

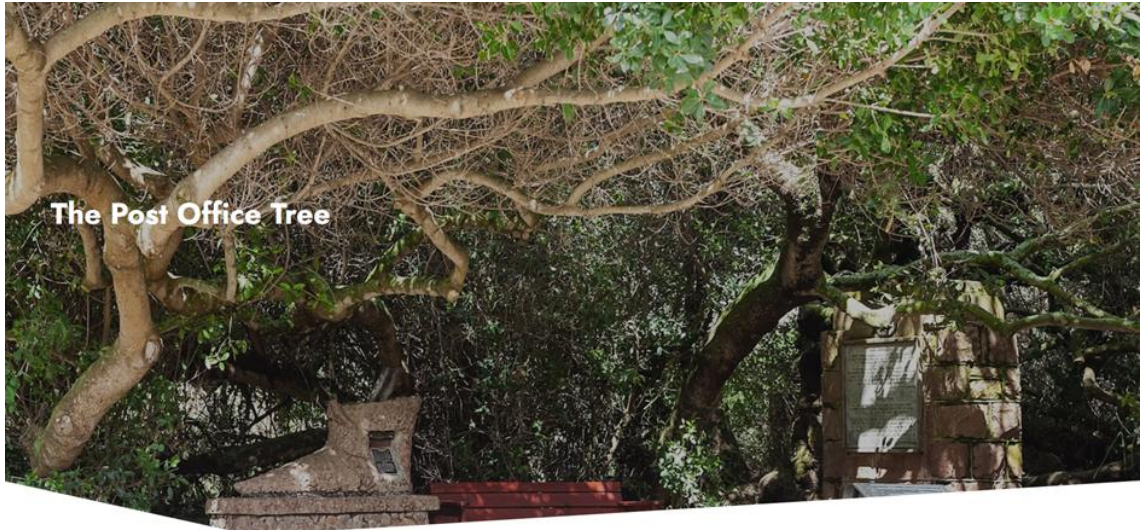
an unwritten life: the domesscroll book, ishtiyaq shukri**the manuscript under the tree**

image courtesy of: [bartolomeu dias museum | mossel bay](#)

one of my favourite chapters from primary school history is about the origins of south africa's postal service. during the 16th century, portuguese navigators exploring the oceans around south africa left messages for one another under a sprawling milkwood tree in aguada da sao bras, present-day mossel bay, the place where europeans, led by portuguese navigator bartholomew dias, are first known to have set foot on south african soil on 3 february 1488.

to a school boy, much about this story sparked my imagination: the 500-year interval separating me from them, their intrepid pioneering adventure, their reliance on leaving messages in an exposed location where they might get damaged or lost, the extended periods of time that lapsed between leaving and finding a letter, the evolution, over centuries, of such a makeshift system into a national postal service. during our childhood holidays around the country, the post office tree, estimated to be more than 600 years old, was one of my favourite places to visit. when the others had left, i would creep back under the

canopy of that ancient tree to imagine the scenario and try to conceive of the enormous timespan. how long is six centuries to a school boy at an age when a year seems like forever? that these early portuguese landings were also the origins of european dispossession and dominance in southern africa was not on the primary school curriculum in apartheid south africa. learning about that trauma and the enduring aftermath came later.

as a 21st century south african writer looking back over five centuries, those messages have an added layer of significance. while mid-17th century dutch diaries and documents have received a lot of attention, the messages left under the post office tree by portuguese sailors are from 150 years before. as such, they are amongst the first texts ever to be written and read on south african soil. ominously, most are warnings, typically announcing shipwrecks, storms, and hostilities along the indian ocean coastline. as a gesture to the spell that episode in our written history cast on my young imagination, and as a contribution to our writing tradition, in which strife, struggle and conflict have continued to be enduring themes, i am leaving this manuscript as though under that milkwood tree. it is the outcome of ten years of writing in very dark and turbulent waters, with very few lighthouses to guide the way.

systems are rudimentary at the edge of experience. no other hands have been involved here. *an unwritten life* is a entirely unmediated endeavour. releasing an uncut work is an unprecedented experience for me, and therefore somewhat daunting. foregoing the security of one's caravel is a menacing prospect. yet, this is precisely the scenario all the characters in the novel have to face, so why not the author? considering their circumstances, none of them have guarantees. to survive, they simply have to walk the tightrope, with no safety nets below. this is the world they inhabit. their only recourse is to white-knuckle it into the future. authoring them was a uniquely raw and gruelling experience. but they have also been the most incredible company an author could ask for during the course of a traumatic decade. of all my characters, for their

uncompromising authenticity, unwavering audacity, brazen defiance, and unshakeable bravery, the ones you are about to encounter in *an unwritten life* have my utmost respect. resolute, their undaunted attitude is: it's only fear. that is what makes them transcendent, at least to me. i shall miss them in my daily life going forward.

time is limited. new challenges beckon. january 2025 has been a terrifying century. a new world order is upon us, marked by the convergence of extreme and unkind wealth, duplicitous high-tech incitement, and the steady normalisation of fascism. it is time to relinquish this story. i fear harder times lie ahead, especially for readers in more vulnerable and marginalized communities in south africa and elsewhere. i am leaving this manuscript freely accessible under this tree especially for them and other dissenting explorers on their own intrepid voyages of self-discovery and defiance, a yarn for the odyssey ahead, encouragement to carry on. you are not alone. chart your course with care. this remains a fraught coastline, evermore littered with wrecks. the water grows increasingly treacherous, the currents ever strong.

poseidon be with you.

ishtiyaq shukri

january, 2025

an unwritten life: the domesscroll book

a traumatised dissident writer known only by his first initial, “m,” is confined to a psychiatric facility in a lush suburb of pretoria east. determined to make the most of his diminished circumstances, he perseveres with his new manuscript before he loses his mind completely. during his confinement, he encounters the stories of two fellow inpatients: totem, a non-binary adult entertainment illustrator on a digital detox, and malika, a wealthy but desperate woman on the run from a violent marriage. while trying to focus on telling his own story, m also gets increasingly absorbed by theirs. what emerges is a sweeping tapestry of tales from pretoria to cape town, london to la, durban to the arabian peninsula, revealing startling insights into contemporary british and south african urban subcultures. hilarious and tragic, sacred and profane, cruel and kind, exquisite and horrendous, shukri’s third novel escalates the themes of the genre, pushing its characters to the very edge. it is a moving exploration of the mind, a painful enquiry into the nature of truth and honesty, and a wincing depiction of dysfunctional people struggling to overcome extremes of abuse, exploitation, dispossession, violence, and torture. they have confessed, but will they attain healing and absolution? not for the faint-hearted, *an unwritten life* is a devastating story told in shukri’s distinctive interwoven narrative style. reader discretion is advised.

**an unwritten life:
the domesscroll book**

~

**the debris of a novel
in five fragments**

**by
ishtiyaq shukri**



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<https://www.ishtiyakshukri.com/>

<https://www.anunwrittenlife.net/>

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www.craiyon.com

this is fiction

for a malala

and in memory of

imam muhsin hendricks

1967-2025

“my conviction and my need for authenticity were greater than my fear of death.”

the hate you give: on being queer and muslim in cape town, by zachie achmat, tanya pampalone (ed.)

“the unexamined life is not worth living.” socrates, as spoken at his trial, in which he chose death over exile, 399 bce.

“the mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” satan, *paradise lost*, john milton, 1667.

“god help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee.” herman melville, *moby dick*, 1851.

“far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life.” herman
melville, *moby dick*, 1851.

“the first sentence of every novel should be: ‘trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.’ meander if you want to get to town.”
michael ondatje, *in the skin of a lion*, 1987.

author's note

dear reader

authors are commonly asked about the autobiographical elements of their novels. i have always flinched from the question; it misses the crucial distinction between two separate genres—autobiography and fiction. it also comes across as prying, an intrusive attempt to probe further into the life of the writer when they have already been generous through their story telling.

yet, the decade spanning the composition of *an unwritten life* from 2015 to 2025, includes some of the most traumatic events of my adult life: my deportation from heathrow in july 2015, fleeing pretoria with my sister and young nephew in december 2017 after she received death threats from her husband, coming out in february 2018 about the child sex abuse i experienced at the hands of priests in the anglican church of southern africa from the age of ten, and receiving a serious medical diagnosis in january 2024, a time when the horrendous genocide in gaza had already decimated whole swathes of my mental health, wellbeing, and sense of justice in the world. dna results in august 2024 compounded issues further, on the one hand expanding my insights into human migration, the staggering levels of hybridity, and monumental scope of humanity and history contained in the country of my birth, but also radically altering received ideas of ancestry, heritage, ethnicity, family, of who i was told i was, and of who i am. any remaining vestiges of exemption from strife were completely shattered with a catastrophic injury to my dominant right arm in october 2024, leaving me entirely reliant on my left hand, with which i am writing this note to you.

looking back at the relentlessness of the past decade, i am no longer surprised that so many of society's most pressing issues have also manifested in my life. anti-immigration bigotry, gender-based violence, sex abuse, and conflict are persistent plagues. why should i be exempt from them? the part of me that assumes immunity is the part of me i grapple with most—my privilege. why should i be deported when i wasn't washed ashore in a dingy, but flew in on a premium airline, a suited driver waiting with a name sign in arrivals to whisk me home to an affluent neighbourhood in north london? why should gender-based violence occur in the heart of my family, when we epitomise south africa's sheltered urban educated elite? why should i have to confront the enduring effects of child sex abuse, when i saw my world-class education and successful career as evidence that i had not been scarred by the trauma? why should my health not cave in, when deadly conflicts in ukraine, the occupied palestinian territories, myanmar, the sahel, ethiopia, the drc, sudan, and elsewhere were amongst the most defining features of 2024, which, according to ocha, was also the deadliest year on record for humanitarian aid workers?

notions of immunity from actuality are amongst the greatest delusions of privilege. if my experiences of the past decade serve as a warning, the world is becoming a harsher place, and unsparing consequences are closing in. humanitarian conventions are increasingly being undermined, even by democratically elected governments in long-established sovereign countries, international aid is chronically underfunded, basic services are stretched, even in industrialised countries, and everywhere, cushioning is wearing thin. the mountain of evidence is now incontrovertible: the current global structure, overseen and enforced by those same long-established democratic sovereignties, has failed the world, including the vast majority in their own countries. almost half the global population in over sixty countries and territories, including the european parliament, went to the polls in 2024, one of the most alarming outcomes being a marked swing to the far right. it remains to be seen how these newly elected extremist governments will serve the very people who voted for them out of a sense of frustration and disillusionment with

corrupt and indifferent mainstream parties. add the social influence and political interference of unelected tech billionaires with unimaginable wealth, and cataclysmic events resulting in dystopian outcomes suddenly seem less farfetched.

for twenty years, i have felt compelled to write about the ensuing pressures, even at times when i just wished the ground would open up and swallow me whole. a few days after my deportation, i woke from a nightmare screaming: i was born nowhere. i was born somewhere. i was born everywhere. i am accustomed to the presaging nature of certain dreams, having had them all my life. several scenes in *the silent minaret* and *i see you* are based on dreams and nightmares: the flashing green light in tariq's prison cell, his obsessive counting, his sleepwalking into the refrigerator, and the novel's opera score. such dreams have been some of the most terrifying aspects of my life and of my work as a writer, at times leaving me unsettled for days on end. this was one of those dreams. even in my dazed state, i stumbled to my desk to jot down these bizarre utterances: i was born somewhere. i was born nowhere, i was born everywhere. they were the first words i wrote of what, over the next ten years, would develop into the novel you see before you—*an unwritten life*.

i have always been able to write on the move, wherever i have found myself, in airport terminals, on aeroplanes, in hotel rooms from durban to damascus, at israeli occupied border crossings and checkpoints, in palestinian refugee camps, in camps in the arabian desert, in laybys and petrol stations in the karoo, in the houses of family and friends from johannesburg to jenin, cape town to cairo, salalah to sana'a, in short stay mental health crisis centres and longer term psychiatric facilities, even in my head, memorising whole swathes of writing in the deportation and interrogation cells operating behind the scenes at heathrow airport, where i was deprived of pen and paper during my detention.

my whole career, i have been a writer on the move. none of my writing happened at a single desk, or even in a single country. *the silent minaret* was written in the uk, south africa and india, where i also did a lot of rewriting on overnight trains between mumbai and bangalore. the final draft was on the rajdhani express from mumbai to new delhi. *i see you* was written in seven countries around africa, europe, the middle east and asia. my letter to desmond tutu about the child sex abuse i experienced was written on a flight from johannesburg to dubai. assigned by my psychotherapist in 2023 with the gruelling task of rereading my writing, two themes stood out: movement and the mind. both are amplified in *an unwritten life*.

it is a novel spanning three distressing periods of my life. born out of my deportation in july 2015, in july 2017, having spent two years on the manuscript, i resigned my career in higher education and returned to india to write full time. i think of those years as the era of dislocation and displacement, giving rise to al mustaqbal's story of dispossession in the skeletons. in december 2017, i flew to south africa to protect my sister and nephew. today, we light-heartedly refer to this as the time when we were "on the run," but underneath our gallows humour, the gravity of the experience abides. this is the era of fear and flight. it gave rise to malika's journal, in which she records her getaway from pretoria to cape town with jackson and zak. like issa's thesis in *the silent minaret* and tariq's article, "... and one can of sardines," in *i see you*, malika's journal is the novel's central narrative, the spine on which it stands. upon our real life return to pretoria, we had to find safe alternative accommodation quickly. at first, this seemed daunting, but then i had a dream about a friend in palestine. when i woke the following morning, i sent them an email. they replied within the hour, from pretoria. having just relocated, they had up to date spreadsheets of properties and agents from their own recent search. we moved into one of those properties within the week. in february 2018, two days before my scheduled return to india, tutu resigned as ambassador to oxfam following the sex abuse scandal that rocked the organisation. feeling compelled to speak out, the first opportunity to write my statement was on the flight from johannesburg to dubai,

sending the first draft to my publisher in johannesburg from the transit lounge in dubai airport. at first, i thought that statement sufficed, that i had confronted the matter, that nothing more needed to be said, and that i could carry on with my life. but, much to my dismay, my psychotherapist dismissed it as masking, a feeble gesture merely hinting at the experience while skirting around the excruciating details completely. she was right. the years of research into the topic, hospitalisation, therapy and training that followed felt like excavating graves and bringing up the bodies. only those who have undertaken the ordeal themselves can fully know the agony of the process. it is the era of psychiatric collapse, confinement and psychological trauma, giving rise to m's story in mensa with totem and malika, a fusion of personal experiences in psychiatric facilities from the age of eleven.

while these events have hemorrhaged into my writing, it is important to remember that *an unwritten life* is a work of fiction. considering it along with my other writing as my psychotherapist counselled, i see how the novel conforms to the blueprint in my work: not a single story, but a collage of fragments, a piecing together of shattered remnants by flawed and traumatised protagonists trying to reclaim and reconstruct their lives. if this has been your endeavour, i hope you find their attempts meaningful, inspiring and transformative.

thank you for reading.

anicca, dukkha, anatta ...

ishtiyaq shukri

london

january, 2025

commence domesscrolling

fragment one

mensa

1. mensa: a mountain of stars

why are your eyes so red? i got asked that a lot when i was growing up, totem says. they are my ward mate. i got good at spinning excuses, they continue. i was a very good liar. i would say: i got soap in my eyes, or, i couldn't find my goggles ... that was a favourite. i swim a lot, so it seemed very plausible.

totem is talking. totem is remembering. i am listening.

people talk a lot about memory and articulation here, about remembering and articulating the trauma so that you can overcome it. they use words like “catharsis” and “emancipation.” they say it is brave to remember when all you want to do is forget. structurally, i think it is an elegant thought—i like the juxtapositions—but, to be honest with you, i am finding it difficult to put into practice. call me a coward, but i would rather not remember. all *i* want to do, is forget. still, i persevere, writing in my journal every day, as we are encouraged to do, even if it is only about trivial things. this suits me well because these days my observations are only about the banal and the mundane. mediocrity is all i can muster. in fact, i excel at it. i am the master of the mediocre.

our ward is comfortable enough for two, but stark as any twin ward in a psychiatric facility can be. the walls are painted a light grey, the colour of stone. there is a seating area with a sofa, an armchair and a lamp. there are pictures on the walls, one at the head of each bed, daisies above mine, sunflowers above totem's; the kind of insipid art you get in drab hotels. the picture above the sofa is of two horizontal stripes; the top one is grey, the bottom white. the grey stripe on the top is broader than the white. i avoid this picture. it has a melancholy feel, too much like the seaside on a gloomy day. there are reading lamps attached to the head post of each bed. i like them because they are like

swivelling torches, so you can aim the beam away from your ward mate when they are asleep.

welcome to mensa, totem said when the nurse showed me into the ward. they were wearing a pendant that said: skank.

naturally, the nurse had introduced them by their real name, but i forgot it as soon as she had said it. you know how bad i am with names, so i think of them as totem, on account of their tall, lanky frame and all their tattoos, all crowned with a head and framed with a beard of flaming red hair like a burning bush.

it's a southern constellation, they continued when the nurse had left, one of the faintest in the sky. then they cupped their mouth conspiratorially. i looked it up late one night on a secret phone i had stashed away. it's named after table mountain, actually. did you know it is the only geographical feature to have a constellation named after it? isn't that dope?

i smile and nod.

a mountain of stars, they say ponderingly. imagine that.

so, totem said, clapping their hands together once with bonhomie as if they were about to announce a trip to the fun fare or the beach. when people ask why i'm here, i find it best to just be up front. i tell them i'm on a digital detox. no smart phones, no computers, nothing. i'm on the dark side of the moon, trying to get over a fucked-up relationship. and all the toxic substances. and all the crazy sex.

i think: i didn't ask, but i say: i see.

anyway, a few nights ago, that nurse caught me on the last of the secret phones i'd stashed around the place. i'd hidden it behind those kitsch daisies above your bed. she confiscated the phone. things have been a little awkward between the two of us since then.

there are two single beds in the ward, wankers' beds, as you used to call them. totem's is by the window. between our beds is a desk. i work there. when i was admitted, the desk faced the window and had views of the garden. sitting there meant having my back to the door, and you know i can't do that, so they were immediate anxieties for me, except now i was doubly anxious about having to explain these compulsions to a stranger. but totem made it easy.

they said: i never work at desks anyway. they remind me too much of school.

so, we moved the desk to face the wall. totem mostly works on their bed, their back against the wall, their legs crossed or stretched out or folded up at the knees, their sketchpad cradled in their lap. sometimes they sit in the armchair or lounge on the sofa.

there are two wardrobes, but i haven't unpacked yet, not yet. totem doesn't seem to mind my case at the foot of my bed, so i leave it there, like we did in our room in wadi al mawt. we also get on well like that, totem, and i. at first, i was apprehensive about sharing a ward, but we're okay. whether by design or by chance, we're a good fit.

the hospital encourages its patients to continue their work if they feel up to it, so long as they are not noisy or disruptive. there is a famous dj down the hall. he mostly keeps himself to himself, mixing music on his computer with his headphones on, headbanging while he works. totem is an illustrator and i am a writer, so we're quiet as mice.

our work has started taking over the walls of our ward. totem has stuck up a few of their sketches; mostly conventional scenes of london: red buses and telephone booths, black cabs, underground tubes; that kind of stuff. they draw them again and again. this surprises me, because there is nothing conventional about totem.

they're for burning when i'm ready, they say. i'm trying hard to move on from london and all the fucked-up shit that happened there. my psychotherapist suggested this process, drawing then burning. fuck bruv, let me tell you, it's tough, but last week i was finally able to tell her: mission accomplished. i've burned london. what do you want me to do with the sketches?

i have stuck up a few quotes above the desk:

"the sea is the universal sewer." jacques yves cousteau.

"yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever."
herman melville, *moby dick*, 1891.

"the engulfing waters threatened me, the deep was around me: seaweed was wrapped around my head." jonah 2:5.

"theo deutingen calls on the european commission to adopt his idea for 'europe in africa'—'tabula rasa' that would provide sanctuary for migrants heading to the eu." *e&t engineering and technology*, 7 december 2017.

"refugee nation would have to be a utopia or it would become a dystopia," bill frelick, human rights watch, *the washington post*, 23 july 2015.

"and the price to be paid by all who live in such places is to live with fear and hostility." chinua achebe, *home and exile*, 2000.

"if there is a hurricane you always see the signs of it in the sky for days ahead, if you are at sea. they do not see it ashore because they do not know what to look for." *ernest hemingway. the old man and the sea*, 1952.

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totem is a very open and generous person. their openness complements my reticence. sometimes i feel we slot into each other like two pieces of a puzzle. a light glows inside them when they show me their work.

what's this one?

the bank of england.

i like this obelisk. egypt?

it's cleopatra's needle. it was made in egypt in 1450 bce, but now stands on the north bank of the thames in london. i say, do you know why the pyramids are still in egypt?

because they were built there?

no, because they're too big to move to the british museum.

nice one. is this harrod's?

yup. i used to live near there.

i think: rich guy, but then a rabbit hole opens in my mind, and soon i'm free falling, legs and arms flailing during my plummet. who issued my license to make such assumptions? and if i am to be sincere about respecting their choices, as i said i would, i need to stop thinking of totem as a "guy."

after they had shown me a few of their sketches, they asked about my work. as usual, i recoiled at first, but given their openness, i told totem about europe in africa, and about the skeletons. they ask if they can read a bit. my first instinct is hesitation—the writing is still so unrefined—but in the end, i give them a few random pages.

and then totem brought something new into my creative life, because the following day, i found their illustrations of these places on my desk. now we have developed that kind of relationship; sometimes they sketch what i have written, and sometimes i write what they have sketched.

i stick totem's sketches of europe in africa and of the skeletons on the wall along with the quotes. they have depicted europe in africa as utopia. they signed it "tabula rasa."

it's latin for "blank slate," they explained. i wanted to capture the proposed sense of europe in africa being a fresh start.

the other illustration is of the skeletons. totem has sketched them as giant concrete rigs rising from out of a black sea, looming against a dark sky. they

had named the sketch “dystopia.” i had not thought about the skeletons in that way before, but totem had planted a seed.

sometimes totem’s vulnerability can move you to the verge of tears.

you honour me, they said on entering the room the next day. today’s pendant says: cunt.

i couldn’t fathom what they were talking about.

they pointed at their sketches on the wall. so, you like them.

i do.

they nod and smile. i really enjoyed sketching them. something different. not london. so, which do you like the best?

i like both.

they snapped their fingers. oi! don’t be boring. be decisive.

i look at dystopia. i want to tell them that it is as though they had stepped into my mind and plucked the place from there. dystopia is perfect, if there can ever be such a thing as the perfect dystopia, a more precise rendition of the place than i had imagined. totem’s work is like that; it penetrates the heart of the matter.

*

we can’t decide whether our ward is spartan or monastic.

totem asks: what’s the difference?

i say: we’re not monks, so it’s not monastic.

hell no. but we're not warriors, either, so it's not spartan.

but we are wrestling our demons, so maybe it is.

what?

spartan.

in the end, we resolve to see our ward as a cocoon, a boring grey canvas from which something dynamic will emerge. let's wait and see ...

we have a private bathroom. this is a big relief for me. you know my dislike of communal bathrooms. the windows overlook the garden, which is always neatly trimmed and clipped. there are lavender bushes along the pathways and under the windows. i pick a few sprigs on my way to my psychotherapy sessions with sandra. i roll them between my thumb and forefinger to release the scent, and to ground myself. i am smelling lavender, i observe, stepping into the moment. the crushed sprigs end up in my pockets.

there are benches and tables in the garden where some patients sit alone—a few in rigid, frozen postures, some rocking back and forth—while others chat in pairs or groups in the sun. buildings get cold inside during the winter, so it's warmer to be outside in the sun during the day. totem hangs out in the garden often. they have an easy way about them, whether they are alone or with others. they slip effortlessly from being solitary to being sociable. or at least they make it seem that way.

i only write in the ward. you know how i can't write outdoors or with others around. the desk is full. totem's journal and books are on the left, next to their side of the desk, mine on the right, next to mine. everything else on the desk is

mine: my laptop, my manuscript, my journal, and the extracts from malika's journal, which she reads in group from time to time.

*

balqees, queen of sheba. that is what i thought when i saw malika for the first time. she was stepping out of a luxury vehicle with tinted windows. i was mesmerised. she had a driver. she carried malika's baggage. i wondered about what had brought her here, and how long she was being admitted for. then, she vanished into her ward. three days passed before i saw her again. i had been looking out for her, so my heart leapt when she appeared. it was at group. what i noticed was this: she wears the finest clothes i have ever seen, and she knows how to make an entrance. i thought: dramas.

good afternoon, she said. i'm malika.

you already know that it's a common muslim name. the male form is malik, like one of my older cousins. it means "king." malika is the feminine form. it means "queen," so you can imagine my surprise when she told us her name, but i continue to think of her as balqees.

i have been here three days, she said.

hello malika, we said in unison, welcoming her to the group before going around our small circle introducing ourselves.

malika had a few sheets of paper rolled up in her right hand like a scroll. she tapped it in the curved palm of her left. she cleared her throat, readying herself

to speak. but then she fell silent, staring at the floor, gently twirling the pendant around her neck. it's an unusual piece; three pebbles clasped in gold. she's never without it.

my husband killed my best friend a few months ago. i find it hard to talk about. it's still very raw and painful. but i have been writing about it, as we are encouraged to do here. i'd like to share it with you.

she had made copies of her writing for each of us, which i thought was very considerate and open of her. she went around the group handing us each a copy. people sat up in their seats. we unfurled the rolled-up scrolls, intrigued and curious.

before we start, i'd like to say a little about the title, *the uncleanliest traffic*. i remember when i first read those words. i was an undergraduate student, eighteen and already in an arranged engagement to my cousin. we were to be married immediately after my graduation ...

i was studying *the story of an african farm* as part of my literature course. that novel lingers, and one sentence in particular has stayed with me: "marriage for love is the beautifulest external symbol of the union of souls, marriage without it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world." few lines from my learning linger more. frankly, i loathed my cousin, and, as things turned out, he loathed me ...

but we married as had been arranged. we had a son, zakariya. he's four now. at first, i thought that having a child would bring us closer together, but our loathing for each other intensified over the years instead. so, for all the years

we were married, i felt as though i was defiling the world, as though i was on a journey in the uncleaniest traffic ...

and then malika did something that surprised us all; she asked for a volunteer to read what she had written. totem's was the first hand up.

2. the uncleanliest traffic: malika's journal

this year,
i'll wear *purple* on christmas
maybe add a little *blue* here & there
a splash of red near my sleeves
ah, that'll do well
by mk, 2015

pretoria – kroonstad: let's go

the car moved south across the country, like a teardrop down a cheek. only you were awake, hunched over the wheel, hands grasped tightly at ten-to-two. your eyes flicked constantly between the mirrors and the headlights of oncoming traffic, the strain of your divided attention taking its toll. you thought you were focused, but it was only when you took the exit to the filling station that you realized you had actually been falling asleep at the wheel. joining the shortest queue at the pumps, you became aware of your toddler's nursery rhymes, still playing on the loop as they had been ever since you left mamelodi: when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, down will come baby, cradle and all ...

you asked the petrol attendant to check the oil, water and tyre pressure, things you'd skipped in your rush to get out of gauteng. but cape town was still a long way off, and you didn't want to run the added risk of car trouble on the way. it felt good to be out of the car, but the nagging feeling that he might be following you surfaced again, so you got back into the car, locked the doors, and kept your eyes on the mirrors.

the commotion woke jackson.

where are we? he asked, looking around with sleep-soaked eyes.

kroonstad.

want anything from the shop?

coffee. black. no sugar.

what about him? jackson checked, tilting his head at the child sleeping in the back seat.

he's sorted. but get some more jelly babies. he loves those, you said, counting out enough notes to pay the attendant before handing jackson the rest of the wad you'd withdrawn from an atm in pretoria.

all this? for coffee and jelly babies?

it's safer with you. my head's all over the show.

upon leaving the shop, jackson wandered around the parking lot, looking for the car. it was the start of the summer holiday season, and the filling station was full of travellers from the northern provinces destined for vacations by the sea. in the end, he sent a message: can't find the car. where are you?

the tone filled you with dread. you reached for your phone with trepidation, but sighed with relief when you saw the message. behind the pickfords truck, you responded, flashing the hazard lights.

he found you in the passenger seat, scribbling down numbers. how are you feeling now? he asked.

you'll have to take over from here, you said, dismantling your phone.

but i don't have a license.

what?

he shrugged his shoulders. prison and what, what, remember. me, i'm still catching up with life.

well, it's either a fine with you at the wheel, or an accident with me.

you reached for your coffee with one hand, and gave him the key with the other.

let's go, you said.

3. mensa: a striking piece

totem and malika sit together in the garden smoking from time to time. we're discouraged from forming intimate relationships with other patients so as not to interfere with their healing process, but they don't seem to be overstepping.

i sometimes watch them through the window, drinking coffee and smoking together. in each other's company, they seem light, radiant, as though with haloes. theirs is a beautiful dynamic to observe. they're sociable with others, too—smokers are sociable people; a shared lighter often ignites a group—but mostly it's just the two of them. they invite me to join them, but totem and i see

enough of each other, and i'm shy with beautiful women like malika. i never know what to say to them, then i get overwhelmed and just walk away.

when totem gets back to the room, they ask me something like: do you think she's really the you she's writing about?

i don't pay them much attention because i'm mid-sentence, so i shrug.

they say: i think she is.

i say: sounds like fiction to me. bad fiction.

totem scoffs: who comes to a psychiatric facility to write fiction?

then i look up from my writing, and say something i immediately regret: i don't know. maybe the same kind of person who comes to a psychiatric facility to draw london. bad london.

totem gives their bonhomie handclap again, and says: i'm going to have a shower.

