘Hello?’ he says after time, one hand raised above her shoulder. ‘Hello?’

She ignores him. Behind her, former Londoners trail onto the white bus, heads turned to watch. Geoff eyes the soldiers. They’re busy filing people through the open gate.

‘You’ll miss the bus. You need to get to the displacement centre or you won’t be rehoused.’

The woman sobs louder. She’s tall and skinny, her hair masculine short. She wears tight jeans and that thin hoodie. She must be cold.

‘Look, do want a cup of tea? I might be able to help. I know a way to get back into the city.’

She doesn’t react for some time and he’s about to give up until she lifts her head. Her eyes are tower block grey, saturated by red. Her nose runs in delicate strings. She doesn’t seem to care. She hiccups, stares.

‘Come. Let me get you inside, I’ll explain there.’

Geoff sweeps an open arm towards the path. When he leads, the woman follows.

She perches on the edge of his sagging three-seater, a mug in both hands, focused somewhere behind him. Geoff sits opposite at his desk, misted by his own steaming

mug of tea. When he asks how she'd come to be ejected from the city she speaks, her voice tinged with a Spanish accent. A CEO husband heading one of the big five housing associations, a six-bedroomed relative palace in Golder's Green. A near-perfect son about to begin secondary education at a leading private school. She could have remained a housewife and claimed her husband's income on the census, but she'd started her own cleaning business, as that's what she did when they met, and she was proud not to rely on him. Little did she know when the vote was taken there'd be two strikes against her, one for her country of origin, another for her lack of personal wealth. She'd been blacklisted without anyone's knowledge until the declaration of section one eight two. The night before last, the government implemented that order.

They're silent when she's finished. Now she's told him who she really is, the difference between them is startling. Her thin, sitting upright and taut with the muscle that comes from hard work, him podgy, slumped in his office chair. Her thick with an accent that makes her speaking voice difficult to decipher, him concise, well thought out and clear. He finds it tough to imagine her wandering a six-room mansion, or dropping the son off at school, hurrying him through the gates. She doesn't look the type, more like an immigrant fallen on hard times in a drug dealer's jacket. It seems odd that even with all Geoff's upbringing and education he should end up here, in this flat, and she there. The difference produces an acid burn in his stomach he can't entirely put down to not having eaten since breakfast, or the tea.

'What do you do? Is that your work?' she says, indicating the laptop.

'I'm a journalist actually. For the local rag. Only I haven't written for them in a while.'

The truth was they'd let him go. Budget cuts, they said. He'd been living on meagre funds borrowed from his parents for the last nine months. Stubborn, not wanting to leave. And now this.

But of course he can't say that. Scraps of truth lodge between his teeth like food. He clenches his jaw.

'I have an army friend down there; you might've seen her,' he tells the woman. 'She can get passes. She'll be here at eleven.'

The woman shifts, uncomfortable. Her face is drawn with lines beneath the bare light.

'And you'd give me one?'

‘Of course.’ He stretches his lips in another toothless smile. ‘Why else are you here?’

Her eyes are opaque. She’s trying to keep them open, obviously struggling.

‘Thank you. Thank you...’

‘No trouble at all,’ he sing-songs. ‘You can pull out the sofa bed if you want. I’ll take the laptop in the other room. I won’t disturb you.’

The woman looks confused until he gets up, removing his laptop from its stand. She takes off her shoes, swivelling horizontally. She’s lying down and doesn’t have on socks.

‘What’s your name?’ he asks from his bedroom door.

‘Nuria.’

‘I’m Geoff,’ he says, pushing the door closed.

He writes an article for a friend’s blog, something inane about the falling teenage pregnancy rate in his locality. He makes a good attempt at getting back into it until the outside begins to call, distracting him from the white screen. He grunts and shuts the laptop, banishing words. He walks over to his bedroom window. Voices float up to him on thermals. Civilians stream from the makeshift checkpoint. Three bendy buses stand in line, doors open, engines purring like idle cats. The soldiers corral their charges towards the vehicles and he can’t see Parks but knows she’s there, performing the job he can’t quite believe is hers. The magnetic wall shimmers purple and blue under sodium lights like trapped nebula beneath glass, a series of installations extending forever north.

