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# **Splitters: A Nervous Novel**

Jamie Alcock

A novel and critical study submitted to Bangor University, School of English Literature and Creative Writing as a dissertation for the degree of PhD

April, 2021

'Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw'r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o'r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw'n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.'

Rwy'n cadarnhau fy mod yn cyflwyno'r gwaith gyda chytundeb fy Ngrichwylwr (Goruchwylwr)'

'I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.'

I confirm that I am submitting the work with the agreement of my Supervisor(s)'

.....

## Abstract

This novel is a fiction that explores intercultural relationships over three generations between Wales and Kenya. The accompanying commentary explores the interplay of reality and fiction, autobiography and imagination, and the ethical considerations of representing racial others as an author from the centre of the white male hegemony. The grey area between the freedom to fictionalise and the potential for what Gayatri Spivak called ‘epistemic violence’ is navigated using the medical anthropologist Michael Taussig’s concept of the Nervous System, and consequently Walter Benjamin’s idea of the dialectical image, which is at its root. These influence both form and method. I contend that this may allow a writing proprioceptively sensitive to culture if the author vulnerably interrogates their own biases. The commentary explores to what extent fiction is autobiographical using theory from Zadie Smith, Walter Benjamin, and Binyavanga Wainaina, and through a fictocritical deep dive into the author’s own biases. In conjunction with this reflexivity are Suzanne Keen’s ideas on strategic empathizing techniques to implicate the reader in the manipulation of form and voice, thus effecting an equivocal, dialectical authenticity throughout the novel, which in turn destabilises essentialist ideas of racial or national purity.

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## Introduction

This project is a practice-based creative work that aims to explore writing across race and culture. This is approached via autoethnographic and fictocritical explorations of the self and the representation of the other. Ultimately, I am concerned with the fictional space as a meeting point and the ethical considerations of a white self writing black others given the global socio-political climate in race-relations. The creative-critical interplay with biography and fiction is informed by Michael Taussig's notion of the Nervous System and nervous system writing. Taussig never quite defined the nervous system, purposefully, as he turned away from any structural/functional operations of high theory towards a montage effect of social/cultural critique. To introduce my thinking here I cite Taussig's ruminations on the Nervous System in a 2010 recorded classroom lecture;

I don't know how much of the nervous system as I spell it out [...] is convincing or coherent as I believe, but I use it as a sort of performance jab – as an abracadabra! – to shake things up and create a feel, be antagonistic and slippery, to try to get that sense of the world across. And part of it involves the relationship between writing and reality, or writing and the rest of reality [...] there's got to be some connect between what they call your representation and the world at large, and that's, I think, what we're all, or should be, anxious about [...] So to me it's like a magical formula really, to try to make those connections work for me.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Taussig, Fictocriticism 2010, European Graduate School Video Lectures, Feb 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkzrxvDhDak&t=2900s>> [accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021], 1:10:14.

The Nervous System is a way to conceptualise the synchronic and bi-directional relative vectors of power and culture between person and world, self and other, and, importantly, implicate those forces into the writing of them. I use it to position and interrogate myself within my fiction and its (my) reality. Taussig, as a medical anthropologist, used it to write his experiences of fieldwork, I am putting it to work in the fictional space.

The Nervous System shares many aspects with the foundations behind Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*,<sup>2</sup> her title taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of The Earth*: 'The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*.'<sup>3</sup> Dangarembga is well aware of the feedback between writing and reality; 'To me, ever since I read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, writing a pain body and also reading such a body are acts of resistance and triumph.'<sup>4</sup> I read Dangarembga's use of 'nervous condition' as a diagnosis of an individual's psychic decay due to suffering the effects of colonialism's violent disruption of the cultural and social body. As Dangarembga states it is through the writing and reading of such disturbances that positive change may come about. However, it is a very different thing for Dangarembga – a black Zimbabwean woman, born into Southern Rhodesia – to portray the traumas associated with its history, than it would be for me to do so – a white British male with no personal experience of colonialism. I have used Nervous System writing, a flitting between order and disorder, definition and vulnerability, to inform the creation of *Splitters* as a way to examine and *destabilise* my biases and assumptions from within the European white male hegemony I was socialized

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<sup>2</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (The Women's Press: London, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface' in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth* (Penguin Books: London, 1967), p. 17. Italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga, Writing as Witnessing: The Tambudzai and Nyasha Trilogy, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32:4, (2020), 467-470, DOI:10.1080/13696815.2019.1704700, p. 470.



into. The critical commentary, 'A Nervous Novel', finds that this approach is necessarily autobiographical and therapeutic due to this destabilisation.

My reflective focus in the sections 'Altered Ego' and 'Ego' are therefore an attempt to expose the order in the disorder of my experiences of racialisation as a well travelled, borderline Welsh/English person, and how that identity informs my writing. I do this by using a dental motif, as I was alerted upon reflection to the coincidence that the majority of my experiences of racialisation included teeth and were in some way traumatic, perhaps causally linking to my dentophobia. It links also to Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* where the symbol of white teeth stands for many meanings from character history in the chapters 'The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal, The Root Canals of Mangal Pande, The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden',<sup>5</sup> to early in the second chapter 'Teething Trouble' we are told that 'Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*',<sup>6</sup> the italicisation drawing attention to the double meaning.

Bookending these dives into the psyche are the sections 'Keeping it Mimetic' and 'Being Otherwise' which simultaneously discuss, and attempt to exemplify Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image. This concept informs much of Taussig's critical thought and writing practice, into and from which the Nervous System grew. In 'Keeping it Mimetic' I theme a montage of critique and textual images to discuss my decisions around *Splitter's* omission of the 'N-word' and its potential to be viewed as a dialectical image within a single word. In 'Being Otherwise' I explore notions of authenticity and mimesis via a comparison of Benjamin's 'The Storyteller'<sup>7</sup> with Zadie Smith's 'Fascinated to Presume: In

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<sup>5</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27. Italics in original.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov', in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. by Dorothy J. Hale (Blackwell, 1936), pp. 361-378.

Defense of Fiction'<sup>8</sup>. Here, autobiography and fiction are shown to entwine so that mimesis and expression are equally implicated in our conceptualisation of what is 'real'. In the section 'Masks' I explore where consciousness exists in the novel and how that shapes the ethical decisions of representation, in particular regarding how to show identity when it is a performative and non-essential thing.

'A Nervous Novel' maps the navigation between mimesis, autobiography, expression, and ethics in the making of a fictional novel that is guided by the autoethnographic technique of Taussig's nervous system writing. The methodology of the novel stems from this. Therefore *Splitters*' form is a montage of images; its pace is fast in order for the images to implicate each other, furthered by parallels, echoes, and call-backs across time and space; the narration is multi-perspectival from reflector narrators because identities are split or merged and transient or contingent; it is in the first person to greater expose the authorial decisions about the writing of consciousness; its settings are either moved through or liminal places, thus characters are not grounded in landscape or place which questions essentialisms; its language crosses codes and refuses to italicise so as to show multiplicity and give no priority; and its use of different storytelling techniques, concretism, the protagonists' discussions about how to write something, its near constant orality, work to both expose the craft in the fiction and make it as dialogical as possible, not just intradiegetically but with the reader also.

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<sup>8</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction', *The New York Review*, Oct 24, 2019 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021].

# Splitters

## Nanyuki, Kenya, 1980

The wasps in the garden sound like the thoughts in my head. I want to run away: run, run, run. Mother holds me by my sleeve and tugs it as she speaks, 'Remember child, you may be very clever-clever, but you are not always right?' She whispers into my ear to make me tingle and wriggle, 'You must listen to your teacher; I'll have no more of this ogre nonsense; he will not eat you!' She smells like beer and lavender bushes.

'He eats children; he is too fat.' Muga *is* an ogre.

'You are a man soon, you must learn not to be rude to your elders,' says Aunt Mukondi.

Mother the action: Aunt Mukondi the reaction; *Every action has an equal and opposite reaction* (page 19, underlined in green pencil). I feel like a puppet, not in control of my body. I want to grab the letter then run, run, run.

Aunt Mukondi holds my other sleeve and waves it from side to side, 'I know he is stern, but if you listen you will learn more.'

Blow wind blow, birds swoop past, butterflies flap your wings, work chaos theory (Page 220), work! But no, it stays where it is, the most threatening thing ever to enter our neat garden, worse than any scorpion or wasp, on the table between my puppeteers. It stays upside down so I cannot read it. The breeze gently lifts one corner but does not flip it for me. 'What has he written, Mother? Has he answered me? Will he beat me?'

'He writes about your ideas, your questions, he is worried about you.' All our new teacher Mister Muga ever seems to worry about is which devil lives in which pupil.

But I could look to the tourists for help. I Love the tourists. When our farm turned into a lodge they changed everything: the smells, my clothes, my future, my father.

Businesswoman Maitū must have noticed all the white folk walking past our ranch heading

for Mount Kenya. “Real Kenyan tea served by a real Kenyan boy,” she said; me, balancing teacups, reaching up to touch a white man’s hand for the first time as he and his friends laughed from under their wide hats, and I saw their tongues were the same colour as ours but their breath was funny. What was I? Seven? Taught to lie about the “view” just so we could be called Kirinyaga View Lodge: you can see the mountain if you walk along to the gap in the fence, hidden behind the reed parasols and wicker tables, and the verandah bar. Verandah is an Indian word. Me, I swung a big hammer through my building site childhood.

Grandfather sat in his seat in the corner and he still hails everyone who walks past, abusing all the tourists in Gikuyu so they cannot understand him, “British? Ha. I killed your ancestors. Not enough; you are here. I’m a failure.” And I’ve warned him that it is only a matter of time before they learn Gikuyu. He laughs at me, but not in the same way as he laughs at their “Jambo” or “Habari”. I really think only my sisters and I understand him, the great MauMau. Even so the tourists flood in; we are really quite successful.

‘Help me, I’ll give you a discount!’ I shout in English to some Germans.

They smile and raise their teacups in my direction, ‘It is too hard to help, ve vill have no chance!’ a woman replies. They watch us from thatched shade, gently wafting flies away with a *Der Welt*, it means The World in German. Germans get Vs and Ws the wrong way round. On the cover Jimmy Carter waves and Helmut Schmidt looks angry. I do not want Kenya to miss the Olympics; Russia and Afghanistan are too far away and nothing to do with us. There are pictures from all over the world. The leaders are: Indira Gandhi, Ayatollah Khomeini, Yitzhak Navon, Hirohito, Le Duan, Erich Honecker, Helmut Schmidt, Queen Beatrix, Leonid Brezhnev, Margaret Thatcher, Josip Tito, Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter, Augusto Pinochet. In Africa: Julius Nyerere, Mengistu, Siad Barre, P.W. Botha, Anwar Sadat, who knows about Uganda? We have Daniel arap Moi, but Father says I should never speak about him and Mother gives me her *silence* look. I love how the tourists like that I

know this, how they look at me when I discuss the headlines, then always mention the cold morning air when I bring their tea or coffee. It seems to shock them into stillness. Their bodies move slowly but their eyes never rest.

‘You will be giving no discounts Dudu!’

I take off my hoody and put on my school cardigan. The feel of my body moving makes me think of the cane. Would it hurt less if I didn’t move? Would it help to be early morning and cooler? Mother folds my hoody and places it on a spare chair between them. ‘Seriously, I know he is stern but it is for your own good; you will learn more,’ she tells me, taking my hand and shaking it gently. ‘Anyway, you are lucky to go there, remember that. When you mock your teacher you mock all of us.’

Aunt Mukondi nods in agreement, ‘And if you do no wrong, why should you worry?’ she adds. ‘Mister Muga is different to us, Makena,’ she says in a whisper, as if the bees will be summoned by Muga’s evil magic and tell him her secrets. *Magic was a way to make sense of the world* (page 8, I think, maybe 9).

‘Yes,’ agrees Mother, ‘but we must not pass prejudice to the children. Luo he may be, but the sins of the fathers must not be visited on the children.’

‘He is a Pastor in that American church too, Oscar says he speaks of nothing but devils and hellfire,’ says Aunt Mukondi. ‘The children can learn about God in church, from a proper Bible.’ Aunt Mukondi believes in the Bible written by King James.

Mother glances at me and continues, ‘You’re like a dog with a bone with that book of yours. It is good that you found it, but I worry what ideas it is giving you.’ *I* worry about my Irua Mother, will it hurt? Why does everything adults do to children always have to hurt? Discipline from teachers, discipline from Father, and now my Irua ceremony. ‘In these days,’ she pinches my cheek and turns my face to hers, ‘especially in these days, we need Muga’s

reference for Nairobi. You will,’ she squeezes my cheek, ‘not,’ squeezes again, ‘jeopardise that.’

‘He is a good boy, you can see that in his eyes, but you are right to worry what these chomba teach him, he is only with them when they are drunk or hung-over,’ says Aunt Mukondi. With one arm still held by Mother I feel like a calf being sold by farmers. ‘You cannot learn anything good from drunk men.’ Mother follows Aunt Mukondi’s gaze to the fire pit where my father prepares a goat for slaughter. He picks up his big knife from the table. Some tourists point at the goat. Father and Goko lean on the goat’s shoulders, forcing it onto its side. They argue and Father pulls the goat by its legs closer to the drain. Goko points towards the breakfasting tourists and Father turns angrily away, he slams the store door shut as he passes then weaves quickly to dodge the alleyway wall. Goko leads the goat away down the alley. Mother says I don’t need to know how to slaughter goats, I’ll always have men like Goko to do it for me now we are rich.

‘He should have done that three weeks ago,’ says Mother, smacking my behind to get me moving. Again I think of the cane. ‘Don’t ask questions,’ she says.

This is a problem.

*A History of Man and the World* by Peter Roth is now a problem. Every time I read it thoughts form in my head like storm clouds, thundering and echoing and firing off new ideas and questions, so many questions: “Sir what is *mosaic*?” – “Sir, what is *stratification*?” – “Sir, what is *paradox*?” So, can I now not ask my teacher? And all those conversations with tourists – “It means a picture made up of many tiny parts, like little colourful tiles on a wall. Why do you ask kid?” – have developed my theories about the world, just like the characters do in my book; all those heroes fighting battles, some I understand, many I don’t. Just words came through at first, exotic words and places: Egypt, Vienna, London, Florence. Then I began to understand things by reading over and over. Ideas grew like trees, bursting with

bottlebrush red and jacaranda purple; infra-red to ultra-violet. I can see ultra-violet in glasses when the sun is on them, ultra-violet is my favourite colour. I like fractals in the pictures, and the geometric patterns of crystals (page 233). Multiple Universes. Energy equals mass. Evolution. The Big Bang. DNA. *Question, always question*, Roth says (page 104, marked in my favourite pencil. It's green).