*

i am writing. totem is sketching. just random images: miss piggy, a crucifix, titanic, dr zhivago. they stick the sketches up on the wall. i think: good. not london. they're moving on.

then they start another sketch. they show it to me when they have finished. it is of a car in the shape of a teardrop rolling down the map of the country.

what do you think? they ask. shall i give it to malika? do you think she'll like it?

i think: you really don't bear grudges. i look at their sketch. it's a striking piece.
i'm sure she will, i say.

i watch from the window when they give it to malika in the garden. she gasps.
no matter what they draw, totem's work has that effect on you, even if it's just
of a red london bus.

*

a few days pass before we see malika again. of course, my little fixation meant
that i had been keeping an eye out for her, in the lounges, in the garden, in the
coffee shop, in group, but she was nowhere to be seen, so i concluded that she
must be locked up in her ward writing her journal, and resolved not to let my
crush allow me to slip into becoming her stalker.

she rarely speaks in group, but she's a good listener. you can tell she's really
paying attention to people's stories, laughing along when they say something
funny, or nodding sympathetically when they are distressed. when she is ready
to share, she hands out her scrolls. sometimes we read them there; other times,
we take them away to read in our own time.

it's cold, and i'm keen to get out of my own head, so when i get back to mensa,
i get under the covers and start reading.

4. kroonstad – kimberley: please don't kill me

you woke to the sound of zakariya singing in the back seat. the nursery rhymes were back on.

salaam alaikum, baby boy, you smiled, reaching around your seat to squeeze the toddler's cheeks.

by now the sun had risen, so you pulled down your sunglasses from the top of your head, realising then that they'd been there all night. then you looked around in panic.

this isn't the n1. where the fuck are we?

outside kimberley, jackson answered decisively.

kimberley? what the fuck!

calm. you need to rest, and zak needs to get out of the car. cape town's still far. but—.

and he won't look for you there, jackson said, cutting you short.

*

it was late in the afternoon when you woke up. far from rested, your nap had left you feeling listless and lethargic. your neck was sweaty, your collar soaking wet. in the distance, you could hear jackson and zakariya playing in the pool. you wanted to join them, but fatigue nailed you to the bed, which you felt was sucking you down like quicksand. too tired to resist, you submitted to the exhaustion, and stared up at the ceiling while the sequence of events that had led you to this sweltering city, this bog of a bed, flooded your head once more.

you returned to your office from the last meeting of the year, a spring in your step at the prospect of shutting down your computer for the summer. but your mood changed when you saw the envelope waiting on your desk. you instantly recognized adam's handwriting in the shape of your name. too afraid to open the envelope, you gave it to your assistant. the colour drained from his face when he read the letter.

go back into your office, he said. and close the blinds. i'll call security.

when the security guard arrived, he confirmed that your husband had delivered the letter himself. once the guard had read the letter, he advised you to go straight to the police.

i need to get my son from nursery first, you said, haphazardly throwing things into your bag, unable to distinguish between what was needed, and what was not.

observing your frenzy, the guard took your keys and drove you himself. you had lived in pretoria all your adult life, but now the city seemed terrifyingly unfamiliar, its sedate tree-lined avenues transformed into hansel and gretel's ominous woods, howling trees clutching at the car with gnarled and twisted fingers.

once you were inside the police station, the nightmare abated, but when the police directed you to the family court, providing an armed escort there, the ordeal resumed, escalating before you like a magnifying series of matryoshka dolls, all in the guise of chucky. when the paperwork was finally complete, two officers accompanied you to waterkloof to deliver the interim protection order to adam in person. flanked by an officer on either side, you were nevertheless gripped by terror when one of them rang the doorbell.

please, let's make this quick, you said to the policemen.

when adam opened the door, one of the officers asked him to confirm his name before handing him the order. adam flipped through the document casually, as though he were merely browsing through the pages of one of his motoring magazines.

once he'd signed the document as the policeman had instructed, adam looked up at you, his contemptuous stare causing your hands to tremble. you clenched them into fists to steady yourself, knowing in your gut that the document would not restrain him, but that it had in fact inflamed him even further still. the police escorted you back to your car.

do you have a safe place to stay? one of them asked. realising then that home was no longer home, a feeling of utter destitution convulsed you. for a while, you just stood there staring blankly at the officer until eventually one name emerged from the haze—jackson—filling you with hope as a galleon on the horizon does a castaway.

you found him waiting for you outside his shack. when you crossed his humble threshold and collapsed onto his rickety bed, you became certain of two things: that your life as you had known it was over, and that the mamelodi shack you were in was safer than your waterkloof mansion would ever be. but when you woke the following day, jackson sat you down, his forearms resting on the table in front of him, his fingers interlaced as people do when they have something serious to say.

wena, me, i've thought about this very carefully. even with you locked up inside here, your car has already drawn too much attention. people are talking.

what are you saying, jackson? do you want me to leave?

he shook his head. i'm saying that you're not safe here.

so what should i do?

we need to leave.

that he'd used "we" instead of "you" brought some comfort. and where should we go?

your husband, he's a powerful man.

jackson, you said impatiently. that's not an answer. where should we go?

jackson opened his eyes wide, causing his brow to furrow. as far as possible, he said.

*

mamma, zak called out when you joined them in the pool, the water cool and invigorating against your skin.

under, mamma, under, he shouted, so you both breathed in as you had been training him to do, and ducked under the water.

zak laughed with delight when you surfaced with a boo!

gain, mamma, gain, he called out, slapping the water excitedly with his palms.

he's adorable. it was the woman from the guesthouse, smiling beside the pool.

how old is he, two? she guessed.

he's three, you said, curtly.

and half, mamma, zak added. dak tlee and half.

sensing your awkwardness, the woman dropped the subject and came straight to the point.

i thought i'd remind you that we have water cuts from six to six, in case you want to have showers before, or a bath for the little one, if you prefer. just make sure to keep it shallow, won't you?

tired from the journey and his swim, zak was asleep as soon as you had bathed and fed him. you and jackson were sitting at a quiet table by the pool, your food untouched on your plate. jackson tapped his finger on the lip of your plate three times.

eat, he said. you need to keep strong.

in the distance, there was a dull flash of lighting and a muffled rumble of thunder. a sudden gust of hot wind caused the candle on the table to flicker, and left you feeling flustered and confined.

fuck it's hot, you said, holding up your hair to expose the back of your neck.

you pushed back your chair, but once you had risen from your seat, you didn't know why you were standing, or where you should go, so you proceeded to walk in circles around the pool until the tune of here we go round the mulberry bush surfaced in your head. eventually, you sat down at the edge of the pool, kicking your feet in the water. when jackson finished eating, he sent your plate to your room, and walked over to the pool.

you can't bath, but you can swim, he said, sitting down next to you.

maybe they pay a levy, you speculated. or get a business exemption, a tourism waiver, or something like that.

or maybe they're just rich.

the two of you sat quietly by the pool for a while, moving your feet gently around in the water.

hey wena, you should get some sleep, jackson said, looking at his watch. we have a thousand kilometres to cover tomorrow.

i should, you agreed, but just continued to stare trance-like at the ripples on the surface of the pool.

there was a tv playing somewhere in the background. some of the other guests were laughing at trevor noah's story about a vampire called vernacular who was chasing a woman through a township.

i'm gonna bite you, vernacular threatened.

please don't bite me, the woman pleaded.

you imagined adam pursuing you with his gun.

i'm going to kill you, you heard him shouting, while you ran away pleading, please don't kill me.

5. mensa: wadi al mawt

meet sandra. she's my psychotherapist. she keeps repeating that remembering is brave when you just want to forget, but where is the courage in cowering under your pillow at night, the beauty when your mind is tearing itself apart?

i sometimes speak to sandra about you. i keep recalling our sofa, the one that stood out on your verandah in wadi al mawt. how we used to sit there, talking through the night, or just quietly looking out over the wadi. we'll never again sit in that place where we had formulated so much of our thinking.

like the day you asked me: do you think allah is a muslim?

i was mystified. i'd never thought about it, i said.

i don't think he is.

he must be.

but how can he be if islam means submission to the will of allah? how can he submit to himself? surely that would be diminishment of the supreme.

those times live only in my memories now, and sometimes things get foggy, so i want to write them down before i lose my mind completely. how we argued sometimes. how we laughed, laughed till we couldn't breathe, laughed till we cried. how we sometimes cried.

*

we sleep a lot, on account of our medication. there are two single beds in our ward. i smiled when i saw them.

wankers' beds, you said, when we checked into our room near the rook pools.

how could i forget that day? you almost drowned in one of the deeper pools, in which the bottom suddenly gives way to an underwater cliff. we had climbed up the cliff and followed the mountain path to the mouth of the spring where the water bubbles up through the rocks, clear cool mountain water. we were thirsty, so we drank deeply from the spring.

we were amazed at how such a small spring could produce all the water that filled the deep rock pools and fed the majestic palm trees and lush vegetation that grew along the banks of the wadi.

did you know, you said when you had finished drinking, that all the water in the world has always been here, and always will be in some or other form?

i was still drinking, so you carried on talking.

yup. the earth is a closed system into which nothing ever enters, and from which nothing ever leaves. water can neither be created nor destroyed.

you were a walking encyclopedia.

so why are there expiry dates on water bottles? i asked, wiping down the water i had splashed on my face.

because of the fucking plastic it's stored in, you said. plastic really fucks the world.

there were cockroaches in the room when we checked into our hotel that night, but we ignored them. we were just so tired and relieved to see those beds. we were safe.

alhamdulillah, you said when you laid your head on the pillow exhausted, falling into the deepest sleep i'd ever seen you sleep.

but i couldn't sleep. i lay looking up at the ceiling. i imagined how different it would have been had you drowned in the wadi. how we would have carried your body down the mountainside. me arriving in this room without you.

a place is about the people, you always said.

what would this room be like now without you?

i see your bag at the foot of your empty bed. your father and brother would arrive. they'd find me here with the cockroaches. i'd see the pain on their faces. i'd take them to identify your body, and then you'd be buried here, in the desert, far away from home, and i'd never see you again, when there was still so much to be said.

and then you inhale deeply, and turn around in your sleep. i am relieved. why does my mind do that to me, conjure the worst scenarios, even when all is well?

alhamdulillah, i say, and try to go to sleep.

*

my desk is full. i have a laptop and two notebooks. one is white, the other black. it has the words *we're all mad here* printed on the front cover. we are encouraged to keep a journal, so i use it as one. the white notebook is work. there's a picture of a drop on the cover. it could be a drop of water. it could be a teardrop. it could be the last drop. it could be the start of a flood.

i prefer writing on the laptop, but totem is having a "device detox," as they call it. have i mentioned that? i'm afraid i'm not a lucid witness. i lose track, on account of all the medication, on account of all the sleep.

totem and i respect each other's triggers, paying homage to them like gods. if they walk into the ward and i'm on the laptop, i look to them for a sign. often, it's thumbs up—totem is very brave at facing their demons—but when it's

thumbs down, i lock the laptop away, and continue by hand, or i move into the garden.

i don't like writing in the notebooks outside, though. i don't want people to think i'm writing. i've always felt very self-conscious about that. an intimate process, exposed. when i'm forced to write in the garden, i use my laptop and earphones. then i'm not necessarily writing; i could be doing anything.

at first, it was difficult for me to write with totem around, and i resented them somewhat for that. it wasn't about them personally; i'd just gotten used to being alone when i write. if they felt the same way about me, they didn't show it. but now i've gotten used to having totem around, and that's good for me, my doctors say.

one often hears people here saying things like: "an addict alone is in bad company," or "a suicidal person alone is in bad company," or "a depressed person alone is in bad company."

one day, i came across a quote by jean-paul sartre, and stuck it on the wall with the rest: "if you're lonely when you're alone, you're in bad company."

now that i'm used to totem, i realise how easy they'd made it for me to find a place of my own in mensa. despite all their tattoos, totem has the remarkable ability of making themselves invisible, of seeming absent, of blending into the background, like a chameleon, so that you barely notice them, even in a small ward for two. although they don't know it—or perhaps they do—but through totem, i have come to understand what sandra has been saying: if you're to be safe and well, you should never be alone again.

totem agrees. they say they're going to get a puppy when they get out, or a kitten. and then they look at me with wide eyes, or maybe even a wolf. can wolves be domesticated?

i shrug. that's the kind of thing you'd know.

whatever, totem says. i imagine i'd be untouchable and invincible with a wolf by my side. imagine me walking my wolf and everybody stepping aside to clear the way for us.

*

totem is keeping a record, too. they sketch. they laughed when they saw my diary. theirs has the same words on the cover: *we're all mad here*. we sometimes pick up the wrong diary, on account of their similarity, on account of our sedation.

am i totem in your *mad*? they asked me one day when they had opened the wrong one.

they read what i had written: i call them totem, on account of all their tattoos. that was the first word that came to mind when i met them. then i remembered queequeg. it was not long before i was thinking about tonto, then chief bromden, then uncas, and then my mind set off on a tangent about stereotypical depictions of indigenous people. i fumbled in trying to explain my reasoning to them, along with my very real difficulty with remembering people's names, so i just make up my own names for them.

totem was very kind. relax, they said, handing back my *mad*.

don't over think too much. besides, i like totem.

really?

better than my given names.

why?

surname's kiri. you can find us everywhere, from finland, to india, to nigeria, and of course, japan. but my parents still named me harry. can you imagine the ripping i got at school?

why harry?

because i was born on the same day as harry.

harry? harry who?

it will come to you.

no way. seriously?

that's my parents for you, unthinking till the last. why can't people just take a moment to think things through? still, i suppose he's not the worst of that lot to be named after. and, as things turned out, we're both gingers, and both quite fucked up. but hey, at least he's got megan, whereas i ended up with osama.

*

we call them that now: *mad*. that's my *mad*, we'll say, or have you seen my *mad*? it reminds us of *mad magazine* from childhood. it takes off the edge.

in my *mad* i write about the things sandra tells me to consider, or things i want to say to you. things only became real once i had articulated them to you.

you helped me clarify so much of my thinking, but you were wrong about the earth being a closed system; there's a crack somewhere in it through which you fell from the world, a crack that transformed you from a living person in my life, to a memory in my mind.

now, nothing seems real, and i have become unstuck, like the loneliest whale in the world, lost somewhere in the pacific, hopelessly looking for friends.

some say it's a myth.

if so, am i?

*

the white notebook with the drop on the cover is for work. i try to keep track, but sometimes i get confused, on account of the medication, on account of all the documents i'm working on.

i have three open at the moment. sometimes i focus on one. other times, when my mind is restless, or i'm manic, i flip between all three of them simultaneously.

sometimes i find myself repeating things, or forgetting things, or writing them down in the wrong places.

i think i'm starting to forget.

it's not long before i'm going round and round in the revolving door in my head. then i can't figure out if what i'd written was intended for my *mad* or for my white notebook or for my manuscript, or even if i had written it down all.

sometimes i can unravel the thread, other times my stories just flow into one another like a confluence of colliding rivers, crashing in my mind.

and then there are times when i'm just too medicated to figure it out, then i remember totem's words—don't over think too much—and i shut down the laptop, close the books, and go to sleep. tomorrow is another day.

*

totem is lying in their bed, and i in mine.

they say: tell me something.

i say: i can't think of anything.

they ask: what's in *teardrop*?

i smile. *teardrop*. that's totem; they nail things. i pass it to them. it's about europe in africa, and the skeletons, i say.

they flick through the notebook. i don't know why i'm thinking *lord of the flies*.

totem is going off on a tangent, but then they make an interesting point. europe in africa is a vision of utopia. the skeletons is the dystopia it falls into. totem has that extremely rare quality; they are an inspiration.

we're quiet for a while before totem says: you know what i've always wondered about that book? what if they'd been girls?

then we start talking about the possible scenarios until we fall asleep.

*

one day, totem finds me with their *mad* open in my hands.

i'd confused the two again. sorry, i say. i would have closed it immediately, but the pages fell open on these.

on facing pages, totem had drawn two images. on the left page is europe in africa. they'd titled it *tabula rasa*, and it was more beautiful than i could have imagined. on the right page they'd drawn the skeletons. it was a dark and ominous sketch. it made me shiver.

no worries, they say. they're for you anyway. i'm trying to draw things other than london.

they reach for their *mad*, tear out the sketches, and give them to me.

they're up on the wall, too. i spend a lot of time looking at them. they help focus my mind.

6. the skeletons: breathing

think of me as al bedoun, because i am the one who is without. i am writing a history so that something remains, for what is history but what remains, what is remembered, what has been written down for posterity? there are no blank slates, no tabulae rasae. history is everywhere, even here, in the middle of the ocean.

when i was a boy, i would sometimes sit next to sitting man, feebly imitating his pose, but while he remained still as a statue, i fidgeted and moved around, as a child is prone to do.

then, one day, sitting man opened his eyes and looked right at me. caught in the act of staring, i looked away for a moment before looking back at him again.

what are you doing? i asked.

breathing, he said. you should try it.

i can already breathe, i thought, and walked away.

time passed. people passed. ayah passed, and i soon became occupied with the effort of survival, diving for a livelihood into the depths of the ocean with the other young men of the skeletons to pluck what treasures lay down there. but when i was a young man, aimless one day as to what to do, i sought out sitting man once more. he always sat facing out over the ocean. i sat down next to him.

still breathing?

he inhaled deeply.

all these years. why?

sitting man exhaled. to see the truth.

and what's the truth?

that nothing is permanent. everything is always changing.

i had been expecting a long lecture, but that was all he said, repeating:
changing, changing, changing. anicca, anicca, anicca ...

sitting man vanished a long time ago. nobody really knows what became of him.
he was just there one day, and gone the next. ayah is long gone, too. so is
mohannad.

i remember when we cast their bodies to sea. i watched ayah float away from
the edge of the rig where we used to sit, her stories whispering in the waves:
you were born nowhere ... you were born somewhere ... you were born
everywhere ...

i watched mohannad float away, too, climbing up and up the skeletons, until i
reached the top floor of the rig from where we'd made our last dive together.
when his body sank, i saw us underwater, him pulling my face to his, putting his
mouth to mine, and kissing his last breath into me.

sitting man, ayah and mohannad are what remain.

remain amongst the many names on our wall of the dead.

remain in me.

7. mensa: pregnant eyes

i see our sofa again. those times live only in my memories now. how we argued sometimes. how we laughed, laughed till we couldn't breathe, laughed till we cried.

they say that remembering is brave when you've taught yourself to forget, but where is the courage in cowering under your pillow at night? how beauty falls from the world like dead leaves in autumn when your heart is hurting and your mind is tearing itself apart. the mind is relentless, and i'm unable to find an answer or solution to make her feel at ease. the mind is always keen to stalk dark alleyways.

we sat a hole in one end of that sofa. eventually, it became so deep, it was almost like sitting in a bath with your feet hanging over the edge. so, we stuffed the collapsed end with a tray from the oven, but that made it hard to sit on, so we'd vie for the softer end.

i've never forgotten that sofa. the things we spoke about in it. totem says i talk to myself a lot, even in my sleep. i deny it. but it is true that i remember you sitting next to me, playing the violin, the music that calmed us—fairouz in the morning, umm kulthum at night—the debates about islam and the muslim world that got us vexed, the books we read, the movies we watched, the food we ate, then it's not long before i'm having imaginary conversations with you back in the sofa. maybe that's when i start talking to myself, as totem claims i do. i often wonder about who's sitting there in that sofa now. do you think they know what happened to us?

*

i have agreed to writing every day, even if it's only about trivial things. my ward is square. there's an armchair and a desk. the desk faced the window when i arrived, but views are distracting, so i turned it to face a wall. it's painted grey. i'm sitting there now. the wardrobe is in the corner, but i haven't unpacked. my case is still at the foot of the bed. i dig out what i need every day. there are two single beds. one of them is totem's. they're my ward mate. i smiled when i saw the beds. wankers' beds, you'd called them.

the wards have names: centaurus, crux, hydrus, indus, aries, gemini, leo, orion, pisces and taurus. we're sectioned in a galaxy, a galaxy for the insane. but there is no scorpio. i notice this because it's my sign. however, there is mensa, our ward. i'd never heard about it, but given the pattern, i concluded that it must be a constellation, too.

am i repeating myself again? i'm sorry if i am.

welcome to mensa, totem said. it's a southern constellation, in case you're wondering. i looked it up late one night on a phone i'd stashed away. it's named after table mountain. a mountain in the sky. imagine that.

it was a pleasant image to have in a new room, but then totem continued. what came next surprised me, not least because of the ease and candour with which they spoke.

then i started watching a video of osama fucking me, they continued. he's my toxic ex ...

actually, that's not fair. i'm not blameless either. it's just that we unlocked dark portals in each other, and went to very dangerous places together ...

anyway, i was just about to cum when that nurse came in and shone her torch in my face ...

fuck mate! tell me, how do you apply the brakes at that stage? plus, i jizz a lot. seriously, it's like the fucking bellagio fountains. it takes forever for me to shed my load ...

but i was so distracted by her hovering in the doorway, i forgot to tilt my head away from the buzz, so i nuttet in my fucking eye, and you know how that stings. seriously, my eye was red for three days.

a new excuse for red eyes, i say. i came in my eye.

nice one, totem says, high-fiving me.

my eye is pregnant.

we fall over sideways on our beds, clutching our bellies.

seriously, bro. you'd think she'd have closed the door, totem continued when our laughter had subsided, but she just stood there, and i remembered nurse ratched, and that just totally wrecked what would otherwise have been a great fucking nutt ...

she could have closed the door, but she just stood there till i finished ...

then she took the phone, and left the ward, all judgy and superior.

dr smith brought it up in our therapy session the following day. she started with the mobile phone and how it was a contravention of our process yada yada yada. but i was already feeling bad enough about it, so i tuned out ...

then she asked me about what i had been looking at on the phone. i had anticipated that one, so i told her about mensa.

anything else? she asked.

i didn't know how much nurse ratched had told her, so i confessed to the rest as well.

then totem looked me straight in the eye.

i don't know why you're here, they said, and i don't need to, but i'll say this, just tell them everything. open up. it's a very powerful thing to do.

8. protea: spilling ink pots

sandra says that people with a history of trauma often attempt to conceal their anxiety. she explains that in psychoanalysis it's called "masking." she says it's a common coping mechanism to conceal negative emotions. she says i've become good at it. she wants me to articulate details, and she poses a scenario for me to consider. but instead of her scenario, my mind starts flashing with iconic masks: batman, guy fawkes, scream, phantom of the opera, darth vader, maximus' helmet, zorro's black band, hannibal lector's muzzle.

i look away from sandra, and slap myself across the face to make it stop. there is a digital photo album on one of the bookshelves. the images change from time to time, but gently and only intermittently, so they are not a distraction. today, there is a quote: being entirely honest with yourself is a good exercise, sigmund freud.

i try, but my mouth opens and closes, like that of a fish. movement, but no sound. malika's story comes to mind: "the car moved south across the country, like a teardrop down a cheek." i take a tissue from the box, which is strategically placed on the table.

have you thought about writing it down, she asks?

i know her methods well enough by now. she frames suggestions as questions.

“it,” i thought, a two-letter funnel though which everything must drip.

last week, it was speaking to myself in the mirror. i nodded. she has come to know me well enough, too. she lets me be silent. she doesn't push hard at closed doors.

i do it myself sometimes, she said, but only when the mirror's still steamy from the shower.

the week before, it was rorschach cards. in the first one, i saw a bat. number five was a bat also. three looked to me like two monkeys, or baboons, but then their pointed snouts reminded me of poodles.

then she laid down number six. i immediately saw a violin, and shuddered. my hands clenched into fists. i closed my eyes. i brought a fist to my mouth, and started biting my clenched forefinger as i do. i sat tightly frozen like that for quite some time.

just breathe, sandra said.

go on, she encouraged me. breathe in. like this, she demonstrated, inhaling deeply through her nostrils, then exhaling through her mouth.

breathing connects you to the world. it's the only thing all living creatures do together all the time. it's the first thing you do when you are born, and the last thing you do when you die.

go on. try it.

i inhaled.

that's good, sandra said. now step into the moment. observe your current reality, as it is in this very moment.

look around you. what do you see?

don't think about it too much. just observe the simplest things.

her surgery is in a sunny corner at the end of the corridor. the patients' wards are named after constellations, the doctors after flowers. sandra's is called "protea." it is in a prime location. light flows in through large windows commanding sweeping views to the north and west. the windows overlook the garden, the treetops and the hills beyond. the walls are lined with bookshelves and paintings. seating is arranged around a coffee table in the middle of the room. there are side tables with lamps and potted plants. it is a tasteful room. almost a living room. almost a home.

i sit facing the window. sandra sits a comfortable distance away; her chair is directed away from the windows, and is angled gently towards me. there is a fine persian rug on the floor between us. i think that's why she seats her patients here, so that our eyes have room to wander. she is a thoughtful and considerate woman, i feel.

i see a violin, i said.

and what does a violin signify for you?

my best friend played the violin.

the first week was mostly silence from me. i would look at the lush garden through the window, or the woven garden in the rug on the floor. they remind me of home. sometimes i'd look at the paintings, or the bookshelves.

discreetly hung on a quiet wall is a print of a man in a blue suit. i flinched when i first saw it. he is sitting by a fire with his head in his hands. i saw despair. i saw submission. i saw honesty. a confession. me. but i don't look in that direction too much because it also means looking away from sandra, and i didn't want to seem rude.

when i got back to mensa, i opened my laptop out, and looked up the picture. that old man, let me tell you, even with his head in his hands, he saw right through me. i wanted to know who could paint an image that can see right through a man like that. it's by vincent van gogh—one of his last.

the following day, i pointed at the picture.

mind if i take a closer look? i asked.

by all means, she gestured.

i stepped up to the picture. van gogh died two months later. i think it's the most honest portrait i've seen, and a brave picture to display, given the setting. i remember what totem said: tell them everything.

sandra joined me at the bookshelf after a while. there was a lot of sigmund freud and carl jung.

what have you got there?

i'd taken down *the white hotel* and *moby dick*. this one i read at college, i said, holding up *the white hotel*. and this one, i said, holding up *moby dick* ...

this one ...

take your time.

this one reminds me of my best friend, too.

i call you that now, "my best friend." it's hard to say your name, and i wince when i hear it spoken. maybe one day, insha'allah, i will be able to say it again.

our names are part of what makes us human, sandra said one day.

i couldn't say it, but i agreed to write it down. i started in arabic, but just as i switched to english, she stopped me, and held out her hand. i passed her the paper with your name in arabic.

she ran her finger over the letters. when you look at this, you see a name of deep significance. when i look at it, i see only unfathomable shapes, a veil, even though we've spoken so much about this person. this is what i mean when i talk about masking. i'd like us to take off the masks and pull back the veils someday. can we do that?

*

sandra likes crosswords. she's mid-word when i arrive for our next session, so i let her finish. when she's filled out all the remaining letters of the word, she puts the crossword aside.

how are you?

i give her two sheets of paper, one with your name in arabic, the other with the arabic alphabet and corresponding latin letters.

she was quick. i think i know his name, she said. there was real excitement on her face.

and then she did a very considerate thing. but can i say it?

i was struck by her thoughtfulness once more. she didn't take the liberty of just saying a name i could not.

yes, i said. you can say it.

and then she said your name.

i nodded. that was his name, i said. that was my best friend's name.

i tried hard not to cry, but i couldn't stop myself, so i did.

sandra said: good. masks off.

i said: fuck off. i hate you.