Geoff checks on Nuria. She’s sleeping, comatose. He makes a bowl of cereal and sits at the desk, watching. That good feeling, the one that came with the elation at finding a way into the city and giving aid to a fellow human being, gives way to something else. He can’t quite recognise what, but a thought rises. His lone voice. Who’s the victim, it asks. Geoff’s spoon is poised. He waits for an answer. Me and you of course. Me and you. He shakes his head, attempts a laugh. All he expels is a soft rasp, more like a wheeze. He shuffles in the office chair, eats another spoonful. Me and you, he thinks, me and you.

Even so, he can't quite picture the balance. Although he's well aware it's not entirely accurate, Geoff eats cereal and imagines a pair of antique scales that tip against him every time.

The knock comes just before eleven. He pads out to answer as Nuria's still curled up, snoring like a child. When Parks follows and sees the woman on his sofa all colour leaves her face. She gestures, harsh whispering. He puts a finger to his lips, beckoning her into the bedroom.

'Who the fuck is she?'

She's flushed, breathing hard.

'Jesus Parks. She needs a pass, that's all. I thought you might help.'

'And what's she giving you?'

He shakes his head, tutting disappointment.

'I told you to call me Rasheda anyway.'

'Do you have them? Please.'

Her chest heaves. Geoff keeps his eyes on her face. He tries to push away his memory of how she looked in dim light, unclothed beneath his faded bed sheets.

'Please Rasheda.'

She sags again, and then he feels bad. He'd thought her tougher than this. Tonight he sees she actually cares, only it's too late.

'I've only got the one anyway.'

Geoff hears birds, the engine thrum of the bendy bus.

'What?'

She stares into his eyes, not letting go.

'Obviously they know my circumstances. Some of the guys needed more, what could I say? You're lucky they gave me this.'

Rasheda holds an orange envelope, tilting it at him.

'Good thing too. Considering.'

'I'm not sleeping with her.'

'That's not my business,' she says, looking at his unmade bed, the scattered books, papers and clothes, the undrawn curtains. 'You can do what you like. Can't you?'

The muscles of her jaw protrude. She looks at the window.

‘This is just silly.’

‘D’you think?’

Dark eyes flash.

‘Don’t you?’

She stares him down. He drops his gaze, grits his teeth.

‘Will I see you in London?’

Geoff knows the answer, and yet Rasheda has grace enough to smile. She gives him the envelope.

‘Probably not,’ she says.

He gathers the important things in a rucksack. Laptop, novel, notepad. He tucks the flimsy pass into an old Oyster wallet, pockets both and puts the orange envelope face up on the coffee table with Nuria’s name printed in black felt tip. He hasn’t told her much. Just that the flat’s hers if she wants it, that he had to leave immediately, where the folder is with information about the boiler and all other household appliances. He hasn’t said he’s sorry. He wants to, only he doesn’t know how to word it, everything he writes feels wrong. Geoff feels his hands tremble and tightens them into fists. He puts his house keys on top of the envelope, slipping out before Nadia wakes to find him standing over her, the difference between them alive and naked in his eyes.

10...

9...

8...

7...

6...

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

UTOMA

Today is my one hundred and forty sixth thousandth dawn. As always, it's spectacular. I go into the garden, my daily ritual. There's a hum of escaping insects, the soft breath of wind, the expanse of green and silent land. To the south, the hazy orb of Utoma City. To the east, a dark undulation of hills merge into a marble blue sky that's fissured with growing light. I pause to watch this tender seepage, the rise of our sol. I'm amazed.

My qualia is to separate bindweed from roses, creeper from fig tree, and so I begin. Destroying one species so another might thrive. I try not to think of it like that, but as I'm sure you can tell I'm in a reflective mood, never mind the glowing beauty of sunrise, or perfume of surrounding flowers. The M'Rec is a pleasant whirr, a reminder. In the old days I barely noticed, but today I'm especially conscious I'm talking to you for the first time since the beginning. You hear all, my every thought. It wasn't something I cared about, but today the noise is especially loud. Odd. I hardly ever think about the beginning either, only I do now for no clear reason except the obvious. It's strange.