The arrival of this letter means I have asked one too many questions. I can feel it. But I could never tell Mother, imagine: 'Maitū, I have a theory, just like Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Oppenheimer. I will work on my theory and it will be written in books one day. It is The Particle/Wave Human Behaviour Principle Theory.'

Perhaps it is because of her that I am an observer of human behaviour, having put me to work in the bar since I was ten: a perfect viewing point to perfect my knowledge. 'Maitū, I observe that sometimes the bar is empty, other times it floods with bodies into every corner, like a surge in a river. Of course, I know, after *Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle* (page 187, see, by the green pencil), no one thing, person, or action is ever exactly the same but, after much observation, I note that Kenyan individual particles (the correct words are important) are slow relative to Tourist individual particles. However, when the particles come together they form a wave and the Kenyan one tends to have more energy. Individually, as you know well, Tourist particles tend to demand things to be done quickly, often with no introduction. After two years of observations I realise that this is not because they are rude, as that would be rude of me, but that they are following their own *cultural code* (page 89). After all, I have had many enjoyable chats and often talk about my future.'

Then she'd be spinning like an atom so I'd have to give her an example, 'Maitū, here is an example of Particle/Wave Human Behaviour Principle. I observed four American Particles, two male, two female, arrive straight from Nairobi and their plane and matatu journey, still moving very fast. They demanded two rooms and beer from The Mukondi



Particle, without even saying Jambo. She remained un-moved, having much greater mass. I watched as she, slowly and quietly, opened the diary to check availability. The American Particles collided together and would not be still, “Do you have a room or not? These guys need paying. Do you have a phone we can use to call somewhere else if you don’t have rooms? We need two rooms, or two beds at least. Do you have a phone?” wasting their energy on the back of the slower moving particle. They finally settled to watch in silence as your sister turned pages at the speed of the glacier on the mountain above us (*Glaciers are rivers of ice*, page 78), and Wangari swept a mop slowly across the bar’s floor, making the place smell of *Dettol* and beer.

Eventually, Aunt Mukondi said, “Yes, two rooms. Three hundred shillingi each room. How many days?”

“One day,” said an American, “we climb tomorrow.” Here is the level, I thought, now there is calm because The Mukondi Particle and the American Particles moved together at the same pace. You see Maitū, such a thing makes me proud to be human. Such a thing as watching the world through the prism of every glass I clean, twisting the light to make colours, such a thing makes me happy. And did you know, shot glasses are much more beautiful than wine glasses because of their ability to split the light?’

It is because of this theory I have asked Mister Muga three questions:

- A. “Sir, why is it that Tourists go everywhere together?”
- B. “Sir, can you explain Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle?”
- C. “Sir, are there as many white people as black people in the world?”

But of course he did not answer any of these questions, just looked at me from deep inside his big fat head. I had hoped that some of the questions are answered in the letter, but it is getting late and I am terrified of being late.

\*

Wangari and Wangiri sit with Guka at his chair on the verandah. 'Where have you been?' says Wangari.

'We need to get going,' says Wangiri.

'Ah, here I am. Young Matu, have you been reading for me? Do you have a new story for me?' asks Grandfather. He often looks like a fig when he smiles. It is nice how he calls me "I" because I took his name; comforting. I hope he feels the same when I call him "Old Me". I thought I might tell him of the cat that was both alive and dead.

'Yes, I finished the chapter last night.'

'What country is this story from?'

'This one, Guka, is from Austria. It is very...'

'Do not even mention what they are about in the daylight, good boy, wait until sunset,' he wags a long finger.

'No, of course,' because it is said that stories told in daylight make the cattle disappear and anyway, stories told in the evenings feel better somehow: the way the stars are close and the old tales' deep-deep roots extend through my chair into the garden.

'And do not be afraid of that ogre Muga, tell him I will come and eat *him* if he wants a fight!' Old Me jumps to his feet, scattering my screaming sisters and roaring like a lion, swishing his stick around. 'Tell him! Be brave!' he shouts after us as we run.

'We will tell him!' we call back, laughing.

We walk quickly, Wangiri in front with Wangari, down our side road to the main road through the village. How many more times will I make this journey? It feels like my irua ceremony will truly cut my old life away and it will send me to Nairobi; chop, chop.

'Hurry, hurry slow Chameleon,' taunts Wangiri.

‘Big eyes like a Chameleon!’ says Wangari. They both laugh and hold hands, swinging their arms together and running a few yards ahead.

How many more times will I see the Kimathi boys on the back of their father’s picipici? They always pass us here where the hedge turns to fence and we can see Kirinyaga. And the girls always run across the road to avoid the guard-dog of those shops, but he’s always on a tether so he can never reach us. Nyawira comes out of her hairdressing shop and waves at the girls and they call back, “Nyawira, we will come soon for a treat.”

“You are welcome, come soon,” she answers, as she always does, leaning in the red doorway, holding her broom full of hair and dirt, shoos her little boys playing marbles on the porch. I expect that when Oscar and our riika have our irua party next month the girls will get their hair done for that.

A big truck is coming. It is loaded with logs from the mountain’s sawmills. They kick up a lot of dust and Mister Muga does not like dirty uniforms. I warn my sisters. We run as far from the road’s edge as possible and fight to hide behind each other as the truck nears. We decide to make a break for it and run ahead of the truck, at least we won’t be late for school. “Tardiness”, as Mister Muga calls it, earns three strikes of the small cane across the hand, whereas “uncleanliness” earns only one.

\*

I look at the walls, they are blue like the eggshells of the pigeons in our garden. The window grills are white. The others sit on benches lined up like the pews in church. Small islands of grey concrete peel out from the blue wall. I look down to my feet. A red dust covers them. I look up to Mister Muga. His collar is fastened tightly around his neck, it looks like his head is a tyre being inflated. Maybe that’s why he wheezes all the time and speaks in whispers: he is

full of air. In fact, if I concentrate, I can hear his breathing. The buttons on his grey shirt are under such strain. The class is silent but I guess they are thinking:

It is because of all the chickens he has eaten.

They are flapping to get back out!

They are not chickens, they are hippos!

He is turning into a hippo!

Mister Muga looks funny but, like a hippopotamus, he is dangerous.

I stand, facing the danger. A wind blows in the yard outside, gently rustling the cedar tree in the center. The exercise books on the shelves around the room will get covered with a thin layer of dust. If you don't blow the dust to the floor before opening them it jars against the pencil leaving tiny gaps in the writing and sending shivers down your spine.

Behind Mister Muga's head, President Moi looks out of his frame. I have always thought he looks like a nice man. Mister Muga frowns at me and President Moi looks kind. It is hard not to laugh so I bite the inside of my cheek.

'Matu, this is religious education. When we do science class, you may voice your opinion. Now, for the third time,' he licks his lips, 'and this should be very simple Matu, in how many days did God create the Earth?' Mister Muga leans forwards and eclipses the President, like planets in alignment. *Galileo discovered Neptune but thought that it was a dim star* (page 171).

I hear children close to me trying to whisper the answer, trying to help me. Some say 'six', others say 'seven, seven.' I will thank them later for their bravery but I know the answer.

'He created it in six days, Sir, and rested on the seventh.'

'Correct,' exhales Mister Muga, 'finally. Now sit down.'

'But,' I say, and cause Mister Muga's jowls to wobble with the speed of his sudden head movement, and I can't believe I'm going to do this but... 'I do not understand Sir, why

he would have to rest since he is a God?' Mother and Aunt Mukondi and all my friends believe in God. I even think that I do, but only because I can't understand what came before the Big Bang. I like to think that God saw the universe like a marble and gave it a flick.

The noise of the world disappears. Mister Muga has sucked it in through his teeth. I feel everyone looking at me. Some giggle then suddenly stop themselves. But I must live up to my heroes: Guka, the great MauMau, he fought for what he believed in; Einstein and Schrödinger, they questioned things that seemed wrong. Surely, only people who are badly behaved get punished.

Mister Muga's eyes are *black holes* (page 201). 'Come to the front of the class,' he breathes. Mister Muga reaches behind the flag at the head of the class for the big cane. We have learned about the strength and versatility of bamboo in class, about its speed of growth and its many uses making it an excellent cash crop for both export and domestic use. We all miss the days of Mister Odumbe. The cane was his last resort and sparingly used for resolving fights. He only had the small cane, the big cane is a new institution. I miss how Mister Odumbe would flick our ears and laugh as we squirmed about and we would laugh whilst trying to remember facts to answer the question. I miss Mister Odumbe's songs and how we would sometimes chant and dance his favourite sayings out of the classroom, around the playing field, singing to the cedars and the sky, getting our uniforms dirty with our kicking feet. "Kila mwenye kusubiri hakosi kitu – A patient person never misses a thing," we called to the birds to help them find food, "Dunia duara – The Earth is round; wherever you go you will always return to the same place," we sang to each other in the knowledge we were home.

Mister Muga tests the stiff flex of the cane and inhales like a big frog, 'Class, this is a religious education lesson where you learn the truth as our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has taught us. I am well aware Matu', he paces slowly across the front of the classroom, 'of the

politics of the modern world. History’, he pauses to inhale from the silence, ‘is the tale of The Word against ignorance. Satan has infiltrated our endeavours. Satan has caused man to question. We must’, he points the cane around the class, ‘cast out the demons in our thoughts, for it is written,’ he takes a slow breath, ‘*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside*’, in other words,’ he looks directly at me, ‘man cannot question God.’

I am not questioning God, I am questioning you.

Mister Muga places a hand on my shoulder and turns me to face the class. Having seen other children in this dilemma I know what will happen. I will not cry. They cried, I will not. They cried then they collapsed then they did not speak for days. Mister Muga will preach the reasons why the person has allowed Satan into their heart, then he will expel the devil with swift strokes of a cane, the way Goko scares away baboons or stray dogs.

Forty pairs of eyes switch between staring at me and staring at the floor. Mister Muga pushes my shoulder and I bend over; no point making this any harder; be brave like Grandfather. Why can’t I think quickly enough and explain why I questioned. I must be so arrogant to think God would not need a rest; it is a big universe, perhaps I really should be punished. But why then should I be punished, if God knows I feel guilty for my behaviour and he is a forgiving God? Mister Muga must know more than me otherwise why is he a teacher? But he is only a man, how does he have any power with which to expel devils?

Mister Muga’s voice whispers above me, ‘In the book of Genesis, Satan became a snake to test man. In the book of Jeremiah, Satan became a king to destroy the Word of God by casting it into a fire. Our truth comes from the Bible and it is how we should, must, live our lives, otherwise we are no more than beasts of the field,’ he only just manages the final word with a wheeze into the silence. He raises a finger to the sky, ‘You shall not question the words of our Lord. The Bible is written by God, theories are written by men and that is that;

politics and lies.' His gaze scours the class, 'Which one is right? Man or God?' I realise I am shaking.

Nobody speaks. I wish someone would speak so he gets angry with them instead. I wish he'd hurry up because I am starting to cry. Mister Muga's hand returns from the sky and grips the base of my cardigan, wrapping it around his hand so it pulls tightly on my shoulders. He steps to my side and I see the cane in the top of my vision.

'Which!' Mister Muga strikes and I bite my cheek and lean forwards against my cardigan which he jerks so that I rock back onto my heels. 'One!' Mister Muga strikes a second time and I feel sick and I think I'm going to be sick. 'Is!' Another strike, and I thought I would only get three but he raises the cane and pulls me up by the shoulders again. I squeeze my eyes tight to stop the tears and there's a roaring noise. 'Right?' Mister Muga pauses. 'Which one is right?' he wheezes. I look at Oscar in the front row and he's swerving from side to side and everywhere is covered in shiny points of light and there's a roaring noise.

'God,' say the children in tiny voices as if choked by dust.

'Man,' I hear a quiet voice say.

### Swansea, Wales, 2004

I wanna surf The Shit Pipe. Mam has always called it “The Pipe”, but Davy just called it “The Shit Pipe”. I wanna surf The Shit Pipe. I wanna ask Davy why it’s called The Shit Pipe but he’s standing still looking at the sea; he’s reading the waves and that’s important. I’ll have to ask Mam, ‘Mam, why does Davy call it the, you know... poo pipe?’

‘That’s its real name Kwel, but you’re not allowed to say it so I never say it.’ She ruffles my hair, which is annoying so I duck and move away but my board hits a car and Davy looks at me and says *careful* with his eyes. I guess because it’s his old board and he loves it. Mam’s so annoying sometimes.

‘Does it have poo in it? It looks brown from here.’

‘No, there’s no poo in it. We wouldn’t be here if there was would we?’

‘Why’s it brown?’

‘It’s always that colour darlin; it’s Wales.’

‘Why do they always say the sea is blue then?’

Mam breathes in and out and does a small smile, ‘The sea is whatever colour the sky is, but also it can go the colour of the sand if the waves churn it up. That’s why big shoreys always look dirty.’

Davy has come over and is zipping his wetsuit up. His arms have big muscles. I want big muscles. ‘What’s he on about?’ He rubs the car where I hit it, ‘Looks ok; board costs more than that car.’

‘He wants to know if there is...,’ she says something quietly so I can’t hear, I guess it’s *shit*, ‘in there because you,’ she hits him with her gimp hat, ‘said its proper name.’



Davy smiles, I like it when Davy smiles because he never does, which makes me think like I'm always in trouble. 'No, there's no sh...' he stops from saying the bad word and looks at me, '...in it. It's a pretty clean beach really.' Is it ok if I just say *sh*? 'But Babe, don't go over there; stay on the inside cos it's around four foot and it's gunna get bigger on the turn.' But I wanna surf The Shit Pipe.

'Why, where're you going?' Mam looks sad and her voice sounds angrier than just now.

'I'm gunna nip out to The Crab for a bit, I'll only be half an hour Babe.' I wanna surf The Crab.

'Can't you slum it with us for a bit, juss for once like?' Mam's got whiny voice now. Annoying.

'Hey? I'm always in with you two. Who gorrim standin up first time?' Davy is the best surfer in Wales, so I will be the best surfer in Wales because he taught me.

'You were in the right place at the right time. For once!' she says and hits him lots with her gimp hat. 'G'won then, half an hour, if it'll keep you nice and fit.'

She stands up from the van step and hugs him. He hits her on the bum and it goes slap! and says, 'Don't worry I'll have plenty of energy left for later.' Then Mam slaps him on his bum and he jumps away and picks up his board, 'You'll be ages gerrin in anyway; he's not even changed.'