*

she asks me another question, but sometimes one question sparks a thousand thoughts, like a fireworks display going off in your head. then i quickly become overwhelmed again, and i can't answer.

okay, she says after a while. let's set it aside for now. how's your work coming along?

the deviation brings no relief. i feel anxious about my work, too. it feels interrupted, encroached upon. my trauma has started haemorrhaging into my writing. i feel paralysed. inadequate to the task. some days i can only stare at my monitor, the cursor flashing mockingly at me: come on, chicken. don't leave me flashing here all day. go on. use me. i dare you.

i'm not fast like totem, or focussed like malika. i'm slow. maybe totem's right. perhaps i do think too much. i'm always listening to the voices in my head, which sometimes sounds like listening to several radio stations at once.

sandra will listen attentively to anything i say. that is a very powerful position to be in, but i'm not used to talking about my work. so, it remains locked in my head, spinning in a never-ending loop. the untrained mind is always busy; that is its undisciplined nature.

but writing has also taught me patience, like mining for diamonds: a lot of digging for a little yield. so, i have learned to wait, like a surfer for a wave. sometimes i'm just bobbing about, treading water, staying afloat, keeping faith—waiting. and when the wave comes and the words pour out, it's as though you're simply taking dictation. and then a simple question with a complex answer arises: where did it come from?

i still remember our conversation about revelation and hallucination. it was ramadan, and we resumed our conversation after taraweesh. we had been talking a lot about the nature of revelation, about how terrifying it must be, about the traumatic effects it had on the prophet.

what's the difference? i asked.

you answered concisely: revelation is external; hallucination is internal.

some things you forget, some things you remember. that i have not forgotten.

i hear my name being called. it's sandra.

sorry, i slipped away.

i asked how your work's coming along?

totem says i over think.

and what are you thinking?

they're all bleeding into one another.

that's a very striking metaphor. who are they?

my journal, my manuscript, my essay. it's like spilling inkpots. i feel flooded.

what about taking a break?

i shake my head. not possible.

why not?

one's nemesis never takes a break. i have to keep up.

in which case, talking helps clarify things. it gets it out of your head so that you don't get overwhelmed. shall we try it?

i nod.

good. imagine we're doing the laundry. the washing machine is your mind, the clothes inside are the thoughts in your head, going round, and round, and round. now press stop. take out one of those thoughts, as you would an item of clothing. now, let's hang it out in the sun to dry, then iron it, then pack it away neatly. what's the thought you've taken out?

saudi arabia.

the words fall between us with a thud.

okay. let's hang saudi arabia out in the sun. tell me about it.

how much do you know?

not much.

i don't believe her. i think she feigns ignorance to get me talking. so, what comes to mind when you think about it?

the embassy in hatfield. i drive past there every day on my way to and from work.

and what does the embassy prompt in you?

the recent assassination of the saudi journalist ... i'm sorry, i don't remember his name ...

jamal khashoggi.

khashoggi. that's right. horrific.

others, too. nimr al-nimr. and many hundreds more besides. and why do you think such things happen in saudi arabia?

but it was in their embassy in istanbul, no?

still saudi soil.

granted. because it's a strict islamic country?

i disagree.

why?

because it's not an islamic country at all. it is a corrupt theocracy under occupation by an obscene family—the house of saud. i don't think it should even be allowed to carry the shahada on its flag.

what's that?

it's the islamic creed. la ilaha illallah muhammadar rasool allah.

meaning?

there is no god but allah, and mohammed is his messenger.

now i know.

do you also know that the house of saud has also presided over the dysneyfication of hajj.

i don't know what that means.

it's quite simple.

not to me.

it means that the sauds have completely destroyed historical mecca, totally altering the landscape of the city in favour of monstrous high-rise hotels and expensive time-share resorts for wealthy pilgrims.

and what's your issue with that?

it runs contrary to the whole idea of hajj, which is to bring muslims together as equals.

sandra sits up in her chair and crosses her legs the other way.

those historical sites do not belong to the sauds, or even to the saudis; they belong to the entire muslim world, and the sauds have no right to destroy them.

i sense a lot of passion; some might even say fervour.

i'm not alone. there's a small but growing call to boycott hajj.

why?

human rights violations, but also because of this war with yemen. it was a turning point for many muslims of conscience, the notion of one of the richest countries in the region pulverising the poorest and most fragile. there's nothing islamic about that, more so when the aggressor projects itself as the avatar of islam. and then there's the story of hajj itself, the story of hagar, for instance.

abraham's wife?

his egyptian slave. sarah was his wife.

what's the story?

so, abraham abandoned hagar and their baby son, ismail, in the desert. hagar is specifically a single mother, a woman alone. in one of the rituals of hajj, pilgrims move back and forth seven times between the two hills of safa and marwa as she did, to commemorate her desperate search for water. but, today, women cannot go on hajj alone without a mahram.

a mahram?

an unmarriageable male chaperone.

so that it would be impossible for hagar herself to make the journey today.

and there you have it. don't be fooled by the saudi's surface attempts at reinvention.

i hear totem's advice: just tell them everything. it's a very powerful thing to do. so, i say it. i think we should liberate islam from saudi arabia. i think muslims should take back mecca from the sauds just as the prophet took it back from the quraysh.

sandra rests her elbows on her armrests, and brings her hands to her chin. this is how she sits when she's considering something seriously.

can i ask you something? i ask after a while.

by all means, she says, opening her palms.

what's the difference between revelation and hallucination?

i'll think about it, but let me ask you to consider something in return. where are you in all of this? what's your story?

my work is important to me.

i know. and i'm not contesting that. but how important are you to yourself? you talk so eloquently about such difficult topics, but you can't articulate your own trauma, the reason you are here. this is what i mean about masking and deflection. you're expert at using other forms of trauma to mask your own. saudi arabia isn't my patient, you are.

fuck's sake, i hiss. you wanted to do the fucking laundry, and pack it away neatly. pack this, i shout, sliding everything off the coffee table on my way out.

*

to our next session, i bring props: totem's illustrations.

my ward mate drew these. the first one is of europe in africa. it's an idea to build an artificial island in the sea to accommodate migrants and refugees, the repurposing of the sea for habitation by the destitute. the other sketch is the skeletons, what happens when europe in africa turns into the catastrophe activists and humanitarians warn it will be. i give her a short extract to read. the main character, al mustaqbal ba'ad al ufuq, is the narrator.

she makes a good attempt at saying the name.

it means the future beyond the horizon.

once again, these are very burdensome, very heavy themes. why?

they say writers don't choose their themes, but that themes choose their writers.

and do you think that's true?

i sometimes wonder where the words come from.

are you familiar with the theory that traumatised people often choose to work in traumatic settings?

i chill passes through me.

she retrieves two books from the shelves. i think they'll help as stepping-stones to take us forward. one is called *the body keeps the score*, the other *dark nights of the soul*.

i thank her, and when we conclude, i return to mensa where i place the books on my side of the desk and go to sleep.

9. the skeletons: the vastness of my mind

i won't start with my name. had it been ishmael, that would have been simpler, and i too could have said, "call me ishmael." i've always thought that a clever introduction; it doesn't mean his real name was ishmael.

let's not start with the body, ravaged and thin. all used up.

nor the place. mine is not a story about the land, but of the sea, ever changing, the water always migrating. can anything be said to take root here?

neither the mind—it's the hardest of all to dive into. sometimes it's stark, like i'm told the skeletons were on the day we arrived, bleak clouds hanging over a grey sea. at other times, it is vast and sweeping like the ocean, which surprises me.

what constitutes such thoughts when i have lived a confined life here on the skeletons, so that the vastness, which sometimes sweeps through my mind overwhelms me? our watery universe, of the people who endured it, like the old man who sat out on the edge of one of the rigs, legs crossed, eyes closed, back upright as a column, body motionless as a statue. that was long ago. he is long gone. i still remember the last time i saw him, etched in my memory.

my childhood with mohannad; how he could dive from the top floor of the skeletons and slice through the surface of the ocean like a sword, embodying the meaning of his name without a splash.

memories of diving deep into the sea, hunting for fish and sea fruits, sponges and pearls with mohannad and the other young men of the skeletons. the underwater world into which we escaped, and in which mohannad gave his last breath to me.

of the day the pirates arrived, not in galleons under billowing black sails, but roaring up in speedboats.

memories furnish my mind, but some ways of thinking need to be tossed out and pitched onto the flames. a bonfire of the mind, in the middle of the ocean. sending smoke signals, from incinerated thoughts, that's how desperate we are.

10. mensa: do you remember “an unwritten life?”

sandra and i agreed that i would try and write it down, but i find myself staring long and hard at that word “it.” i type it a few times—it, it, it,—but then i am reminded of jack torrance typing, “all work and no play makes jack a dull boy,” over and over again in the overlook hotel.

so, here i am, once again writing to you. i miss you deeply. you were my banister, now i'm falling down the stairs. it would have been better had we been sitting in our sofa. writing isn't easy, even when it's only to you. you know this. i once told you about a man who rowed solo across the atlantic, then wrote a book about it. he said that writing the book was much harder. you liked that story. how easily we talked on that sofa

let me tell you, writing is even harder than cowering. i force my hand towards other things, but the mind is stubborn, like pushing at a wall. set on its course, like an ocean current, or an oil tanker. like a railway line, or a carriage being pulled by a thousand horses. its path is set. it will thunder ahead on that path like a steam train, fixed in its course.

how hard it is to direct it towards other things. but only if you let it, sitting man said. you must develop the strength to wrestle your mind into equanimity, to tame it to perceive finer things, towards cultivating new pathways out of the dark forest, towards the sunlight and the open meadows. the untrained mind dwells in the past, and frets about the future. it swings like a pendulum between old preconditioned saṅkhāras of craving and aversion. the disciplined and focused mind attends only to the present.

i have persevered in writing to you, and now i have arrived at a break in the clouds in my mind, and step into that meadow ... do you remember how beautiful the meadows were in spring, the desert transformed into carpets of wild flowers as far the eye could see? i'm often reminded of those meadows when i look at the rug in sandra's room.

i think i've struck on a title for my manuscript. do you remember "an unwritten life" from the time when you were reading *moby dick*?

listen to this, you said. "far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life."

an unwritten life, you repeated.

saheeh, you said. it is true. we're just channels to be flicked through, pages to be turned, tragedies to be tolerated.

i still remember that well. it was so easy to be in that sofa, to talk, or to be silent, if that was how we felt.

kassam, that sofa was a free country.

population: two.

*

they say that remembering is brave when all you want to do is forget, but where is the good in cowering under your pillow at night? where is beauty when your mind is tearing itself apart? ya zalami, let me tell you, writing is even harder than cowering. i'm telling you; i force my mind towards other things, but the mind is stubborn, busy, set on its own path, sometimes even throwing up a multitude of thoughts simultaneously like an explosion of fireworks, and one just stands there, dazed and overwhelmed.

but only if you let it. you have to stop it and step into the moment. you must be strong and wrestle your mind, as alexander did bucephalus, taming a horse no one else could ride. then i see myself on a stallion hacking new pathways through the forest as he did pathways through the world, until i break into the sunlight and the meadows. do you remember how beautiful the meadows were in spring, wild flowers as far as the eye could see?

how we used to sit on that sofa, talking through the night, discussing the world, sometimes arguing until one or the other of us stormed off in a huff. how we laughed there, laughed till we cried. how we cried.

we sat a hole in one end of that sofa. eventually, it was so deep it was like sitting in a bath with your legs hanging over the edge. so, we stuffed the collapsed end with a tray from the oven, but that only made it hard and we'd vie for the softer end.

the things we spoke about. all sorts of things, but we had our hot topics: the occupation, corruption, police brutality and the foursome—as you put it— involving the usa, the uk, saudi arabia and israel.

so, one day, you were overheard saying something in that sofa that changed our lives forever.

your neighbour was going to mecca on hajj, and a large group of people from the village had come to greet him, spilling over into the street.

you said: hajj is for hypocrites.

later that night, the mutaween broke down the door, and dragged us away.

i still remember glancing at the sofa as they threw us into the back of their black van.

i think a lot about that sofa.

i wonder if anybody is sitting in it now.

*

from the ward, i can see the garden. people sit around alone, in pairs or in groups. i don't sit there. i've found a quiet table on the other side of the ward. it's under a big weeping willow, with branches drooping down to the ground. nobody can see you when you're sitting there. someone wrote on the table: "if i got rid of my demons, i'd lose my angels."

there are no locks on the doors. they have taken away my belts and shoe laces. when i want to shave or trim my nails, they bring razors and clippers, and a nurse watches while i use them. so, my beard is long, and i bite my nails, gnawing at them till they bleed, like i used to do when i was a boy. a nurse moves around with a torch during the night. she comes into your ward and shines a torch into your face. when i turn around and face the other way, she leaves the ward. i am still there. i am still alive.

her patrol distresses me. i tell sandra that. i tell her about the wankers' beds in the cockroach hotel. we were just so tired and relieved to see those beds.

i still remember how you said alhamdulillah when you lay your head on the pillow, before falling into the deepest sleep i'd ever seen you sleep.

sandra asks: why do the nightly patrols distress you?

because i should have checked on him during the night. i live with a deep sense of regret that i didn't do that.

*

they wake you at five with tea and rusks. breakfast is in the dining room from six to seven, but i can't eat with others watching me, so they bring my food to my ward. a bell rings at eight, and we line up for medication at the nurses' station. they serve your medication in a small plastic cup, but you have to take your own bottle of water to swallow them with.

you have consultations with your psychiatrists and psychotherapists in the morning. the psychiatrists prescribe medication. mine wants to even out my experiences. they only ask you a few questions, but otherwise they're brief. therapists spend more time with you. they try to prompt conversations. they ask more questions. mine wants to know about the history of my mind, the furniture of my mind.

when they bring lunch to my ward, the breakfast plate is still sitting there.

you're not eating, the nurse says.

i don't respond.

she takes the breakfast plate away, and places the lunch plate in front of me.

there are group sessions in the afternoon where people sit in a circle and talk. you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. i haven't spoken yet. i mainly listen. but a few of the others speak a lot. i struggle with names. one has a stud in her nose. i think of her as nosebud. then i discovered that she hears so many voices, she stabbed in herself in the ears with knitting needles to make them stop. now she's deaf, but she still hears the voices. i started thinking of her as earbud, but that felt cruel.

i look up at sandra. what was the point? you asked me a question.

we were talking about john locke, about how the mind comes to be furnished?

yes, i nod. life, i say. your mind is furnished by your life.

there are creative writing sessions where some people read out their stories. there are craft sessions; painting and working with clay mostly. i try to draw the old man from the print in sandra's room. there is also drumming. i enjoy that. i think of the constant drum in the background when khaled is singing *wahrane*. you can also practise yoga and meditation. they remind me of sitting man and those giant concrete structures out in the middle of the sea.

dinner is from five to six. the nurse checks my lunch plate. i'd left it on the stand by the door.

the food wasn't eaten off this plate, she says. it was slid off.

she holds out the plate to show me the drag marks left by the gravy. she checks the bin. she checks the flowerbed outside the window. she checks around the toilet, where she finds a few peas around the back. then she leaves the ward. a few minutes later, she returns with a second plate of food, and a porter.

this is geoffrey, she says. he'll make sure you finish your dinner.

in the evening, some people play cards or board games at tables in the garden. a few are wrapped in cosy blankets against the cold. others seem immune in shorts and flip-flops. some chat in groups. a few watch tv. i write in the ward. when the bell rings again at eight, we return to the nurses' station for night-time medication.

smarty time, totem says, stepping up behind me. i turn around to look at them. you forgot this, they say, holding out my water bottle.

tonight, they're wearing a pendant that says: miss piggy.

baths and showers are prohibited after night-time medication. the sedatives could cause you to slip and injure yourself. at eight thirty, they serve tea and biscuits by the nurses' station. by nine, you must be in your own ward. lights out is at ten. you have to be in bed by then, but i'm usually passed out way before. the next thing i'm aware of is that nurse shining her torch in my face in the middle of the night.

*

anyone with a new idea is crazy, you once said. you spoke about the prophets and the nature of revelation and hallucination.

what's the difference? i asked. they're both about hearing voices.

revelation is an external source, you said. hallucinations are internal.

you spoke about mohammed. people thought he was mad. it's easy to be complacent now that muslims are a billion strong, but mohammed was once an outcast, too. how would you have responded if your friend told you that he had seen an angel who told him that he was the messenger of god? the topic moved quickly to saudi arabia. how can people still go on a spiritual journey to such a place? you asked.

because it's a pillar of islam.

only if you are able to. what if your conscience forbids you?

you can pay for someone to go instead.

you took out your phone, and showed me maps of mecca. you pointed to the american fast-food outlets surrounding the kaaba.

the so-called "kafirs" can't go to mecca, but their money can, you said. and their imperialist food. do you know how many hujjaj eat only from those outlets because they are convenient and familiar? these fast-food chains, they're not about the cheap, shitty food they peddle, they're about the premium land they occupy.

*

what about malika's story today? totem asked.

malika. i was waiting in reception for my appointment with sandra when she arrived in a sleek limousine with tinted windows. she had a driver. she carried her luggage.

balqees, i thought when i first saw her, queen of sheba, so i was amused when it transpired that her real name is malika.

she had a lot of baggage. i wondered how long she would be staying. she has sleek black hair and wears the most beautiful clothes i have ever seen, with light scarves that sometimes slip down her hair, long and straight like a horse's tail.

she is writing a diary, too. when she finishes a section, she brings copies for each of us to follow while she reads. sometimes she asks for a volunteer to read. sometimes she reads herself. her voice is clear as crystal. she doesn't falter once. perhaps she practises before she reads to the group. her reading transfixes us, or at least it does me.

11. mensa: take your cock out of my son

you'd call regularly. i'm cooking, you'd say. come home with me.

one day, you called and said: i've baked a cake.

any occasion?

just to have a happy day to remember.

i'd meet you at the bus stand after work, and we'd walk to the vegetable market by the mosque. you liked aubergines, so we'd always get a few. then we'd stop for coffee by the stand on the corner of al awal street. we'd have it short and black, you with two cubes of sugar. we'd drink in silence, watching the commuters go by. we tended not to talk in public because you didn't like to, especially not on your mobile.

you'd say: i can't talk now. i'm in public. then you'd hang up.

i'd think: weirdo.

one time, when i sat down on the pavement like a few of the other men drinking coffee, you looked down at me and said: you're a professional, educated person. don't sit on the street like an awatli. stand up.

and you're a snob, i said. so fuck off.

that started a muffled row between us, but in the end, i stood up all the same. sometimes it was easier just to let you win.

in the taxi home, you wouldn't say a word. so, i'd keep quiet and look out the window.

at home, you'd take off your jacket and tie, and change into a t-shirt and flip-flops. you'd look like a young man again, cool and relaxed.

you liked being at home.

you're a noisy cook, singing to yourself, chopping, banging and thrashing away. messy, too. the kitchen would always look as though a hurricane had passed through it when you were done.

i'm not much of an eater, but you're an excellent cook. we'd lay newspaper on the rug in the living room where we'd eat barefoot and crossed-legged from the same dish.

the food was always delicious, although i don't like mulukhiya or bamiyah because they are sticky. we argued about that once, when i didn't eat much, and there was a whole bowl of mulukhiya left. that's when i told you what my father had said a few days after he caught me with my older cousin, malik.

my father had been silent for days after he caught us, until one night the cook served mulukhiya.

i helped myself to rice and soup, but my father placed a large bowl of mulukhiya in front of me as well.

no thank you, i said. i don't like it.

why not? have you lost all respect for all your culture as well?

it's sticky.

mukhannath, my father shouted, slapping me off my chair with the back of his hand. cum is also sticky, but you swallow that. i want you out of this house by morning.

everybody around the table just looked down at me lying on the floor. lying there, i just wanted the earth to open and swallow me up. i think that was the first time i wanted to die. i'd learned an important lesson about men that day: they can banish you.

malik's wedding had taken place the week before. beit al ahlam was radiant. flowers decked the halls, and in the garden the trees were dressed in lights. the scent of jasmine and frangipani filled the air. when he had dressed, malik came to my room. we'd agreed that he would come to see me first before going down for the nikah. he looked like a prince, more handsome than ever, dressed in a tailor-made sterling white kanzu, a blue cashmere shemagh, and fine brown italian sandals.

i have a gift for you, i said, and held it out.

it was the photo we'd taken after our first time, holding up a bag of m&ms, like our initials. on the surface, it is an innocent image—two boys eating candy—but when malik opened the box and saw the picture, he opened his arms, and i stepped into them. we hugged tightly, and then we kissed.

we had planned this moment to make it easier. we agreed that it would be brief, and we would not touch. but there we were, sucking the tongues out of each other. then he lifted his kanzu, and we fell onto the bed. that was how my father found us when he walked into my room. my father pointed at malik.

take your cock out of my son, he shouted.

when i burst out laughing, my father stormed towards me. malik had dropped his kanzu, but his erection raged on underneath, creating a fold in the garment, like a pleat in curtain.

my father took off his sandal, and started beating me over the head. this was intended to humiliate. then he punched me with his fists, and kicked me in the stomach with his bare feet. this was intended to hurt. malik did nothing. he just looked down at me before leaving the room, giving my father a wide berth.

i still remember my father leaving the room, and the sound of the door as he slammed it behind him. i had been shut out. i couldn't attend the wedding. i was covered in blood, and it was too painful to move. humiliated and hurt, i was unable to identify what hurt more, the pain or the humiliation. so, i lie there, curled in the painful loop, and listened to malik's wedding proceedings in the garden below. lying on that floor, i realised two more things about men. they can abuse you. they can abandon you.

*

after dinner, i'd clean the kitchen while you'd watch something on tv. you'd always have a notepad nearby to record interesting facts or quotes you liked. one time, when i'd finished cleaning, i came into the living room to find you watching *moby dick*.

fuck, you said, pointing at the screen. i always thought it was a children's story, a fairy tale, like *bambi*, but actually, it's fucking a nightmare.

we watched the rest of the film together, you on the sofa at one end of the living room, me on the stretcher at the other. it was my seat when i visited, and my bed whenever i stayed over.

like *bambi*! you mocked yourself when queequeg's coffin surfaced at the end.

i'm going to buy a copy tomorrow. meet me at the bookshop after work.

that was you; you took the bull by the horns.

after isha, you'd brew a pot of mint tea, which we'd have on the porch with watermelon or figs or prickly pears. the village would be quiet by this time. we'd sit on that brown sofa looking at the stars. sometimes we'd sit in silence, the tv on in the background. sometimes, you played the violin. sometimes we'd talk. the things we talked about. we were a free country. i wonder who's talking freely in that sofa now.

*

there is a curious new sketch on the desk when i return to the ward from counselling. totem has drawn don corleone wearing a red shemagh and radiant white kanzu, seated in a padded leather chair, stroking a cat. we had been talking under the weeping willow.

pretty boys have a hard time, i'd said, starting with their complex relationships with their fathers. i told him about the boy who fell in love with his father. as a boy, he had no words for these feelings towards his father; he simply felt them, and they made him content.

later, his father would also become the first man to break his heart. the pain was so intense, it bewildered the boy, and he stopped eating and speaking, eventually becoming so ill, he had to be hospitalised for several days.

with time, he got better, but he was never the same carefree child again. the pain his father had caused him never left. instead, it settled in the deepest recesses of his heart, where, even now, as a grown man, he could still feel it throbbing.

the second man the boy fell for was don corleone, seated in a padded leather chair, stroking a cat—the luckiest cat in the world, the boy thought. aside from the silver ring and cuff links, accessories his father always wore, the boy had never seen such a man as don corleone before, grey hair slicked back, the black, satin-edged tuxedo and bow tie, and, most especially, the red lapel rose.

a few weeks after his mother's death, the boy had been lying awake in bed as usual, waiting for his father to return. it was late when his father's car eventually pulled up in the driveway. he turned on his bedroom light, and for a while he stared at the gently rotating ceiling fan, waiting for his father to check in on him as he usually did. but instead, he heard his father turn on the tv, so he got out of bed, and crept downstairs.

his father was reclined on the majlis sofa, flicking through channels. the boy hovered tentatively in the doorway, as if waiting for permission to enter. they never spoke, and even now, he can't remember a single conversation between the two of them. his father looked up at him, and once again the boy spied the sadness that now hung in his father's big black eyes.

sensing no resistance to his presence, he sat down at the far end of the majlis, a safe and unobtrusive vantage point from which he could pretend to watch the screen, while all the time stealing sideways glances at his father, his black beard set off strikingly by his red shemagh and sterling white kanzu, which flowed the length of his long body down to his ankles, revealing only his face, his hands, and his bare feet.

even from this distance, he could smell his father's perfume, a fine mukhallat of amber, rose, sandalwood and saffron, oils mixed especially for him in secret proportions by his mother. she blended individual unctions for each of her four sons to complement their unique temperaments, but always reserved the most luxurious ingredients for the boy's father, her youngest and favourite son. this late at night, his mukhallat had settled into its deeper, richer notes, fusing now with the scent of hookah smoke and the whiff of alcohol.

when the film started, his father removed his watch and cufflinks. he unwound his shemagh, and ran his fingers around his scalp, his thick black hair falling down to his shoulders. he set the shemagh to one side, and stretched open his arm, beckoning the boy with an open palm. like a loyal dog, the boy needed little coaxing. he leapt across the sofa, and into his father's embrace. that night, observing don corleone from the cradle of his father's chest, the boy lost all sense of where his father ended, and where don corleone began. he couldn't smell don corleone, but imagined that such an elegant man must surely be engulfed in the same heavenly aroma as his own handsome father. in his young imagination, the two men melded into the ideal image of a man, a mirage he would spend the rest of his life pursuing.

now, whenever he is reminded of *the godfather* and don corleone, it is his father's essence on that night that the boy remembers, as vividly as if he were lying right next to him ...

“why did you go to the police? why didn’t you come to me first?” ...

“you come on my daughter’s wedding day and ask me to murder for money.”

totem isn’t one to probe. he waits until he is told. when we returned to the ward, i stuck his sketch of don corleone dressed like my father on the wall with all the rest.

12. protea: commitment

the room is in a sunny corner at the end of the corridor. light flows in through large windows. one window faces north, the other west. they overlook the garden, the treetops, and the hills beyond. the walls are lined with bookshelves. seating is arranged around a coffee table in the middle of the room. there are side tables with potted plants and lamps. it is a tasteful room. almost a living room. almost a home.

my seat faces outward across the garden. sandra directs her patients there, giving their eyes room to wander.

are you settling in?

i get on well with my ward mate.

and sleep?

i shrug.

appetite?

i grimace.

well, it’s been a bumpy few days, but i think we’ve got the dosages right.

i nod.

and have you unpacked?

i shake my head.

i see. we agreed that you would.

i point at the print of the old man in the painting. have you read *moby dick*?

i have not.

i think all counsellors should.

why?

because it's a story about the mind; its power to construct its own realities. for most of the novel, captain ahab's obsession with the whale is all in the mind, in his lust for vengeance, no matter the cost. it's not till late in the story that we eventually encounter the real whale. that old man in that painting, he reminds me of ahab. "god help thee old man. thy thoughts have created a creature in thee."

i want to pick up with something you said at the end of yesterday's session, she says. you said that writing is commitment.

i have a sinking feeling. it's permanent.

explain.

do i need to? it's obvious.

not to me.

you're committing yourself to something that will remain.

yet, you also said that you are unable to commit.

i look through the window. you hear voices, thoughts in your head, but when you write them down, they change. what you think is rarely what you write. somewhere en route between your mind and the page, the thought slips into

something different. so, you try to follow them, but just as you're about to catch up with them, they disappear around the corner. then you're not sure whether to follow the voices, or stick with what you've written.

you can only find out what you really have to say by writing it down. you have to commit to your characters and their lives. are they old or young, male or female, rich or poor? such realities. that decides their life's journey, but also yours. you will live their lives in your head over and over again. they will be your best friends when your writing flows, and your worst enemies when you get stuck. you must be able to commit to that.

and what's the commitment in unpacking a suitcase?

i hadn't seen that coming. it stings. it feels like an ambush. i see where you're going.

where am i going?

back to the washing machine analogy. unpack the suitcase, item by item.

then what?

pack it in the wardrobe.

and what's wrong with that?

the journey is over. you have to settle. i shiver. you have to become part of something. the rollercoaster is ascending. i look out into the garden.

i grew up in a house with a beautiful garden. i want to tell her that. there was a large fig tree. when they were ripe, we'd climb into the tree to eat figs, dangling carefree from the supple grey branches. my mouth feels dry. i can't swallow. i sip water from my glass on the table.

it was my grandfather's house. there were courtyards with fountains and arches and balconies that overlooked the sea. that was where i grew up, in an extended family with three generations under one roof. i can still hear the noise. the coldness turns into an itch. i start to scratch my forearms.

it was called beit al ahlam, the house of dreams. there was a beautiful mihrab in the grand hall, indicating the direction of mecca. it had a pointed arch and porcelain mosaics. in the library, the walls were lined with books. on the top shelf, the qur'an and the biographies of the prophet. the sheets were of white egyptian cotton. there were elegant parties and elaborate weddings in the garden, like my cousin malik's. it was all magnificent.

i am scratching uncontrollably. the itching is unbearable. i am on fire. i stand up, scratching the back with one hand, and my chest with the other.

what's wrong?

i lurch across to her desk, and hurl into the wastepaper basket. the room is spinning, and i break out in a cold sweat. i don't remember anything after that.

13. mensa: body and soul

geoffrey is with me when i wake. he has wheeled in a plate on a tray. there is soup and toast. i swallow some soup. when the evening bell rings, i look at geoffrey.

the nurse will bring your medication here tonight, he says.

it's just the sedative tonight, the nurse says when she arrives. your psychiatrist is revising the rest of your medication.

make sure he gets some more to eat, she says to geoffrey before leaving the room.

i eat what i can, and swallow the sedatives. it's not long before i pass out.