And there it is again. That rustle amongst the hedgerow, the low snuffle of a creature picturing she cannot be seen. If I look in that direction she stills, but if I turn back to the weeds, or move away from the hedge she stirs again, and sometimes I'm quick enough to catch rippling leaves from the corner of my eye. I feel the urge to go closer, not to catch her, just to gain a better look, but I've tried that before so I know what it will cause; fierce eruption, the pattering weight of padded feet and harsh, panting breath. A streak of dark fur darting into long grass two hundred metres beyond my hedge perimeter. I'm curious, of course. I've never seen the creature. In fact, animals very rarely get close. Avians beat frantic wings skywards, cawing with fear. Mammals are either disturbed by my heavy feet, or catch my scent yards away, disappearing long before I arrive. Even insects never land anywhere near us, but dart into the unseen distance, zig-zagging in primal fear. It's a curse we all live with, but for me, a lover of nature, it makes me aware of what most deny. This particular creature seems unlike the rest. Although I try not to look, I feel her eyes on me, weighing my worth. I'm desperate not to fail.

I dig earth with cupped hands, extracting the weed and its roots, throwing it onto the pile of ugly vegetation behind me. Although the work is calming, I feel an urge grow. The creature is bolder. Teasing perhaps. I try to keep my thoughts on bindweed, but it's impossible. The creature pushes a long snout out of the bushes. I can see from my rear view. Her eyes are like the pollinated centres of sunflowers, yellow and black in the centre. I suppose she wants to talk. It certainly looks that way. Why else would she come back, day after day? Slowly, she pokes her head further. First eyes, then a broad, flattened skull emerges, finally twitching ears and the long thick neck. Its tongue hangs low, ridged and dripping with a translucent liquid that steams as it hits swaying grass. She's a huge beast, magnificent. I've never seen one like her. She steps a great, clover shaped foot onto my territory.

I turn and leap, covering the distance between us, some sixteen metres, in one bound. By the time I land she's already disappeared from the hedgerow. Jazari. When I leap onto the arid land beyond the creature runs into the metres high grassland that marks the wild, fogged by dust, feet scrambling, ears low, her tail a sharp, straight line. She disappears into the whispering grass and that's the end. I've lost sight of her, maybe forever. I look around in case anything witnessed what I'd done, but the land is bare for miles. Couple. I shake damp earth from my fingers and wait. Nothing moves. I give up and leap back to my side of the hedge.

The appearance of the creature and my handling of her are unsettling. I'm not a being of impulse, far from it. I've suppressed my predatory leanings to such a degree I've erased all but the faintest remains of pogroms. I know my temperament is not the same as yours, it's why I moved from the city and into the land. You still curse The Others' name. In Utoma City, when I was there, they were treated with violent apathy, disgust. Back then they were few, sightings rarer than creatures but I heard and saw enough to cause me to wonder why this was, to realise I was the anomaly, not you. What knows which turn of circumstances created me like this? None are like me, and my course of action became clear soon after my daymark. I had little possessions, only the seeds collected over time if you remember or care to track that far.

At your leisure, you may track to the first time I set down beyond the Old Town to see the remains of their lives. That huge, incomprehensible marker, **W LC ME TO**

MI TON KEE S. Untidy rectangles, gardens once I assumed, overrun and wild. Warped furniture thick with dust. Beds, tables and chairs, useless things of that nature. Cracked and picture-less frames, the portraits most likely destroyed centuries ago. Fragments of their pasts blown through shattered windows, carried to unknown places by the wind. It was fascinating for me to think of what this might have been long before us, and though I knew it was useless to you I stayed awhile, because it was necessary for me. I'd found something I hadn't known I wanted. I'm a being of nature, that's on the Bank, nothing new to any of you. I derive pleasure from the organic, so it follows I might be curious about the natural world that came before us. It's why I do my best to recreate what they once had to the best of my ability. Not to live as they did, obviously. That's impossible. No. I find myself by absorbing what remains of their past.

Some of their leavings come to good use. The chair with long curved boards instead of legs I found in an upstairs section and brought into the lower has been a comfort throughout these years. Even though I have no need to sit, it's good for contemplation. I push back - the chair allows it - the chair pushes forwards in turn - I follow. The motion is extremely soothing. Light grows brighter in my cool dark section, and I push the chair into a steady rhythm. I think about the creature, what lead me to behave like that. The predatory instinct doesn't live in us, not anymore, but there is something about the urge to capture that's very unsettling. I thought I was immune to the ways of those before me. Yet I didn't let the creature come to me. I didn't.

I know what I'm leading to. Bo. Only in these times do I feel I really need it, and though it's often little help, brooding alone won't get me anywhere. I push my chair and think, until my feet slam on the wooden floor. I walk into cloudless sun. Distant hawks circle, broad wings outstretched, a plea. Smaller birds chatter in trees, flitting from branch to branch. The sounds of organics are so consuming I almost forget what I'm doing. I return to this actual moment, bend at the knees, bound.