'C'mon then boy, get your wettie on. Boots first.' It's gunna be really cold cos it's just gone into winter. I hate my gimp hat cos it rubs.

'Do I have to wear my gimp hat?'

She crunches her face up in a pretend angry way, 'Who told you it was called that? Lemme guess?'

Umm, I'm not sure, I think Davy did. I give her my big massive smile so Davy doesn't get into more trouble. What's wrong with *gimp hat*? 'Is it a swear word?'

She pokes me in the belly. Not fair, I have my arms tangled in my jumper, 'No it's not a swear word, it's juss somethin that little boys shouldn't be sayin.'

Why, if it's not a swear word? 'Why?'

'Just because, ok. It's not a normal word.'

What's a normal word? 'Why?'

She breathes in and out again, like we have to do before a race, or before the wave gets to you, or after you've been crying, but just once; one-in-one-out, 'It's a word that adults use that children can't use. It comes from an adult... thing.' She smiles with her head to one side and her lips squished together.

I pull my wetsuit boots on, 'Are these gimp boots?'

'Kwel, don't be naughty now, I've said.'

'Are they?'

'Kweli. Stop now. No, they're not.' Her angry voice is there.

'Can I say *sh*?' Instead of shit. Shit shit shit.

'Don't shh me. What d'you mean can you say *sh*?'

'Davy said it, instead of Shit Pipe.'

'Kweli! I've said you can't say that, and don't think I don't know you're trying to get round it by quoting. So no, you can't say *sh*.'

She's angry now. It's bad to make people angry. But Mam has to teach me. Quoting is saying something someone else has said. 'Why can't we surf Poo Pipe? You said we could.'

'That's better. Because Davy says it's not good for you, for us, today; too big.'

'But I'm good now. I want to.' I reeeally wanna surf the Shit Pipe. Shitty pipe, shitty pipe, I wanna surf the shitty pipe.

‘You’re great boy, but no, not today. We’ll go in the mush in the middle. What do you get along the edges?’ asks teacher voice Mam.

Rip tides. Shitty rippy tides. ‘Rip tides. But Mam, it’s boring in the mush, only little kids and tourists and groms go in the mush. I’m not a grom now, Davy said.’

‘Are there any there today?’ I look out the window, there’s someone ripping up the Shit Pipe, shitty rippy, but there’s nobody in the mush.

‘No.’

‘Why d’you think?’ She’s still got teacher voice on; this is a lesson. Wish we could do surfing for school.

‘Cos it’s cold.’

‘Yes, partly, why else?’

Dunno. Tourists don’t come in the winter. Students come in the winter, but Davy said some of them are good and the bad ones don’t come in the winter because it’s windy and cold and the waves are bigger. The waves are bigger. ‘Because the waves are bigger.’

‘Good. Clever Kwel. Now, those waves out there today are four foot, you are four and a half foot.’

‘I’m bigger than the waves!’

‘When you stood up last time the waves were two foot max, so we’re not going out the back, we’re going into the mush and you’ll see that it’s much stronger than you felt before.’ She’s being very teachery today. I want to have fun. ‘You can stand up in the mush, it doesn’t have to be... what do we call the waves out back?’

‘Green waves. But they’re brown waves.’

She ruffles my hair again then goes to put my gimp hat on me. I say no and we scrap a little pretending to be rabbits, like how they fight, ‘Well I’m putting mine on,’ she says. Her

face looks puffy and her nose sticks out. ‘Experiential learning,’ she says and puts her head to one side again and smiles.

What’s that? I think she’s being bad to me so I’m frowning whilst she puts my gloves on. We step out and she slides the door shut. We pick up our boards and race down to the sea, which is not as far as Llangenith but is far cos the tide’s out. The moon must be pulling the sea somewhere else says Davy. My head is cold but I don’t want a gimp hat. ‘Star-jumps,’ says Mam, so we do star-jumps and I’m still not very warm. ‘You warm yet?’ says panting Mam. I’m not so I shake my head no. Mam tags me then runs backwards away from me. I chase her but it’s no fair cos she has a head start and she can run faster than me backwards. ‘Arms!’ she says so I make my hands thin for the air and I make sure they come up to my hair coz Davy says “Air and Hair” so I can remember. ‘Better!’ she says. She keeps looking behind her then at me and we get close to the rocks at the edge. The splashes have made me feel cold on the outside but I’m feeling warmer on the inside.

Up on the rocks is painted “Fuck off students”. ‘What’s that?’ I ask Mam.

‘Oh good grief, that’s been there before. Some surfers are idiots, that’s all Kwel. Ignore it.’

‘Why are surfers idiots?’

‘Cos they think they own the place. How can you own the sea, Kwel, eh? How can you own the sea?’

‘That’s swearing bad isn’t it Mam?’ That’s the worst one; “fuck” is the worst one. Karl says “cunt” is the worst one, but I’ve never heard that one, cept when he said it. I won’t say these ones: shit, gimp, fuck, cunt are bad words. Mam says bad words are for bad people.

‘All swearing is bad Kwel, but yeah, that is very rude of them. Come on, back to the boards. You go first, I’ll try to catch you.’

I go. Air and hair. Kick out. Sand is bad for running. I can hear Mam has started now. How will she catch me, I'm going so fast? Air and hair, kick out, kick out, quick quick. The splashes aren't cold now, the water can't get at me. Mam's getting very close. The boards are getting very close. I can see Mam's hands in my side eyes and the splashes from her feet are hitting me. It's not fair! She should let me win for once. I try harder but it makes me go slower and she overtakes me just at the end. I fall over into the sand and puddles. My head goes into a puddle and the water is really cold so I sit up. Mam is doing some stretches, 'You're getting quicker boy, definitely. One day you'll whup me.' She is proud of me for trying cos she always says she is proud of me if I try and I was reeealy trying. 'Do your stretches,' she says.

I bend down to touch my toes. Mam says, 'The back of your hair is covered in sand Kwel, it's all squashed.' Sarah Richardson said, "Fuck off to your field, sheep head", cos she thinks my hair looks like a sheep and she doesn't like me. She is a bad person. Mam's right; bad people swear. I bend down to touch my toes again and squash my hair into a puddle so it goes all flat. Mam laughs. I love it when she laughs. 'C'mon let's get the leashes on,' she says. I put mine on, but then she bends down and puts it on tighter and tugs it about a little.

'Ow,' I say, cos it kinda hurts.

'Jus checking,' she says, and now I feel nervous cos she's never done that before. Also the waves are louder than before and there's nobody else here; it's weird.

'Follow me Kwel,' she says, so I follow her but I know she doesn't mean right behind her cos that's dangerous, and I musn't put the board in front of me but to the side so I don't get hit. Here comes the first mush wave. I jump then put my board down over it and lie on the board and start paddling out. Mam looks back at me and says, 'No Kwel, don't go much further than here,' so I jump back off, and the mush is still moving in and it's strong, like having two people pulling your waist in rugby.

‘Ready for the next one?’ shouts Mam. She’s looking into the beach and has her board ready to jump onto. I can do the turn Davy showed me; I push the tail in then turn it round and Mam shouts, ‘Excellent!’

I breathe in then out then in, then Mam says, ‘Readyyy... go!’ and I jump onto the board and start paddling steep and deep like Davy said, and look back for the wave like Davy said, and the tail lifts and the nose goes into the water and I go into the water and the board goes over my head and I forward roll under water and I put one arm across my face and one arm over my head like Davy said, and I relax like Davy said, and I bump the sand on my back a bit and then I stand and I’m ok. Mam is right next to me and she hops off her board, ‘You ok?’ she says.

I’m ok, ‘Yes. That was annoying, the nose dipped.’

She laughs, ‘Yes it is really annoying isn’t it?’

The mush is moving back out and it takes my board and tugs my leg. I pull it close then head out with it. Mam is behind me now, to the side where it’s safe. I turn the board with the tail and get ready. Mam does the same. I don’t need her this time. I must jump on just a little further back.

Mush coming. I jump on, start to paddle, look back, there it is, here it is, flat hands, look forward, pop-up like a cat, crouch. I’m surfing. I’m surfing! I can hear Mam going ‘Whoo-hoo!’ Davy says you go where your eyes go, so I look forward and the sea is all white and grey and it’s moving towards me and zooming under me. Now there’s a tug from the fins and I’ve hit the sand. I step off and do my dance. Mam’s laughing. Again, again!

‘C’mon!’ I say and head back out. Mam follows looking very happy; she is proud of me. The logo was just by my nose; lie on the board with the logo by your nose. There’s a mush coming, not as big but I don’t care. I turn and catch it and stand and surf past Mam who waves like I’m the king, so I wave like I’m the king and fall off and it’s really funny. This is

easy if I just get my nose by the logo. I'll tell Davy. I'll probably be the best surfer in Wales when I'm his age.

I head out again as Mam's just catching one, she pops-up easy. I jump over her wave and shout, 'Yey Mam!' She does wavy hands and sticks out her tongue. Her wave was big and it's hard to push against, but the next one is miles away, big gap. If I jump on and paddle out a little I can catch it when it's a bit bigger. I paddle and paddle and don't think I'm going anywhere, but then I get good at it and I'm zooming out towards the next mush. But there's no mush and no waves and Mam's shouting, 'Kwel, turn round now!' I look back to her and she's paddling out too, but she looks small. Why do I have to turn around? I can wait here for the next one. I jump off to turn the board around by the tail but I don't land, I go all the way under, head and everything, and my tip-toe touches the sand. I pull myself up onto the board. The sea water's hard to blink away so I wipe my eyes with the back of my glove, it feels really rough and doesn't help much. I lie flat and the water's going flap flap under the board and it's wobbly. I do a push-up to look around. Mam's still coming out to me. She sees me looking at her, 'Start paddling in Kwel!' she shouts. Looking at her it feels like I'm moving backwards out to sea more. I hear a noise behind me, like a wave but louder and it's getting louder. I think Mam shouts 'Breathe in' but I dunno cos of the noise. I look behind me and there's a huge wave coming, right across the bay. It's like the roly-poly slope at the back of school, but it's got white along the top and it's getting more white along the top as it gets closer. I'm staring at it cos I've never seen a wave like that. You go where your eyes go. I look at Mam and paddle, I paddle like a cunt.

### St. Andrews, Scotland, 1996

He taps ash into the empty bottle of *Bud* and reclines again, elbow on the armrest and wrist cocked back so the smoke coils from underneath his fingers to the high, narrow windows of the cellar bar. Many feet splash past hurrying homeward. Everyone's trousers are wet. He waits for my reply with an aloof confidence. He keeps testing me as if I need to pass something, as if I have to prove myself to him. He is quite good looking to be fair, objectively speaking; aquiline nose, but it's beginning to dawn on me that he really is a pretentious tosser. To underline this perception his eyes narrow theatrically as he takes a drag. He has such long, thin fingers. The fact that he hasn't once glanced at my tits is, surely, a ploy. He seems to be enjoying this psychological tennis. I'm not, I'm bored. I wish Sarah and Dougie would be on time for once.

I answer him, 'Refusal to smoke anything is not a symptom of control freakery. Smoking isn't living life on the edge anyway. Maybe you need to smoke in order to hide something. You need it to control how you are seen,' he seems to enjoy this, he thinks we're flirting. He retorts with a little Gallic shrug, although he said he was from Hounslow, and another tap into his ex-*Bud*. A grin hovers around his mouth.

The disembodied legs continue to splash past. It's getting dark out there. On the really bad winter days, if you stay still outside, you get the distinct feeling that death is only a few minutes away. I've jogged down West Sands in February and seen sweat turn to ice on my trackies. It's such an elemental place. Water and wind tear at the igneous architecture, forced out of the peninsula and solidified into spires, thin mountains against the huge skies of Fife. And the golf courses, all green undulations, with bunkers for stumbling into at the end of a drunken night. Inland, away from the Old Town with its university and links hotels, sprawls



the place's guts, the council estates, the real St. Andrews. There's a line, The Kinessburn, a small manky ditch of a river, that separates the two worlds. Old, proud, visitor-friendly Scotland on one side, modern shit-hole Fife on the other stretching away to Glenrothes and Dundee over industrial farmland, punctuated by council estates full of neds. Across the Dee estuary lies Leuchars air base, the afterburners rattle the windows of our flat-roofed lecture rooms on a Monday morning.

I love exploring the town and landscape on runs, it feels like I'm safe when running because nothing can touch me. No one else explores the place, no students do. They're so conformist to their various cliques, like this guy here whose name I can't remember. I'm not surprised by his conformity to the Philosophy student stereotype, they're all deviants anyway. They hang around together like cats, suffering each other's presence whilst being ferociously competitive and never getting too close. A group of them will sit and each will look in a different direction, semiconsciously recreating an album cover for The Smiths or The Fall, trying to out-cool and out-smart the others. It's easy for them; they turn pub talk into essays, writing down the bleedin obvious, then into bed to jerk-off to Dietrich posters. But instead of repulsion I feel a sympathy for this guy; a cute, clever boy, facing graduation and the real world in a year and a half. His big black jacket won't shield him from that. I smell his suburbia and appreciate his pretty brown eyes and ask, 'What does Foucault say about smoking eh? Some kind of social control perhaps?' I swig from my *Bud* and wriggle an eyebrow encouragingly. His cool returns like an opening parachute and I set my head to one side, coquettishly I hope, and nod as he drones on about the loci of societal forces being the body yet how he's subverted that by being able to give up whenever he wants.

I zone out and watch the feet splash by above his head. I'm aware that one pair of feet is stationary, heels to the window. They are male, dressed in cheap brown slacks and slightly lighter brown leather shoes, the sort made by overlapping panels with neat little decorative

circles along the seams. He appears to be lost as his balance indicates he is looking left and right, up and down the street. I feel sorry for him and want to help. I know the town well now. He is obviously un-cool, a golfer maybe. He drops a piece of paper and quickly reaches down for it. He's black: not a golfer then. Maybe he's studying here on a scholarship as if his life and those of his fellow countrymen depend upon it. A Microbiologist seeking ways to increase crop yields or purify water or cure malaria, something like that. Unlike me and Whatshisname here, on grants and unlikely to make anyone's lives better by getting two-ones or Desmonds in Philosophy and Sport Science. He may return to be the only doctor for hundreds of miles and fifty thousand people. I think about Mam and Dad in Swansea and how they'll be so proud of me for putting the right words in the correct order in the allotted time and getting a degree. I wish I was a proper scientist.

'Kate?' Oh bugger, he's asked me something. He's doing the cocked wrist, quizzical stare thing again.

'Hmm?'