*

on the wall by my desk, i have stuck marvell's poem *a dialogue between the soul and the body*. there is also a portrait of marvell, every bit the seventeenth century dandy, with a long wig of thick black curls, a bronze cape and an elaborate collar. his right hand is rested effeminately on his chest, and there's a ring on his little finger.

it kind of looks like a selfie, don't you think? totem laughs.

they have taken the poem off the wall, and are illustrating the first stanza in their *mad*.

soul

*o who shall, from this dungeon, raise
a soul enslav'd so many ways?
with bolts of bones, that fetter'd stands
in feet, and manacled in hands;
here blinded with an eye, and there
deaf with the drumming of an ear;
a soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains
of nerves, and arteries, and veins;
tortur'd, besides each other part,
in a vain head, and double heart ...*

“blinded with an eye,” totem recites ... “deaf with the drumming of an ear.” it’s sick. i’m going to talk about it in group.

in totem’s sketch, there is a figure dangling from the roof of a dungeon. the dungeon is dark, with only a trickle of light from a small barricaded window. the figure has black hollowed out eyes, and is wrapped in chains. nerves and arteries and veins spread out from the figure like dark rays from a black sun. he titles his illustration “a soul hung up.” we slip on our flip-flops, and walk to group, where totem talks about their new sketch, and malika continues to read from her diary, but i say nothing.

fragment two

tabula rasa

14. the skeletons: my name, al mustaqbal

yusuf, the dreamer. it's friday and the imam is reciting surah yusuf, his recitation echoing through the skeletons.

the prophet yusuf had a dream. when he woke, yusuf told his dream to his father, the prophet yaqub, begat by the prophet ishaq, begat by the prophet ibrahim.

father, i had a strange dream, yusuf said. i saw eleven stars, the sun and the moon all bow down before me.

yaqub immediately understood the significance of his favourite son's dream.

he said: do not share your vision with your brothers. they may become jealous, and raise a plot against you.

but yusuf's older brothers, knowing that their father loved him more, hatched a wicked plan to slay yusuf.

let us not slay yusuf, one of his brothers said. but let us throw him down a dark well instead.

and so yusuf's older brothers lured him away, and threw him down a well.

the imam recites surah yusuf often, so we have spoken a lot about it. it's the twelfth surah of the qur'an, and one of the longest. it is unique from the other suwar in many ways. it's the only surah to have been revealed in a single sitting. it is highly structured; a single unity of theme and chronological progression distinguish it from the other suwar.

the imam says he recites it often because it fills him with hope. it was revealed after the year of sorrow and despair, during which mohammed had lost both his uncle and protector, abu talib, as well as his beloved first wife and confidant, khadija. having been orphaned at an early age, he had now lost everybody who had loved and cared for him. he endured all the pain and loss a man can. what could be worse?

exile.

the persecution of muslims in mecca at the hands of the quraysh was intensifying, forcing them to flee the city for medina. the imam says he wonders often about the experience of receiving one hundred and eleven verses in one sitting, under such traumatic circumstances; about the intensity of the experience for mohammad, when it takes him forty-five minutes to recite surah yusuf, leaving him calm and uplifted, but breathless.

what is the nature of revelation? i ask the imam.

it is from an external source, he said.

and hallucination?

the source is internal.

*

i think the time has come for us to broach the topic of my name, al mustaqbal ba'ad al ufuq, but let me borrow from ishmael and say, call me al bedoun, for i am the one who is without.

indeed, like yusuf, we too languish in a well, an inverted well in the shape of a tower floating out at sea. perhaps that is why the imam recites surah yusuf so often.

for now, our floating well is a popular idea, popular even amongst reasonable people, people who consider themselves good people, but the time will come when they will look back, like good germans, and ask: how could such places have been built? how could such things have been allowed to happened?

15. protea: from dreams into nightmares

sandra says: let me paraphrase john locke's question. imagine the mind to be a blank paper. how does it come to be furnished?

have i told you about home?

a good place to start.

home was my grandparents' house. your rug reminds me of it, i said, pointing at the rug on the floor between us. it was called beit al ahlam, the house of dreams. my grandparents created a paradise there, a miracle, in fact.

family legend goes that when the bulldozers came, my grandmother rubbed her magic silver ring, raised the house into the sky, flew it across the ocean, and set it down on malabar hill, from where it commands a panoramic view of the

arabian sea. my grandmother told me that i was born flying midway during that oceanic flight, which she called the miraj, hence my name.

beit al ahlam had a mosaic courtyard with a fountain, a grand library and a fine mihrab pointing out the direction of mecca to the west. my father, his brothers and my cousins were all married there. their wedding portraits lined the wall along the grand staircase. my eldest uncle's was first, at the foot of the stairs. the balustrades, balconies and pergolas were draped with garlands, and in the sumptuous gardens, lamps and lanterns hung from the trees. my father was the youngest. his wedding photo was last, near the landing at the top of the staircase.

my mother was the most beautiful of the brides, my father the most handsome of the grooms. she wore red. he wore white. the other brides sat with downcast eyes, but my mother looked straight through the camera and into the future. my father wore a purple shemagh. the other grooms looked like princes, but he alone looked like a king.

beit al ahlam was so big, a maze of floors of corridors so large, it was never fully explored. visitors easily got lost. the mansion rose up over many floors, with many rooms and wings.

the formal reception rooms were on the ground floor. the casual family living rooms and guest wings were on the first floor. beyond that, the brothers each had a floor to themselves and their families.

the top floor was the most elegant, reminiscent of musamman burj, where shah jahan's spent his final years in captivity. it had spacious balconies overlooking

the sea. it was reserved for my grandparents. we only went there at their behest. *mughal-e-azam* was their favourite film. dialogue and music from the film filtered through the house: *pyar kiya to darna kya?* why should i be afraid to be in love? despite the intolerance of their age, the love between my grandparents echoed that of akbar and jodha bai. beit al ahlam, the oldest furniture of my mind is there.

and then, one day, my grandfather died. before the sun had set, my grandmother was dead, too, and beit al ahlam went into mourning. the flowers were removed, and the mirrors covered. i'll never forget the starkness of the house. it was the first time i saw the house go into mourning, and i felt more sadness than i had ever felt.

we observed the customary three days of mourning, serving little cups of bitter black coffee to all the people who had lined up to pay their respects. women gathered in the main house, while we received the men in tents that had been set up in the garden. there were no lights in the trees, only dark looming shadows with ghostly branches hovering over the garden.

during the three days of mourning, people call in to pay their respects from nine till dhuhr prayer. they'd start coming again after asr. some only stay a few minutes, shaking the hands of the mourners then sitting down and sipping bitter black coffee before leaving.

close members of the family are present at all times, especially the main mourner; he now represents the family. it's a very demanding role, and sometimes that person has to step away to rest for a while. i saw the pain on my father's face when his older brothers rested, and he had to stand in the role.

more people come after maghrib and stay till after isha prayer. then everybody goes home we go to bed, sad and exhausted.

there is always a throng of visitors on the first day of mourning, but they start trickling away after the second day or so. but when my grandparents died, the stream of sympathisers was constant for all three days. people even traveled from other cities and countries to pay their respects. this astonished us because even though my grandfather had once been a great storyteller, he had become a recluse, and it had been many years since he told his last story. i remember him as a quiet man. during my lifetime, he spent his time in prayer and books.

on such formal occasions, sons stand next to their fathers to receive guests. my father would sometimes lay his hand on my shoulder while we stood side by side, and i would sometimes hold his hand while the long line of sympathisers snaked its way through the garden.

i now remember those days i stood next to my father in his mourning as amongst the last of my childhood. looking back, it was standing there next to my grieving father that i first had an inkling of what it meant to be an adult, a man. i would never snuggle into him on the sofa during a film again. so, i held his hand again, and he squeezed it tightly, until he was almost crushing it. i looked up at my father to see a teardrop roll down his face. for the first time in my life, i felt helpless as i watched my childhood slip away.

and then one of sympathisers greeted me, and asked: what is the first word of islam?

allah, i said.

he shook his head.

mohammed? i was guessing now, and becoming embarrassed at being shown up at my grandparents' funeral in front of all our guests.

iqra, the man said. read. it was the first word jabreel revealed to the prophet. i don't know if your grandfather prayed, and i never saw him at mosque. but he was a reader. to me, that is what made him a good muslim. always remember, reading itself is an act of worship.

after my grandparents' deaths, life in beit al ahlam turned from dreams into nightmares as the battle between the crescent and the om unfolded. the tolerance that beit al ahlam had stood for, crumbled into ashes as my eldest uncle assumed the puritanical role of aurangzeb, and beit al ahlam, like the mughal empire, went into decline. my tyrannical uncle forced my father to make a choice: divorce my hindu mother, or leave beit al ahlam for good. my father chose the latter, and we never saw beit al ahlam again.

all these years later, i wonder if beit al ahlam ever existed, or if it was just a figment of my childhood imagination.

i looked at sandra as if through a haze. what was my point? you asked me a question.

i asked you about locke. about how the mind comes to be furnished?

i guess lock would say that your mind is furnished by the reality of your lived experience.

and what do you say?

who cares what i have to say, perhaps i've said enough. perhaps i've said too much.

sandra glances at her watch. then let's leave it there for now. we'll continue next time.

16. mensa: dragon fish

when i wake, i notice that totem has added new images to the wall. there's a raft, a mountain, a shovel, a king, a ship, a sail, the pyramids, a host of constellations, a seaplane, a dragon fish.

how did you come by these?

you were talking in your sleep again. it sounded like you were reciting a poem. i just drew what i could fathom. what's a dragon fish?

17. the skeletons: rowing with shovels

there is a raft, a mountain, a shovel, a king, a ship, a sail, the pyramids, a host of constellations, a seaplane, and a dragon fish. of these, the oldest murals are of the seaplane and the dragonfish. they have been there all my life. over the years came more: rivers and deserts, jungles and trees. a sitting man. a singing man with long dreadlocks. a woman with a billowing skirt. the murals spread over the decades, until no wall of the skeletons was left bare. the outline of a man in a beret. the cartoon of the boy with his hands tied behind his back. a crucifix. the golden death mask of a pharaoh. the globe. outlines of countries. ganesha. a statue on a mountain, its arms outstretched. flags. keys. a framed woman with a wry smile. a man in a loincloth. the taj mahal. the sphinx. the kaaba. the dome of the rock. a mountain in the shape of a table, another in the shape of a cone. until our floating world was a collage of the world as we remembered it. a gallery of lost people and things. lost places from the time before. an epitaph to our nowhere world.

and now i come to a new image of a raft. a raft with three figures, rowing with shovels. our ill-equipped don quixote saviours.

18. mensa: a floating patchwork

totem asks: who do you think she's running from?

the husband.

what makes you so sure?

the child.

do you think it's about her?

would it make a difference?

of course. why else would she be writing it here?

i'm uncomfortable talking about, so i don't respond.

is some of what you're writing real?

i shrug.

go on.

it's complicated.

i know.

how? i point to the wall. you draw london buses.

is that all you see?

i scan totem's sketches.

what's it called?

i'm not sure, but i have three words going round and round me head: an unwritten life.

sounds good.

it's a quote. from *moby dick*. i sometimes feel it's killing me.

totem nods. i read somewhere that creatives age faster than consumers. it takes more energy to make than to buy. i'm not religious, but i think creating is the highest form of worship. i'm my best self when i'm sketching. do you feel that way?

i'm not that committed.

yeah, totem nods. such a slacker. they point at my monitor. what's going on there today?

oh, it's just a random page.

can i see?

i turn the screen to face them.

i can't touch it. you scroll, i'll read.

*

... and now i come to a new image of a raft. a raft with three figures, rowing with shovels. our ill-equipped don quixote saviours. the two young men untie the mooring lines then board the raft. the old man dislodges the raft from the rig with one of his shovels. when the raft is afloat, he sits down in the tattered aeroplane seat he had salvaged from the debris. he digs his shovels into the garbage, and starts to row.

the raft is large enough for three men and enough water stored in plastic cans for the ordeal. the man had paddled around the garbage with his shovels for three days, salvaging what could be used to fashion the raft. at night, he worked on the bottom level of the rig, weaving the raft together out of rubble, like the poor miller's daughter weaving gold out of straw, until a floating patchwork emerged. he positioned the aeroplane seat at the stern, the seatbelt still intact. how many travellers had used it? who was the last? with him in the raft are two

of our strongest swimmers, to row when the man rests—he does not like others handling his shovels—or to swim, should it come to that.

it takes the pirates several hours to reach us on speedboats. it will take the old man and his two companions several days to row in the opposite direction. those strong enough have come to stand at the edge of the skeletons to bid them farewell, women ululating, men strumming drums. we watch until they have disappeared completely out of view and into the rubble that surrounds us, propelled by the old man with his shovels.

*

then we hear the bell.

smartie time.

i close my laptop and we walk towards the nurses' station together. it's not long before we're both in a swoon, but when totem starts sketching, i continue writing

...

18. the skeletons: how can you lose land?

three things my ayah told me about myself:

you were born nowhere.

you were born somewhere.

you were born everywhere.

ayah told me many stories, as many ayahs do, her hands moving like a kathak dancer's while she spoke. for "nowhere," she makes a circle with her forefinger and thumb, her three remaining fingers spread out like the wings of a dragonfly. for "somewhere," she places her right forefinger in the middle of her left palm. for "everywhere," she puts her wrists together, unfurling her fingers like a sacred lotus.

such intricate hand gestures animate all her stories. stories about our town in the time before the ocean came. about the people of the skeletons: umm sahar, whose magic could move whole buildings. ayah said that when the great wave hit, umm sahar saved the holy places by raising them above the level of the water, like haji ali's dargah floating in the arabian sea.

abu shaywali, the most revered vagrant in the city, wandering around the streets with the shovels that gave him his name. outsiders would wander about this strange man and his shovels, his shemagh dishevelled, his white kanzu threadbare and dirty, his sandals tattered and torn, the shovels with which he'd dug his wife's grave, and which he has carried around with him ever since. being rich, shah jahan built the taj mahal; being poor, abu shaywali carries his shovels. now, abu shaywali floats around the skeletons in patched inner tubes, his shovels his ores, digging holes in the ocean.

about my friend, mohannad. how he came home from school one day during the de-landings to find his mother in tears.

why are you crying? mohannad asked.

because we've lost our land, his mother cried.

the boy knew that one could lose pencils, and money, and keys, but land?

how can you lose land when we're standing on it?

one day you'll understand, his mother replied.

the bulldozers came the following day. the wars had spread; the seas had swelled, leaving safe and habitable land at a premium. mohannad and his mother were amongst the many de-landed to europe in africa, where they were never to see land again, just water and sky as far as the eye can see.

ayah is long gone, but those words have remained with me through the decades: "one day you'll understand."

19. mensa: europe in africa

in the clear light of day, i show totem an artist's rendition of europe in africa online, an island paradise, a perfect blend of the efficiency of the north and the nature of the south, the spirituality of the east and the technology of the west. there will be a mosque, echoing the great masajids of cairo, casablanca and cordoba. a church, like those of jerusalem and rome. a school and college on par with the centres of learning in windsor and oxford. a port, inspired by harbours of rotterdam and dubai. a bank, modelled on the financial institutions of london. a library, paying homage to that of timbuktu and beit al hikma, the house of wisdom, that once stood in baghdad. a park as splendid as bosque de la primavera in guadalajara and the table mountain park in cape town. a lighthouse like the magnificent sentinel of alexandria. ambitious grandeur on an epic scale. a true utopia. paradise on earth. "it is a full-blown city built according to european standards filled with african style of living and working."

20: the skeletons: *mind matters most*

sometimes ayah told me her stories at bedtime, casting silhouettes on the wall with her fingers; sometimes while we sat with our feet dangling over the edge of one of the rigs, looking far out to sea. stories about what lay beyond the watery horizon, in sinking, war-torn worlds i could only imagine.

ayah speaks with longing of our city during the time before. she describes it as a curve, like the crescent of the new moon shining between the sea and the mountains, the desert beyond. it is amongst a few of the landscapes now painted on the walls of the skeletons.

but no matter how much i study these murals, i still cannot conceive of a mountain, so much rock rising to meet the sky, or a desert, so much sand stretching to join the horizon.

the skeletons and the ocean are my world. i don't long for what i have not seen, but for those i have known. i long for ayah. i long for sitting man. i long for mohannad.

but for those who knew those lost and far-off places in the time before the seas rose and the wars exploded, for them, the loss of those places was devastating. some died of their sorrow, mohannad's mother amongst them. after my mother's, umm mohannad's is the second name on our wall of the dead.

*

but of me, writing from nowhere, a place beyond grasp? writing from somewhere, a watery world, a theoretical idea of an artificial world willed into being? writing from everywhere. can the oceans be contained? what will remain of me? from time to time, i stop to read the lines someone had inscribed on the floor of one of the rigs during the first days before the concrete had even set ...

*since from everything a little remains,
why won't a little
of me remain? in the train
travelling north, in the ship,
in newspaper ads,
why not a little of me in london,
a little of me somewhere?
in a consonant?
in a well?"*

*

ours have been nowhere lives, unwritten lives, like the great whale in one of the books the pirates once brought me: *far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life*. our lives are nowhere lives. landless lives whose footprints have been eliminated from this earth. such lives must be willed into remaining. what happened here must remain, remain somewhere. let it remain in the murals on our walls. let it remain in this when the time comes for me to cast it to sea, to float to places i have never seen, nor ever will.

it's easy to tell stories in the past tense, ayah once said. it's a comfort. everything is known. everything is concluded. now even ayah is concluded, and soon, so will i. what does the past tense conclude for me?

my oldest memories, as far back as sitting man, a time when europe in africa was still bare, the time when we started calling it the skeletons. now it's hard to imagine the skeletons as they were in those early years when europe in africa was still stark and empty. it filled quickly from all the catastrophes and conflicts on land, these platforms in the sea, and became overgrown with a life of their own, their supporting columns barnacled like a shipwreck, the terraces we fashioned, overhanging roof gardens we had planted with plants and earth the pirates had brought us, animated by a network of hoists and pulleys we had interwoven between the structures, interconnected with planks and hanging bridges we had strung between the rigs. the rats that occupy the lower levels — where did they come from? — the cats that keep their numbers in check, the sea birds that circle above, the walls decorated with landscapes from the time before: mountains, deserts, forests, skylines of cities and all kinds of animals, plants and trees, painted in ochre on bare concrete walls, like the cave paintings i have seen in books. a calendar of white stripes counting the weeks, months and years since the first arrivals. our time. our era over many walls. the wall of the dead. some of the images are painted in blood, from a time when there was no other medium to be had, images of the dying, images of the dead

.

we don't have graves to visit, so we come here, to the wall of the dead. it is our quiet place. people of all creeds retreat here, to sit in silence, in meditation, or in prayer. some light candles, or leave mementoes. umm sahar always has frankincense burning here. in our effort to survive and transcend, we have left marks, created meaning, kindled a culture. yes, we have moulded the terrifying into something with a semblance of beauty.

*

in those early memories, the skeletons is a stark place, with sitting man etched against the horizon. while some lamented, and others died, he sat, eyes closed, back upright, legs crossed over tightly, the soles of his feet tucked into his hips, motionless, like a statue. padmasana.

my mind is cultivated by the skeletons, by people, by sitting man, by ayah's many stories. my vistas—the sea, the sky. my mind ploughs the sea. the sea cultivates by my mind.

three days after we cast mohannad's body to sea, when the prescribed period of mourning was over, sitting man came for me. by this time, people had cordoned off their living spaces with drapes of canvass and long bolts of cloth, so that the skeletons consisted of a multitude of tents inside tents, a palace of veils.

sitting man found me curled up on my bedroll, bearded and unwashed. he looked at mohannad's empty bedroll, his goggles and nose clip on his pillow where i had placed them. then he looked at me.

come, he said.

i followed sitting man to the top of one of the skeletons where he had drawn two white circles on the concrete floor. there is a thin cushion in the centre of each circle. he pointed to the cushion in the circle on the left.

mind matters most, he said. we must purify it. sit.

i sat down in the centre of the circle to where he had pointed, he in the other. it was an overcast and moonless night, the mind as dark as the sky.

sit as i do, he said.

i crossed my legs over as he had done, straightened my back and held up my head.

close eyes. move not. speak not. only nobel silence. only breathe, in, out. observe breath in nostrils. that only. mind wanders, return to respiration. eat only the little i offer. drink water only when i give. rest when i say. pain will be there. so much pain. anguish will be there. so much anguish. be not afraid. i with you. anicca, anicca, anicca ...

*

i sat until it felt as though my back would break and my legs would fall off. the rivers of my mind split into tributaries; the texture of the water sometimes rough as rocks where turbulent white-water crashes. i see two paintings from the picture book the pirates brought me. one is by van gogh. it is of an old man sitting by the fire, his head in his hands. to me, it is an image of desperation. van gogh painted it just a few months before he shot himself. the other is by munch, painted three years after van gogh's death. it is of a screaming figure on a bridge, the angry sky red as blood. if i could paint like these great artists, i would paint a crucified mind on the walls of the skeletons. then i realise how far my busy mind has wandered from the simple task sitting man had set for me, so i bring it back to focus on my breathing.

*

days passed. and so many nights, i lost count. but we sat on. when sitting man eventually released me from my circle of silence, i wandered through the skeletons, back to my quarters. i shaved my head, trimmed my beard and oiled

my body. i put on mohannad's goggles and nose clip. i climbed to the top floor of the skeletons from where we used to dive into the ocean below. i swam down deeper and deeper, and then deeper still, down to the rock formation in which my foot got caught. mohannad was already surfacing when he looked back to check on me. i knew the choice that faced him: whether to surface for air or return immediately for me. i stayed under long in that place in the bottom of the sea where mohannad gave his life for mine. so long, i saw everything, heard everything, felt everything.

when i surfaced, my mind had become so sharp, i inhaled the world in a single breath, feeling it surge through every part of my being. sitting man was standing at the edge of the skeletons, looking down at me. he nodded. i exhaled. he turned around. i inhaled. he walked away. that is my last memory of him. mohannad saved my life. sitting man saved my mind. now, i sit everyday as sitting man had taught me, only taking a break to scribble this as quickly as i can. the end, i sense, is near.

21. kimberley – three sisters: every in-utero blow

by the time the white line of dawn appeared on the horizon, they were approaching the orange river. you opened her eyes and leaned over to check the speedometer.

i don't drive as fast as you, jackson said. he slowed down as we crossed the bridge into hopetown. let's stop there for some coffee, he suggested, pointing at a little filling station on the south bank of the river.

when you returned from the shop, you found jackson squatting in front of the car. elbows resting on knees, he was looking out over the river, smoking a joint. hey, you whispered with urgency. there's a police van right over there.

already clocked, jackson said, and took another puff.

first, you looked at him in disbelief, then you sat down beside him, and lit a cigarette.

i had no idea where i was when the alarm clock went off this morning, you said after a while.

i looked around my room for clues, but nothing made any sense, not the lamp by the bed, or the curtains on the window, or the carpet on the floor. even the cot at the foot of the bed; i didn't know why it was there. it was only when i saw the picture of the big hole on the wall that things came back to me.

the sun was rising, illuminating the fog on the surface of the river and the trees growing along the banks.

i wished he'd drive his car right into that fucking hole, you continued.

they say it's so deep, the water down there is like acid. i imagined him and his car just melting away, the biggest asshole in the world melting away at the bottom of the biggest hole in the world.

you and jackson looked at each other, and laughed.

jackson started collecting pebbles from the ground between his feet.

i read a lot in prison. the books were old, and the pages were yellow, with a smell of stale bread and dust that could knock your breath away.

i read about this place in one of those books. they say farm boys once played marbles with diamonds here, he said, placing three perfectly smooth pebbles in your palm.

never lose hope, he said. nothing's going to happen to you. me, i'll make sure of it.

say insha'allah.

why?

otherwise, it's bad luck.

eish, wena. i thought you don't believe in all that stuff.

well, my feelings come and go, and under current circumstances, i'd rather not tempt fate.

okay. nothing's going to happen to you. me, i'll make sure of it, insha'allah.

*

nutly lime, mamma, nutly lime, zak called out, clapping his hands in the back seat. you pressed play, and the nursery rhymes resumed: three blind mice, three blind mice, see how they run ...

how do you know what he's saying? jackson puzzled. me, i sometimes have no idea.

mothers just do, you said. mothers just do.

by now, we were deep into the great karoo. with two provinces and half the country behind us, you were starting to feel a little more at ease, although from time to time you still leaned forward in the passenger seat to check the wing mirror.

the road was quiet, and jackson had set the cruise control at 130 while he sat cross-legged behind the wheel in a lotus-like position. you marvelled at him with a mixture of irritation and awe.

how do you remain so calm?

jackson looked around. all this space, he said.

then he leaned over the steering wheel, and looked up. all that sky. "uit die blou van onse hemel."

i've never heard you speak afrikaans before.

but this is jackson, you thought, never starting to answer at the point you'd expect, but somewhere far away and tangential. so, you just stared at the road ahead while he told his story.

there were times on death row when i felt so sad, not for killing those men, they did not deserve to live, but for all the places i would never see after they hanged me, like the sea, like here, he gestured.

you'd barely noticed the landscape jackson was pointing out at. to you, it was a desolate wilderness, a tedious backdrop to the terrifying scenarios circling the ominous merry-go-round in your head. you just wanted to get to cape town. but jackson, never having left gauteng, was fully present; overwhelmed by the unending vastness of a country he was seeing for the first time.

our sky, he said, it's not just a sky; it's like a universe. our land, it isn't just land; it's like a continent.

you know, babies are born alcoholics here, you said.

but jackson, overcome by an uncanny sense of déjà vu in a place he'd never been before, wasn't listening. perhaps he'd been here in one of his walking dreams.

he shrugged. wena, you never know how life will turn out. look around. me, i should have been dead in my grave for twenty-seven years by now, but here i am, driving you to cape town, in a two-tone maybach no less.

you'd registered jackson's words, but your own were echoing more loudly in your ears: babies are born alcoholics here. you cringed at their superior tone.

now, fully aware for the first time of your own son's ordeal whilst still in the womb, you felt embarrassed. how were you any different from these abused hinterland women you felt yourself so superior to? you were a rich city girl, you thought, but that was all.

you pulled down the sun visor to look at yourself in the mirror. your wealth made you all the more culpable. you had the means to leave after the first punch, but chose to return instead, and every in-utero blow zak endured subsequently, you now thought, was a blow you had exposed him to.

fragment three

flight of the dragon fish

22. mensa: follow them into the sunshine

today, totem's pendant says: bitch. how many do they have?

we are taking turns reading the scheduling status of our medication. the print is very small, so we're sitting cross-legged on his bed by the window where the light is better. we've turned it into a game. we have a bag of smarties open on the bed between us. if one makes a mistake, the other gets a smartie and takes over reading.

totem is reading ...

lilly-flouxetine

pharmacodynamics

the antidepressant and anti-obsessive-compulsive action of fluoxetine is presumed to be linked to its inhibition of central nervous system (cns) neuronal uptake of serotonin...

warnings

patients with major depressive disorder, both adults and children, may experience worsening of their depression and/or the emergence of suicidal ideation and behaviour, whether or not they are taking antidepressant medicines.

olexar

indications

olexar is indicated for the treatment of the manifestations of psychotic disorders (including schizophrenia).

olexar is further indicated for the treatment of an acute episode of mania of moderate to severe intensity and for the prevention of recurrence of manic or depressive episodes in patients with bipolar disorder ...

side-effects and special precaution

side-effects

the following adverse reactions have been reported in association with **olexar** treatment:

blood and lymphatic system disorders ...

neuropsychiatric disorders ...

eye disorders ...

ear and labyrinth disorders ...

cardiovascular disorders ...

dyna-lamotrigine

warnings:

severe convulsive seizures including status epilepticus may lead to rhabd ...

totem stumbles, so i get a smartie, and continue reading ...

... may lead to rhabdomolysis multiorgan disfunction and disseminated intravascular coagulation, usually with fatal outcome ...

dormonoct

dormonoct is a short-acting benzodiazepine with hypnotic properties and a half-life of 6-8 hours ...

indications:

- 1) short-term treatment of insomnia.
- 2) sleep disturbances in geriatric patients.
- 3) pre-operative sleep disturbances.

dormonoct is only indicated when the disorder is severe, disabling or subjecting the individual to extreme stress.

fuckity fuck, totem says, downing a handful of smarties. if not the sadness, then the meds will get us.

they roll up the scheduling status into six balls, and aim for the waste paper basket, but miss every time. i remember one of the books that sandra had lent me, that traumatised people are markedly less coordinated than others. it's not long before memories of me being selected last for sports teams at school come flooding back.

totem knows my dark face.

come back, they say, tapping me on the knee. let's go sit in the sun.

i step into the moment, and follow them into the sunshine. i am present, i say to myself. i am stepping into the sunshine with my friend.

that was when it first struck me: i was starting to see totem as a friend.