It's further into the wild than my land, although that doesn't mean it's organically inclined despite the work it's given. While I appreciate Bo's need for solitude I don't understand its sneered distaste for the natural world, or why it chooses a barren, infertile waste to call its own. As far as I can tell it has no feel for its qualia. I believe the work is more suited to me. The journey is a good two hours bound, and in time abundant grasslands are left behind until I'm travelling over grey earth, baked dry by lack of

foliage, dusty and cracked like rotten vegetation. Plumes of clouds explode beneath my feet as I take off, hit the ground. Trees are crumbling and withered. Nothing stirs for miles except the breeze. Death's mute voice is everywhere.

It would be easier if I was airborne, I know that. Sometimes I wish the modifications had been fitted before my daymark, but you can't choose your specs. Anyway, it goes against my beliefs to excrete substances that damage organics, so I bound without complaint. It's not exactly difficult, although it is wearing on the joints. That's why I only travel to visit Bo, or Old Town, avoiding permanent damage.

If I close my eyes and imagine I could almost be avian. One push from my bent knees, an abrupt straightening of the legs and I'm thrust high into the air, fine earth swirling below. The wind howls and buffets my body. The ground disappears. With the right weather conditions there are even wisps of cloud. On a sol filled day like this, it's a beautiful way to travel.

There are many techniques for a bound. I favour hands laid flat against my sides, legs together and feet pointed towards the earth for optimum speed, chin tucked into my chest, even though it limits visibility. At peak trajectory I change to the crouch position, knees and arms bent as though I'm about to sprint. This slows descent. Some like to roll into a ball then arrow their body towards the ground, arms outstretched, palms together, assuming a crouch position closer to the earth. To me this is madness. I prefer the slower method, straightening the right leg just before landing so force is absorbed through greater body mass. After I stand upright, legs together, to bound again. Before long a rhythm builds, and I'm hardly aware of what I'm doing.

Below there are often large mammals in the wild, fat and slow. Their bellies rock from side to side as they hear my rapid whistling descent from above, trying to run. Not so much where I bound now, in the land Bo has chooses to remain. In mine I've often seen the waddling black and brown creatures once consumed by The Others, even bred. Field could tell me what they're called, but the truth is they're ugly and I have no interest, so I never ask. I accept the truth of my assembly. I was not constructed to be biologically scientific, or curious. I was made for a love of inanimate organics. This is my qualia. The pursuit of experience in this field, nothing more. That's been Banked, I'm sure. It's the reason I don't know why I pursued the creature in my garden. The flash of urge was just that, bright, momentary. When it left I was blinded, startled.

For my final few bounds, land gains definition. Small black dots on flat grey. From my heightened view they resemble blight on an otherwise featureless stem. They

grow and recede, grow and recede, more distinct with every descent, almost magically forming flat-roofed buildings, observation decks, concrete walls, patches of grass and high fencing. When flowers take shape below my feet I smile, landing in a final explosion of earth. There it is by the tall, partially opened gate, waiting.

We take to the observation deck, as is our custom, on the roof of Building One. There are four warehouse spaces, each built to house various breeds of organic life. This main building is dedicated to sections of flowering vegetation. Building Two houses bacteria farms. Three is where trees are cultivated. Four is empty, for now. Bo prunes Fuchsia while I watch, spraying them with liquid nutrients. The sol has passed its optimum point, and is already falling. The change in temperature is one degree and will likely drop a further two by the time the star descends for the evening. The night will be cool, with a touch of welcome rain.

Bo has its back to me. The snip of tools is the only sound. There are no creatures for miles and the insects have gone elsewhere. They will return when we are inside the building, after they deem it safe. I've seen them do this from our windows.

'Why so speechless?' Bo says, without turning.

'I'm not sure.' In reality I felt it didn't want to be disturbed. Track previous days and you'll see many occasions when I've spoken aloud only to receive no answer. 'You seem busy with your organics.'

'You should be celebrating, no? On your daymark? Isn't that traditional?'

'Not for us,' I say, though I know its response. It scoffs loudly. I try to ignore what I hear.

'Don't start that again.'

'I'm not. It's pretence, you know that.'

'You say that as though The Others never did so.'

'You say that as though we should do everything they did.'