'I mean, to get into this uni,' he spirals a hand, 'Scotland's best, one must have an extra-mural skill, another major talent that separates one from the hordes. I'm interested to know what is yours?'

'Oh, I'm a runner, eight hundred mainly. I was on the Welsh under twenty-one squad.'

He looks slightly surprised and asks, 'So why come to uni, surely your times will suffer?' He's done well to predict how much I've fixated about times.

'I was never that good, always on the fringes. I want to get into coaching though.'

'This would explain your disdain for smoke and your, umm, athletic physique,' he finally glances at my tits with this excuse to look me up and down.

‘Thank you,’ I say, ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’ I escape to the toilets, all exposed brick and black edged mirrors, very nice. I wish Sarah and the others would hurry up, this guy is tedious. I hope Dougie’s bringing some E, I could do with a dance. I wonder what Foucault out there would be like on one, ha, could go either way. Right, I need a phone; call Sarah, see if they’ve left yet. There’s one just outside the bogs.

There’s a guy on the phone, soaking wet, brown shoes, brown slacks with a blue Adidas top. The lost black guy from outside; I recognise the shoes. He’s almost hip-hop B-boy, almost African businessman but not really either and very definitely cute. I mean really stunningly beautiful actually, glancing at me and flashing a recognition that our eyes have met with a quick eyebrow raise and chin jut, then turning inside and hunching around the receiver to shield his conversation in some African language. I need that phone and I don’t want to return to Whatshisface so I lean, back to the varnished brick, standing on one leg with the heel of the other tucked under my bum resting on the wall, in the time honoured fashion of someone trying to look cool whilst waiting for something. I think of Madonna in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, or is it in a video where she does this and blows bubble gum bubbles over saccharine pop rock? I suddenly wish I looked cooler. I crane my neck to look back into the bar and can just see Thingy’s DM-clad foot tapping along to Deacon Blue’s *Chocolate Girl*. I smile as he almost unnoticeably mouths along with ‘\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*.’ I bet he’d never admit to his comrades he’d done that!

Three RAF guys - I can tell by their well out of date moustaches – walk in and each one looks over at me. God, men are such pervs. They sit at a table by the door, in the draft because they probably think of it as macho training or something.

I look back to the phone. He’s tall, over six foot, has an athletic build. His voice is low and quiet but rather rushed and serious. He must be cold, he’s dripping wet. He seems to

be battling between staying hunched over the phone so that he can't be heard, and turning outwards to check if I'm still there. As if I could understand his Zulu or Swahili or whatever. It sounds like an African version of Italian, sort of multi-syllabic yet quite melodic. It sounds lovely but he's got stress in his voice. I begin to notice English words upsetting the rhythm. I hear "Sierra Leone" and "Land Rover". Maybe he's a refugee from Sierra Leone doing research here. He's hiring Land Rovers for an aid expedition into the interior. He's so cool. Maybe I could go with him, set up some kind of sport facilities for the orphaned kids, turn them into a running force like the Ethiopians and Kenyans, get them to the two-thousand Olympics. I wish I was looking more feminine.

He's hanging up. He holds the receiver while staring at the taxi numbers above the phone. I don't think he's actually looking at them, he seems to be shaking slightly, I guess because of the cold. He takes a deep breath, wipes an arm across his face and turns to walk past me. I give my best 'it'll-be-ok' look and he softens slightly. 'I need a drink,' he says as he passes me. I want to stop him and find out what's troubling him: if he is going to Sierra Leone, how hot he'd look if he smiled at me, does he want to come out tonight? I need back-up. I throw 20p in and call home.

Dougie answers, '\*\*\*\*\*'

'Dougie! What if it was one of our folks?'

'\*\*\*\*\*'

'Dougie, is Sarah there?'

'Ahem. \*\*\*\*\*'

'Good grief. Getting less cool now. Will you...'

'\*\*\*\*\*.'

'Dougie, how d'you remember all this crap?'

'It's no crap, Taff! It's the best film script of all time.'

‘What about *Casablanca*? Get me Sarah you div!’

‘*Casablanca* has dated. *Some Like It Hot* is pretty special though. Then there’s the classic Westerns, eh?’

‘Dougie! Sarah!’

‘*Pale Rider. The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*; hardly any dialogue in that. Harder to write a script without any dialogue.’

‘Hard to write anything if you just sit in front of the telly all the time smokin doobs.’

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* ...,’ I do love Dougie but he really can’t stay on track.

‘Goddamit Dougs, get Sarah!’ my 20p is now 10p.

‘\*\*\*\*\*. She’s out getting skins and milk.’

‘Bloody hell. Well get her to come to The Undertow, a s a p, and bring my green dress, the one in the wardrobe not on the back of the door. And some E, I wanna dance. Hurry up, I’m stuck with a right dweeb.’

‘Can I come? Where are we going?’

‘West Sands, later, remember?’

‘Why don’t you come home first to get changed? What d’ya need an emergency dress for? Oh wee Katie, have you finally...’ rude to hang up I know, but the money was going to run out anyway. I haven’t “finally” done anything. Yet.

I head to the bar. The Saviour of Sierra Leone is sat with what looks like a whiskey, elbow on the bar, forearm vertical so the drink is just beside his chin. He rotates it slowly between his fingers, viewing it askance and closing one eye then the other. I grab the bar near his elbow, in his eye line, and do a sort of standing push-up to look past him towards the barmaid. I glance past the whiskey, trying a smile that’s friendly but not too committal. He

raises his eyebrows again and looks into the mirror behind the bar. The barmaid approaches, I ask for a *Bud*. When she moves away we're left looking at each other in the mirror.

'That boy not getting a drink?' he asks me, twitching his head at the philosopher's reflection.

'I hardly know him, we just met. Hi, I'm Kate,' I manage. One of the RAF guys appears the other side of him and orders three cokes.

'Matu.'

'Mathew?' If it is Mathew he said it with a weird accent.

'Maa-too. Call me Mathew if it's easier, many people here do. You drink that stuff because it's cheap or because you like the taste?'

'Both really, I guess,' I tilt my head to one side because *Cosmopolitan* says it shows you're interested in someone. I swear I will try to call him by his proper name. 'Where are you from Matu?' I ask, trying to encourage some reaction, get him to look at me with those eyes.

'Kenya,' he necks the whiskey and raises the empty glass at the barmaid. She ignores the fixed bottles and reaches for a *Glenfiddich* off the shelf.

'Are you at university here?' I try.

'Are you?'

'Yes, I'm doing Sport Science, third year,' so unimpressive.

'And what discoveries have you made?' He sniffs his new whiskey. It's funny how the tables have turned. A minute ago I was being asked dumb questions and feeling superior, now, for no reason other than physical attraction, I'm on the back foot. What discoveries have I made? My leg strength is disproportionate to my muscle bulk; I have fifteen percent body fat; I am pissed on two pints, rat-arsed on four; I hate sharing a room; I give a great blow job;

I care very deeply for only a handful of people; I could run faster if I had no social life. I decide to tell him this last discovery.

‘You are a runner?’ he asks.

‘Yes, I love to run.’

‘Where do you run?’

‘You know, at the track, on the coast, the beaches,’ he still hasn’t looked at me directly, still looks at his whiskey as if it’s whispering to him.

‘If you ran faster would you be happier?’

Christ, I should be paying him for therapy. ‘Yes, with myself, probably. But then I’d have to wonder why I’m spending time studying and not running.’

‘So you restrict your dream and do what is necessary to survive.’

‘Well, yeah, sort of,’ this is getting heavy. ‘I know this lad back home in my old club, my age, has always trained. You know, we used to train every day? Two hours before school, three to four hours after, every weekend. Had to sacrifice so much, like. He’s just missed out on the national squad by an average of point three seconds, you know, they add up all his races and work it out. All his mates are off now round Europe competing, ready for the Commonwealth games, and he has to stay at home and wonder how to get those fractions back,’ I’m waffling, stop waffling, ‘or whether he actually can.’

‘Will he? Would you?’

‘He probably won’t now, says he’s had enough of it, is gettin into surfing instead. I know how to. I enjoy knowing how to, but doing it is a very different matter.’ Why is this all about me? ‘What d’you do?’

‘I work with light,’ finally he looks at me, ‘with lasers. Basically, I attempt to reduce diffraction, making it purer.’

‘Is that why you only drink single malt?’ He smiles; result! I am beautiful *and* witty, well, witty at least.

‘I am not on a purity crusade,’ he is still smiling, ‘I try to make it more efficient, just like you and your running technique. Unlike you however, that does not make it faster.’

‘Eee equals emm see squared,’ I say, encouraged.

‘Indeed. And what does that mean?’ he looks down at me from his bar perch, lean shouldered and gorgeous.

‘Well,’ I rack my brains, ‘emm is mass, eee is energy and see is the constant speed of light,’ I swig my beer, triumphant.

‘Yes. And what does that mean?’

‘It means that everything’s relative, like.’ Doesn’t it?

‘Yes. And that everything is energy,’ his index finger points at me from his glass, ‘you, whiskey, the space between me and you here,’ he waves his glass in a brief circle between us, ‘and that those around you get smaller if you can run very, very fast. Is that how it feels to run fast?’

‘I feel lighter when I get it right. Occasionally, very occasionally, the only way to know I’m moving is the wind on my face and the blur around me. It’s weird; it’s no effort then. You go slower when you tense up.’

‘I don’t like to run. Especially not if I have to,’ he straightens up and stretches a little, his right elbow nudges the RAF guy who’s trying to collect the three glasses in two hands and causes him to spill a little. ‘Sorry mate,’ says Matu.

‘No problem pal,’ says the guy. They’re on their best behaviour when in town, they keep getting banned. In fact I’d heard they were. Maybe these guys are officers, hard to tell when they’re in civvies. Goddamit, the philosopher’s coming over. Just when this was getting interesting.



‘Hi, I’m Dan,’ he says offering a hand. Dan! That was it. Dan gets his hand shook by Matu. ‘Kate and myself share a Philosophy module. How do you two know each other?’ Dan has been watching us at the bar and has bravely made this intervention. It’s kind of flattering really.

‘I thought you did Sport Science,’ says Matu, looking at me and ignoring the question.

‘We have to do options until third year. I thought Philosophy would be easy,’ I hope that didn’t sound too thick, ‘You know, we don’t have to actually prove anything.’

‘Easy? Oh dear Kate, we have to have a proof for everything don’t we?’ Dan sort of snorts the end of his question.

‘Yes, but they’re not things are they, they’re just ideas, they can only be proved once they’ve actually, like, happened. You know, Matu has to deal with things actually working: lasers, light.’

‘Ah, but is not all Physics at its limits rationalism, not empiricism?’ says Dan, ‘Untested thought experiments, the conception of the possible, or even more exciting, of the impossible?’ Dan’s face is alight with this talk. I wonder if he ever thinks of stuff like doing the dishes, or what’s for tea. I wonder what he eats, he is very skinny. In Dougie’s Film World he’d be one of those who has to dig. I bet he’s never used a spade since he was a kid on a beach. In the Westerns the physically weak lose. Maybe though, because he’s a thinker, he’d always have a little pistol hidden in his boot.

‘Improbable. In the physical world there’s no such thing as impossible; we can’t conceive of it. If we can conceive of something, then it is no longer impossible, merely improbable,’ Matu grins at Dan, ‘it’s just semantics,’ he summarises with a shrug and taps his glass at the barmaid again.

‘Ha, it would be impossible for that waitress to get here in less than half a second, that is for sure,’ says Dan.

Matu seems to be slipping back into his shell and looks ahead into the mirror again, ‘No, just improbable. Given the correct conditions she could, and we may now, having conceived the objective, be able to surmise how it could be done,’ he answers in his slow hypnotic flow. ‘The options range from the peculiar – she may expand the fabric of space-time behind her into a bubble and bend space-time in front of her, she would essentially exist here before us, not over there with those loud rugby players – to the horrific, whereby she would be propelled by an explosion behind her. Perhaps one of those “yahs”, as you call them, is royalty and the IRA have targeted him. She would arrive here unfit for our purposes, granted, but it is not impossible just, thankfully, improbable,’ he has a wonderfully benign expression, almost deadpan.

Dan places his ashy bottle onto the bar between Matu and me. He’s thinking. ‘The space-time warping idea would require an *impossible* amount of energy,’ he pauses in his leaning towards the bar as he delivers this sentence.

‘No, just an improbable one. Given what we know and our current capabilities,’ I love the way Matu enunciates every syllable.

‘Like you say, semantics. Our terms have not been defined.’

‘I’m afraid they were defined a long time ago,’ says Matu, rather more to himself than us.

‘What exactly do you study?’ asks Dan.

‘Lasers and light,’ I answer for Matu, ‘he’s going to Sierra Leone to help out,’ the look on Matu’s face makes me wish one of those space-time warps could happen to me right now, take me back to when he walked past me at the phone. I should have grabbed his hand

and run outside, down to West Sands to kiss in the sea mist and hold each other warm in the dunes.

Dan looks incredulous, ‘Help out? In Sierra Leone? The coup? Cut Strasser out with lasers like a cancer!’

‘Something like that.’

‘Wow, you’re like a secret agent or something,’ says Dan and, I mean, I’m out of my depth, but to be snorting his ridiculous laugh and looking around at the bar in some weird internal comedy routine is just strange. No wonder all our classmates left me to my fate with him, they know what he’s like. Matu seems to be wishing us away. I’m such a tit.

‘Do you wanna come out with me tonight Matu, to the party?’ I ask, resorting to a tactic of just pure honesty and candour, hoping that it’ll drive Dan away and cheer-up Matu. Dan still has his hand on the bar between us, there’s about six inches separating him from our bodies. ‘There’s a rave and a bonfire on West Sands,’ Matu’s just looking into his whiskey. I persist with my charm offensive, ‘There’s a sound-system coming over from Edinburgh.’ I feel guilty for listening in to his conversation and jumping to conclusions. What the hell *is* he going to do in Sierra Leone? My image of it is a Toyota pickup bristling with armed men covered in dust, looking at a film crew through dark eyes. What’s he going to do, burn it like a kid burns an ant under a magnifying glass?

Dan looks to the Barmaid for attention, ‘Very tribal, you may like it,’ he asides. I shake my head and begin to blush.

Matu looks at me, then directly at the side of Dan’s head, then looks around the bar, then back at me and raises an eyebrow, ‘Oh, well, tribalism is not something I am particularly drawn to. But perhaps I should experience this cultural phenomenon for myself, in Britain,’ says Matu. I grin, excited.

‘Have you never been to one?’ I ask.

‘I’ve seen a few in The Union,’ states Dan.

‘I have not yet been to one, but have read about them. They seem like fun,’ says Matu.