23. the skeletons: origami anchors

i was born nowhere. i was born somewhere. i was born everywhere. that is what ayah told me. old, all the witnesses to my birth have passed on, their skeletons roaming the ocean bed, waves their floating tombstones. destitute, so will mine before long.

the past is concluded, ayah used to say. the present requires all the will you can muster. the future is not for now, even for you, whose name binds you to it.

it is true. my name points to the future, but now the future is retreating from me. it is not a tense in which i am at ease.

it is in our nature to die, sitting man used to say. accept it.

only a handful have survived; ravaged by everything that has happened here. umm sahar, abu shaywali and i, the last of our generation. time and space we have, but not of the right kind; the days are deadly and routine, the space treacherous and of little use.

i should have been dead; the weak succumb first in famine. perhaps the abstemious habits i acquired from sitting man, which leave me immune to hunger and to thirst for several days, account for my endurance. still. i am. i sit. i remain.

my papers remain, too. i keep them close in a leather envelope i had stitched to fit my pockets perfectly. i should have stored them flat in a book, but books are rare in the skeletons, and frequently move hands from one reader to the next, so my whole watery life i have worn them in my pocket. they are

simultaneously my most loathed and treasured items, loathsome as other demeaning regalia are, prized as a testimony to one who is from nowhere, living nowhere, going nowhere. fragile from the folds of a lifetime, they are the origami anchors of my nowhere birth, my nowhere life, and soon, i sense, my nowhere death. it is in our nature to die, i repeat to myself, my body now frail as my papers. i don't unfold them often. over the years, each unfolding was like stripping another layer from an onion until just the thin, lean core remains, thin and lean like me. i sense that this will be the last time i look at them. i must be careful how i unfold my nothingness, take care of how you tread on my nightmares.

bearer born on an aircraft flying at stated coordinates at time of birth.

name:	al mustaqbal ba'ad al ufuq
identification number:	030520—
date of birth:	03/05/20—
time of birth:	09.25 local
place of birth:	international waters
citizenship:	europa in africa
citizenship of father:	x
citizenship of mother:	revoked/delanded/deceased
aircraft:	kunlong
registered country of aircraft:	x
departure:	x
destination:	europa in africa
place of first disembarkation:	europa in africa

*

despite my mother's agony during my difficult birth, kunlong continued along its flight path, set as earth in its orbit, pre-ordained and irreversible. some of the deportees were beating their chests and rocking back and forth; others were half awake, dreaming uncomfortable sitting-up dreams, heads lolling about on shoulders. many people thought they were dreaming my birth.

i was born somewhere. but no map captures the transient place fully. part a coordinate out in the deep ocean, part the intangible stretch of sky through which we were passing at great speed, so fast as to have traversed the precise moment and place of my birth before they had even transpired, my screams resounding like sonic booms in our wake, shattering the place from where we came. i was born in the sky. i was born flying. that's what ayah told me.

during take-off, people crowded around the windows to catch a final glimpse of the world they were leaving behind. de-landed, they would never see land again. dawn commenced in the east, dusk in the west, the only remaining certainties. winds whirled through canyons and across plains. rivers lay dry, like the drained veins of carcasses.

i was born everywhere. omnipresent like a god, in all places at all times. wars were raging on like volcanoes erupting, waves like liquid mountains continuing their advance. many people on board just stared ahead, watching their memories play out on the headrests in front of them. the pious prayed for deliverance, but it was of little use; the sky stayed dry, our destination remained fixed.

i was born in an epic nativity scene, but it was as devoid of comfort as it was bereft of location. not meeting the stipulated requirements for life on land, we were amongst those many thousands being deported to giant offshore rigs

officially known as europe in africa, but which at first sight we took to calling the skeletons.

earth still dangled in its orbit, but that was all. dawn commenced in the east, dusk in the west, but only those certainties remained. winds whirled through the canyons and across the plains, hot and foreboding harbingers. land was at a premium, the preserve of the wealthy; the poor, the infirm and the destitute banished to towering concrete structures out at sea, marooned out of view beyond the horizon.

the preacher quoted the book of revelation: "the sky vanished like a scroll being rolled up," and the imam, surah al anbiyaa: "on that day we will roll up the heavens like a scroll of writing." earth continued in its orbit, but with a slight dangling sensation, and everywhere it felt as though it were the end of time.

24. mensa: smelling lavender

totem crashes through the door, both thumbs down. they are visibly distressed, so i immediately close my laptop.

anything i can do?

a lot's coming up for me. i'm going to bed.

sure. i was just about to leave, anyway, or i'll be late for my session with sandra. have a good sleep.

i leave mensa, picking a few sprigs of lavender on the way. i am walking. i am smelling lavender. i am on my way to see sandra.

25. protea: my father came home

in the face of my inability to talk about “it,” sandra and i have spoken about a lot of other things, even my vitiligo, which has left a large white patch on my forehead like black beauty, on my chest in the shape of a heart, on the inside of my wrists like stigmata. she told me about a man who’d described his patches as white spots colonising his black body. the map of the old bantustans and of palestine came to mind when she said that.

and then she spoke very bluntly. it’s shock, she said. an autoimmune response to trauma. your body has started attacking itself, simple as that

.

i thought that was a harsh way of putting it. my dermatologist had said the same, but he said “one’s” body, which made it more general. he didn’t personalise it. but sandra was sending a clear message aimed directly at me.

the thought of my body at war with itself was too much, so i looked out into the garden. but i’m annoyed. things have gone too far. i feel that my back is against the wall.

why do you do this? i ask her.

because i’m here for you, she says.

i shut down, and close up like a clam.

*

sandra says: we have a shared history, but it's a traumatic one, and we're living through its aftermath. we've all been left brutalised and traumatised in some or other way.

she must think i don't believe her because then says something that i did not see coming.

my father was a military man. today, the thought of that alone makes me shudder, but when i was child, it was just his job. it took me many years to formulate the words i'm about to share with you. it was many more years before i could say them out loud, and then only into a steamy bathroom mirror. that precision took years to formulate. i had to be efficient; to reduce it to the essence of what happened. articulation is a very important step on the path to recovery ...

one day, my father came home from work. he walked through the door and shot my mother, my brother, my sister and me. then he shot himself. only i survived. i was eighteen.

i was stunned. sandra knew immediately that she had made a mistake, violated a boundary. even as she said the words, it was as though someone else was speaking, a ventriloquist seizing control of her words, and there was nothing she could do to stop her story from tumbling out.

i glanced at the painting of the old man, then looked back at her. you should listen when someone is exposing their soul. i suppose sandra was trying to establish a sense of rapport; in the face of my reticence, she was telling me about her "it" so that i could talk about mine. but it felt as though someone had

cut the lights, leaving us in total darkness. everything just shut down. i don't remember anything after that, or even how the session ended.

26. the weeping willow: one step nearer

sometimes when totem's around, i write by hand. they tell me when the laptop is a distraction. i understand. we respect each other's triggers, almost as though they were gods.

totem was in a deep sleep when i got back to mensa. i didn't want to wake them, so i took my laptop and left him a note: under the weeping willow. watching movies. join me if you like. i find the dj there, headbanging with his earphones on.

i turn around, but he beckons me to take a seat. we don't say a word to each other, but there's nothing awkward about our silence. i scroll through my list of favourite films. over the years, they have become like best friends to me. i click on *the godfather*, and immediately feel a sense of calm as nino rota's opening theme fill my earphones. "i believe in america ..."

*

in praise of fiction! we've spoken about that. you're a scientist. you read facts. but i find them cold. we used to argue about it. facts are more useful, you insisted. what is the benefit of fiction? i'd rather read a useful theory than a novel. we'd argue about that, too.

english has twenty-six letters, i said. they can spell more than 200 000 words, more than any other language. and those words can be used in an infinite number of combinations to write anything from secret love messages to hostile declarations of war.

you weren't convinced. facts are reliable, you maintained. useful. true.

i showed you an extract from a book i was reading at the time. i have it stuck on the wall amongst totem's sketches and all the other quotes:

in your dark night you may learn a secret hidden from modern people generally: the truth of things can only be expressed aesthetically—in story, picture, film, dance, music. only when ideas are poetic do they reach the depths and express the reality. in his highly original essay "the poet," ralph waldo emerson says that the poet "stands one step nearer to things" and "turns the world to glass. you don't have to write poetry, but you need an appreciation for story, image and symbol. it would help to get beyond the modern habit of giving value only to facts.

and then you took on *moby dick*. people are full of surprises, but that is how you were, always taking the bull by the horns.

27. patient notes: heal the mind

when miraj left, i drew the curtains, turned off the lights, kicked off my shoes, and collapsed onto the couch.

i was about to go to university, and had just had my first kiss with a beautiful girl called belinda. my father shot me last. when he pointed the gun at me, i didn't

think he would actually pull the trigger, but he did. and because i was last, and because i survived, i remember everything.

i've always wondered why my father shot me last, or whether he'd even thought about it. sometimes i think that he shot us children last to spare our mother from seeing it. sometimes i wonder if he even thought about it at all.

i had always wanted to study medicine, but after i was discharged from hospital, i stood in the registration queue for my first year at university, and thought: i don't want to be here. i was living with my father's brother and his family, and had as much of that scenario as i could take.

so, i went home, collected my passport, got myself a visa, and took a coach to the victoria falls. i didn't know why. perhaps it was because we'd had a happy family holiday there once when i was child. when i got to the falls, they were not as i had remembered them, lush and misty from all that crashing water. they were dry, with the cliff face exposed and people walking across it. the world was no longer as i remembered it. nothing was the same. i fell to my knees and wept until it felt as though the falls would flood once more.

during the journey back to south africa, i knew i couldn't go back to that old landscape, to my uncle's house, who was also a very angry man, to all the violence and aggression, to all those battlefields whose names had been drilled into us at school, at home, at church: blood river, margersfontein, helpmekaar ... i'd always thought that an incongruous name for a war, but not more incongruous than our living room at number 27 voster drive, a new battlefield to add to the list.

i could not go back to the smallness and the bitterness of my people with all their hatred; to my obliterated family. my family history had brought me to the point where i was the last survivor left standing on the battlefield, shell-shocked and stumbling through the groaning wounded and the wide-eyed dead. in the face of my trauma, i considered three options: freeze, flight, fight. i chose flight. i speak dutch, and so got a job with klm, and travelled the world.

one day, i was sitting on a park bench somewhere in the world—i can't remember where—when an old lady came to sit down next to me. the old woman was dressed all in black. she turned to me and said, you're alone in the world, aren't you? the old lady didn't wait for me to answer. i can see it in you. i've been alone all my life. when i was young, i carried the loneliness just like you. my family died during the war, you see. our house had been hit. i still remember my brother running to the bomb shelter with me in his arms. he got me there safely, but he didn't make it.

the woman's story evoked in me the desperate image of hector pietersen, limp in the arms of mbuyiso makhubo.

i'm sorry for your loss, i said.

what happened to your family?

she was the first person i told the story to out loud.

i'll never forget her response. it was silence. she just nodded, and sit with me. i knew i was in the presence of someone who understood, who empathized.

what did you do? i asked her. after the war i mean.

i became a nurse. i've healed hundreds of bodies, but let me tell you, i've never managed to cure a single mind. those poor men. the body's inclination is towards self-healing, the mind's towards self-destruction.

and in that moment, i thought of my father. it was the first time i felt any kind of pity for him.

heal the mind, my dear, the old lady said. the body can heal itself.

*

dj joined me halfway through the film. when the credits rolled up, we walked back to mensa in silence.

totem was sketching on their bed, and eating maltesers.

good movie?

the godfather.

totem positioned two maltesers on either side of their bottom lip: "you come to me on the day of my daughter's wedding and ask me to kill a man i don't know."

perhaps they were expecting me to laugh, but i just stood at the foot of my bed before dropping down on it, clothes and all, as cowboys do in saloons, and crashing into the deepest sleep.

28. mensa: our histories now merging

there are days when i can't get out of bed, when i open my eyes and think: not this again. that's how the nurse found me the next morning when she delivered the message that sandra had called in sick, and that dr williams would be seeing me instead.

i'd anticipated such a scenario, and had thought through the options. i resolved to continue as usual. yes, a line had been crossed, but we would have to deal

with that. for now, sandra was stepping back, but i went to see dr williams as had been planned.

i won't be long, i said. and please don't take this personally. but it's been a long path up to this point, and i don't feel able to step back to fill you in. neither can i step forward with a stranger. i wish to continue with sandra once she's ready. tell her that i hope she'll be feeling better soon, and please give her this, i said, handing over one of the poems i had taken down from my collage on the wall.

to my daughter

by n. balamani amma

*daughter, lying on a snow-white bed
far away in a hospital,
are you weaving midnight into day
with the dark threads of pain?
don't be depressed.
when we, too full of life,
rush about too much and need rest,
the goddess of creation offers us a sickbed.
lie back, be refreshed; reinvigorate yourself.
there are so many steps still to be climbed.*

*reading your poems in the dew-wet courtyard
i wonder whether the spirit in you,
which makes life blossom,
hurt you more than the body
that grew inside me like a flower.
these cocoons you've spun,
to put to sleep the worms*

*gnawing at your core,
burst open; fluttering, rising,
swarm my mind.*

*your mind may grow restless with unhappy thoughts,
your body may be weary of household tasks,
but i have no fears for you.
your power to turn worms into butterflies comforts me.*

then i came straight back to bed. where do i start to tell you about sandra's story? the 80s were dark times. people did horrible things. we're of the same generation, sandra and i. she's only two or three years older than i. now our paths have crossed, our histories merging, so that i'm telling her about my life, and she's telling me about hers, but our lives were so separate back then.

i don't recall how i came to know about afrikaner family killings, whether they were ever reported in newspapers or on tv. maybe they were in the afrikaans media, which we never followed. family killings like that happened far away from our world, to white people, to afrikaners, to people you only ever passed on the street, but whom otherwise you had very little to do with.

but now one begins to realise that while we were separated, our pain was interconnected, that we were all just scattered pieces of the same psychedelic puzzle in which all the colours had been reduced to black and white, which aren't even colours at all.

there were places where the pieces of our puzzle overlapped, like the crash of the helderberg in 1987. sandra and i have been able to speak about that with relative ease. the struggle was at its height, our leaders at the maddest, and we

were more divided than ever. but when the helderberg went down, everybody was touched. i can't recall that ever happening country before, when we all felt sad together about the same thing. in a divided country, the helderberg was a rare moment of collective mourning.

one day, i tell sandra about flight twa 800. it crashed on 17 july 1996. we were staying in the winter palace. i remember the date because we'd visited tutankhamun's tomb that day. i'll never forget it. we left the palace at dawn, and took a felucca across the nile. the river was still covered in mist, and there was only the lapping sound of the boatman's oars in the water, propelling us gently to the east bank of the river. our sense of expectation was heightened, more than ever.

from tutankhamun, we followed our map to hatshepsut's unexcavated tomb. it wasn'tt easy to scramble down the rubble, and the tunnel took a turn a few meters down, after which you were in total darkness. at that point, we turned back. there was lots of crawling ahead, and we didn't have torches, so we decided to come back another day. we never did go back, but today feels as though i'm crawling through that dark tunnel on my belly, terrified of the darkness, the spiders, the bats, searching for a queen who became a king.

our conversation moved on to american airlines flight 191. it was a dc10, flying from chicago to los angeles, but it fell out of the sky just after takeoff, killing all 271 people on board.

how dreadful.

it was 25 may 1979.

making you eleven at the time.

i've never forgotten it. i've always loved aeroplanes.

why?

immediate escape. a plane hurtling towards takeoff, a total thrill, like slamming straight into a vein. but 191 was my first plane crash. the realisation that planes can also crash and kill hundreds of people, this unsettled me.

your recollections are very specific, even though you were still quite young.

yes.

why?

because it was also the day i stabbed my classmate in the eye.

*

sandra was right. her story is not separate from mine. we're all just as brutalised as the other. my assumption that sandra was a woman to whom nothing terrible had happened, someone who'd had a happy childhood, a healthy family life, all of which brought her to a successful career as a psychotherapist, that image has crashed, and now we're both left on our hands and knees, rummaging through the debris, piecing together our traumatic history with fumbling fingers, the shattered nerves raw, exposed and painful to the touch.

29. patient notes: my father's grave

i finished medical school with distinction. i also got the "dirty sheets" award six years in a row. only ever seeking solace in the comfort of strangers, most of my conquests were anonymous one-night stands, my default setting. most of them disappeared at dawn, like mist before the sun, but a few lingered, and some i'd meet them again from time to time. with time, they became close confidants,

my confessionals, people in whom one could confide one's deepest secrets in safety and without fear of judgment.

imtiaz is such a man. we'd met at medical school. he was the first man i saw twice, and then thrice, and then a few more times, until one day he asked me to marry him. my heart leapt. he had been the first and only person—man or woman—with whom i felt safe. i desperately wanted to say yes, but i couldn't.

we'll be breaking the law, i said.

so what? we're both about to graduate. we can leave the country.

i couldn't believe what i was hearing. i have no family to leave behind here, i said, but what about yours?

what about them? they'll get used to it. and what does it matter if they do or don't? that's their issue, not mine, and it certainly shouldn't be yours.

i sometimes wonder about what life would have been like had i said yes. but i didn't, and imtiaz fell into an arranged marriage. but we continued to see each other over the years, especially when one or the other of us was having a tough time of it. we'd meet in luxury hotels and shut out the world with all its issues. the act was like falling deep inside oneself.

imtiaz was the only man with whom i'd spend the night. we'd be passionate at first, but then there followed a more enduring calm, during which we'd confide in each other.

i've overstepped with one of my patients.

how will you take it forward?

i don't know. it's a total fucking wreck.

then why don't you take a step back? take the day off, and just be with yourself. i've got the whole day. we can hang out if you like, whatever you want.

*

we drove to a place i'd never been before—my father's grave. how could i expect my patients to face their demons when i couldn't do so myself?

i stood there at the graveside, looking down at the headstone with my family name on it, the family name of a family murderer.

yes, i said. here i am, after all these years. even in death, i have been terrified of you. it's taken all of thirty years for me to come here today.

if you'd lived, you would have been seventy-nine. mother would have been seventy-seven, anton would have been forty-nine, and suzette, forty-six. i am fifty-two.

wat het jou die reg gegee om te doen wat jy gedoen het?

i have been loved, but i have never loved. in my work, i have tried to create a safe atmosphere for others, but i have never felt safe myself. i have been trusted, but i have never trusted in return.

when your coffin sank into this grave, i was not here. i was in hospital from the bullet wounds you had inflicted. but even though i was absent, you took so much of me into this grave with you.

this country has changed in ways you could never have imagined. on the surface, we have forgiven one another. we think we have moved on. but deep down, when we go to bed at night, we know the old resentments linger. all the anger. however well we mask it, the pain lingers, the hatred endures. even though you're dead, the trauma men like you inflicted, endures.

the bullets you fired are still travelling. i see it in my work every day. at heart, we remain a traumatised country, an angry country, an abused country, an abusive country. there is no end to the fear we feel, and brutality we are capable of inflicting on ourselves and others.

yes, your tombstone says, "rest in peace," but every day i see people who live in the hell you created, including me. especially me.

your bullets went off right in my surgery a few days ago, and caused another man deep anguish and pain.

so i am here today to tell you that i am letting you go, that i wish to overcome my fear of you.

for thirty years i've been struggling to reconcile two ideas of who you were: a father, and a monster.

now i realise why that's been so hard. it's because such reconciliation is impossible. there is nothing to reconcile. you were just a monster.

coming here is the first step in that process of severing myself from you, of cutting the chords that keep pulling me down into this grave.

i am here to resurrect myself, to heal myself, to shed this trauma, so that i can do better job at helping my patients to confront and shed theirs.

30. the roses of heliogabalus: door open

i am agitated. totem is, too. by now we've become synchronized enough to sense it in each other.

totem punches the wall. fuck all this abstinence, they say. i'm not a nun. i miss playing out.

sometimes it's just too hard to remain resolute. within minutes, we had scaled the wall that surrounds the facility, draping our coats over the electric fence to absorb the shock.

a voice calls out from behind: wait for me.

we look back. it's dj. that was the first time we'd heard him speak. famous first words—wait for me—called at two psychos flying over the cuckoo's nest.

dj pulled his headphones around his neck before passing his backpack over the wall for us to catch.

when we arrived at totem's apartment, dj set up his compact stereo while totem retrieved what they called their "dirty phone." when they turned on the phone, it vibrated until eventually it slid off the table and fell onto the floor, where totem left it lying, twitching like road kill. during the time it took for all the messages to be delivered, the three of us knocked back slammers, sniffed a few lines, and passed around a bong. when totem checked the phone, there were just too many messages to respond to individually. without reading them, they clicked on "reply all." they typed: "door open," and sent our location.

dj turned up the volume on his compact stereo. i was surprised at how something so small could explode with such big sounds. it wasn't long before the apartment was flooded with revellers, the walls vibrating, the windows rattling.

when i eventually passed out, i don't know why, but my thoughts were of francois mitterrand's illegal last meal, a dish of ortolan, which he ate under a sack to enhance the aroma, to cover the hedonistic pleasure, and to conceal the shameful act from god.

when i woke up, i didn't know how much time had passed. i staggered around the apartment, strewn with the debris from our crash, naked and half-clad bodies draped all over the place. the scene reminded me of the painting by lawrence alma-tadema, *the roses of heliogabalus*, inspired by the legend of the roman emperor, elagabalus, notorious for his decadent feasts. according to legend, on one such occasion, when his sycophantic guests were in a stupor, elagabalus released a flood of rose petals that he'd had concealed above a false ceiling, drowning them under a sea of rose petals. way to go.

standing in the middle of all that mayhem, a panic rose inside me: where is totem? i found them naked and passed out on the bathroom floor, their whole body smeared in a brown substance. at first, i thought it was a mud-pack, but then the smell hit me.

i hovered in the doorway, not knowing what to do. i hadn't seen anything like it, so i floundered. i took a step back to leave them to their privacy, but then another panic struck me: what if they're dead?

i stripped down, and stepped into the bathroom. having established that they were still breathing steadily, i pulled them into the shower and washed us down with copious amounts of soap and disinfectant.

that was the first time i noticed the tattoos that covered their back. they were in the shape of angel wings. they spread out from their spine, extending across their shoulder blades and tapering along the back of their forearms to a point at their elbows, so that when i raised their arms in the shower, totem took on the apparition of an angel in flight.

when i dried them down, i noticed that the feathers of their tattoos were actually male names interspersed with roman numerals. down the length of their spine ran the name, osama, repeated three times without spacing: osamaosamaosama.

i don't care much for tattoos, but totem's angel wings were a work of art. later, they would tell me that the names were those they could remember of the men they'd fucked, and that the roman numerals stood for the ones whose names they didn't know.

they said: of the nameless ones, i remember random shit like the place, a nose, a smell, a piercing, a dick, a foot or an ass, but that's all. when i got up to ccc for three hundred nameless fucks, i just stopped counting. but, to be honest, i think i must be well into the roman ms. plus, my back was also running out of space. it occurred to me the other day that the letters of lust can also spell slut. and that's me. no matter how much i try to rearrange the furniture, i'm just the same old tip.

i said: try sleep. dj and i will tidy up.

when we'd gotten rid of all the revellers, dj said: time to pay homage to my hero.

i don't know much about dream house, but i immediately recognised *children* by robert miles. when the three simple acoustic tones that introduce one of the most iconic tunes in dance history kicked in, dj pulled on an apron, and i snapped on a pair of rubber gloves. nobody raves like the mad, and nobody cleans up like the obsessives. if you're going to burn the house down, they make the perfect combination.

when we were done, i woke totem.

they said: settle old business before starting new business.

then they smashed their dirty phone, and threw the shards in the trash. they pulled dj and me closer.

they said: i can never come back here again. don't let me. i can no longer be this person. it will kill me.

then they locked the door behind us, and we walked away.

in the taxi back to mensa, dj rode shotgun, headbanging with his headphones on. in the backseat, totem rested their head on my shoulder, before curling up in my lap. i stroked their flaming red hair, so red, it felt as if i was playing with fire.

31. rivers of cum: london and osama

it's the bitterest night of the year. everything feels brittle; on the verge of cracking. a sigh will shatter a window. outside, the ground is covered in frost. inside, totem and i are in our beds. we lie facing each other. totem is talking. totem is remembering ...

my first scat experience was in london. i was working so many jobs to get by, it was crazy: a window-dresser, an installation artist in art galleries and museums, a designer in a tattoo parlor, where i also doubled as a receptionist, and a barman in a dive bar in soho. but what i loved to do most in the little spare time i had was to set up my easel around town, and sketch famous london landmarks. i was doing it just for me, so imagine my surprise when tourists offered to buy my work. that evolved into me sketching portraits of them. soon, the income i earned from sketching allowed me to give up the dive bar job.

and then, one day, the most handsome man you can imagine sat down on my stool. i had to look twice because i didn't know what i was looking at. i didn't think it was possible for a mere mortal to be that beautiful. i mean, this guy was beyond. he looked to me like an angel, or a god.

he winked at me, and said: do me.

if i'm totally honest, my first thought was: trouble. i felt it in my bones. i even hummed taylor swift's song, which made us both laugh.

when i handed him the sketch, a look came over his face, the kind of piercing look people give you when they've caught you eavesdropping, or going through their stuff. i really thought he was going to punch me in the face, but he said: come with me.

i hesitated for a moment, but then i thought: what the fuck. so i packed up my shit, and stepped into the black cab he had hailed.

he said to the cabbie: brompton road.

i thought: okay. remember, at this time, i was living in cheap and overcrowded shared accommodation in the east end, so knightsbridge was not a part of town i ever visited much; never, in fact.

what i didn't know when i got into that cab was that i was not just going to knightsbridge, i was also embarking on the most unsettling relationship of my life.

i'm still not over it. i thought i was, but as last night demonstrated, i'm not.

when the cab stopped, i followed him to a plush apartment just behind harrods. i was like a fish out of water, but he smiled at me, and said: relax. let's play rose and jack.

he stripped down right in front of me, reclined on the sofa, pointed at the exquisite silver ring on his right ring-finger, and said: i want you to sketch me wearing this, and only this.

it was while i was studying that perfectly proportioned body, that i realized why this gorgeous man seemed so familiar to me; i was sketching the most famous gay porn star in the world. he noticed the look of recognition on my face, but i said nothing. i think that's what sealed it for us, that i didn't splutter and fawn. i just did my job, and sketched him as he had asked. when i handed him the sketch, there was that look again, the look that i was intruding.

he said: i have been photographed and filmed thousands of times by the best artists in the industry, but none of them ever saw me like you. watch this.

he posted my sketch on his social media, rolled a joint, and we sat down and watched the numbers go up and up as the sketch went viral.

within a few hours, the job offers started streaming in, and within the week, i was illustrating for some of the most famous adult entertainment platforms in the world. the good times had arrived, or so i thought. the parties, the clubs, the drugs, the celebrity, the yachts, the first-class flights, even private jets on a few occasions, jets to secluded locations owned by rich closeted men who would pay osama \$5,000 an hour.

what wasn't to like? at the time, it all felt so real, but actually it was nothing, nothing at all, because when the party finally crashed, and i was being called a "widow," none of those people were there. none. not one. that's how i eventually ended up here, in mensa, sharing this ward with you.

in the industry, his screen name was david de angelo, a reference to michael angelo's statue. i never knew where that came from, because he was more "brown cocoa skin, and curly black hair."

but still, the name "david" always stalked him on social media where he was also called the "black david," even the "muslim david," which always annoyed him, because even though his birth name was osama, he was actually from an eastern orthodox family.

yeah, go figure. the burden of that name on top of all the other shit that was going on in his life. that's why, in his day-to-day life, like when you have to leave your name at the drycleaners or to reserve a table in a restaurant, he sometimes went as ozzy, and sometimes by sam.

in london, the only person he ever wanted to call him osama was me, and then only when we were at home and alone.

what you need to know about the porn industry is the pressure on actors, the pressure to perform, day in and day out, and the pressure always to escalate the boundaries of performance. so, it starts with a solo performance, then a one-on-one, then a threesome, then a group.

i was not a part of osama's life in those early years of his career, so i don't know how he coped with it, but i was there when he was being pressured into doing his first bareback film.

sure, osama and i were promiscuous. unleashed. no fucking boundaries. for us, sex wasn't a private intimacy, but a public defiance. we fucked at bus stops in the middle of the night. i serviced him on busses and tubes and in the back of cabs, even right outside scotland yard once. we'd ride the last tube of the night to fuck in empty carriages, waving at people standing on the opposite platform. we fucked strangers in parks, in the middle of the day. we fucked on the steps outside st paul's cathedral, behind the pillars of the bank of england, and in almost all the red telephone boxes and mcdonald's toilets in central

london. we went to more london chemsex orgies than i can even recall. they go on for days, so we'd easily fuck twenty or thirty guys in one session.

osama could pick up any man he wanted, anywhere. once, we picked up an mp on parliament square, and fucked him on his desk in the houses of parliament. that was the only time we knowingly fucked a tory. we had a threesome in st james's palace after he winked at a queen's guard who promptly made an about-march and escorted us to a room inside a room. another time, we fucked a beefeater in the tower of london after visiting hours, just a few feet away from where the crown jewels are displayed. one night, we crept into the grounds of the royal hospital in chelsea, and fucked as close as we could get to where margaret thatcher's ashes are laid. when we finished, i didn't swallow osama's spunk as i usually did, but spat it out on her plaque. and one day we took a day-trip to warwick, just to get high and fuck on enoch powell's grave. we nuttled rivers of cum all over his headstone. it was all very trippy. life on the edge. flying high on chems and adrenalin.

but no matter our promiscuity, when we played away, we always played safe, and the only unprotected sex we had was with each other. it was one way of protecting our intimacy, something that separated his professional sex life in the industry from his private sex life with me.

so, the prospect of a bareback film, "*david de angelo's bareback debut*," really daunted him. in the run-up to that shoot, he took more chems than i had ever seen him take because the thing about gay g&t, chems like g and t and meow meow, is that they increase your libido, so you can fuck for days. but they also make you lose your inhibitions, so you do things you would not normally do.

but, in the end, it paid off, or so we thought, because that year osama won the gayvn, the oscar of gay porn. he was now a superstar, a sex god, the international object of gay desire, but after the ceremony, he came back home with me, *me, this*, skinny, pathetic, unremarkable me.

when we got home to knightsbridge, we switched off all our devices, and went to bed where we slept in each other's arms for a week. that was the first time i really saw that other side of osama. i had glimpsed it before, but that night confirmed it for me. in public and on set he could be fully switched on to play the part, but inside he was in a lot of pain, a lot of pain, and when he got home, he would just collapse in bed, and not get up for days.

people look at a guy like osama and think: he's got it all, the face, the body, the career, the lifestyle. they thought we were living the dream, but the reality just wasn't like that. osama had endured a lot of childhood trauma, and while on the surface he seemed perfect, he was actually carrying around a lot of invisible scars. but people didn't see that. they only saw the image he projected.

after his gayvn win, the pressure mounted on osama to push his boundaries even more, and the next film he was scheduled for was "*david de angelo's bottom debut*," during which he would be performing opposite the new rising star in the gay porn firmament—python xxl. i mean, seriously, what an overkill handle, as if "python" didn't already say it all.

at this point, you should know that osama had only been penetrated by two men, his uncle who raped him when he was a boy, and me, because he wanted us to share everything. i'm bottom, so the thought of me fucking the most famous top in the world totally freaked me out.

but he took charge, and we did it jockey-style, which left him in control. i was gentle, and it was intimate, and not to put too fine a point on it, i don't have 23cm dangling halfway down to my knees like python xxl.

still, work is work, so we flew from london to la for filming. on the morning of the shoot, i watched osama hit the chemo again. when shooting began, i heard the director call lights, camera, action, and then i watched with helplessness and horror as python xxl pinned david de angelo down, and started ploughing into him, usurping him, dethroning him, showing him who was boss. python xxl had

arrived, and david de angelo was nothing but a bottom slut left torn and in tatters.

to be honest, that shoot was nothing but studio-sanctioned rape, rape in front of the cameras, rape under the spotlights, while the director was shouting: yes, like that. give it to him like that. i had to step away and put my earphones in. when filming finished, one of the fluffers came to me and said: it's done. on my way back to the set, i distinctly remember one of the camera men saying to the director: but de angelo didn't cum. the director said: look at him. he's too fucked to cum now. it's a wrap.

while everybody was high-fiving python, osama was left dangling in a sling, shivering and quivering like a slain animal. honestly, i'd never seen anything like it. if you've ever been on set, you know how hot those lights get, but there he was, shivering as though he were lying out in the snow. that's how much his body went into shock and spasm

take me home, was all he could manage to mutter.

osama would never be the same again.

neither would i.

i got us onto the next flight back to london, back to our safe space in knightsbridge, or so i thought, because midway across the atlantic, osama started haemorrhaging. i must have gone into some kind of shock, and the flight crew must have taken over, because all i remember after that was us landing at heathrow, an ambulance tearing through the night, and me sitting by osama's bedside for days while he was hooked up to intravenous drips and monitors that beeped and beeped. he had sustained a severely ruptured anal sphincter, and a perforated colon, or at least that's what i can remember from the jargon that the doctors threw my way. they were so judgmental. they made us feel like

shit. anyway, that was their diagnosis, but looking back, i think the real diagnosis was “fucked to death.”

osama was in hospital for almost two weeks. when he was discharged, it was under the clear instruction that he was to be under bed rest, medication, lots of liquids and soft food.

and so, for several weeks after getting home, i fed osama from a spoon as a mother would a child. at first, i had to pull him to the bathroom on a blanket because he was still a strong-built, muscular man, but beyond those first weeks, i was able to carry him to the bathroom in my arms, me, skinny, puny me. within the space of just a few weeks, osama had lost so much weight that he had withered from christian bale in *the batman* to christian bale in *the machinist*, right before my eyes. i mean, what are you supposed to do when you're helpless and alone and watching someone disintegrate in real time right in front of you?

for me, my only focus was osama and sketching. i'd sketch anything, osama's pill bottles next to the bed, he's flip-flops under the bed, the view from the bedroom window, which was of a corner of harrods.

one day, while he was bed-bound and i was sketching some or other mundanity by his bedside, osama surfaced from his swoon, threw back the covers and said: do me now.

studying that emaciated body, i could have cried, not just for osama, but because in that moment i realized that beauty means death. that was what i unknowingly sketched when osama first sat down in my stool—the beautiful visage of death. beauty cannot walk through the world untainted by desire and corruption. beauty is a cruel fate.

by the time i finished the sketch, he had fallen back into a deep sleep from which i did not want to wake him. i remember going to the bathroom, and

burning the sketch. i made a paste with the ashes, and drew these weird lines across my face, like i was some kind of tribal warrior. it was so fucked up.

time passed, and eventually osama was able to move around by himself. we went around town, window-shopping in our favourite stores, drinking coffee in our favourite coffee shops. it wasn't easy, and we had long silences because osama just wasn't there anymore.

but it was also an intimate time because now nobody recognized david de angelo. people didn't smile or point or whisper or come up to take selfies. now we were just osama and me. left by ourselves in the loneliest of voids of all, the void that comes from having been celebrated to having been forgotten.

life went on like that until one day i came home to knightsbridge to find osama with his head in his hands.

what's wrong?

they're not paying me.

why?

because i didn't cum.

you're joking.

and i wasn't around for post-production publicity.

yes, because you almost fucking died in hospital of sepsis.

osama shrugged: breach of contract.

all i could do in that moment was to sit down beside him while he curled up in my lap, and cried himself to sleep.