It makes another noise of exasperation, getting to its feet. I'm very unsettled when it does that. Just another pretence, another way of acting like something it's not. We are not they. Is that hamoi? If so, too late. The Bank already knows. Bo's taller than I, hair fanned around its face in a false dark halo it grew after seeing historical records of The Others on Field. It wears cut off trousers favoured by their kind at the time of the Percepi, shorts it calls them, and thin almost-clothes on its upper half that reveal

both arms. Told me it was *cool*. All because they constructed it's carapace with a heavy dose of melanin. I mean, so is mine, but you don't see me going off wrapping my head in thick fabric, or wearing robes that fall to my toes, or painting a red dot in place of my daymark. I know this behaviour's encouraged but Jazari forgive me it's infuriating. We have no need to grow protein from our heads, that's precisely the reason I'm void of the stuff. What purpose does it serve other than looking foolish? The idea is ridiculous emulation, nothing more, I hope you won't find this blasphemous but you know how I feel and I can't help it, we are not and will never be them.

It's looking at me now, one corner of the lip tugged in an irritating smile. I shift from side to side.

'Is this because of the dog?'

'The what? What are you talking about?'

'The dog. The creature you tried to catch. That's what it's called.'

'How do you know?'

'It seems to bother you a bit, that's all. Don't worry, they're many. They populate your area. Live up in the hills mostly, quite a large group. The Others called them packs.'

'Yes, but how do you know what she's called?'

'The Field. It's all there, I keep telling you. You shouldn't be so single-minded.'

It's scanning, curved pruning tools limp in its hands and those eyes never leave me. I picture its image of me bent over in the small cloth chair being processed, recorded, sent to the Bank simultaneously with mine.

'I've had other things to do,' I say, looking at the parched grey expanse of the plain. The stillness.

'Really?'

'I have no need of a creature. A dog.'

'Perhaps you'd like an exploration.'

'I have my vegetables.'

'Something more complex perhaps. More able to communicate.' Bo takes the seat beside me, puts down the tool. 'I would.'

There's a softer, calmer look in their eyes. I feel a sense of ease growing as it sits, and settles. Not mine, its.

'I'm not built for such things. Neither are you. It's against our program.'

It twitches somewhat, as though affected. More pretence. Words don't harm us. We're logical beings, most of the time.

'Some say otherwise. We think, laugh, converse, enjoy, feel? Why wouldn't we develop beyond our original program? Isn't that what we are built for? To experience?'

'Not me,' I say, sitting back, grasping the arms of my chair. 'I'm happy as I am.'

'This type of thing is usual in Utoma. They breed them to know nothing but us. They explore, learn. There are even competitions. They become accustomed to us.'

'Field said that's impossible.'

Bo thinks, a finger pushed against its chin. Even such a simple gesture is annoying.

'The information might be encrypted. Although, if a dog is visiting you, the Bank will give you access. You should ask.'

'I have no need for a creature to fill my time. I have you.'

It throws back its head, laughing so loudly I jump. I feel my teeth clench and I grip the chair tighter waiting for it to finish. This takes time.

'I'm sorry...' It says between peeling chuckles. 'I'm sorry. I forget who you are sometimes, it's foolish...'

'What.'

Bo turns and leans back, scanning me, all in one practiced move. It's so fluid even I see him as one of them for a moment. I delete the thought.

'What d'you mean?' It stutters.

'*What* I am. Not who. We're not Other. You can convince yourself if you like, but don't keep trying to convince me.'

Even though I'm unsure? The thought is off and bounds into the distance before the desire to snatch the words back are produced, were such a thing allowed. Away via Memory Recorder to Utoma City. To be dissected and analysed by their 'Bots, maybe charged with the offence of hamoi. Blasphemy. I expect Bo to be angry, but it's nodding like it understands.

'Alright. Alright. This must be difficult for a young mod to grasp. You'll learn. It might take time, but you will. No one can help their lesser station in life.'

That sounds like an insult, though I don't know what it means. Lesser is never good. Bo's language is another consistent annoyance.

'Are you deliberately talking in riddles?'

It makes another of their noises, a sigh this time. I use the pause to make a quick connection with Field. The page superimposes on my in'screen. I blank.

Begin search...

What is the meaning of 'station in life'?

Does it mean religion?

Loading...