‘The Union? That’s not a rave Dan, that’s just a night out,’ I laugh. Dan seems totally unperturbed.

‘The structure is entirely the same,’ he says.

‘I don’t think health and safety would allow a bonfire in the middle of The Union, and the music’s tame,’ I say.

The door opens and Dougie wobbles in wearing his baggy red hat and massive rainbow jumper. He’s followed by Sarah wearing my green dress, and three of her Art History mates, can’t remember their names, but I’ve danced with all of them and hugged and laughed. Olly is one I think, tall, smiley guy. Rebecca? Yes; Becks. And that Glaswegian girl who looks like the lead singer of The Bangles and always seems to be wearing a black dress. What is it about Weegie girls and black? They never wear anything else.

‘Sarah, about time! You look lovely dah-ling, in my green dress. Why are you wearing my green dress?’ I say as we air kiss - ‘Mwah, mwah’ - a show to satirise the yahs at the other end of the bar.

‘Dougie told me you told him to tell me to wear it. I thought it was a lovely idea. Bit chilly though, hence the leg warmers.’

‘Dougies!’ I say hugging him. There’s nothing quite like a Doug hug. In addition to my green dress, Sarah’s wearing woolly black tights and day-glo yellow and black striped leg warmers. And a yellow feather boa. She looks bonkers. We look so very different to anyone else in this minimal bar, rugby shirts and pearl earrings dominate. Pity, because it has the potential to have a good dance floor and it’s called The Undertow, which is cool. The RAF look pissed-off with our noise, that’s rich coming from them. Dougie isn’t helping our

attempts to claim this place as ours by stubbing out his spliff in an ashtray on the bar and shouting ‘Wot ho!’ He shakes Dan’s hand then Matu’s. Dan remains motionless, caught in the throng of people. Matu has Olly to his right and turns to acknowledge his friendly greeting. Dougie points, unnoticed, back and forth between Matu and Dan, whilst mouthing ‘Which one’ at me. He pulls an icky face when pointing at Dan and raises his eyebrows whilst pointing at Matu.

‘Fuck off,’ I mouth.

‘Here, catch up,’ says Sarah surreptitiously handing me a small pastel pill with a little dove embossed on it.

‘\*\*\*\*\*’Eh, eh?’ asks Dougie, and I can tell now they’re all taxiing the runway, excited for take-off.

‘\*\*\*\*\*,’ answers Sarah, both faces grinning at me.

‘You’re quoting from *Ghostbusters*,’ states Dan.

‘Fuckin too right pal,’ says Dougie who then hugs the thin philosopher and shakes him boisterously causing his fringe to flop about as he attempts to place his *Bud* on the safety of the bar, ‘I like this wee man. I like you wee man. Hey big man,’ he says lightly punching his free fist on Matu’s shoulder, ‘are you experienced?’

‘Very,’ answers Matu who appears to be enjoying the exuberance of my friends, although is looking a little lost, ‘What in exactly?’ he asks.

‘Just ignore him,’ says Olly, ‘he’s on a personal mission to get everyone high as kites.’

‘Dougie, this is Matu, Matu meet Dougie,’ I say, ‘and that’s Dan under your arm.’

‘Is it dangerous?’ asks Matu.

‘Only the first one’s dangerous,’ says Olly, ‘cos after that ye ken if yer allergic or no! Jus have a half.’

‘Hauf an a hauf!’ says Sarah.

‘Drink plenty of water,’ says Dan with such assurance I almost believe he’s a hardened raver.

‘Well, eat, drink and be merry,’ says Matu and necks the half offered by Olly. I must say I’m surprised, I didn’t think he’d do it. Olly necks the other.

‘For tomorrow we diet! \*\*\*\*\*!’ shouts Dougie, ‘This place is shite, let’s move. Cover me!’ he combat rolls, as best he can, across the empty pine floor to the door. He stands with gun-fingers clasped to his chest, back against the double doors, takes one hand and crosses himself whilst glancing upwards, breathes in deeply and forces the doors open, twisting outside into the baltic street. In the second the door is open I see him glance left then run off rightwards.

‘Best follow,’ says Becks.

‘Is he always like this?’ asks Dan.

‘Only when he’s not watching films,’ says Sarah, ‘come on.’ She takes Matu in one arm and Olly in the other and follows Dougie out to the windswept, brilliant cold of November in Fife. The RAF guys watch the odd trio leave.

‘Aren’t you cold?’ I ask the Weegie as I follow her and Becks in an attempt to leave Dan at the bar, ‘and why do Weegies always wear black?’

‘Ah’m no cold; ah’ve got mae beer jaikit on, an we’re off tae a beach,’ she smiles.

‘An the black accessorises oor Gothic architecture.’

Becks laughs, ‘It’s always sunny on beaches.’

‘It’s six thirty in the evening,’ says Dan, getting up to follow us, ‘the sun set an hour and seven minutes ago.’

## Swansea, Wales, 2015

## Days of Beauty

There are no more excuses  
 I'm seeing it all so lucid  
 in between days of beauty  
 nothing can disconnect me  
 out of darkness shall come the dawn  
 we shall be re-born

Notes To the Dick heads -

(meant to be hard, like proper bangin!)

*So build it slowly here...strings an shit*

## Chorus

And if there was ever any doubt in you  
 then I will hold you  
 I will hold you

*Choral???*

*Paul's solo here - PAUL - Like a MUSE solo!?*

Forever holds no questions  
 There'll be no more revolutions  
 infra-red to ultra-violet  
 Zero to infinity  
 Alpha to omega  
 It's all inside of me.

*Choral / Chanting*

Follow me follow me follow me (repeat)

*keep repeating on a loop for the  
 whole thing?? Up and down and stuff??*

## Chorus

Love life and laughter  
 There is no ever after  
 Paint hope in red  
 for god is dead  
 for god is dead

Follow me follow me follow me follow me (repeat) OR just bring it back in  
 again here from the loop

## Chorus

Love, from your resident genius. OH YEAH!

(you'd be lost without me)

PS - Don't fuck it up

*Karl xxx*

‘Ceri?’

‘Yes Kweli.’

‘Is Karl reading the Bible? ‘av you noticed?’

‘Dunno mate. Can he read?’

‘All that chantin’ and choral stuff. I mean... Choral?’

‘Yeah, I know, maybe he’s finally lost it.’

‘You alright singing that?’

‘Yeah, fine. I’ll sing anything.’

‘But the ‘God is dead’ bit, you know, could get nasty.’

‘Naa, this is Wales not bloody America, worra you scared of? We should burn a cross on stage!’

‘Oh, cos that’ll go down well. I’ll wear a pointy hat too shall I? Brother in the KKK!’

‘You’re no blacker than me: you’re a white boy with a tan!’

‘I can dance better than you.’

‘I can play drums better than you.’

‘Yeah, well, I can sing better than you.’

‘You’re not even the best drummer in The Undertow!’

‘Don’t mis-quote Lennon at me girl!’

‘Ah, gerroff! Stop! No fair, no fair, watch the guitar, ah! Come on Dame Kweli McCartney, pick a key. Gerroff!’

‘Ok, Ok. There’s a major to minor somewhere in there on the third verse, so let’s go with C maybe.’

‘There, wasn’t too hard eh? Anyway, I yeard you ‘av some black qualities.’

‘Focus girl, focus.’



## **Nanyuki, Kenya, 1980**

Darkness. Voices. Silence.

The sun has set.

Ugai Itha, the story begins here.

Once it was that men and women could never die. Ngai wanted there to be more people, he wanted the people to grow and grow. He sent The Chameleon with this message to tell the people. The message was, People will no longer die. They will live and live and their children will grow upon the earth, this was the message for The Chameleon to relay.

So The Chameleon walked through the skies to find the people but he was very cautious and walked slowly because he did not want the skies to collapse and hurt the people. He stepped slowly and cautiously. In this manner he walked slowly with his message.

The people waited for the message. They were waiting for the message and The Chameleon spoke, but he spoke too slowly and the people could not bear his stutter, I...I...I... So the people grew impatient. Ngai saw that the people were impatient so he sent Nyamindigi to fly quickly and he flew so fast to them. When the bird found The Chameleon he had still not finished the message.

What is your message to the people? Nyamindingi asked shortly.

And The Chameleon started his message again, I...I...I...

But Nyamindingi could not wait and delivered the message from Ngai before The Chameleon could finish and this was Nyamindingi's message to the people, From this day people are to die and never return, then he flew swiftly away.

The people were angry because they had to die and never rise again, so they hated The Chameleon and cursed him telling him to grow skinny and wither into dust. So The Chameleon felt guilty and withered into dust.

This is the end of the story. Rukirika.

But it is not the end of yours young Matu. What did you think of the story?

I thought Nyamindingi was the bad one because he was impatient, not the poor old Chameleon, perhaps he was slow with age. You told it well Grandfather.

Now will you give me a story?

Yes.

Ugai Itha, the story begins here.

A long time ago a young man found a box. The box was floating in the sky. The wise men told him that inside the box was a very special cat, neither alive nor dead, young nor old, born nor ghost. They told him that if he could tell the health of the cat he would become a very rich man. Then they told him that he could not open the box or else the cat would be either alive or dead.

What the man did was this. He made a tiny hole with a tiny needle in the box and pointed the hole to the sun. The wise men said that this was not good enough to tell if the cat was alive or dead.

So the man found another box and threw it into the sky. Then he told the wise men, I shall put a hole in each box and show one box to the sun. The cat will be alive in one box and dead in the other. This is what he said.

Some of the wise men did not believe him and some did. So the young man did what he said and then opened both boxes. One box had a dead cat and one a living cat. He became

very rich and the wise men said he was wise also. This is what happened. The story ends here. Rukirika.

It is a good tale and you told it well. I think it is a tale of how young men become wise. Now you need to wake up, you have slept long enough.

But the sun is not up yet, why do I have to wake?

Because the sun is coming and because you are not really sleeping, you are hiding. Do not be scared, awake!

But I am happy here, warm

and

safe

and

there

is

no

pain

Red.

Violet.

Light.

‘Makena! Come, he is awake!’ Grandfather, shouting, leaning over me and holding my hand. Where am I? I feel sick. I’m going to throw-up. ‘Ha, good lad, get it out, you’ll feel

better. I should know, I've had a few bumps on the head in my time. None as hard as that one you took from Muga. What a coward, hitting a kid. But you took it, you took it my little warrior.'

My sisters come running into my room and try to hug me. I flinch because my jaw hurts so much. Wangari says to Wangiri, 'Show him the mirror, quick, quick!' I catch glimpses of myself in their hand mirror as Wangiri shakes it about in front of me. 'Hold it steady,' says Wangari. I look like a baboon's arse, swollen and colourful. My lower lip is huge and my left eye is red.

'Cousin Oscar says you told Muga that God doesn't exist,' says Wangiri, even more quickly than she normally speaks.

'Oscar caught you when Muga punched you,' adds Wangari.

'He dragged you away from him or he would have squashed you.'

'And eaten you!' squeaks Wangari. I hold up a hand and lean over the side of my bed again to add to the puke. It looks pale and watery, no lumps in it.

'Stop throwing-up!' says Wangari.

Mother walks into the room and stands by the foot of my bed in her shawl. I have never seen her look so tired. 'Do you think you can eat?' she asks.

I don't think I can, but she sounds so stern so I say 'Yes, a little ugali maybe.' She turns and I hear her walk outside towards the kitchen.

'Mother is very angry with you,' whispers Wangiri.

'Yes, she says it is your fault, she says she warned you,' says Wangari.

'It is not his fault,' says Grandfather, 'yes, you must respect your elders but Muga is a shit, an un-cut Luo shit at that, you cannot respect him,' he has never liked the Luo. Come to think of it, he does not like anyone who is not Kikuyu. In fact he does not like anyone who is not me or my sisters.

‘Mother and Grandfather had to stop Father from getting his machete and running to the school. Nobody knows where Muga has gone,’ says a wide-eyed Wangari.

‘There is a time and place for everything,’ says Grandfather in a serious tone. Then with his usual throaty laugh, ‘He’s gone back to his wallow hole with the other hippos, eh kids, with his hippo family?’ The girls laugh with him but I do not. My jaw hurts, my eye hurts, my mukundu hurts, everything hurts! I wonder where Muga is and I wonder where Father is. I can see that the light is changing outside and I feel it begin to flood in through gaps in the curtains and I’m not sure I’m meant to be here or where I am meant to be or even if I am at all.

### Swansea, Wales, 2016

He just sits there, Kwel, behind his drums, all limbs and hunched over the snare. Just sits calmly while it all goes on around him, watching from one to the other: me to Karl to Paul, to his sticks, to the rims, strokes the snare with his little finger, such a tiny sound but I hear it cos I see him do it. Infuriating really, just washes over him like waves. He does love his waves. We need sound waves now like, waves of sound, and Karl's still banging on about a two-tone thing. But I agree with Paul; that it's not there, it's just nothing like that this one. How could it be? Pixies and Pumpkins, Pixies and Pumpkins we was on about, me 'n' Kwel, on this one, maybe a bit of early Bloc Party. Paul's just not havin it, but.

'Like The Specials, like, or Sublime?' Paul's asking, starting to lose it a bit. I know what Karl's gunna say to that, he's no idea who Sublime are, he's not got that American head like Paul.

'Well, obviously not *like* The Specials, how the hell could we be anything *like* The Specials? They're the coolest band ever inney? Seriously though, inney? I mean who's cooler than them? Ever? Eh?' Karl's looking at me and Kwel as if he's made some kinda point. He's no idea who Sublime are and isn't gunna admit it. Kwel just passes me a little grin and eye roll. Karl's going, 'Actually that's the answer innit? The Specials are the coolest band ever, not necessarily the best like, not that they're bad, obviously, but no band has ever been as cool.'

'We're not cool,' says Kwel.

'Answer to what you dope?' I go, 'Your own totally irrelevant, as usual, question.' I look at a point on the ceiling above Karl's head, 'What's that?' I ask. He follows my gaze to

see the garage roller-door rails doing absolutley nothing other than supporting grey spider webs. ‘Dope.’ He’s a dope.

‘Insult of the day is ‘dope’ is it then?’ asks Paul.

‘It’s an underused, forgotten word,’ I say.

‘Twat,’ says Karl.

‘Inventive,’ I tell him.

‘True though,’ he says.

‘I was being nice,’ I say.

Kweli hits the high-hat as hard as he can, great technique Kwel, says ‘I dunno how you two don’t get bored, you’ve been doing that routine for years.’