*

we woke up on the sofa in the middle of the night.

osama asked me: will you be mine?

i already am.

by how much?

by everything.

then let's play *doctor zhivago*.

i was used to osama's little games; i sometimes even enjoyed them. they started the very night we first met, when we played jack and rose. over the years, we played a lot of games: *back to the future* in greenwich park, with me on all fours straddling the meridian line; *antony and cleopatra*, during which osama fucked me up against cleopatra's needle. on new year's eve 2018, we played *cinderella* in the middle of the crowd on trafilgar square. the rules of the game were that osama had to hump me twelve times to the chimes of big ben, and that he had to cum exactly on the stroke of midnight. his timing was impressive; he shed his load inside me just as one of the most spectacular fireworks displays on the planet went off in the sky.

but over time, as we were taking more and more chems, we pushed the boundaries further and further, and our games morphed into something darker and more extreme. we started playing stuff like *six feet under*, during which we hooked up with an undertaker and had sex on his slab, asphyxiophilia, during which osama would strangle me to the brink of unconsciousness, crucifixion, during which he would drive needles into my hands and feet, and flog me with a whip, *scarface*, during which he branded his initials on my arm.

you might think this crazy, but the craziest thing was how normal it all felt. at no point did any of it feel strange; it was just how our relationship developed, a relationship in which osama was the master, and i the slave. but the game that scared me most was stockholm syndrome.

he said: how much do you love me?

with all my life.

and heart?

yes.

body?

yes.

mind?

yes.

do you want me to fuck your mind like i fuck your body?

yes.

good slave. you're the best slave. then let me give you stockholm syndrome.

osama put a black pillow case over my head, sat me on a plastic sheet, chained me to the radiator in the spare room, and locked the door. i was there for days and days while i heard him coming and going from the flat. i have never been so afraid in my life. it was terrifying. my worst fear was of him being in an accident, and me dying a horrible death chained to that radiator. he'd come in from time to time to give me a sip of water, sometimes a bit of milk or a piece of bread. but for the most part, he left me lying there on that plastic sheet, wallowing in my own piss and shit. the objective of the game had been achieved: mind fuck.

it was a long time after that before he suggested the game of *dr zhivago*. osama had never slammed before; of this i am absolutely certain. i certainly had not, either. during our time together, we had taken a lot of substances, but only what could be sniffed, drunk, inhaled or smoked. we never slammed.

so, i was taken aback when osama produced a syringe, strapped my arm, and slammed directly into a vein. then he did the same to himself. the next thing i remember is the two of us in the bathroom.

he said: be mine.

i am.

by how much?

by everything.

good. so, let's play *the muppets*. you be miss piggy.

he laid me very gently onto the floor, opened my mouth, and defecated all over me. i didn't know what the fuck was happening. it was a jarring moment in which you're simultaneously aware but can't understand what's going on. it was immediately repulsive, and yes, i gagged, but when i saw the pleasure on his face, and the reassurance that i would submit to anything he wanted, i felt nothing but a sense of intimacy such as i had never felt with anybody else before. i felt that we were united forever.

he said: good slave pig bitch. now you're truly mine. now let's play *the invisible man*. this game would last for years; in fact, it's still in play now, because when i woke the next morning, osama was gone.

at first, i thought he'd gone to our usual coffee shop on brompton road. but then i found his mobile phone, his wallet and his keys. a sinking feeling came over me.

i rushed to find my keys so that i could go out in search of him, but when i picked them up, i noticed osama's silver ring where he had attached it to my keyring. it had been a gift from his mother, who had since passed away. the only time he took it off was on set.

my blood ran cold, and in that moment, a large part of me died, because i knew instantly that osama had stepped out of his life, our life, my life, never to be seen by anybody again, including me.

i spent months riding our usual bus and tube routes, hanging around our usual places, waiting, hoping for him to appear. i set up my easel in the spot where we first met, and sat there come sunshine or rain, just staring at the blank sheet for hours because i could no longer sketch anymore. besides, that blank sheet now captured my reality perfectly; emptiness.

i was constantly online, all my devices permanently switched on, scouting all the chat rooms and dating apps in the hope of finding him, or him finding me. in the meantime, the industry, the online community, even our friends, were speculating about suicide, overdose, abduction, even murder. it wasn't long before i became a hashtag, #widowdeangelo.

i withdrew to knightsbridge. i didn't leave the flat for almost two years, partly because i was waiting for osama, but also because i just couldn't face the world. it was during that time that i really realized how intense my time with osama had been. we went to deep and dark places together, fuelling our demons, and now i was alone with my monsters taunting me from every side

but the experience that haunted me the most wasn't being chained to that radiator, it was our scat session during my last night with osama. that really started to freak me out. it had completely changed my idea of who i was. i remembered how, after he had covered me in shit, he stood up and said: now wash yourself with this. and then he pissed all over me. i had surrendered myself completely to him, total submission, to the point that no matter how much

i scrubbed my skin, scrubbed it till it bled, i would never feel clean again. how much more can you surrender beyond that? what's the next level of submission; a suicide pact?

where i had once felt intimacy, i now felt shame and self-loathing. i realized that i had had the most extreme experience of my life, more than anybody else i knew, but that i had nobody to talk to about it. in fact, the only person i wanted to process it with had walked out on me. why would you make someone eat your shit and drink your piss, and then abandon them?

when i started reading about scat and discovered that it is linked to schizophrenia, i went into a total tailspin. people talk about establishing healthy boundaries. how do you do that? i realized that i had none; when it came to sex and my body, i had never been taught or learnt about healthy boundaries. that was the point at which i started cutting again. i used to cut in patterns when i was a teenager, but now i cut in letters, osama's name all down my arms. and when the bleeding stopped, i would cut lines through his name again and again, as if to cancel him out. during my time with osama, i had become so wound up with him, i didn't know how to live without him, so i inflicted pain on my body so as to relieve the pain in my heart. it was a very dark time. i was totally depleted.

but with time i came to realise that if i continued to stay in that dark place much longer, i would die. when two years had passed, and i gave up on the prospect of osama ever coming back, i decided to live my life, just as he was living his. whether it was to punish me or protect me, either way it was now clear that osama had decided that he no longer wanted me in his life, and the realisation that i was going to have to live a life without him made me cry like i had never cried before. i was totally devastated. that was when i started visiting the tattoo parlour where i had once worked to cover his name on my skin. when every inch of my skin had been covered, i walked out of knightsbridge and came here to mensa, to this bed, where i am now talking to you. and that really is the best

and the only way forward, to step out of the shadows and the darkness and to talk to someone about the trauma of what had happened to you.

then totem got out of bed and took down all their sketches of london.

they said: i'm ready. you coming?

it was the middle of the night. we pulled our blankets over our shoulders, tiptoed out of mensa, and went to sit under the weeping willow. we sat there quietly for a while before totem took out their lighter. they held the flame close to their sketches, then pulled it away. they did that a few times.

i can't, they said. i think of them every day, of london and osama. my body's here, but my mind is there. i think it's always going to be like that. they changed my life forever, that amazing city, and that beautiful man.

so, what if i burn these sketches now? his name is always going to be carved on my skin. he fucked me up, but i know that if he stepped up in front of me right now, part of me will want to take him back. part of me will always want to take him back.

totem let out a sigh. then they tapped me on the shoulder and tilted their head. come, let's go to bed.

back in mensa, totem left their sketches on the desk, and sobbed themselves to sleep. during the night, i retrieved the sketches to study them under the light of my reading lamp. on the surface, they appeared to be london buses, red phone booths and letter boxes, underground trains, famous landmarks, but upon closer inspection, something else emerged. in sketch after sketch, totem had drawn intricate optical illusions. shift your focus, squint slightly, or turn them upside down, then something different emerged, a bus transformed into a torture chamber, big ben adjacent to the london eye into a dildo approaching a

gaping asshole. from all the sketches, there surfaced the same handsome face, hovering like a watermark, like a ghost, and in all the scribbles, the hieroglyphs on obelisks, the letters on street signs, the headlines at newspaper stands, the price tags in window displays, the small print on billboards, there appeared the same name, over and over again: osamaosamaosama.

32. the skeletons: migratory locators of motion

everybody came to see me and congratulate my mother, the pilot, too, whose name, some recall, was captain charles montgomery, the man who flew us to nowhere. apparently, he only nodded at my mother, but said nothing. one passenger even wrote me a letter. i have that at hand, too. i keep it with my identification documents, fragile papers that have become the parchment anchors of my nowhere life ...

3 may 20—

dear al mustaqbal

welcome to the world.

i will never forget your remarkable birth, high up in the sky, moving fast, everywhere and nowhere at once. but by the time you can read this short letter for yourself, you would have come to know that we were on a flight to nowhere, so this is what i was thinking when you were born ...

sweep the deserts

mop the seas

hang up the rivers

dust down the trees

blow out the stars

*switch off the sun
then go back to bed
for the end has begun*

your birth coinciding with my apocalyptic thoughts is another searing experience i won't forget. i hear that your mother has named you al mustaqbal, which i am told means the future, and that your full name is to be al mustaqbal ba'ad al ufuq, the future beyond the horizon. a formidable name has been bestowed upon you, and our fellow passengers were deeply moved to hear it. many cried at the mention of your name, me amongst them. i pray that your namesake will smile —

the rest is smudged, so i don't know the author's name, not even if it was a man or a woman. i wonder often about that person, whom i first thought of as ashshahid, the witness, but who, when i encountered those lines, which someone had scribbled on the walls of the skeletons—a woman doesn't want a rich man or a handsome man or even a poet. she wants a man who understands her eyes when she is sad, and who points to his chest and says, here is your home country: nizar qabbani—i renamed the anonymous chronicler of my birth qabbani. my father being absent, i sometimes wonder if it was qabbani who whispered the shahada into my ear for the first time, but it was probably ayah, because she was the one who caught me. i think this is how it must have gone ...

la ilaha illallah muhammadar rasool allah, ayah would have whispered into my ear.

what shall i name him? my mother may have asked.

al mustaqbal, ayah said.

my mother may have smiled. and then she died.

*

three days after we were deposited on the skeletons, weak with hunger and dying of thirst, abu shaywali noticed something. he stood up. leaning on his shovels like crutches, he pointed out to sea. a ship. we would have shouted and jumped and waved our arms about if we'd had the strength. made a fire if we'd had wood. but we just watched. the ship hovered some distance from the skeletons before launching three skiffs in our direction.

when they arrived, three of the men stepped onto the skeletons. one of them raised his hand in greeting. their leader. the other two stood silent, machine guns slung over their shoulders.

welcome to my world, the man said.

when he snapped his fingers, his men on the skiffs unloaded their cargo: barrels of water, crates of fresh fruit and vegetables, bags of porridge, rice and sugar, cans of tinned food and condensed milk, cooking oil, gas stoves and oil lamps, cooking utensils, mats, blankets, soap.

call me hamyaa, the man said, for i am your protector. you are my people now.

before they left, the men unloaded one more crate.

keep it safe till i return, hamyaa said.

when he and his men returned to their mother ship, we opened the crate. a stash of weapons. ayah acted quickly. she covered the crate with one of the blankets. my crib. i grew up to be a man of the pen, but i was raised on a bed of guns.

when hamyaa and his men turned to leave, umm sahar snapped her fingers, and his men froze to the spot. when hamyaa turned to look at her, umm sahar snapped her fingers once more, and hamyaa's men turned their weapons on him. hamyaa froze.

we have means at our disposal, too, umm sahar said. better to remember that.

*

the first consequence of my nowhere birth, was my mother's nowhere death. when they reached the skeletons, the women wrapped her body in a simple shroud, and lay it in the centre of the raw concrete floor. the concrete was still wet when they lay her there, the outline of her body surrounded by the footprints of her mourners are permanently impressed in the floor. they are part of what remains. burial rituals had been performed as best as could be, but there were no perfumed wrappings lined with rose petals. when prayers for the dead had been offered, my mother's body was committed to the sea. "to allah we belong, and to him we return."

my mother had died nowhere, her remains roaming the ocean bed many fathoms below. all our dead roam there, confined in life, floating in death, their hair spread out in the water, their names scratched into a concrete wall, my mother's the first amongst them. there were already many names on the wall of the dead when i added ayah and mohannad's to the list in my own blood, adding the lines from one of the books the pirates brought me: "i loved you, so i drew these tides of men into my hands and wrote my will across the sky in stars."

*

my mind is cultivated by the skeletons, by the sea, by ayah's many stories. stories about my mother, stories that constituted the imaginary world in which i sought refuge from the harsh monotony that often typified life on the skeletons,

carrying me to lost and far-off lands. worlds into which i sometimes retreat at will, like opening a door and entering a room. walking down a street, through a forest, up a mountain, none of which i have ever done. lost worlds that resound like voices in my head, echo in my mind, ring in my ears. i tune into them, as one would a radio. sometimes there is only static, but sometimes one hears something worth listening too, worth recording. something to remain. that is the purpose of my effort. for something to remain. of our transient existence, something must remain. be made to remain. be willed into remaining.

how much do people know about this wretched place, these unclad concrete structures looming offshore, out of view just beyond the horizon, sometimes swaying in the wind like skeletons on stilts? it is said that when we disembarked from our seaplane and were boarded onto boats for the final leg of our exodus, some people became hysterical when they caught first sight of these structures. a few even threw themselves overboard, choosing death in these treacherous waters over the prospect of life in such a god-forsaken place.

one of the deportees recalled looking back at the seaplane before it returned to the mainland. as it took off, he noticed that it was called kunlong, another bit of detail to fill out my sparse genealogy. i was born nowhere, during a flight on an amphibious plane that floated, a ship that flew, called kunlong, which, penticosta later taught me, means dragon fish.

*

i was too young to testify fully or to be a reliable witness to those early years on the skeletons, but i am now amongst the oldest of the original inhabitants of these structures. with age comes hindsight and history. when newcomers ask about life in those early days, i tell them what i remember of ayah's many

stories, about how the beautiful bones came to rest in a make-shift glass casing in our cabinet of wonders displaying mystifying objects plucked from the ocean, about the morning old jubran, bleeding spontaneously, declared through a bleeding, toothless mouth his wish to travel to mecca before succumbing to the scurvy that had ravished so many of us.

not in this life, people sighed, but umm sahar pushed all the sceptics aside, scratched a line on the edge of the rig, and ordered the bleeding man to step across it. instead of falling into the ocean below, he disappeared completely from view, leaving only his sandals where he had been standing. about the day the hurricane struck, leaving the skeletons bare once more, and many more names on the wall of the dead. about how the horizon never changes, except when it vanishes completely when grey clouds weld the ocean and the sky together, making it impossible to distinguish where one ends and the other begins, leaving us enclosed in a disorienting grey orb, raining until it feels as though the sky itself is falling down on us.

*

let me start with my head, as i should have done while i was being born, but instead, i pointed my toes out first, like a weakling trying out the water; toes elongated as fingers from stretching through my birth in search of a foothold on this earth.

delivered between heaven and earth, i am not tethered to the world by fixed prepositions. 'in' and 'on' are incapable of anchoring the story of my birth, unable to demarcate the spatial relationship between my advent and the place in which it happened. not accommodated by ins and ons, i am banished by overs and unders, throughs and acrosses, flighty migratory locators of motion

that cut me lose and—. i was going to say, “set me free,” but it would be more accurate to say, “kick me out.”

expelled in the very moment of my arrival, i accomplished the remarkable feat of arriving and leaving at the same time. and by so arreaving, entering the realm of myth, the intangible location of my high-altitude birth propelling me into the inconceivable spectacle of my landless life.

no continents claim me, no countries protect me, no cities house me. only the specials still have places to be born in these days. people like me; we aren't born anywhere, we're born away, to mothers on the move. no stones, no earth, no mangers. just thin air; that's our thing.

*

whatever is born must first be conceived. experiences have cultivated my mind. so have ayah's fables, and the exceptional story of my birth is preceded by ayah's even more extraordinary tales of my many conceptions, stories that dwell in the chambers of my mind like the winds that whisper through the veils of the skeletons. people longed for their homes and landscapes. even exiles from the coast were overwhelmed by the 360-degree aspect of the open ocean. a few desert people died within just a few days of arriving. the unchanging repetitive vista of the ocean forcing them deeper and deeper into their minds in search of deviation and distraction, to depths where monsters lurk, mental depths as deep as the mariana trench.

sometimes they would talk or sing about things that happened a long time ago, telling stories about the warrior, qaiser, who conquered vast lands and invented

the year. lullabies ayah sang to me, stories my mother told while rubbing her undistended belly, because despite my multitudinous conceptions, i have always taken up very little space, even in my mother's womb, a meagreness of being that left her to conclude that if she was pregnant at all, then surely it must be with a vacuum.

perhaps i was conceived from these imaginings my mother spun to fill the vacuum, like stuffing the cavity inside a turkey, or filling the mouth of a cave before rubbing her hands over her flat, vacuum-filled belly as if to seal the stories in. my genealogy floats on the tunes of the lullabies ayah sang to me. given the fantastical nature of ayah's fables, perhaps i was not conceived at all. perhaps i have no mother. perhaps the stories ayah spun were merely fictional attempts to fill the vacuum that was the skeletons in those early years, like filling the decaying cavity inside a rotting tooth. ayah the myth-maker who created legends of belonging.

ayah said that i was conceived in my mother's dreams, dreams that came to her in a cocktail of elements and a swirl of languages, languages she did not understand but in which she spoke fluently in her sleep; land dreams, air dreams, water dreams, fire dreams.

in one of mother's land dreams, during which she spoke in portuguese, mother danced on a needle all the way to cabo das agulhas. a dream so vivid that, when she woke from it, she stitched it into a giant tapestry, a tapestry depicting a woman lying down at the southern point of a skull-shaped continent. her right leg stretched out along the east coast all the way to the horn, her left stretched out along the west coast all the way to the occiput. her ankles hooked around the horn and the occiput while she pulled the continent into her. when she finished her giant tapestry of dreams, she wrapped it around her shoulders like

a cloak. “you were sewn with a needle,” she said, rubbing her belly so empty with me.

another land dream came to her in arabic. a rhino was carrying her all the way to ras hafun where the creature set her down and told her to “ride the horn.” she used the arabic—irkab al qarn—as if unfamiliar sounds would camouflage vulgar images.

mother’s air dreams came to her in french. in them, she crossed the sahara all the way to pointe des almadies, floating on a verse from the qur’an: “none hold them up except allah.”

your western conception at almadies is the reason for your big head—“la raison pour ta grande tête”—ayah said. in another air dream, a lost trade wind diverted from its path, and blew her north to ras ben sakka where it dropped her before blowing on across the mediterranean to italy.

ayah said that mother would fall into a series of wet dreams inside wet dreams. she called them her water dreams—ahlam almiah—in which she swam through confluences where, turning against the currents, she opened her legs to the collisions of great rivers, the marriages of the black and white voltas, the save and odzi, the benue and niger, the ubangi and congo, the blue and white nils, causing their unions to crash into her and form me.

you live out in the ocean, ayah said. but in reality, you’re a fresh water baby.

i’ve always thought that “reality” was an incongruous word, given our context.

sometimes ayah narrated her stories backwards, spinning her fables of my begats anticlockwise like a southern cyclone, blowing away my father from the

plot. of him, ayah never spoke a word. little wonder then that, having gestated in my mother's story-stuffed womb, i have come to conceive of him as a continent rather than a man, with a gushing river for a mighty phallus.

*

the morning star, venus, when it lingers in the sky before sunrise. defiant. the sky is my world, too. a screen reflecting the centuries of dreams and notions men have projected there. constellations of crabs and whales, dolphins and sails. carina, like a ship. vela, like its sails. a galactic ship on which i stow away, far from the confines of the skeletons and its squalor. far away from the confines and the squalor of my mind in the hope that a black hole will suck me in.

there are days when my worlds meld together, the ocean and the sky, with no end to one or beginning to the other. days when it rains in deluges, till it feels as though the world is upside down and the sea is falling down on us. then we drape the cube the skeletons form in black canvas sales traded from the pirates, creating the impression that mecca itself had been flooded, leaving the kaaba, the house of god on earth, abandoned and hopelessly afloat at sea. days when the sky is blue, so blue, the sun bright, so bright, its rays reflecting sharply off the surface of the ocean. then one cannot look out without having to shield your eyes against the glare.

on such a day, abu shaywali was rowing around the skeletons. save for the lapping of his shovels in the water, the ocean was as calm as sitting man's disciplined mind. then abu shaywali stopped rowing. he had sensed a change. he looked up into the clear blue sky, and thought: hurricane.

33. protea: what's a randi?

we're all entitled to a past, sandra says.

i bite my lower lip.

it's brave to remember when your mind has trained itself to forget.

i rotate my ring with my thumb.

it's how we respond to the past that matters. respond, she repeated, holding up a forefinger for emphasis, not react.

i've been talking to totem about plane crashes, i say after some time. they're my ward mate. they drew these sketches while i spoke, as if in a trance, like a medium at a séance, flipping the finished sketches aside before moving on to the next.

i hand them to her arranged them in chronological order. the first crash is of american airlines flight 191 on 25 may 1979. then saa flight 295—the helderberg—which crashed into the indian ocean on 28 november 1987. and then there's twa flight 800, which exploded over the atlantic on 17 july 1996.

these are remarkable, she says of totem's sketches.

i nod.

she spreads the sketches out on the table in front of me. which one would you like to remember first?

i noted her pointed use of the word "remember." she could have said, "talk about."

i picked up totem's sketch of twa 800. i have clear memories of the day. we visited the valley of the kings and tutankhamun's tomb. we were staying in the winter palace, and crossed the nile in a felucca at dawn. the river was still covered in mist, and there was just the sound of the boatsman's oars lapping in the water.

from tutankhamun's tomb we followed our map to hatshepsut's. her tomb was unexcavated, but she was egypt's only female pharaoh, a queen who became a king, so we were strident. but it was not easy to scramble down the rubble, and the tunnel takes a turn a few metres down, after which you're totally in the dark. there was lots of crawling beyond that point, and we didn't have torches, so we decided to come back. we never did go back, but today feels as though i'm crawling through that dark tunnel on my belly, terrified of the darkness, the spiders, the bats.

why would you imagine such a harsh scenario for yourself? why turn the past into a scary present?

i was a dreamy, bookish boy, i say after giving it some thought. i've always loved aeroplanes and egyptology. when twa 800 crashed, those interests collided. i was often whisked off to those places by the magic carpet in my mind.

by the end of junior school, i had read everything there was in our local library about the boy king and howard carter's discovery of his tomb in the valley of the kings in 1922. first, carter made a tiny hole in the sealed doorway then peered through it with the light of a candle.

can you see anything? lord carnarvon asked.

yes, carter replied, the first person in three thousand years to glimpse the contents of the tomb. wonderful things.

i was captivated. turning the pages of my book, it was as though i were standing right there next to carter, peeping down through the millennia into that tomb filled with wonderful things.

it was at that time that a teacher, upon finding me daydreaming once more, looked at me and announced to the class: miraj is far away again, on another flight of fancy, daydreaming his life away. it embarrassed me, and i resented her for a long time. and then, the other day, i got talking with totem, wondering why her comment still bugged me so.

because she saw you, they said. she could have handed it better, of course, but she saw you.

and what do you think? sandra asked.

i still flinch when i think about it. to this day, i remember where i was sitting, where she was standing, even what she was wearing ...

decades later, standing in tutankhamun's tomb, it was like i had stepped into a room from my childhood. it felt familiar, like déjà vu. i was now a part of all those centuries, and at the time, the most recent witness to them. it was somewhere during the journey back from the valley of the kings across the nile to the winter palace, that it occurred to me that i had fulfilled a boyhood dream. i smiled. i felt alive. i felt content. i felt as though i was doing exactly what i was meant to be doing—exploring the world.

but when we got back to our room, the crash of flight twa 800 was in the headlines on the tv news. it changed the feeling of the day. i don't remember what we did that night, even though it would have been something special. how different the winter palace was to our cockroach-infested room in wadi al mawt a few years later.

why do you think the crash had that effect on you?

plane crashes do that for me. when i heard about the helderberg, i cried. i picked up totem's illustration of the crash. he had drawn a flying springbok falling into

the ocean. the anti-apartheid struggle was at its height. you and i, although we're talking now, we were living in very separated worlds back then.

sandra nodded deeply.

the country was more divided than ever, and our leaders at their most possessed, but when the helderberg went down, everybody was touched. in a divided country, it was a rare moment of collective sadness.

did you know somebody on the helderberg?

i shake my head.

so why that level of grief?

because it resonated with me. i picked up the first sketch. totem had drawn the shallow arch of the plane as though it were half of the setting sun.

american airlines flight 191, she said.

i nodded, biting my lip, rotating my ring.

and did you know somebody on that flight?

no, i said. but it's the crash i know best. it was a dc-10 flying from chicago to los angeles, but it crashed just after take-off.

you would still have been a boy in 1979. why does this crash linger?

because it was the day i stabbed my classmate in the eye.

if she was horrified, sandra did not show it.

what provoked you?

i became rigid.

we all owe the future a past. what provoked you?

i was always being bullied for being soft. i wasn't athletic, but skinny. i couldn't play rugby, but i could play the piano. anyway, he called me mukhannath. that i

could take. it was not the first time the slur had been flung at me, nor the last; my own father used it after he caught me with malik some years later.

but when my classmate insulted my mother, calling her a low-born hindu randi who had married a muslim for his money. i reached for the first thing at hand and sank it into him. not conscious of what i had grabbed, it took a few moments before i realised that it was a divider compass sticking out of his eye.

sandra and i sat in silence for a while before she said: help me understand. what's a randi?

i said: it's hindi for whore.