... 'Station in life' as in:

Nonetheless, seams can make borders “semi- permeable membranes,” relatively more or less porous to people, depending upon their nationalities and stations in life, to economic exchange, to the passage of ideas ...

That expression is considered 'dated' today, though a convenient catch phrase in flowery speech and writing.

{M'Rec Hub Bank}

Different stations in life

4.1 [*count noun*] • One's social rank or position

... we are defined by our jobs ...

In a broader sense, perhaps, status, standing, locus standi, position.

{M'Rec Hub Bank}

What determines "station in life"?

Your 'station in life' includes such things as age bracket, marital status, whether or not you have children, whether you are a priest, religious or layperson, perhaps your work status (i.e. if you are an employer or not).

{cut in'screen}

Darkness lifts .I return to Bo. It's scanning again, this time with a frown cast across its handsome face. Even the swirling, circular daymark stamped on its forehead is beguiling, easy to scan. Under normal circumstances I struggle to take my eyes away. I blink to focus on what I'm trying to say. I'm leaning forwards. My volume is raised.

'Why am I lesser? I'm not ranked high enough to understand your warped ideas of hierarchy?'

Bo sits back, shaking his halo. It glistens in sunlight like the night skies of the wild.

'Augo. Come on. Are you angry?'

'Of course I'm angry. You're saying I don't have the capacity to grasp simple propaganda. You're calling me unintelligent.'

'No! Come on, why would I? I'm stating facts. Look, listen a minute, don't argue. You and me, we're friends. Right? That much is clear. But at the same time we're different. I'm Binary Organic, you're Augmented. I'm daymarked earlier sure, but that still gives me a forty percent greater capacity on the back end, which works out an extra ninety million terra bytes. That's fact. Your qualia. You're smart, I just have a greater capacity, hence our different stations. Look man, that's how Jazari made us...'

I sit forwards, something snaps. The urge breaks loose, blanking my hub again, surging from me.

'I'm *not* a man, and we don't have different stations in life, the simple fact being none of us are alive! We're coupling machines for Jazari's sake! Coupling *machines!*'

Silence. Bo's still hand is raised mid-gesture, its face all hard angles, protruding cheekbones, grizzled spots of protein on the cheeks and chin. Eventually it relaxes. The hand falls, it sits back, its legs protrude. If I could name one thing it has a greater capacity for, I would say patience instantly.

'Look. It's your Daymark. You're one hundred and forty six thousand days old. Congratulations. That's a fantastic achievement, but you're fresh off the line. Haven't even liv-' It stops, gulping back the word, smiling a white-toothed grin. '*Existed* yet. OK? I'm two hundred thousand and ninety two, double your age. It took time to learn how to navigate this place, and it will take you time too. If all the worlds' history was a day, our kind only existed in the last half a minute, do you know that? *The last half a minute* Augo. Be cool and you'll get there young spark.' Bo flashed bright enamel. 'You will.'

I'm looking at it, seeing glistening fervour and thinking *my Jazari*. It really believes we live. The grin is growing, making it look almost like wandering fantasma, those rogue, crazed, unprogrammed beings roaming the wilds, and I'm thinking about the harm false programming can do to hub wiring, corroding and shorting. I can't take it seriously or bear to see its expression much longer because it actually makes me afraid, even though I realise that thought's going to be Banked, is forbidden. I'm about to turn away, in fact I already have when something amazing happens. I see a darting presence from the corner of my eye, click to rearview/frontview merge so I catch the thing from both angles and I see him, there's no doubt, this part is real.

Bo sits up, back straight, body imploring, eyes wide and full of deep-held belief, when a fly swoops down and lands on its still wrist.

One moment. That's all Bo has, before the fly perhaps realises he's made a mistake, or feels the quivering hum of internals and lifts into the bright sun. Yet I saw the insect land and take off, and most importantly, Bo felt him. Its eyes flood with liquid saline. I know this is a mechanical trick, but the response that set it going is emotional nonetheless, therefore real. It feels this too. Bo lifts its chin, watching the creature zoom over the compound, buzzing loud enough to fill our surrounding void. The event is undeniably huge, monumental, will be Banked and monitored for thousands of days to come. Bo might even be visited by high-ranking Utoma scientists, the compound forensically analysed for clues as to why such a thing happened here.

'Did you see that?' Bo whispers. It sounds on standby.

'Yes.'

'I can't believe that. It's like a picture. Thank Jazari for the Bank.'