‘They love it,’ says Paul, ‘It’s like breathing for them: breathe in... argue... breathe out... argue.’ Maybe we do love it. We ain’t saying though. Kwel’s nodding and looking at us both, Karl to me to Karl, with his head cocked to one side and his eyebrows raised, going ‘Hmm? Hmm?’ Eh? Don’t blame me for this unharmonius dischord. I love a bit of real dischord, writing some now would be useful. My mental bro’s fault, as per.

‘Can we just get back to the basic fuckin central theme of this song please?’ If there is one, I’m really not sure. I still don’t think the best way is to start from lyrics, not every time. I think we’re gunna miss things that might come out in a jam: hooks, melodies, counterpoints, just basic feckin *musicality*. But if I say this it’s gunna sound like it’s just me muggin Karl off again. How do I tell him I just don’t think it’s all that good?

‘It’s got to be funky, dance-able,’ says Kwel, quite reasonably given the lyric *get down boy get down girl get down*, which isn’t very *us*, really, if I’m honest, but not what we was on about earlier. We need to have something fast and repetitive behind, faster than what ska can do, maybe. Though we mentioned Bloc Party, and thinking about it *Banquet* is pretty two-tone. Maybe it could work.

‘That’s why it should be two-tone,’ says Paul, ‘it accomodates the change we’re going to have to make due to the fuckin change in syllables between the first and second verses.’

Karl waggles his finger in the air a bit, ‘Eh? Thought you wanted waves of sound; you was on about waves of sound a minute ago?’

‘Yeah, but cos you fecked up the rhythms we’re just going to have to do something different aren’t we? That’s clear. That’s how it is. That’s how we’ll do it.’ Paul’s capitulated, so we’ll all capitulate too. I suppose I don’t mind since I was heading that way myself. Kwel will just go along as usual.

‘Kwel?’ I say.

‘Yeah, fine. Broadens us out. Texture on an album. Try it,’ he says, gets out his phone and types something in. A tinny siren followed by spooky chords squeaks out. Kwel picks up the beat as it kicks in. ‘*Ghost town*,’ he says, ‘it is the coolest video ever, actually, lookin at it.’

Paul copies the guitar.

‘Lemme just find sax on here,’ says Karl.

‘We’re not doin a feckin cover,’ I inform him. Knob. ‘Who’s sampled this Kwel?’

‘Gorillaz,’ says Paul.

Kwel searches a bit, ‘Yup. And Santogold.’

‘Well we can’t sample that then. Find something else.’ I think we need something to build off, anything right now.

‘Madness?’ Kwel asks.

‘No fuckin way,’ says Paul, ‘Fuckin *hate* Madness.’

‘What’s wrong with Madness?’ asks Karl.

‘If you think Madness and The Specials are on an equal level then you haven’t got a fuckin clue about music, or style, or any fuckin thing,’ says Paul. Bit harsh, but true.



‘Alright. Fuck,’ says Karl, ‘how about Sublime then?’

‘Oh, which song d’you reckon then Bro’?’ I ask him. I do love watching him squirm. He looks at me about to do his bluster thing, where he’ll either blame it on us that we’re not listening or something, when we clearly are, or he’ll make a song up and claim it’s obscure. I’ll help him along, ‘I mean which one fits the vibe we’re after for this, your anti-corporate *Give em cash to burn the ground* stuff?’

‘Dunno, they’ve got loads of tracks like that aveney?’

‘Too much choice, yes, from their... how many albums?’

‘Alright, I know what you’re doin. I don’t see why you feel the need though, like, to get at me. It’s not easy writing lyrics. Just cos I don’t listen to all that American shite. I don’t mean shite, as in shit. You know?’

‘Whatever.’ This boy is my twin. How the feck? He’s like half my age. Bloody guilt tripping twat. And I do feel guilty now, and I do look after him, and I will apologise, and I will continue to ensure his insecurity so he continues to be reliant on me, which will continue to annoy me, yet I will continue to need it. For fuck’s sake, what is wrong with me?

‘If!’ shouts Kweli to the roof, ‘you can think for a second,’ he continues at normal volume, with a fake smile and posh English accent (I love his accents, he’s so good at them), ‘you may become aware that samples are oft’ applied to music of a certain genre from music of a contrasting genre in order to give an impression to the listener of the artist’s wide ranging knowledge, and in turn to the music a sense of tension, yes even of drama, thus and therefore elevating said music to sumtin nang, get me fam?’ Nice, Kwel, mixin it up there. He’s always diverting us from conflicts, always the calmer downer. Also, he may have a point.

Paul says, ‘Izit?’

Kwel says, ‘Innit.’

Karl's put a bit of delay on the synth and is tapping out a two tone dub thing. He's upset. With me.

'Izit?'

'Innit.'

Paul and Kwel continue, varying their pitch in their own boy-world. And this is my world: these boys matching two syllables to two tones and moving with each beat in funny/not funny comedy stylings and knowing that they're not being funny whilst being hilarious, and I don't know if they know that I know it's all for me. So I laugh, cos it is funny and they need me to. And I pick up my bass and start along with them. This is an opportunity to get on with it and jam something out but, 'Come on boys, pick it up now,' I tell them. Kwel does, bins being silly instantly and starts focussing, but he would cos I'm his song writing partner and he takes that more seriously than anything. Karl starts to vary the delay to see what works. Paul gets in key and synchopates away. I know he hates rhythm guitar, thinks it's beneath him, when actually I reckon he finds it harder because he can't cover the fact that he's always a millisecond slow on the beat with axe-wank.

This is great. We never properly jam like this, me 'n' Kwel do but that's just two of us. Here's that feeling, my clear-cloud, the prediction all around me, the moment, the future, all finger tips, strings and vibration; just be part of this vibration.

But we need to get on, I need the lyrics to try them out. I move over to Karl's synth, can see his page upside down. He spins it round for me. I smile at him. Try to fit in the first lines, '*He said...there is nothing like... standing on the edge of... a cliff and spinning round... She said... I see everything in... the crouch of a cat or... the tricks of a clown,*' not working. Crowbarred in. Try next, '*We say... kick off your shoes... run through town... They say... give us all your money and... get down boy... get down girl... get down... Take a look inside... take a look around... make your own sound... make your own sound*'. Kwel's biting

his bottom lip, eyes closed. Paul's looking at me, eyes narrowed. Karl's looking happy. I stop. Kwel stops. Paul stops. Karl stops after another bar.

'It's the *give us all your money* bit,' says Kwel.

'Yeah, doesn't flow,' says Paul.

'Yeah, and it's just not *ska* is it?' I say.

'It's not a bad lyric, like; it's good mate,' says Kwel to Karl.

'Ska's either fun, or heavy politics; this is kinda trying to be both,' says Paul.

'It's so hard to write lyrics, like,' says Karl to Kwel, 'dunno if I'll do it again.'

'No, they're fine Bruv, they're good, but we've gotta think about the rhythm of it first, it's gotta flow,' says Kwel.

'It's good,' I tell him. This visibly affects him, he grows a few inches, like. My twin needs me to be his big sister. 'Just though, for me to fit them in I need it to be looser so I can overlap and run on, you know? With something minimal like that I can't hide.'

'Just thought we could try something out, like, something different. Like Kwel says; give the album a texture.'

'We could bring in some samples,' says Paul, 'I reckon Kwel's right about contrast, but I want this pure punk start to finish.'

'We'll have to cut short some of your previous solos then,' says Kwel, quietly, pretending that he's saying it under his breath. Love Kwel. 'Any song longer than two minutes fifty nine seconds will be faded out.'

Paul scrunches his face, looks at me, 'Am I under-appreciated? You all know I'm the best, only, musician here.' He's half joking, I know he's only half joking.

'Go solo then,' I tell him, 'go to Three Sided Coin without us. Your "mate" Twm wouldn't notice probably would he? Have you even told him about the rest of us?'

'No. My "mate" is a busy man, he doesn't need to know about you lot yet does he?'

‘Music fwend,’ says Kwel.

‘Fwriennd,’ says Karl. I hate it when they go quoting TV shite. And Karl jumps onto any bandwagon, he’d never face up to Paul alone if he needed to. And I don’t think that’s just cos he’s my boyfriend. Fwriend. Fuck.

‘Just play your riff then, let’s see what you’ve got,’ I say to Paul to call him on it. So he does, instantly. He’s so fuckin hot when he plays; he has got star quality, but it’s the anger that does it, so if any of us ever tells him it’d go to his head and he’d lose it. It’s good too, usually always is, bit like Iggy’s *be your dog* riff: descending, and he makes it sound like he’s a bit pissed and about to lose it, makes it sound dangerous. Kwel explodes in after four bars, I track along the chord changes below. This is the dog’s, like. It’s no use for these lyrics, but we gotta keep it for later. We gotta keep the album like this; what’s the point in proving we can play other stuff? This is us; special by being brilliantly not special. Just punk bollocks really.

‘Record it,’ I mouth to Karl. He nods, presses buttons. The noise seeps into the bare concrete blocks of Paul’s dad’s garage. Wish it could seep into the both of them and split them open, like the waves do at Ogmore, booming into the blowholes and showering us above. This sound in this grey cave is like all we’ll ever need.

**Nanyuki, Kenya, 1984**

Always picked second to last, no change for me. Oscar is always last because of his size, and I am always in goal. Oscar stands nearby, so far offside it doesn't matter, just so he doesn't have to play. He won't score; he's on my side in life, if not this game. He wouldn't score anyway even if he decided to try. It's more fun here than school; back home fun not school friend fun. Here is no longer 'home' but 'back home'. Oscar always stands at the far-post side, away from the attack. Me, I know he is aware of the game because wherever the action is Oscar is at the far-post side. Even when he's talking to me, looking at his feet, throwing rocks at the dogs as dog-repeller-in-chief, even when the action is upon us in dust and feet and elbows and masculinity, or at the opposite end, his end, he is in position at the far-post side. He holds a stick, the ceremonial and actual dog-repeller-in-chief stick. This end backs onto the butchers and by the butchers are the strays. Oscar and I will be able to talk more after half time, partly because of the favourable uphill slant, but mainly due to the lack of dogs.

'Did you smoke yet?' he asks, forgetting that I found those cigarettes a few years ago and told him of how Wanjiri and I coughed and spat. However, I know the question is more to do with what boys I am 'in' with and therefore how cool I am, because as friendly as we are I must admit there is always a tension to be the least overlooked.

'Yeah, of course. I mean I'm not addicted or anything, but sometimes we can sneak a mozo after lights out.' He shuffles over to my right as my team win a corner down our left. He's not even looking at the action, he's watching the dogs slink in and out of the brush around the drains of the butchers.

‘Cool cool,’ he says somewhat distractedly as if he didn’t really care about the answer and is almost trying to quieten me. He’s very focussed on the dogs, they are growling and snapping at each other a lot. Maybe it’s because of my Sheng use; he knows he can’t match me because he’s stuck out here and I’m in Nairobi. I hope word doesn’t reach Mother via Aunt Mukondi that I’ve been speaking Sheng, she sees it as degenerate, whereas it’s actually the opposite, it’s actually very generate, it’s the new Kenya, my Kenya. I should be fine, Oscar is very trustworthy.

‘And what do you guys watch on tv?’ he asks, sidestepping left against the action, looking at the dogs.

‘Umm, we’ve managed to catch some Star Trek,’ when we have time to be in the common room and when the damn thing is allowed in there with us. ‘Oh! Did you see *Return of the Jedi* yet?’

‘No, not yet,’ he says, sounding optimistic.

‘No, well, neither have I, but did you hear they speak Gikuyu in it?’

‘Who does?’ I have his attention, he is a sci-fi buff after all.

‘I don’t know exactly, but people are saying it’s very funny.’

‘I bet it’s not the Americans, it won’t be Luke Skywalker or Han Solo. It will be the aliens. They will have searched for an obscure language and found ours.’

‘Why didn’t they just go ‘blooja glooff wogatch badatatatab’, or something?’

‘Dog!’ warns Oscar, and he whips the stick towards the dog to slap on the ground in front of it. I spin around and kick dust and rocks. It’s slavering and flecks of spit fly as it growls and bares its teeth, luckily nothing hits me. It seems to be fighting against itself, maybe that’s the tell-tale sign of a rabid animal that knows in its normal mind not to attack two bigger mammals but can’t help itself. It seems thankful as it tucks tail and runs along the

pitch's perimeter towards the midfield action. I always wondered what a rabid animal looked like.

'Scary dog,' says Oscar.

'Yes, poor thing.'

'I guess they wanted someone to understand the alien,' he returns to the Jedi.

The dust cloud is approaching from their right wing, Oscar moves to my right. A shot comes from somewhere and I manage to stick out my right foot to angle it away. Oscar, perhaps bouyed by rabies induced adreneline, kicks the air in the vicinity of the original trajectory, before being overcome and obscured by the bodies and elbows. Someone kicks it away towards the circling dog which goes to attack the ball but is repelled by the sight and sound of ten boys fighting towards it. Me, I'm upset that Oscar blatantly tried to score in my goal. 'We don't know for sure it is spoken by an alien, perhaps it's just one of the intergalactic languages,' I say.

'Have you noticed how all the Star Trek aliens are versions of different countries?' he says, slightly shifting the subject.

'Yes. Klingons are Russians.'

'Japanese'

'Really, I thought they were America's biggest enemy,' although I suppose that could be Japan in recent history.

'The Romulans are the Russians.' Oh yes, of course they are. 'All those aliens are basically humans with just one or two strange things about them.' He swishes his stick about towards a few slightly closer dogs. They recoil normally. I think he spends a lot of time thinking about this stuff.

'Do you think there are real aliens?'

'Yes, of course, but maybe we can't sense them in any way.'

‘Mathematically speaking there are aliens; in an infinite space there are infinite possible things.’

He draws a figure of eight on the ground, ‘Weird isn’t it, infinity?’

‘Infinitely,’ I say.

He draws an equals symbol then a zero. He looks at it for a short while, tapping the stick on the side of his foot. He turns the equals into a ‘greater than or equals’ symbol. I begin to ponder it too, but then there is a change in the movement of the group and their tone; the boys have stopped play and are crowding around the dog, kicking, yelling, jumping back, running away. Then all of them run away and they’re shouting and making uhhh noises. Some are laughing but not in a mirthful way and not for very long. The dog is tossing a chicken carcass around, what looks like one half of the ribcage. It’s dark with dirt and thick. Maybe it dug it up.

‘What is it?’ asks Oscar.

‘Chicken,’ I say.

Kenny, nearby, wringing his hands inside his t-shirt says, ‘That’s no chicken, it’s a hand.’

‘A hand?’ says Oscar.

‘Go and look,’ says Kenny.