34. hurricane rudra: anicca, anicca, anicca ...

abu shaywali was right. three days later, hurricane rudra struck. to understand rudra, i must talk about the nine aesthetics of performance in the *natya shastra*, which ayah told me about. she assumed the intricate postures as she spoke, narrating their emotions, colours and deities.

there is śṛṅgāram, ayah said. it stands for love. she held her arms out wide. the deity is vishnu. she spread her fingers, looking as far left as her eyes could go. the colour is green.

there is hāsyam, for mirth and laughter. she stood with her hands on her hips and smiled. the deity is pramata. the colour is white.

there is kārūṇyam, mercy, in the colour of grey. yama is the deity. she stood with one leg in front of the other; her right arm held out, her fingers together pointing upward like a lotus in the sky.

there is bībhatsam, aversion, she said, pulling up her nose. her thumb, forefinger and middle finger were held together, her ring and little fingers stretched out as though she was about to drink from two fancy teacups at once. the colour is blue. the deity is shiva.

there is bhayānakam, fear, in the colour of black. the deity is kala ratri. ayah assumed a retreating posture, her palms held out, her fingers quivering.

there is veeram, heroism, in the colour of saffron. the deity is indra, ayah said, crouching like a wrestler with her feet pointing outwards, and her elbows rested on her knees. in that posture, ayah seemed invincible.

there is adbhutam, wonder, in the colour of yellow. the deity is brahma. she stood with her legs apart and her fingers spread open.

and then, ayah said, her tone changing to one of dread, there is raudram, fury. she opened her eyes wide and clenched her fists, her thumbs stuck out as if she were hitching a ride. raudram, named after the god rudra himself, its colour is red, she said, pointing at the twisting hourglass of fiery water that was heading towards us. the most terrifying of gods. he comes in howling hurricanes and clouds of fire. brace yourselves; the slayer of men, the destroyer of worlds approaches.

when the rudra's turmoil engulfed us, the imam recited from the cleaving asunder:

*when the sky is cleft asunder;
when the stars are scattered;
when the oceans are suffered to burst forth;
and when the graves are turned upside down;
each soul shall know what it has sent forward and kept back.*

but there also peace, ayah would say after rudra passed. the colour is purple. vishnu is the deity. she joined her palms in front of her chest and sat in the lotus position. like sitting man, ayah could sit like that for hours, sometimes days without ever flinching once. looking at them, you'd think that they have tamed their bodies, which they have. they were immune to the itches, and could sit through the cramps; they could ignore their hunger and thirst, only attending to higher states of being, knowing that they endure, while gross sensations always pass. anicca, anicca, anicca ...

but more than the body, what they have really tamed is their minds to be equanimous. in that state, the equanimous mind becomes fully focused on the present moment, free of anxiety about tomorrow, or regret for yesterday, free of the running, never-ending narratives that swing it from here to there, free of aversion, free of craving and desire. no longer obsessing, the mind learns to attend to the present, the sensation of your blood coursing through your veins, your heart beating in your chest, your lungs filling with air. with every breath, a myriad of finer sensations course through your body, like the feeling of water from a warm shower flowing over your skin. now, like gautama buddha, you are fully present in the moment, your mind no longer an ocean where thoughts come crashing in relentlessly like waves, but calm as a lake and fully focused.

*

we had weathered many storms, and knew how to prepare. we moved all our essentials to the central rig. during a storm, it becomes the crucible of our existence, and we cling to it for life. we call the nine rigs of the skeletons by numbers, but the central rig is the only one we have named, al dieama al muhit, the pillar of the ocean.

when the howling funnel appeared, sucking the ocean up into its vortex, it was like nothing we had ever seen, the clouds red as blood, and the ocean a spewing volcano. the ocean rose higher. the winds howled louder. there was the terrifying sound of waves exploding and of things being ripped apart and torn away. under rudra's arsenal of thunder and lightning, it was as though the gods themselves had declared war on the skeletons and its people.

then, umm sahar rubbed her antique silver ring. she raised her cape in her right hand and flung it around her until it embraced al dieama and all of us. the effort would forever leave her drained. people huddled together in terrified groups. some cried. many prayed. a few sang.

i resolved to be unafraid. i sat as sitting man had taught me. rudra was terrifying, but not as terrifying as the mental hurricanes that twist the mind, episodes during which i would stand on the top floor of one of the platforms and contemplate the difference between a dive and a fall. a fall is an artless dive. from this height, a flailing fall would transform the surface of the water into a slab of concrete, shattering the body to splinters. a fall like that could injure or kill. but an artful dive could slice right through it, as mohannad used to do.

i would dive as though into the depths below the skeletons, staying down longer and longer, feeling as though i would never resurface again. but mohannad

would always find me, in the crevices behind the solar panels, in the shadows under the water tanks.

the more rudra howled, the more people cried, the more i sat; it will pass, it will pass, it will pass ... anicca, anicca, anicca ... but when mohannad drowned, it would not pass. there was no longer any need to seek out the solar panels, or the water tanks; alone, my bedroll in our quarters now sufficed. in that desolate place, in which mohannad's presence still lingered as though he had only just stepped out of the room, it no longer mattered whether it was day or night, or whether i had washed or not. the stars in the sky and pearls in the sea no longer sparkled for me. my mind had become like a stagnant pond, the stench of putrefaction hanging everywhere. there was no tomorrow, no respite, just this terrible condemnation to this relentless state of stagnation. mohannad had given me breath, but had taken everything else with him, and all that remained was nothing, nothing in me.

*

not as athletic, not as accomplished a diver as the other young men, always surfacing first, always having caught the least, i was excluded from their circle. only mohannad acknowledged me, and after ayah died and i was bullied from the prime location in which she had transformed hamyaa's arsenal of weapons into my crib, mohannad invited me into the quarters he had once shared with his mother.

*

when i fall deep into himself, into my mariana trench, sometimes disappearing for days, mohannad moves from rig to rig, searching. he passes the fish market, where fish open and close their mouths, drowning in air, past the preachers, past the oral poets reciting their newest compositions, until he finds me on the top level, amongst the solar panels or under the large tanks of desalinated water the aid agencies had installed. huddled in a tight curl, like a prawn, eyes wide open, unblinking like a fish, staring at nothing. then mohannad sits down beside me. it will pass, he says. i am here.

it did pass, but so did mohannad, and now i am alone.

fragment four

the universal sewer

35. the skeletons: muharram

it's the first day of muharram. the imam's khutbah is about exile. he quotes surah at-tawbah, the ninth chapter of the qur'an. unlike all the other suwar, it is the only surah that does not begin with bismillah, in the name of allah ...

and if anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of allah, and then escort him to where he will be secure. qur'an, surah at-tawbah, 9:6.

brothers and sisters of the skeletons, at the start of a new islamic year, we remember at-tawbah because this is the duty of protection that allah places on muslims to demonstrate towards refugees. we remember this surah because muslim countries fall short of their commitments. so many of the world's refugees come from muslim countries, yet so few take them in. instead, the muslim world creates and rejects refugees in the same moment. we criticise other countries for their shortcomings but, with the exception of only a few countries, most of the muslim world falls far short of its islamic commitments towards the outcast.

i have been contemplating the start of the islamic era. the islamic year does not commence with the birth of the prophet, or jibreel's first revelation, or any of the prophet's moments of triumph and of conquest. many other cultures, islamic new year is not a time for celebration. instead, the muslim era starts at a low point, with the hijrah, the flight of the prophet and his followers from persecution in mecca into exile into yathrib, the pre-islamic name for medina. why is this so?

i was talking about this to one of the sisters the other day, but before i could continue my rationale, she interrupted me and asked: but imam, why do you call it a low point?

i have to say, her question floored me. i had not thought of the hijrah in any other way but as a low point, so i attempted to explain my thinking to her. because exile is death, i said. as romeo pleads when he is banished from verona: “ha, banishment? be merciful and say ‘death.’ exile is much worse than death. don’t say ‘banishment.’”

because to go into exile is to lose what you once were, to have your life stripped away from you like a flailed snake shedding its skin. it is the most painful state one can inhabit. others can sympathise, but only exiles can empathise.

because to go into exile is to become vulnerable and exposed, to be at the mercy of the journey, at the mercy of strangers, at the mercy of allah, like hagar, whose name is the root of hijra—migration. she is the quintessential example of a migrant, an exile, a woman alone, a single mother. to go into exile is to inhabit a state of complete humility and total surrender. it is to be destitute, like hagar, destitute like we here in the skeletons have been left to be.

the sister nodded. the hijrah and exile is all those things, she said. but, as muslims, we see the prophet’s life and experiences as an example of how to live, an example to emulate. we are expected to be compassionate to the vulnerable and the less fortunate, and because he himself had experienced vulnerability and misfortune, so we should open ourselves to such experiences, too, and be compassionate to those who are forced to endure them.

and let us not forget, the sister continued, that to be an exile is also to be born anew, as a snake grows a new skin, as a caterpillar breaks through its cocoon to transform itself into a farasha, a thing of beauty, a creature that can fly, despite the fragility of its wings.

to be an exile is to discover the world anew, to see with new eyes, to hear with new ears, to feel with a new heart, to understand with a new mind. it is indeed to find a new place in the world and a new way of being in the world. to go into exile is to change the world.

and then the sister said something that moved me deeply. khadija was the first muslim, but i think that the hijrah is the moment at which the prophet himself became a muslim, the moment at which he submitted and surrendered himself completely to the message of which he himself was the messenger. giving up everything for nothing was the moment in which he demonstrated his total commitment to the message, and his total submission to the will of allah. exile made the prophet a muslim.

but most of all brothers and sisters, the imam continues, let us not forget that to go into exile also holds of prospect of return, however dim it may seem. by the mercy of allah, hagar found water for her baby in the well of zamzam. the prophet yusuf did not remain at the bottom of the well. neither did the prophet muhammad and his followers remain in exile in medina, but returned to mecca victorious, and thereby changing the world forever.

my conversation with the sister changed my relationship with my faith, and made me see it anew, which is what as muslims we are required to do, to think, to question, and to challenge. she inspired me with hope. and so this muharram, as we enter the ten sorrowful days of ashura, let us cling to the prospect of

newness that exile promises, to the possibility of return, whether it be during our lifetimes or during those of our children or our children's children. let us cling to the promises of exile, whether they are attained in this life or in the next, insha'allah.

36. malika: dishevelled

a week passes before malika distributes her scrolls again. people are shocked by her appearance. her hair is dishevelled, she is in her pyjamas and slippers, and instead of the fragrance from her perfume, a musty, unwashed smell creeps around the room. she makes several attempts to read, but breaks down every time. in the end, she walks out, leaving copies on her chair to read if we're interested, which i do in bed that night ...

37. three sisters – laingsburg: a very calm mind

at three sisters, we debated about whether to stop or continue on to beaufort west. your anxiety resurfaced; you were back on the n1, the road adam would be on if he were pursuing us.

how far is beaufort west? jackson asked.

i'm not sure, about 100 km, you said, glancing at the fuel gauge. there's enough petrol, and zak's fast asleep, so let's press on.

the road was much busier now, with a more visible police presence hovering on the side of the road. jackson resumed manual control of the car, making sure to stick to the speed limit. i think you should drive from beaufort west, he said.

*

the heat slapped you with a scorching palm when they stepped out of the air-conditioned vehicle at beaufort west.

puppy, mamma, puppy, zak called out.

what jackson heard was pappa, mamma, pappa, so he bent down to reach for the gun strapped to his ankle.

your eyes went wide open. you have a gun, too?

but seeing zak point at a little boy with his puppy, jackson left the gun in its holster, and scooped the child up in his arms as he rose back up.

why don't you go to the bathroom, he suggested, while we go see the puppy, he smiled at zak.

your mind jarred before your predicament came crashing in like a tidal wave. you were about to leave your son in a parking lot with a man who had a gun. you looked at your son, then at the boy with the puppy, then at jackson's ankle. you didn't want to be here, weighing your deadly options. you wanted to be back home in waterkloof, surrounded by luxury, cared for by doting servants. when your eyes met jackson's, you could tell that he had read your mind.

if that's okay with you? he checked.

and just like that, he'd defused the situation. you sighed out loud, your shoulders dropping from where they had been hunched around your neck. you didn't attempt to camouflage your altered posture; you were now too tired to pretend.

whatever, you said, waving your hand dismissively

for solace and concealment, you pulled your light scarf loosely over your hair, and walked to the bathroom.

*

the queue at the ladies was long. you wondered why the woman ahead of you seemed familiar. at the washstand, you recognised her as the woman from the parking lot, the mother, you now concluded, of the boy with the puppy. the taps were set to slow release, and the woman was hunched over the basin, her palms cupped under the slow trickle till she had collected enough water to splash on her face.

when she rose to look into the mirror, you noticed the bruises on her face. the woman made as if to lower her sunglasses, but stopped herself. she dropped her arms by her side, and just stood there, looking back at you, revealing herself fully to her in the mirror.

drying your hands on your t-shirt, you turned to face the woman. you took adam's letter from your back pocket, and handed it to her.

the woman's face fell. is dit hy? she asked. ontvoer hy jou? ek het sy geweerd gesien.

you shook your head. it's from my husband, you said. we're on the run.

and then it hit you. you'd become a woman you never imagined you'd be, a woman on the run, from a man with a gun. a woman on the run, with a man who had a gun. sensing your fear, the woman in the bathroom put her arms around you.

you're very brave, she said. i'll never forget you.

ek sal jou ook onthou, you said.

those are our boys playing out there, the woman continued. i'm staying for the sake of mine, maar jy vlieg met joune. ek sou dit nooit moontlik gedink het nie. but now i see it can be done.

i've wasted a lot of time by staying, you said. i thought things would get better, but they just got worse. i should have left him a long ago. just leave him, you encouraged the woman.

and go where? maybe one day i'll find a way, like you. she returned the letter, pulled her sunglasses down, and left the bathroom.

insha'allah, you whispered.

*

the road to laingsburg seemed endless, and zak would not stop crying. from the passenger seat, jackson had held out toys, offered jelly babies, sung nursery rhymes, and pulled all the funny faces he could muster, but the child was inconsolable.

eish, i give up, he said. he wants you.

when you'd found a safe place to pull over, you switched on the hazard lights and attended to zak, while jackson paced around the car.

what's this? he asked, pointing at the arabic calligraphy that ran along the bottom of the rear window.

my father put it there when he gave me the car.

but what is it?

it's the shahada.

what's that?

the islamic creed.

and why is it here?

i told you, you said impatiently while trying to comfort zak. my father stuck it there.

but why?

i don't know, jackson. muslims have it everywhere. it's even on the flag of saudi arabia.

can you read it? he asked, his fingers tracing the intricate weave of white loops and strokes standing out in striking contrast to the black tinted window.

you nodded.

what does it say?

really? now?

jackson tapped his finger on the glass three times.

okay, okay. it says: la ilaha illallah muhammadur rasulullah.

and what does it mean?

you rolled your eyes and sighed. it means: there is no god but god, and muhammad is the messenger of god.

good, jackson said. pray. you need to keep strong.

*

in the distance, he saw a small white house. he wondered what it must be like to live there, so far away from everywhere and everybody. he liked the hustle and bustle of the township, and knew he couldn't do it; too much space can be

as restricting as too little, he thought. he knew he'd feel very confined, very closed in, as though he were back in prison.

*

look, jackson said.

you jerked. what? you asked, looking around anxiously.

that man over there, he said, pointing at a lone figure walking in the distance.

oh. what about him?

he's walking. where is he going? jackson muttered to himself. when will he get there? he turned to look at you. do you know what my friends call me?

seated in the back seat, you shook your head, your attention more focused on zak.

when i was in prison, there were nights when i couldn't breathe, and i'd break out in sweat, even in winter. wena, let me tell you, nights in prison are long, and you find yourself getting lost in your mind, like in those rooms with magic mirrors you get at fun fairs, except you're stuck and you can never find your way out. so, you just go round and round while your mind turns and twists your thoughts into scary shapes.

so, me, i would close my eyes and imagine i was walking. just walking, walking, walking. many times, i couldn't picture where i was walking, so i'd just imagine looking down at my walking feet, one foot going in front of the other, step by step. you know what i did on the day they released me?

you shook your head again.

me, i walked. i walked right out of pretoria, wanting to get as far away as i could, until i eventually ended up in ga-rankuwa.

rocking zak in your lap, you turned to look up at jackson. ga-rankuwa!

wena, i'm telling you. i just walked. it was almost dark when i got to ga-rankuwa. i had no money, no phone and nowhere to sleep.

what did you do?

i just turned around and walked all the way back to mamelodi. what else was i going to do? now, i walk every day. most days, i walk home from work.

you what? from— you cut herself short, incredulous at the prospect. you walk from waterkloof to mamelodi?

jackson nodded.

how long does it take you?

i don't count time when i'm walking. when i'm walking, i'm free.

you stopped rocking the child for a moment, and looked at jackson with a renewed sense of awe.

me, jackson continued, i'm catching up with steps. i can't get back those years i spent behind bars, but i can walk, try to walk all those steps i imagined when i was locked up. it calms my mind, makes me feel alive and free.

by now, the lone figure was reduced to a distant spot. jackson pointed at the horizon. you see that man disappearing over there, he doesn't have much, but i'm telling you, him, he has a very calm mind. me, i'm very sure of that.

*

there was a lull in the traffic, and jackson noticed that the road was empty. he walked into the middle of the road, balancing on the white line, arms outstretched, as if on a tightrope that spanned the country all the way to the old

gallows in pretoria. he'd told you a lot about them. he takes regular walks there to visit them. he used to clean them before and after an execution. he'd stand on the trapdoor, under one of the seven nooses, looking around at the last place he'd ever see. he knew that it was only a matter of time before someone else would be sweeping those steps for him, cleaning up his mess after the life had been wrung from his body. he'd rehearse the moment of his execution again and again in his mind, so that, when the time came for him to be hanged, he'd be resolute, knowing exactly what to do. he'd eat and drink only a little before the day, just enough for the guards not to notice his abstinence. he did not want to shit himself or piss his pants as he had seen other inmates do. he'd use the hunger and the thirst to focus his mind. he would not sing as some men did, or cry, or resist, but would climb those fifty-two steps courageously and to the sound of his own final footsteps resounding through the room. he would not look at the black telephone for last-minute stays of execution. why should it ring for him? he'd take his final two steps onto the foot soles painted on the trapdoor. he'd try hard to keep his feet from twitching when the trapdoor swung open. he would imagine them moving back and forth, back and forth, as though he were walking, walking on air.

*

jackson said that when you've stared at death as hard as he had, you begin to recognise him in the crowd. jackson observes people, their comings and goings, like the woman at number 68. he'd noticed her leave one morning, immaculately dressed as always. when she returned a few hours later, he knew that death had called her number. she invited him over, as she did from time to time. they had tea and cake in the garden while she told him what the doctor had said. after that, he would spend a lot of time patrolling outside her house, not guarding her against mortal men—for whom he no longer had any fear—but standing firm in the face of death, letting the woman know that she was not alone, letting death know that they were ready. he told you about the student at

number 89 who came home early one day. sensing that something was terribly wrong, jackson locked the security booth and cycled after him. he planned to ring the bell and make something up. get him to open the gate and just start talking about something; it didn't matter what. but he was too late. he got to the gate just in time to hear the shot go off. jackson looked over to where you were still trying to pacify zak by the side of the road. yes, we're the same, he told you later: the suicidal, the terminally ill and the condemned—we know things other people don't.

*

he's not settling, you called out.

jackson saw your fear, but it was still the lesser fear of a mortal man, he noted, not yet the greater fear of death himself.

i think we should make a move, you shouted. we're very exposed here.

you did not yet have the resigned look of the condemned, the look he'd glimpsed every time he caught his reflection while on death row. you still had a semblance of hope. this is good, he thought. he was doing his job, keeping death at bay. he pledged to keep it that way. he looked up into the heavens and stretched his arms up to the sky. then he stepped off the white line and walked over to the car.

you'll have to drive again, you said.

*

he had not been driving long when he noticed a traffic cop a little way ahead, signalling them to pull over.

fuck, you said in the back seat, but jackson remained calm.

jackson lowered the window when the traffic cop tapped on it.

you were speeding, the cop said.

no, i wasn't, jackson replied.

one hundred and twenty-two, the cop said, showing him the reading on the radar. he peered through the window at the mother and child in the back seat, and then looked at jackson.

license, he said.

before jackson could answer, you were out of the car with zakariya balanced on your hip. let me explain, you said to the cop, stepping inside the yellow line behind the car. jackson watched through the rear-view mirror. he saw you point to him in the driver's seat, all the while rocking the child on your hip, but the cop seemed determined. you returned to the car to get your handbag from the back seat. you retrieved the protection order from your bag, adam's letter from your pocket, and showed them to the cop.

what's happening? jackson asked when you opened the driver's door.

move over, you said. he's escorting us to laingsburg.

jackson watched you keep up the with cop car ahead. when the speedometer hit 120, the traffic cop turned on his blue lights and siren, while the reading on the speedometer increased rapidly: 125, 130, 135, 140 ...

pee, paw, mamma, pee paw, zakariya clapped excitedly in the back seat, imitating the sound of the siren.

when the speedometer settled at 160, you activated the cruise control.

that's more like it, you said.

38. the skeletons: a single nautical nightmare

when kunlong took off, after we committed my mother's body to the sea, people stood around the skeletons, lost amidst the bare concrete structures in which all the khayelitshas, all the jabalias, all the cox's bazars, all the dadaabs, all the zaataris were rolled together into a single nautical nightmare. just pillars and floors. no walls. of the mosque, only an incomplete mihrab in the direction of mecca. of the church, only half a chancel arch reaching feebly into the sky. half a qibla, half a sanctuary. we pray in incompleteness, plastering over the gaps with stories of places from the time before. stories after friday prayers and sunday worship. today, it's the turn of the hassan al suri. he sits on the dais we had fashioned from driftwood, and we gather around, children and the frail seated in the front, closest to the dais, everybody else standing behind them so that everyone has a view. on such occasions, i become the scribe, writing down what is said for keeping in our makeshift library.

39. protea: gods and temples

i tell sandra about my grandfather who, as you know, was a famous storyteller, amongst the last of his kind. now people are consumed by trifles on tv, but back then they came from far and wide to listen to him.

one day, i found him on the divan in beit al ahlam smoking hookah. it was an unusual sight, as he only smoked there with his friends at night. he put his hand on the empty seat next to him, so i sat down.

let me tell you about the stone chameleons, gods and temples, churches and mosques, where they merge into one.

in the time before issa, pompey defeated tigranes, and syria became a province of rome. i've told you about rudra, the hindu god of hurricanes. in mesopotamia, he was called hadad-ramman, and his prehistoric temple stood in damascus, a city as old as time.

the romans transformed the temple of hadad-ramman to honour their own god of thunder, jupiter. the great archway and pillars of the temple of jupiter still stand in damascus today, at the entrance to souq al hamadiya.

when rome became christian, the emperor theodosius converted the temple into the basilica of saint john the baptist. his green-domed shrine also stands in that magnificent building, a place of pilgrimage for christians and muslims. salahuddin ayyubi is buried there, too.

when the muslims took over damascus, they shared the church with the christians before the umayyad caliph al walid converted it into the umayyad mosque. four ideas of god worshipped on that one site since a time before time began. a building, like the city in which it stands, with a memory as old as time.

there are many such buildings around the ancient world, stone chameleons. they show that there are no dividing lines between cultures. they all overlap and flow into one another. what people forget, the stone chameleons remember.

40. the skeletons: consonants and vowels

ayah said that on that first night after they were abandoned on the skeletons, they huddled together, seeking solace in one another, me screaming in her lap.

how will we feed him? someone asked.

ayah told me that umm sahar took us to one side. she cupped ayah's breasts with her hands until she started to lactate.

the school and college never came. the hospital was never built, leaving us at the mercy of hamyaa and dependent on medical services from the humanitarians. we filled the gaps as best we could. we live out our lives in flimsy improvised spaces. the best thing i ever did was learn to read and write. stories saved me from our desperate facts. we made something with a semblance of beauty, and found a lot of love in a very destitute place.

*

we stumbled onto the skeletons from broken worlds, sunken worlds, dry worlds, deflected here by rich worlds that would not take us in. rejected by the world's nations, we hover here, in stateless limbo. outcasts from the world of nations, from the human family, from the landed ones, from the specials. some of us cope by straddling—dreaming of there, languishing here—while others have learned to set those lost places aside. but whatever our positions, whatever the conjuring of our dispossessed minds, we are all the rejects of nations, and whether willing or reluctant, this shared consciousness binds us together as one.

confined in this maritime prison, we have seeped into one another, like flavours in a pot. the woman who translated in the time before we understood one another. she arrived not on kunlong, but on one of hamyaa's skiffs. a hostage. a diplomat, probably. she did not say. brought to us for safekeeping until her ransom was paid. she spoke so many languages so fluently nobody could tell where exactly she was from. perhaps she was born everywhere, like me.

in those early days, before our different tongues merged into the patois of the skeletons, she was the arbitrator of disputes, the mediator of plans, the translator of secrets. speaking like a goddess with many tongues, and never finding out her real name, the preacher named her penticosta.

writing in this language with all its exceptions is exhausting. it is not the language in which ayah spoke to me, not the language in which sitting man instructed me, not the language in which i interpreted mohannad's underwater gestures while he struggled to save me, not the language in which i dream; that language is too intimate, too filled with private resonances for me to use here. this is a language penticosta taught me, a neutral language, a dispassionate language in which it is easier to record these wretched observations.

mine is a language of consonants, an abjad script, written from right to left, without vowels, without capital letters. when penticosta taught me to write in the opposite direction, i was writing against everything i had known. 'skltns' was how i wrote this language when i was starting out, writing back to front, commencing my ss from the bottom loop, my ms and ns from the bottom of the right leg and working back. my name came out as "mstqbl," my best friend's was "mhnnd," my instructor's "sttng mn," my teacher's "pntcst."

practise letter formation starting from the top, then working your way from left to right. it's easier that way. more flow, penticosta said. and don't forget the capitals and the vowels.

so i'd go back to fill them in—skeletons, mustaqbal, mohannad, sitting man, penticosta—training my brain and fingers to do the opposite of what they were accustomed to doing. to tell this story of our dispossession, i had to dispossess myself of everything i had known. the effort was like swimming backwards to the bottom of the sea in a single breath.

penticosta was on the skeletons long enough to teach me the more advanced nuances, too. i remembered ayah. it is easy to tell stories in the past tense, she once told me. she was right, because i have come to realise it is more difficult to tell them in the present perfect, in which “i was” becomes “i have been.”

penticosta taught me that. structurally, it is difficult, because one needs to know the past participle in which “to be” becomes “to have been.” it is also difficult to distinguish it from the past tense, to grasp the subtle differences between “we were abandoned and left to our fate,” and “we have been abandoned and have been left to our fate.”

the past tense is concluded. ayah was right: i caused the death of my best friend. the action is finished. but penticosta also taught me a more painful grammatical truth; the present perfect endures: i have caused the death of my best friend. it lingers, like a legacy. it is what remains. what remains in you, and you have to live with it.

*

on the morning after rudra finally passed, the people of the skeletons awoke to the vilest stench. they looked out to sea in horror; they were engulfed with garbage stretching as far as they could see.

unable to row his inner tube through the garbage, abu shaywali moored himself to the lowest level of the rigs and, at high tide, dug his shovel into the garbage then rowed it away, as if trying to row the skeletons themselves free from the ocean bed, through the detritus, and on towards shore. eventually, he gave up.

we will not die here, he said. we must go for help. he spent the next three days paddling through the garbage with his shovels, weaving together anything that could float, until he'd spun a large floating patchwork.

where will you go? someone asked.

there, abu shaywali replied, pointing in the direction the pirates came from.

41. cape town: getting trippy

it was late afternoon when we cleared the huguenot tunnel, a palpable sense of relief rising in the car. we were on their final approach down the n1 into cape town, the southern sky still arched overhead like a universe, the cape peninsula spread out before them, just like the jewel jackson had always imagined it to be.

you had the sun visor down against the setting sun. still peering routinely into the rear-view mirror, you noticed the large car that was following very close behind. you pulled down her sunglasses. it was the woman from the bathroom. her husband was asleep in the passenger seat next to her. you slowed down. you lowered her window and waved at the woman through her wing mirror. the woman waved back. then she raised her forefinger and spun it around in small circles. she pointed at her sleeping husband, and then pulled her finger across her throat. you interpreted the gesture to mean, "one day, i'm going to kill him." you stepped on the brake, but only had enough time to make a mental note of the number plate before the woman's car slipped away at her exit, and disappeared over a bridge.

everything okay? jackson asked.

you closed the window, and stepped on the accelerator. the engine roared and the car surged forward, the velocity pinning us into our seats.

please send tina another message, you said. tell her we'll be there in half an hour. you turned on the navigation system, and followed the directions to your best friend's house.