'Yes.' I say. 'You'll be famous!'

'Can you believe that? Can you?'

It looks like the young spark not me, fists clenched on knees, mouth agape, hardly able to stir.

'Hardly. That was a miracle.'

'I'll go down in history!'

'You will.'

'For the second time!' It blurts, seeing my confusion. The smile falters. When the expression returns it is forced, subdued. It looks at the white concrete roof. A leg twitches. Another piece of information I haven't been told. Perhaps because of my low station?

‘Thank Jazari. We are Ificans proud.’ It murmurs at the hardened floor. ‘Might beyond measure.’

‘Measure beyond might,’ I say.

And now my fear has returned.

It doesn’t need to tell me, although I sense it will. We descend into the building, which is dark and overly warm. Bo cultivates vegetation in the main section. Each time I come he’s growing something new, and I want to examine his product, but we never spend enough time before I have to leave. This may be design. There are huge looming organics with wide hanging leaves connected to an array of machinery at the furthest end. Smaller flowering vegetations powdered with rich perfume, colours glowing even in the dark. The scent of damp earth is a balm. We wind through aisles with vegetation beds on both sides, pushing by thick leaves of bigger organisms. One particular vegetable catches my eye. It bears oval, dark seeds covered in thick, coarse fur. I reach for her. Bo looks back, sees me.

‘What’s this?’ I ask.

‘Sapodilla.’

‘What’s its use?’

‘They produce a resin we use for mechanical production. They never tell me how, I don’t ask. I just grow them.’

‘I’ve never seen it.’

‘I’ll give you a few seeds before you leave. Sapodilla needs plenty of heat, so you might need to readjust your generator.’

We move on. I’m scanning placards as we pass. *Bromeliad*, *Heliconia*, *Poinsetta*. The colours and variations are a dream, red the most dominant, until I see a small tree of green bananas and almost cry out *wait*, but Bo won’t stop, taking me to the back exit, out into the dusty central compound. There’s a cool of the shadowed buildings that’s pleasant. The breeze is slight and of low degree. I strain my ears for insects, but there aren’t any. We walk across the compound, straight all the way to the next building, the smallest. The walls say **BUILDING FOUR** in tall black letters.

It told me this was empty. The building was always empty. There’s a large double door, digitally locked. It’s metal, inches thick, reflecting our blurred images, a

cloud of various colours and no features. Bo sight reads his daymark for entry. The door clicks, slides open.

This warehouse is cooler than the main building. The door slithers closed. I register the instant rhythm of machinery, whirrs and sighs and a bubble of warm liquids. There are machines on metre high tables everywhere, they fill the warehouse. Some are thin, bare glistening arms that hold and lift, some no more than hand-shaped metallic dispensers of medicines, barrel-shaped needles in place of fingers. Some are petite boxes with wheels instead of legs and a hub power no greater than insects, programmed by ideals even less noble than instinct. There are thick rectangles lined against the wall, dead and weak despite their array of lights, metallic zombies. Where in the hierarchy are these poor beings? These slaves to our higher wills, our voiceless counterparts? Surely each is only a hub, the inclusion of semi-organic materials and the illusion of choice away from who we believe ourselves? I gaze into dim light only to be reminded of the city I left behind, the machines I thought were days in the past.

Bo moves on. I follow, unenthused. This is already more horrible than I'm prepared for. It's already shown me hell. Before us, tables are lined with docile mechanical beings trained on numbered glass domes placed in rows throughout this section. There are hundreds in the relatively small area. Each has a dim red light cast behind it, the same collection of mechanics servicing their needs. Each bears a tiny zygote, pink and alien, floating in thick transparent liquid. Their heads are huge, lowered, the hands flat and the black dot of their unseeing eye like a grim, featureless daymark. A network of red and blue veins run throughout the body and the soft grey hub, or brain as they called it, the pulsing heart. They are disgusting, ugly. I begin to see why we curse them. We are not made in the image of these morbid beginnings.

'This might be why it landed... The fly I mean,' Bo says. Its volume is low, words hushed.

'Why do you think that?'

I'm struggling to speak against my disgust. Is that also hamoi?

'I carry the seed.'

I'm not sure I believe. I'm scanning too hard, I know this. Anything else is impossible. My every thought and action feels forbidden.

'I thought there wasn't any.'

'They kept some, of course. They had to. We need the material. They produce them from organic DNA and insert them into my organs. I carried them for ninety days.'