‘No way, hapana saaaaana,’ says Oscar.

Me, I can’t help myself. As the thing flops and flicks in the dog’s mouth it morphs into a de-gloved hand, bleached by the sun, then back to a piece of chicken, then back again. I creep forward. Oscar tells me to come back but I can tell he’s edging behind me. The dog gives a kill shake and bits fly off: white, gristly bits. I’m still not convinced it’s a hand. It could be a ribcage that’s been buried and found by this crazy dog, of a goat perhaps. The dog notices my approach and growls through the maybe-fingers. That’s it. I turn and run past



Oscar, he's always been slower than me, he can run behind me. He does, saying, 'So gross, so gross, Matu wait!' There is no way I'm waiting. Kenny looks scared and flees as I bolt towards him, so I worry that Oscar is about to get rabies. I glance back but the dog is gone, and other dogs are trotting down, sensing an easy steal.

'That wasn't a hand Oscar, that was a goat's ribcage.'

'I could make out fingers,' he says between breaths.

'If it was a hand then there is one very clumsy butcher up there.'

'Matu, you know Muga has gone don't you? Packed up and disappeared.'

'I did, yes. But he couldn't have packed with one hand could he?' I don't like this rumour that Muga has lost the hand he hit me with. It has so infected the community that they see a piece of meat and hope that it's the hated hand.

'Do you think, maybe, your father did it, or grandfather, as revenge? Mother says...'

'I can't envisage that.' Actually I can clearly envisage this and often do, 'Who else is thinking this? Have you been spreading these lies?'

'We don't spread lies! Everybody thinks it, and anyway why are you so ashamed? You should be proud to have such tough Kikuyu fathers in your family,' he says, puffing himself up like a mini Muga.

'Muga left because everyone here hates the Luo and won't hide it anymore. Mother says he took a job in Kisumu. And don't you talk to me about who I should be proud of.'

'Well my mother says he fled to Kisumu, and that your mother had to hide all the knives in the house, and that your grandfather has been standing outside the school every day until the twins come out, so that Muga knows he's there. You should be proud of the old man, especially if he had the balls to do it.'

‘Well maybe you should go back and talk with your mother, since she seems to be your best friend, you can tell her that she doesn’t know how to bring up children to not gossip about their own riika.’

‘At least my mother doesn’t give birth to freaks and cursed children.’ Oscar’s lips are tight and his eyes bulge, he looks like an owl. I grab the stick he still holds and we battle to wrench it off each other until he kicks me in the shin, and as I hop he pulls me forwards so I have to use a hand to stop my fall. Instead of hitting me he runs away. ‘Your family is cursed, and I won’t be near it anymore!’ he shouts back.

‘Good, we’ll save money on food then!’

Old Me stands guard at the school to protect Wanjiri and Wangari, always has done at home time, to protect them from the fala of this town who still believe all that curse shit, I expect just like he used to until he first saw them in his daughter’s arms and all that ‘magic’ rubbish just fell away. *Magic was a way to make sense of the world.* Not so much *was* in this place. It was nearly two years ago, and Muga has definitely had both hands since. I don’t care, I have my life to get back to away from ‘back home’, ‘back home’ is not ‘home’ anymore. Oscar is not funny anymore, and he’s stupid and two faced if he always believed that twins are a curse. That wouldn’t come from Aunt Mukondi, I’m sure of that. It must be his father feeding him all the tribal horseshit, no wonder he’s getting so fat and pompous.

The sun is getting low. I can’t sit here forever. I need to go ‘back home’. Why do I feel like I have argued with Mother and not care about Oscar? Also; when I see Old Me I shall say ‘Thank you’ to him, in a meaningful way, in an important tone, and I will tell by his reaction as to whether he did anything or not. If he asks me what for I shall just say for telling me such great stories about our world. If he nods as if something has been acknowledged between us that cannot be spoken of then I will know it was him. But really, honestly, if anyone did anything it would be Father, and he would have been drunk, and he would have

discarded the hand somewhere right about here, on the road between Muga's place and ours, just down from Muga's place near school, a good throw from the road into this pitch would land something of that mass around where the game stopped and the dog appeared, with whatever it was. Ati, grandfather might even have been standing guard over Muga to protect him from Father all this time.

# Swansea, Wales, 2016

The friggin gabba's going *dubbadubbadubbadubbadubba* and the whole front room's jumping, I really should reclaim my decks; this is not the vibe. 'Right boy, listen, this is it so far. You listening?'

'Yup,' he shouts.

'Right, listen:

In this town of crescent moon  
day breaks too soon  
casts shadows too sharp  
for my memory  
She walks the seafront  
a sanity casualty  
cocaine casually  
escapee.

Right, yeah. Makes sense?'

'Yeah.'

'So I couldn't get *Fake Plastic Trees* out of my head, you know the A-D-A?'

'Yup.'

'Me and Mam were talking about Radiohead the other day. And I wanted to write about home, you know, it's important, like?' Some smack ed's got hold of my decks and put on some really hardcore shit and it's hard to talk.

'Yeah mate, yeah, 'sabout drugs 'n' stuff.' He's so bollocksed but I shall plough on.

'Well, yeah. And... well, yeah. So this is the chorus:

And the swans call out to me  
where the sun meets the sea  
head west boy head west  
at the end of the day  
you'll be home.'

‘Swan-zee! Swan-zee!’ he’s shouting. Obviously I’ve connected with some weird tribal instinct, and one of the Brynmill lads grabs his upheld fist and they chant it for a few seconds, swinging their hands together. They’re laughing now and saying about how shit it is here and how much they love it anyway; ‘Cos it’s Swansea.’ He hasn’t a clue, like I say; bollocksed. I pass him the spliff that’s doing the rounds, he sits down again and I try the next verse:

‘Jack sees nothing new  
just turned twenty two  
works call centre jobs  
forgets history.  
He cannot see it  
volunteer prisoner  
horizon divider  
future condemned.’

‘Who’s Jack?’ he interrupts, and I think this probs isn’t the best time maybe.

‘Just a lad. Generic ‘Swansea Jack,’ you know?’

‘Swansea Jacks, we are ‘ere!’ he starts and many lads join in, ‘shag your women and drink your beer!’ And he’s on his feet again and they’re all shouting shit, or shouting about shit and there’s beer being spilt and partygoers getting jostled about. I need more drink. One of them from the rugby’s picked me up and is hugging me in a very rowdy and/or violent manner, I’m not sure which. And he stinks.

Karl is shouting, ‘Put ‘im down, you don’t know where ‘e’s been,’ and they’re all laughing, cheers mate. And we both plonk down again onto our chairs, so I reckon I can carry on getting some feedback, such as it is. His eyes aren’t really focusing, although he seems to be trying to look at me and appear interested. He is interested really; he doesn’t do anything else. Except surf.

I shall continue, ‘But it’s kinda cynical, I think it’s pretty cynical, eh? But we like dark don’t we? We do dark. Not emo though, proper dark innit? Ceri’ll be good on it, but

she'll sing *head west girl* not *boy* eh? Ha! Good thing the English word for *girl* is only one syllable too, eh? Good it wasn't *man*, cos then she'd have to change it to *woman* and that wouldn't scan eh? Ha! Hadn't thought of that. Here, put it in your pocket for later,' I slide it into the pocket of his jacket, his leather speedway thing. Wonder if he's ever washed it. His eyes follow my hand to his pocket, he stares at it, then back up at me, grinning. 'Bloody learn it!' I tell him. He nods, grins wider, takes a swig, looks at me, doesn't focus very well. He's not listening.

'It's a hit,' he says, tapping his pocket and tilting his bottle, spilling a bit. Hashtag patronised. 'What're you on Kwel?' he asks, 'You had some of that meow from the kitchen?' he thinks for a second, 'Kitty been fed in the kitchen?' He's so bloody weird, we should let him have a go at writing lyrics for a change. Though probs best not if we want to avoid an *Octopus's Garden* incident. Why's he think I'm bubblin?

'Naa, just pissed.'

'You don't look pissed, and you're talking shit-loads,' he spreads his arms like he's describing how big a fish he's caught.

There's fuckin kids from year ten coming in now, little skanky skinny ones thinking they're it cos they're at a big boys' party. How many Adidas stripes can you fit on six people?

'Karl, you seen them kids now?'

He turns to look at the door, 'S'ok, they're Sarah's brother and his mates, they're sound.' One of them, brother I assume, approaches my decks and lifts the needle. There's that noise I've always hated of accidentally scratched needle, but followed by the purest silence of nosebleed techno suddenly stopping. Might kick off now though, and everyone's pointing at the kids and shouting. It's a wave of a roar, building out of a split second of flat calm, but it's got humour in it, I'm sure there's humour in there. It's ok; there's only a few twats telling

Kid DJ to fuck off. Smack 'ed DJ's not happy but Kid DJ gently hands him his vinyl and speaks to him from behind his hand and he smiles and gestures at my friggin decks as if he's allowing him to use them. Fuck's sake they're my fuckin decks. Kid DJ flips a disc around and a lush, angular synth and snare kick out and he's playing Giggs.

'Giggs,' shouts Karl into my ear. Everyone's loving the bip bop of the hip hop and this is the vibe now, I'll have to go chat to this kid. Karl's bobbing his hands up and down, bottle in one hand, spliff in the other, perched on the edge of the arm chair, head lowered and swaying to the off-beat. This is more like it; whole room's bouncing, '\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*' he's doing some good stuff there too, getting some deep bass in and working something dirty underneath. All of a sudden kid's mates look ok to me, is that bad? Guess it's just the way we think, not my fault. Wish I had that talent when I was fifteen, but.

The ex-DJ and some of his mates are leaning on the wall by the window, not looking like they're fans of grime. I don't know how they always find out about parties and just turn up, 'Hey Karl, who are those fuckers by the window anyway?'

'Dunno. Smack 'eds. Always round parties inney? Somewhere to keep warm I s'pose.'

'Better watch they don't nick anything: Paul's tv, my decks.'

'Naa, they're alright. They've been here before.'

'They're not looking too happy, like.'

'They never look happy; they're smack 'eds. And what're they gunna do, inject us? You ever seen a smack 'ed fight?'

'No. Have you?' He's so skinny he'd be useless. They're like scruffy vampires, 'You ever noticed how vampires are always tidy?'

'They don't drink each others blood you know? What do you mean "tidy"?'

‘They just are, in films, always well dressed.’

‘Well, proves that lot aren’t vampires then. Food bank chic that is.’

Some lad pushes past and takes the spliff out of Karl’s hand, ‘Cheers kid,’ he says. On second thoughts he looks more like the smack ‘ed’s age: thirty-odd, jeans and a black leather jacket, maybe a scouse accent. Another one follows him. Karl’s looking pissed off, but I reckon he’s clocked something about them too and just puffs out his cheeks in his sort of comedy way. Bit too obvious though as second bloke says ‘What?’ and this could be really bad.

‘Nothing Bud,’ says Karl, and I really feel for him and realise just how much I actually care for him. Luckily Bloke Two moves on and follows his mate towards the smack ‘eds. Karl looks at me, his tiny eyes as wide as he can get them, ‘What the fuck,’ he mouths.

‘It’s your birthday mate, Ceri’s birthday, Paul’s place, we can’t have skanks like that in here wreckin the vibe.’

‘You go and bloody tell them that then, look at the size them!’

‘Better not let Paul go tell them, you know what he can be like.’ He might think twice about those boys though. Bloke One’s talking to one of the smack ‘eds, very close in like, dwarfing him and hunching down a bit, Bloke Two’s just looking around and toking on the spliff. Hard looking bastards, not like the chavs from round by here, all front and swag, these are proper hard fuckers: flat noses, scars, ink on their necks, thick hands.

‘Are they dealing?’ asks Karl and turns round in his seat to look at them.

‘Fuck’s sake Karl, don’t look round!’ And don’t jerk back round to me even more obviously you twonk. Bloke Two’s radar’s working cos he’s looking straight at us now, ‘He’s looking at us.’

‘Shit, is he coming over?’



‘No, dunno, act normal.’ I look at Kid DJ who’s busy speeding it up and flicking the dirty track in, bringing it up from underneath the Giggs track and it eats it alive. I bob my head, look like I’m enjoying myself. It’s Sleaford Mods. I like what he’s doing and how, but this is dark now, room’s gone darker, Karl’s twitching his head to the beat, looking at nothing in particular. I swig hard on the beer, grab the next from under my chair, Karl takes one too and flips the lids off with his lighter against his fist. I’m crap at doing that but he’s weaker than me, must be technique. *Fizzy!* shout the Mods and it’s so loud no-one’s talking, everyone’s moving to the rough as dogs bass, but only a few girls remain; I guess they’re not so keen on angry old men as the lads. Most girls are stood around the edges trying to scream into each other’s ears, some are leaving into other rooms. I wonder where Ceri is. Some moshing’s breaking out, I worry for Paul’s Mam’s ornaments. I wonder if any of them mean anything, like ours do: uncle Dougs’ candlesticks he gave Mam, all our photos. No photos here, none, just a nautical chart of his Dad’s on the wall. What a twat he is.

‘Where’s your sweaty sister?’

‘What?’ he leans in.

‘Where Ceri?’ I mime searching.

‘Kitchen.’

Bloke One has the smack ‘ed DJ right up against the wall but isn’t actually touching him, just right up in his face. His elbow jerks up and the smack ‘ed DJ collapses, Bloke Two is looking at me. Why’s no-one else noticing this? Some girls point, some lads ignore the girls looking at them to do something. Time to go, ‘Let’s go,’ I hit Karl’s leg with the back of my hand, stand and turn for the kitchen. He follows. We push through the party. Mel smiles and squeezes my arm, pity she’s not fit, but it relaxes me a little. I must look stressed so smile back. Mike hugs me, then Karl behind, ‘Yeah, yeah, sound mate, sound,’ says something about the tune, I nod, keep moving. I can see the reflection of the room in the huge windows:

my stupid head above most of the others, orange lights of the bay down to the sea. I re-focus like a magic eye picture and I scan behind for the dealer thugs. I can make out my decks with Kid DJ's head bobbing about, one hand clasped to his headphones. Just to his side in the shadows are the shapes of the smack 'eds, but the dealers have gone. Shit, keep moving.

We make it to the hallway where doors lead off to all the different rooms, each one as soulless as the next. I really want to get out of here. 'In here,' says Karl, and I see why as the way into the kitchen's jammed. We step through into a spare bedroom, one of the ones I've always wondered about, how they keep it ready like a hotel and decorate it with a fake plant. There's a few kids from sixth form cuddled up on the bed, not getting off, just chilling. We nod, then flop against the wall behind the door. 'Did they follow us?' asks Karl.