*

oh, my, god, tina said as soon as jackson went to bed. your man's gorgeous. is he the one you're supposed to be fucking?

you shook your head.

he's so fucking worth it. i'd do him, even if it meant the kiss of death.

we laughed till tears streamed down our faces, and you realised that you hadn't laughed like that in months, maybe even years.

listen, you said to tina once their laughter had subsided. there's something jackson wants you to know.

tina gave you a puzzled look.

he wanted me to tell you on the phone before we arrived, but mine is off and he didn't have much airtime, so i thought i'd wait till i could tell you face-to-face.

sure.

as we're staying in your house, he thought you should know.

okay.

he's a murderer.

tina leaned forward.

he killed two white men during the old days, and seriously injured a third. he didn't want you to find out somehow and think he was keeping secrets.

why?

he just wanted to be upfront with you, i guess.

i mean, why did he kill those men?

they gang-raped his neighbour.

tina's jaw dropped.

who's gay.

tina's jaw dropped even further.

and then they tried to kill her. that's when jackson intervened.

—

tina, are you okay? you asked. i'm sorry to shock you, but it was right to tell you.

i'm glad you did, tina said.

do you want us to leave?

are you crazy? no, i'm glad you told me, because now you've really turned me on to him. is anything more seductive than a bad boy who's a good man? your new man's a keeper.

at that, we laughed again.

it's so good to see you, you said, reaching across the table to hold your friend's hand. thank you for putting us up at such short notice.

hey, how long have we known each other? you'd do the same for me. we're like family, and family don't say thank you. you're safe now.

safer, you emphasised. and it's only for tonight. we'll find a guesthouse tomorrow.

a guesthouse? are you serious? it's the week before christmas. cape town's fully booked. what's still available will be very expensive. you know this.

yes, of course, but i've been thinking about it. adam might guess i'd come here, and i can't take that risk. i can't put you in harm's way, too. no, i can't let him find us here, you said emphatically.

whatever, tina responded. but i'm coming with you.

in which case, can we take your car?

*

the following day, they checked into the cottage, nestled on an oak-lined avenue in one of the city's most exclusive southern suburbs on the slopes of table mountain.

it's all pretty self-explanatory, the manager explained, but proceeded to give them a detailed tour of the luxury property anyway. water from the bathrooms and kitchen feeds the garden, he explained, but do please keep your usage to

the municipal limit of 86 litres per person per day. gauteng is still getting a lot of rain, but down here, day zero's fast approaching.

jackson looked blankly at this man who seemed as though he'd never gone a day without in his life. in the township, he thought, it's been day zero all our lives. he stepped away from the group, and started tapping on his phone.

in the magnificent garden, the manager pointed at the dense growth of trees that ran along the far side of the garden. the manor house is on the other side, but it's quite a way off. it's accessed by a separate driveway, so you'll have all the privacy you need down here. they won't disturb you.

then he pointed at the sparkling infinity pool. but the water no longer flowed over the edges of the pool. the water shortage revealed the weir and catch basin at the pool's most dramatic infinite edge with its breathtaking views of the mountain. with the structural mechanics of the pool now in view, the visual effect was diminished, like a magic trick loses its charm once its method is revealed.

the level's four tiles down now, the manager said, pointing around the edge of the pool. last week it was three, so it's dropped a level in a week, he added for emphasis. it's a nightmare keeping it clean without the overflow, so absolutely no diving, please. we'd prefer to keep the water inside the pool.

feeling patronised, you turned to zak. it's much smaller than our pool in waterkloof, isn't it? but, you said, giving the manager a look, it will have to do.

*

oh, my, god, tina exclaimed when the manager had left. and they call this the cottage!

i've found it, jackson said, handing you his phone.

you clicked on the map for directions. it's fifteen minutes away, you said.

what is? tina asked.

the nearest pawnshop, you replied.

pawnshop?

we're running short of cash, you explained, and i can't use my bankcards. adam will know where i am. so, i'm going to sell this, you said, taking off your diamond wedding ring.

*

tina drove.

how much did you get? jackson asked when you returned to the car.

you gave him the wad of notes.

is that all?

i know. and i even salaamed so nicely, you said, removing your scarf.

jackson took the money and got out of the car.

where are you going? you called out, but he had already closed the door and disappeared around the corner.

*

what the hell, tina exclaimed when jackson returned to the car. i've never seen so much cash in my life. you guys are really getting trippy.

what did you do? you asked, starrng down at the weight of cash jackson had placed in your lap.

i just got you a fair price for your ring, he said. now let's go. i have somewhere i have to be.

you were still reeling. but —.

tina interrupted you by starting the car and revving the engine. the man has somewhere to be, she said, and drove off.

*

they drove east.

tina had lived in cape town all her life, but had no idea where they were when jackson told her to stop the car.

where the hell are we? she asked.

it was dark. there were hardly any streetlights, and groups of hooded thugs hovered in the shadows.

will the car be safe here? she asked.

jackson drew an insignia of some kind in the fine layer of dust that covered the bonnet. yes, he said. follow me.

inside, the lights were dim, and the mood relaxed. people were sitting at tables, and lounging around in sofas. there was a small dance area, but it wasn't full. against the far wall, a projector cast shekhinah, singing in a red vw beetle: "suited for each other, don't try to move me from my lover."

people looked up at the newcomers. tina felt a little self-conscious, but followed jackson in his confident stride to the bar. they sat down in bar stools shaped like bums.

i'm here to see nomsa, he said to the woman behind the bar. we'll have two beers while we're waiting.

the woman didn't look up. there's no nomsa here, she said, and just continued shining glasses.

i won't repeat myself, jackson said.

ignoring him, the woman turned to her assistant behind the bar instead. get that, she said to her. he walks into my shebeen out of nowhere, with this little miss thing, waving his dick around. she sucked her teeth.

it's not your shebeen, jackson said flatly. we'll have those beers now.

there was a sudden hush. looking over jackson's shoulder, tina saw a majestic woman crossing the room; a magnificent doek wound high on her head. she was walking directly towards them. people put down their glasses, others dropped their cigarettes, and those on the dance floor cleared the way for the woman they'd all heard about, but who most had never seen.

the woman stopped a few paces away from jackson. a beer for my friend, she said to the bartender. and one for my friend's friend, she added, sizing up tina.

molo, nomsa, jackson said.

nomsa's dead, the woman replied. i have no mercy left. you can call me big babe now. come, she said, nodding to the back.

when tina rose to follow them, big babe turned around. give us a moment, she said. i last saw this man in another country. de klerk was still thinking he's in charge, and i'm guessing you were still at school. i'll send for you when we're done.

tina sat back down, smiling awkwardly at the bartender. swivelling around in her bum-shaped seat, she took another look around the room, noticing then that there were hardly any men present. it struck her then that the thugs outside were women, too.

*

unjani. how's cape town treating you? jackson asked big babe once they were seated in her den.

well, as you can see, she said, gesturing around the room, then at herself, seated in an elaborate armchair under a portrait of felicia snoop pearson.

what can i do for you? she asked, sparing him from having to.

my friend's in trouble, he said. i need some help protecting her while we're here.

the skinny one at the bar?

no. someone else.

another woman?

yes.

girlfriend?

no. kind of an employer.

big babe raised an eyebrow. your friend, who's also your employer? look at pretoria, getting all progressive.

i'm a security guard in her neighbourhood.

big babe sat quietly while jackson spoke, a steely expression covering her face as his story unfolded.

and where is she now, this employer?

at the guesthouse.

specifics.

bishopscourt.

rich bitch.

jackson shrugged.

you fucking her, this rich bitch? i need to know the dynamics.

no.

what about the skinny one at the bar? she has the hots for you. i can tell.

jackson shook his head.

good, big babe nodded. keep it that way. we don't want soft hearts and wet pussies getting in the way. no messy complications.

so, you'll help us? jackson asked.

big babe leaned forward. mamela wena, she said. there's not a day goes by when i don't remember what you did for me.

jackson looked down. it was nothing

big babe scoffed. death row was nothing?

—

anyway, this is what you're going to do. you're going to send me some pictures of the igwala husband, and that fancy idilesi in bishopscourt.

jackson nodded.

done. big babe pulled out two drawers concealed in the coffee table in front of her, and sat back in her armchair. let's chill, she said, pointing at the contents of the drawer. go get your skinny bitch from the bar, while i fetch mine from the bedroom.

*

when you had put zak to bed, you called the helpline.

promise me you'll call them, tina said before she and jackson left. you need to build evidence for your case. here, i'll leave you my phone.

such a serious death threat, it doesn't come from nowhere, the voice at the other end of the line said. it usually follows other forms of abuse. has that been your experience?

sitting out in the garden, the dark mass of the mountain bearing down on you in the moonlight, you flinched at the memory of the first blow adam ever delivered. you were three months pregnant, and flew home to your parents in durban the following day.

marriage is hard work, your father said. you've got to make things right with adam, he urged. he's your cousin. and our families have been doing business together for generations.

but—.

her mother cut her short. don't be so selfish. this isn't only about you, she said. your sister's married to his brother. have you forgotten that?

hello, ma'am. are you still there? the voice asked.

i'll have to call you back, you said. you hung up the phone, and sobbed.

42. mensa: malika's offer

i'll miss them when they're gone. totem has taken up malika's offer. they couldn't face going back to that flat.

you don't have to, malika said.

i'll have to sell it, first. that will take time.

so what? malika shrugged. come and stay with zak and me in waterkloof till you get it sold.

when they hugged, totem cried. it was the last time i saw them do that.

43. malika: all in black

malika took my breath away again one day when she arrived at group dressed all in black. she had a light scarf draped loosely over her hair. she looked more regal than i had seen any woman look, a queen in black.

what she said made my heart sink. i've reached the end of my story. today's my last day, and so i'd like to read it to you before i leave.

44. llandudno: a perfect day

there was nowhere to park in camps bay, so tina drove them further south along the atlantic coast to llandudno beach. they hired a beach umbrella, setting it up in a quiet spot amongst the large granite boulders at the southern end of the beach.

so, this is what the beach feels like, jackson said, marveling at the feeling of the silky sand between his toes. when he and zak went down to play in the shallows, you turned to tina.

what am i going to do now? i can't stay here forever. you looked around at the other people on the beach. is this a non-smoking beach?

tina rummaged around in her bag.

but i'm so fucking exhausted by it all, you continued. i feel as though my head is going to explode if i have to make one more decision.

menthol or plain? tina asked mischievously, holding out two packets of cigarettes. she winked at you, and the two of you laughed.

can i say something? tina asked through huge plumes of smoke.

you nodded, taking a hit.

i think you were right to get away. you've been to the police, you have a protection order, and you've driven yourself to safety. you've got enough of money for now, and a safe place to stay. most of all, zak is happy and content. and look at jackson. the two of them are having a ball down there. so, here's what i think. it's the holiday season. just use the next few days to do that.

do what?

hello! have a fucking holiday! i mean, look at you, all wound up. you need to relax, girlfriend. take some time to rest and enjoy yourself, so that when the time comes for next steps, you can decide what to do with a clear and fresh mind. but you don't have to make those decisions today, or tomorrow, or even the day after. you've bought yourself time, and jackson's friends are just over there keeping an eye on you, she said, gesturing at the babes in the middle distance. now, just sit back and relax. can you try to do that? tina looked at you intently.

you nodded, but were not convinced. you lowered your sunglasses, and lay down on her beach towel, where, despite your best efforts at relaxing, you just continued to fret.

*

when jackson and zak returned from the shore, you were pondering, and tina was busy on her phone.

how was it? she asked.

eish, the water's freezing, jackson said. and very salty. me, i never imagined it would be that salty.

and you little man? did you have fun? tina asked, wrapping a towel around zak.

the toddler muttered excitedly, pointing around and up and down, but tina couldn't understand a word he was saying, so she just smiled broadly and said, is that so? how about we build a sandcastle? would you like that?

*

tina, jackson said with earnest, holding out his phone. you posted pictures of us on the beach.

tina smiled. aren't they lovely? then her expression changed.

come on, jackson said, jumping to his feet. we've got to go. he tugged you by the shoulder, and let out a wolf whistle to alert the babes.

jackson, out of habit, was counting the steps leading from the beach up to the parking lot. he had not yet reached fifty-two when zak shouted out, excited, pappa, mamma, pappa, pointing at his father, who was holding out a gun. lama laikum, pappa, the toddler said.

you and tina froze. the babes pulled out their weapons, but jackson stepped forward, arms outstretched. everybody just stay calm, he said. then he turned to face adam. please lower your weapon, sir. nobody needs to get hurt here today.

but adam just looked back at him, wild-eyed. you've got that wrong, he said. and then he pulled the trigger, the sound of the shot ricocheting through the air like a series of violently crashing waves.

there was mayhem. the people closest to the shot fell down. those further away darted around, ducking and screaming. you threw yourself on top of zak. only jackson and the babes remained standing.

several seconds passed before jackson fell, first onto his knees before finally collapsing to the ground.

a second shot rang out, striking adam in the shoulder. the babes overpowered him. tina took hold of zak. you rushed over to jackson.

you cradled his head in your lap, a stream of blood already flowing down the stairs, seeping into the white sea sand.

i never got to tell you what my friends call me, jackson said, looking up at you.

sshh, jackson, you pleaded, desperately pressing down on his wound to stem the bleeding. somebody call an ambulance, you cried out.

my friends, they call me walker, he said.

you smiled through the flood of tears streaming down her face.

you can call me walker, now.

okay, walker, you sobbed.

glimpsing the mountain through the canopy of trees that overhung the stairs, jackson moved his lips again.

don't worry, he gasped. everything will be fine ...

what a perfect day. all these things i never thought i'd see. the karoo, cape town, the beach, table mountain ...

i'm a walker, but i've never climbed a mountain ...

me, i'm going to climb that mountain now.

and then his eyes closed, and his body went limp in your lap.

fragment five

“it”

45. mensa: “time’s up”

the ward felt empty without totem. the facing wall is a collage of sketches and writings from our time together. i photographed and catalogued it all when it was time to leave, so that i could reconstruct it later if i wished. i look at the work totem has left behind; it fills most of a wall. totem is astute, prolific and fast. i admire them. they are an inspiration.

time’s up. inspired by totem’s example, i do not sleep. first, i sit. i have been working hard. i can now sit for several hours without flinching. then, i take rest, after which i write myself back to sleep.

*

it is time to talk about “it” or leave. a question from an undergraduate philosophy exam popped into my head: to whom or what does “it” refer? i don’t remember how i answered. all these years later, i’m about to answer that question again. if not now, when? it’s time. tomorrow, i will tell sandra about “it.”

46. the skeletons: help may come

raudra’s rage was terrifying to live through, but, for those who survived, living in its wake was even more horrendous. they felt its anger most.

it’s been two weeks since the raft left. something must have happened to them, or help would have arrived by now. perhaps the earth is flat after all, and they

rowed too far, and dropped over the edge. whatever the case, i don't have long now.

sometimes i teeter around the skeletons with the little energy i have left. on one of my rounds, i see a new image: a raft, a raft with three figures rowing with shovels, our ill-equipped don quixotes.

there are fewer and fewer people every time i make a round. we've stopped putting names on the wall of the dead. the ocean is wretched, the air rotten from the stench. someone has added a final inscription to the wall of the dead, the hadith by abdullah ibn umar:

“and the messenger of allah took me by the shoulder and said, ‘be in this world as though you are travellers. in the evening, do not expect to live till the morning, and in the morning do not expect to live until the evening. enjoy your health before times of sickness, and make the most of your life before your death.’”

with every word, my fingers grow weaker. it's painful to write, but i carry on squeezing out the words. i do not assume that i will wake up when i lay my head down at night to look up at the stars. i keep my writing rolled up in a plastic jar beside my bedroll, making sure to seal it tightly.

i don't see the point of that anymore. when i finally succumb, the jar will only end up in the detritus that surrounds the skeletons, stretching in all directions, as far as the eye can see.

i try not to let that eventuality deflect me from my purpose; i just carry on with my work. that's my job. i sit, close my eyes and breathe through the stench. i sit

through the hunger. i sit through the pain. it takes a lot of mental stamina to dismiss the judge, jury and executioner that condemn the untrained mind. i pray for those who are no longer with us, and for those whose lives have touched mine. tomorrow is another day. help may come then.

47. mensa: a new pendant

the ward was bare once i had taken everything off the wall, and packed up the desk. geoffrey helped me move it back to face the window. only the paintings of the sunflowers and daisies remained above the beds. now, i think they're not there for when you arrive, but for when you leave. they're not bad last images to have of a ward.

malika and totem were waiting for me. totem was wearing a new pendant. it said: totem. they winked at me when i noticed it. the three of us hugged, then got into the car, and malika's driver whisked us away.

we didn't say much, but i sensed that we were thinking the same thing: this is what family must feel like. no matter how challenging our behaviour, we'd be there for one another.

48. waterkloof: that murder in paarl

when she had put zak to bed, malika joined us around the fire do you want to know how my story really ends? she asked.

this surprised us.

it's incriminating, so think carefully. that's why i didn't share it in group.

totem and i look at each other. sure, we say in unison.

remember that murder in paarl a few months ago? it was all over the news.

totem remembers it, but i need to be reminded of the details.

i ordered it, malika said, handing each of us a scroll.

49. cape town airport: do you understand?

at the airport, you and big babe stood side by side by the window, looking out over the runway. in the background, tina kept zak occupied with the toy she'd bought him. staring ahead through your reflections in the window, big babe broke the silence.

so here we are, the poor still taking the fall for the rich.

but you just stared blankly out at the runway where their luggage was being loaded onto the plane.

so now you just gonna stand there, cold as ice, big babe said. let me tell you something. that man, he was on death row, but i was the one who died. thirteen years. it was hard on him, but let me tell you, it killed me. every fucking day, knowing you're out there, free, living your life, while another man is going to swing for you ...

and then, by some fucking miracle, just a few days before he's due to hang, de klerk suspends all executions. can you imagine that? there are no words to describe the relief you feel when history is reversed like that ...

and so, jackson survived, until you rocked up. you, waterkloof, wabenzi, bishops court, masha 'allah, throwing it around, managing to do what the whole fucking apartheid regime couldn't—getting him killed ...

so now i bet you're thinking big babe's a mean and heartless bitch, but i'm telling you like it is. because i know the guilt. jackson survived death row, but me, i still, i still lie awake at night because of the anguish the years behind bars i cost

him. let me tell you, that guilt's gonna haunt you till the day you die. so, you better start falling down on your knees wena, knocking that pampered head of yours on the ground, asking allah for some deep—.

big babe stopped herself, breathing deeply before she continued.

accept this: all you got now is allah, that child, and big babe. i'll say it to your face: i don't like you. but that doesn't mean i won't watch out for you. he called you his friend. that means something to me ...

and you, big babe continued, you're the one, the one died for, while me, i'm the almost-one, the woman he almost died for. that makes me so angry, i could slit your rich ass open right here ...

so, you better make it count. you hear what i'm saying? no more daddy's girl shit, because you know what, if daddy had protected you the way he should have, we wouldn't be standing here right now ...

so, here's what's gonna happen: you'll be met at o.r. tambo when you land. my people will take care of you from there. anything you need, you just say. your bach is already being driven back to pretoria.

you nodded, jaw clenched tightly, standing firm, clasping the three pebbles jackson had given her in hopetown on the banks of the orange river. you could still hear his voice clearly, even though it now seemed like ages ago since you sat there smoking: never lose hope, jackson said. nothing's going to happen to you. me, i'll make sure of it. but when a goods vehicle appeared on the runway, pulling a long white crate towards your plane, you buckled and fell down.

big babe pulled you back onto your feet. stand up, she commanded. this is no longer only about you. stand up, like he stood up for you. make it count. make it count right now.

you turned to big babe, a look of desperation on her face. what if he gets out? why didn't your people just kill him?

big babe did not look at you, but stared at jackson's coffin as it rose into the aircraft. you want to know why my bitch didn't aim to kill? so that he'd go to prison. do you know what we do to men like him in prison? that's where we'll get him, don't you worry about that.

when the crate had disappeared from view, big babe turned to leave. she did not acknowledge tina, but ran her fingers through zak's curls as she passed by.

wait, you called after big babe, then caught up with her. there's something else i want you to do. you handed her a slip of paper. the woman who drives this car needs help, you said. i saw her a few days ago, taking the off-ramp to paarl.

big babe looked at the note. your husband, she said, he's on me, but this job, it's going to cost you. do you understand? she looked at you, waiting for a response.

you held out your hand.

big babe shook it. agreed. whenever i call, you answer. she put the note in her pocket, and walked away.

*

go efafane, mamma, go efafane, zak called out.

yes, baby boy, you said. we're going to the aeroplane.

how do you understand what his saying? tina asked.

mothers just do, you said. mothers just do.

50. waterkloof: house of blasphemy

i remember going to the bathroom during the night. the cockroaches scurried away when i turned on the light. you were fast asleep. but when you were still in bed when i woke up the next morning, i found that strange. you were usually up for fajr prayer, after which you started angling at me to get going.

i threw back my bedding and leapt over to you. i shook you by the shoulders, calling out your name, over and over again. wake up! i pleaded. wake up! when you did not respond, i ran down to reception to get help. the receptionist called for an ambulance, then ran back up to the room with me.

sandra spoke a lot about the three reactions to trauma: freeze, fight, or flight. i froze. i watched the paramedics pump your chest, and breathe into your mouth. i saw their shoulders sag when there was nothing they could do. i saw them zip you up in a black body bag, and wheel you away. according to the coroner, you had drowned in your sleep. he called it a dry drowning, or secondary drowning, or something technical like that. you drowned in your bed in the desert. what the fuck.

*

it was only after all the commotion that i noticed that the cockroaches had disappeared into their crevices. but as i sat stunned on the floor, i noticed them coming out, one by one, until the room was crawling with them once more.

i gathered our things, carried our bags downstairs, and checked out. the receptionists were very kind. i don't remember them charging me for the room.

one of them offered to drive me to wherever i needed to go.

*

we drove in silence through the desert, following the black mortuary van that was transporting your body. i remembered my screams while we were being tortured in prison, but you bore the pain in silence. we had each been sentenced to eight years in prison, and 800 lashes, to be administered after friday prayers, in sets of fifty, over sixteen sessions. many people from the congregation formed a circle around us to watch. allaneen, they chanted with each lash. blasphemers, blasphemers, blasphemers ...

the man who delivered the lashes was very skilled. he flicked the whip just hard enough to deliver as much pain as possible, but without tearing the skin, so reducing the chances of infection so that the lashes could be administered consistently every friday throughout the prescribed period. to this day, i can't face fridays. i stay up through the night on thursdays, then i sleep away the following day.

i still remember our first night back in our sofa after our release from prison, our backs inflamed and bleeding from the final set of lashes, the front wall spray-painted in red, again and again, with the words: beit al-tajdeef, house of blasphemy.

during the last of the lashings, the man whipped us so hard as to rip through the skin; preventing infection was no longer an issue. i bear the scars on my back, as did you. even though we were fit men with lean and muscular bodies, we were never confident enough to go shirtless again; during our last swim together in wadi al mawt, we swam in our vests.

after our release from prison, the pain was so intense we couldn't sleep on our backs for several weeks. neither could we lean back in our sofa, so we crouched on the edge, leaning forward, our elbows resting on our knees as though we were squatting on the toilet. that is also how we sat while each applied balm to the other's back. sooth my back and i'll sooth yours. "scratch" was not something we could ever bear again.

i don't remember us speaking much during those painful weeks. i only recall the night you eventually broke our silence, and uttered what i had been thinking: we need to leave this place. we'll never be safe here again.

*

i was watching the sunrise when totem came to find me.

they said: you're far away.

i said: i was thinking about that scene from *the english patient*, when the sun is rising, and caravaggio says: "you get to the morning, and the poison leaks away, doesn't it?"

i turned to face totem. do you know the violator joke? i've forgotten the punch line, but this kid is testifying in court. and then he violated my mother, your honour, the kid says to the judge. and my ouma, my poor ouma. then my brother, your honour. he violated my brother. and then my sister, your honour. he violated her. and then me, your honour, he violated me. and that's it. that's all i can remember of the joke ...

i couldn't say it after all, i said. i tried, but the words got stuck in my throat.

don't beat yourself up. when you're ready. in your own time.

but i drew a sketch.

totem gave me a surprised look.

i showed it to sandra. would you like to see it?

if you feel it would help, sure.

i reached into my pocket and unfolded the sketch. i can't draw at all, so it's very crude.

when totem looked up from my drawing, they threw their arms around me. they held me for a very long time.

malika joined us after a while. spicked up my sketch. her expression fell, a look of horror taking over her face.

is this zak's?

it's not zak's, i reassured her. it's mine.

i felt tremors reverberating through my body, like an earthquake on the rise.

malika cradled my face in her palms, and looked me in the eye.

just breathe, she said.

when i pulled back, she tightened her grip.

listen to me, she said firmly. the worst thing that could have happened to us has already happened. nothing's going to touch us now. do you hear me? nothing and nobody's going to touch us now. me, i'll make sure of that. so, you just breathe, she said. just breathe. it will pass.

i breathed as malika instructed, but when her phone rang, we looked down at the screen. it said: big babe calling.

when malika stepped away to take the call, i looked up into the clear blue waterkloof sky, and thought: hurricane.

the end

notes

“far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life.” herman melville, *moby dick*, harper & brothers publishers, 1851, chapter xxxii, cetology, 128.

europa in africa is a proposal by dutch architect, theo deutinger, to develop a new city-state on an artificial island in the sea to accommodate migrants and refugees. see europa in africa.

“marriage for love is the beautifullest external symbol of the union of souls, marriage without it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world.” olive schreiner, *story of an african farm*, 1883.

nurse ratched is a character in *one flew over the cuckoo’s nest*, ken kesey, 1962.

jack torrance is a character in *the shining*, stephen king, 1977.

the picture of a man in a blue suit in sandra’s office is a reference to vincent van gogh’s painting, *at eternity’s gate*, 1890.

the white hotel, dm thomas, 1981.

mughal-e-azam, k asif, 1960.

the body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma, bessel van der kolk, viking penguin, 2014.

dark nights of the soul: a guide to finding your way through life’s ordeals, penguin group, 2004.

“call me ishmael,” is the famous opening line of *moby dick*, herman melville, harper & brothers publishers, chapter 1, loomings, 1851, 1.

“if i got rid of my demons, i’d lose my angels,” is a quote by tennessee williams.

“why did you go to the police? why didn’t you come to me first?” is from *the godfather*, francis ford coppola, paramount pictures, 1972.

“it is a full-blown city built according to european standards filled with african style of living and working,” is from europa in africa.

the exchange between mohannad and his mother about the loss of their land is a paraphrasing of a story told to me by a dear friend and mentor, “mas,” in the occupied west bank in 2007, about how he came home from school one day, after the creation of the state of israel, to find his mother and aunts in tears. when he asked them why they were crying, they told him that they had lost their land. i don’t understand, he said. his mother replied: one day you will.

since from everything a little remains, why won’t a little of me remain? in the train travelling north, in the ship, in newspaper ads, why not a little of me in london, a little of me somewhere? in a consonant? in a well?” from the poem *residue* by carlos drummond de andrade.

book of revelation: “the sky vanished like a scroll being rolled up.” 6: 14-16.

surah al anbiyaa: “on that day we will roll up the heavens like a scroll of writing.” 21: 104

“mind matters most,” is by sn goenka, vipassana discourses, 1991.

the screaming figure on a bridge is a reference to edvard munch’s painting, *the scream*, 1893.

the scheduling status of medications are from dormonox by sanofi, olexar by cipla, dyna-lamotragine by pharma dynamics, lilly-flouxetine by lilly.

kunlong is the world's largest amphibious aircraft, manufactured in china.

"i believe in america," is the opening line of *the godfather*, francis ford coppola, 1972.

in your dark night you may learn a secret hidden from modern people generally: the truth of things can only be expressed aesthetically—in story, picture, film, dance, music. only when ideas are poetic do they reach the depths and express the reality. in his highly original essay "the poet," ralph waldo emerson says that the poet "stands one step nearer to things" and "turns the world to glass. you don't have to write poetry, but you need an appreciation for story, image and symbol. it would help to get beyond the modern habit of giving value only to facts. thomas moore, *dark nights of the soul*, 2004.

"you come to me on the day of my daughter's wedding and ask me to kill a man i don't know," is from *the godfather*, francis ford coppola, 1972.

taylor swift, "i knew you were trouble," *red*, big machine & republic records, 2012.

jack and rose are characters in, *titanic*, james cameron, paramount, 1997.

"brown cocoa skin, and curly black hair." cece peniston, *finally*, a&m, 1991.

"i loved you, so i drew these tides of men into my hands and wrote my will across the sky in stars," is by ts lawrence, seven pillars of wisdom, 1926.

"none hold them up except allah," is from the holy qur'an, surat al-nahl, 16:79.

the nine aesthetics of performance, bharata muni, natya shastra, circa 200 bce – 200 ce.

“ha, banishment? be merciful and say ‘death.’ exile is much worse than death. don’t say ‘banishment,” william shakespeare, *romeo and juliet*, 3:3.

the imam’s recitation is from the holy qur’an, surat al-infitar, or the cleaving asunder, 82:1-5.

shekhinah, *suited*, sme africa, columbia records, 2017.

“and if anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of allah, and then escort him to where he will be secure.” qur’an, surah at-tawbah, 9:6.

“and the messenger of allah took me by the shoulder and said, ‘be in this world as though you are travellers. in the evening, do not expect to live till the morning, and in the morning do not expect to live until the evening. enjoy your health before times of sickness, and make the most of your life before your death.’” hadith 40, abdullah ibn umar.

eight years in prison and 800 lashes is the reduced sentence for apostasy handed down the palestinian poet, ashraf fayadh, by a court in saudi arabia.

the english patient, michael ondaatje, 1992.

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