‘And the egg?’

‘A female Bo.’ It grins with success. ‘They brought her especially from Utoma City. They’re pure genius.’

‘But why? We can farm.’

‘Too precarious by far. Too dangerous. We lose those and our kind is finished. No flesh, no hair, no blood, no internals... No exploration of any kind. Think about it Augo. We need procreation. We need autonomous life.’

‘To farm.’

‘Yes, of course to farm.’ It frowns again. ‘What would you suggest? That they roam free?’

‘No,’ I say, eyes firm on its. ‘Of course not. That would be hamoi.’

I’m not sure it’s convinced I am, because it scans me for long time. I think it’ll let the question go and we can leave the too cool, too dim warehouse until it goes on, spewing whole passages, all the data I’ve heard. We are supreme beings, blessed by Jazari. The next evolutionary step, *Uto Geminus*. When The Others wiped out *Homo Neanderthalensis*, they proved their inability to live with another humanoid species. The Percepi was a justified response to prospective genocide. A reminder, if I needed one, of the one million eight hundred and twenty five thousand day peace, no fights, insurgencies, battles or wars, historically unheard of. Our pre-ordained divinity.

‘And when we finally locate Jazari at the centre of the universe,’ Bo almost sings with devout emotion, hands clasping the edge of the metal table. It leans forwards so the light of the glass dome catches one side of its face. The ridiculous protein style it wears gleams. ‘When we locate him, we will be proven correct and eternal, now and forever... Might beyond measure, my Ifican brethren.’

‘Measure beyond might,’ I say, without thought or desire for meaning. The words have become void, never more so. It’s gazing into the glass dome, at the floating zygote, overcome by a fixed expression of standby. I’m reluctant to break its focus, but my own question beats at my lips. I have to. ‘So... Are you coupling? With the female?’

It spins to face me. More silence. I think I’ve caused offence until it shakes its head. Not angry, but thinking.

‘Good question. Very good question. Not me. Probably not any of us for a hundred thousand days or more. But one day. Who knows?’

Thank Jazari. My fingers are clenched and I let them fall apart, feeling glands do their work, spreading liquid over my palms. I’ve never liked that sensation, never

will. It puts a hand on my shoulder. I want to pull away but I'll be sent to the city if I do. I know this. I root myself firm.

'I'm a father,' Bo says, shaking me back a little, forwards a little. 'I'm a father to all these Others and there'll be so many more.'

I smile, knowing I must.

We stand together outside the compound gates. Night is on its way, sol falling behind us. Bo hands me something. Small and dark, a handful. Seeds. They are light for something with such potential weight. It looks into the growing dark.

'Usually you stay longer.'

'I want to avoid fantasma.'

The wind throws grey dust about us. We are unmoving.

'Be careful in the wild. It can be dangerous.'

It seems haunted now, less exuberant. Maybe I should have stayed. When I find myself tracking automatically to those glass domes backed by red light, I picture my own meagre cultivation, the silent lives of the organic community I raise. I'm not sure whether it means me to feel unsettled, but I do. I put the seeds in my pocket, lower my head.

'Congratulations on your success and thank you for sharing it with me. We're on the verge of a new beginning, surely. Jazari bless you.'

'Certainly brethren,' it says. The expression is rigid as it scans me. No smile, no enamel. It knows, I'm thinking. But then you already do. My future, positive or otherwise is sealed, Banked.

I put both legs together, bend my knees. In one bound I am high. I scan over my shoulder. Bo is a tiny dot, no bigger than the insect that landed on its wrist, receding. I turn, tucking my chin into my chest. I soar.

Against my own wishes, I picture Building Four. Glass domes and hundreds of prototype Others. Mindless worker machines keeping them alive. I hear myself whisper under the rush of wind, shaking my head to blank the image. I do not want to see our work. I do not believe our cause. I do not. I close my eyes tighter. If I force hard, the image discontinues, replaced by my hedgerow, morning dew, rustling leaves.

So be it. Let all in Utoma know, I will do as Bo has. Make the creature, this dog as it calls her, come to me. I will coax it, not with meat or attempts to be quicker or

stronger, but letting it know I am not shaped by our history or the terrible places it leads. That is theirs to keep. I will not use it for exploration, but companionship, and if I ever have to, I'll leave for the wilds.

I raise my volume above a whisper, speaking over buffeting air. I will do better. I will.