'Dunno. Maybe. They'd moved anyway.'

The door opens again and Blokes One and Two step in, move close to our feet, smile at the kids on the bed who look like they've just shat. 'Cosy,' says Bloke One, definitely a scouse accent, 'You mates with Ted?'

'Who's Ted?' says Karl. I assume Ted is the smack 'ed who's just been smacked.

'No,' I say.

'Why'd ya keep looking at 'im then?' says Bloke Two.

'Wasn't,' oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.

"'Wasn't", focking bollocks to this mate,' and he laughs at Bloke One, 'Come 'ed, fockin stinks in 'ere.' He steps back leaving Bloke One standing still above us. He hasn't moved, is just inches from our feet and staring down at us. Maybe they've got a good cop bad cop thing going on. Maybe they are cops? Still hasn't moved. No, definitely not cops.

'When you was lookin' at us, what did youse see?' he speaks after ages.

'Nothing,' we both say together.

'You blind?'

‘No,’ I say.

‘Just didn’t see anything, I was looking the opposite way, like,’ says Karl.

‘Opposite from what?’ asks Bloke.

‘Nothing, you know, just couldn’t see much,’ Karl’s sketching now, I can hear he’s lost it, ‘dark in there, can’t really see faces, you know, identify.’

‘Identify?’

‘No, just too dark, you know?’ Bloke One kneels down on one knee so he’s much closer to Karl then reaches forwards slowly until his hand completely covers Karl’s face then he pushes his head back against the wall, and although there’s not much movement I can tell he’s pushing hard. Karl’s making a weird low noise. I can’t do anything, why can’t I move? Sorry mate, sorry lovely stupid Karl.

‘If I push harder now I can split your nose, rip an eyelid. Took a lad’s eyelids off last week. Not with a knife, just pulled till they ripped off. You know the funny thing about losing eyelids is even though your eyes are wide open, you lose your sight. Go blind slowly. So then you wouldn’t be able to fockin see anything, whether it’s dark or not.’ Karl makes grunting noises. Bloke One looks at me and reaches his right hand slowly towards my face. Shit shit. I look away and move a bit to the left. He says, ‘Don’t be a cunt,’ and flicks my ear, so I’m going to let him grab my face because I can’t run and I can’t fight, and he grabs my face. He’s incredibly strong, there is no way I can get out of this. I can strain my eyes rightwards between his index finger and thumb and I can see Karl’s left eye looking sideways at me; he looks more scared than I am. Bloke One is ignoring the kids on the bed, who wisely aren’t moving a muscle, but surely they’re witnesses, so he can’t hurt us too bad can he? His hands smell of spliff and aftershave, must be from when he got ready this evening, splashing a bit on and rubbing it in. He is clean shaven, cropped dark hair, gelled back. He’s got one of them tear tattoos by his left eye. He’s moving his head slowly like he’s clicking his neck and he’s

inhaling us, swear he just sniffed us. He's getting off on this, I reckon he's got a hard-on. Suddenly he bangs our heads together, moves his hand surprisingly quickly and flicks Karl hard in one eye, then stands. Karl shouts and holds his eye. 'Fockin Taff pricks,' says Bloke One and leaves.

One of the kids on the bed leans over and hands us a bottle of vodka. I always thought he did art because he's got green hair, 'Here, you might need this,' he says.

'Cheers,' says Karl and unscrews the lid. He drinks quickly, taking little pauses to swallow and say 'Ugh,' then continues. He passes it to me. It burns and soon we've drunk most of it. Green kid looks a bit pissed off, but under the circumstances I don't give a shit.

'You ok mate?'

'D'you think they've gone?' Karl says.

'Yeah, reckon they have, they don't wanna be hanging around by here do they?'

He nods. 'Try not to bang your head quite as hard against mine next time,' he says.

'Luckily my 'fro gave us some padding.'

'Had to be good for something.'

'We won't see them around will we?'

'Naa. Probably not. Never seen them before. But then we don't go to gay clubs.'

'Yeah, he was a bit gay. I thought he was going to fuck us.'

'Me too! He'd do you first, save the best for afters.'

'Well, you have experience, he could tell that from your eyes.'

'I've got gay eyes now have I?'

'It's ok to be gay Karl, about time you dealt with it.'

'Pass the voddie you twat.' I pass him the bottle, but there's not much left and I can feel the rush of it starting from my burning stomach. It feels good, driving out the adrenaline

and replacing it with fuzzy warmth. ‘Speaking of gay, what was the end of those poncy lyrics? Something about some lad called Jack?’

‘Fuck off, poncy lyrics, I’m telling you, it’s our *Fake Plastic Trees*.’ It’s not poncy. Is it? Oh bollocks I feel embarrassed now, thought he liked it.

‘Go on, how’s it end?’

‘Right, erm... It’s in your pocket.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he pulls it out, reads;

‘Jack sees nothing new  
just turned twenty two  
works call centre jobs  
forgets history.  
He cannot see it  
volunteer prisoner  
horizon divider  
future condemned.’

‘Well?’ want to know what he thinks but he’s struggling to focus from the page to me, or maybe he’s just out of focus anyway.

‘A-D-A, you said?’

‘That was *Fake Plastic Trees*.’

‘Right. Best not nick it.’

‘What d’you think of the lyrics?’

‘Bit poncy.’

‘What the fuck’s *poncy* mean? In your head,’ I tap his head, ‘what’s it mean?’

‘Gerr-off. You know, like, sort of, not shit exactly, just...’

‘Not shit. Well that’s good.’

‘No not shit, no, just not *us*, you know? Where’s it gunna fit in the set list?’

‘In the middle; gives us a ballad. It’s a fuckin ballad innit?’

He’s reading it again, ‘What noise do swans make?’

‘Eh?’

*‘And the swans call out to me; what noise do they make?’*

Green kid up on the bed says, ‘Honk honk.’

‘Fuck off,’ I say, but don’t mean it to the green kid, so I say, ‘Not you, we like you and your vodka, diolch yn fawr iawn,’ and I say to Karl, ‘It’s not what they actually say, they don’t actually call out.’

Green kid says, ‘I like it.’

‘Swans don’t speak, but,’ says Karl.

‘It’s how you feel about the swans, Swansea; home,’ I’m pulling teeth here, luckily we’re anaesthetised. Hard word to say that, wonder if I can, my mouth’s so numb, ‘Anaesfised.’

Green kid laughs.

‘Eh?’ says Karl, ‘Ceri’ll be good on it, but. Good for her lower range stuff.’

‘She’ll sing anything; she can do anything,’ I poke him in the chest.

‘Stop poking me,’ then he thinks for a second, ‘You should tell her, you know?’ he says, and his face is doing weird stuff, I think he’s trying to wink but managing to move just his wispy beard and wrinkle random parts of his forehead. He looks seriously at his feet and then sideways at me again, ‘Tell her,’ he says, ‘you know?’ and he touches his nose with his finger, reaches round my shoulders and hugs, so I hug him back and his beard’s tickling my ear and he shouts into it, ‘Tell her you love her man,’ then leans back a bit looking kinda spinny. ‘You love Ceri,’ he says and touches his nose again, ‘I can see it.’ He gets up unsteadily. He looks bloody tall cos I’m still sitting down. ‘I’m gunna tell her cos Paul can be a twat.’

He’s gunna tell her what? Oh God he’s gunna tell I love her. Oh crap, oh crap. ‘Oi!’ he’s not listening. He’s well pissed now and walks into the wall before surging out into the

hall. ‘Oi!’ I get up quick and need to hold the wall as the room spins. He needs a diversion. I must divert him. Karl: abort, abort! She was in the kitchen, I hope she’s still there. Stay there girl, stay there Ceri, happy with Paul, drinking in the kitchen, “Mr. Dependable”; you said he was dependable. I’ll save the day. Kweli to the rescue. Super-Kweli! He’s heading for the kitchen! Luckily it’s still mobbed. Grab his arm and spin him up the stairs, ‘Upstairs Karl boy, lets see who’s up here,’ he follows, good lad. He’s so pissed. He’s talking to everyone on the stairs as I weave and he stumbles. Don’t knock that spliff over! Oh fuck he’s spilt that lad’s spliff; not happy.

‘Oi! Watchit kid.’ There’s bits of gear and baccy all over the shag-pile. Lad’s picking it up and getting nylon in there too. Probs not taste too good.

‘You love her,’ says Karl, swaying, leaning down towards Lad. Bit off-subject considering, not much of an apology.

‘I’ll bring you some of mine,’ I say, to the rescue again; putting out fires, me.

‘You fuckin love ‘er!’ he says dead loud. Don’t say her name mate, please. And everyone in earshot cheers and raises drinks and he punches the air. And there’s Paul now! passing the bottom of the stairs; he’s seen me seeing him and he knows I’m stressed cos I can’t hide it. Karl hasn’t seen him yet and he’s doing it again, ‘You fuckin love Ce...’ but I’ve yanked him hard and he’s landed on the landing, appropriately enough, and now he’s puking. Brilliant. I’ll have to clean it. But for now, up, up boy to the next level, up to bed. He’s leaning on me, skinny lad, and he’s saying, ‘Sorry Kwel mate, sorry,’ and gesturing at the puke. So I guess he’s forgotten his love mission and I’m dropping him on Paul’s bed in the recovery position, safety first, safety second and third.

I sit with him and wonder what he’d be like as a brother in law, and I know it’d be jokes. Paul’s a lot less fun; serious bastard, Paul. Do I love Ceri? Actually properly love her? She’s so fit and clever and talented, looks amazing tonight in her new wetsuit. And I need a

third verse, something about football maybe. But no one else likes footie, so it'd be vetoed, voted out, it's a democracy after all. So maybe something political about the decline of industry, or how Cardiff still gets everything, or something about Dylan Thomas maybe; some quote.



### Leuchars, Scotland, 1996

There is no point in replaying, replaying. We exist on a Mobious strip. You will become a collection of moments. These that I am forming now will replay through my life: the way you looked at the bar, as if you knew what was about to happen; the way you molded to me in the bonfire's heat, I, we, unable to let go as we danced so close we came together, holding on amongst the tide of bodies for fear of drowning; then running to the dark dunes, over the rise to the cold sand and you, having dropped to your knees looked over your shoulder to say Fuck me, now; the way you bucked and arched and pushed back, with your hair just long enough to grip until I came with my face in the sand looking at your face in the sand as the rain fell, so we had to return to the fire and dance close again until we lay by the embers to sleep; slipping my dead arm from under you to make my way here, you curled like a foetus against the cold. Each moment now a polaroid. You looking over your shoulder and saying Fuck me. You lying there like a foetus. Cold.

My head hurts all the way down my neck. The wind both soothes the burning and irritates the pain. Leuchars' station with a brain stem like a railway track, though I think I prefer this bleakness to any rush-hour warmth that may await in London. My God it is bleak though; this wall-less block in the middle of agricultural fields, delineated by two sets of parallel lines which diverge to accommodate two platforms, each equally dismal in aspect, especially since those pretty purple flowers that seem to exist everywhere in this country have died back for the winter, leaving dessicated facsimilies to crumble into the unhindered wind. I'm comforted instead by the predictable geometry of the blue bridge and, strangely, by the clangs of a loose sign; perhaps a bell to ward off ghosts, faces from another time and place. One face.

From the edge of the nearby town a bus approaches. It drops off one passenger who chooses to climb the gentle angle of the ramp rather than the stairs over the bridge. I recognise him, the slight figure in a black coat, it's Dan from last night, pulling a small luggage behind him. I do remember now, him saying something about going to Edinburgh today. Actually I think I spent a wee while talking with him, by the bonfire, before Katy danced and danced. We are the only people on these platforms. There are twenty seven minutes until our train. If this were home there would be numerous people working here, I suppose what they call 'fully industrialised' in this context means automated signs and tannoy, and a locked waiting room on a winter's day.

'Hello Matu.'

'Hi Dan, recovered from last night?'

'I slept rather well, beer does that to me.'

'Yeah, me too.'

'You look like you haven't been to bed,' he says, 'I saw everyone lie down by the fire, but I thought I'd rather sleep at home.'

'Very wise.'

'Even so, I didn't get to sleep until sometime after three. Perhaps it was the all night bakery's fault, they'd run out of onion bridies so I had to have a sausage roll.'

'Well, you are a student.'

'Yes. Are you not anymore then? You're taking that job in Croydon?'

What did I tell him last night? Why did I tell *him* last night? 'I'm still a student, but I will be continuing my PhD at a distance, whilst I complete the research.'

'So you will be back by the end of the year, or by next year?'

'To go does not prevent a man from returning.' I'm massaging the flesh between my thumb and index finger, Mother says it helps with pain. So far it does not.

‘No, no of course not.’

‘It’s a proverb.’

‘Ah, good. When will the MoD contract finish then?’

So I did tell him too much. I wonder who else I told. I didn’t tell Katy, we didn’t speak. I could come back before I go to Kenya, just for a short visit. But what would be the point? Sex, yes. But after that, a painful goodbye, and the longer I stay the greater the pain will be. Best to leave now, less pain all round. ‘Hopefully it won’t be too long.’

‘You seemed to suggest it was somewhat against your will, that you felt leaned upon.’ He’s sitting straight backed away from this bench’s backrest, perched like a crow, pecking carrion.

‘It just feels strange to work for the military.’ Social niceties condemn me to keep answering these incessant pecks.

‘Strange?’

‘Yes.’

‘Or wrong?’

I look at him, ‘Strange.’ I look back to the bleak.

‘Last night you said that it was more important to care for one’s family than to worry about the future uses of one’s research.’

‘That sounds like something I might say I guess.’

‘It was something you said.’

‘Good. I was right then.’

‘You did seem quite drunk.’

‘That would explain the pain in my head.’ The part you aren’t causing.

‘You mentioned Oppenheimer and how he regretted Nagasaki.’

‘He also regretted not getting the weapon ready for Berlin in time. Look,’ I look at him again, ‘why are you so invested in any moral dilemmas I may or may not be engaged in?’

He looks at me then back to the grey view, places his palms on his thighs, narrows his eyes somewhat, says, ‘I lay in bed last night worrying, that’s why I couldn’t sleep to be honest, I was worrying about what it was you were going to design, and I thought if I could have met Oppenheimer in nineteen forty, that I would have been obligated, knowing what we know now, to dissuade him from his research. There is no knowing how something like that would, will develop.’

‘Would you have killed him? Do I need to be worried?’

‘No,’ he closes his eyes, ‘I don’t think that would have been necessary.’

‘But what if it was? Also, what if something in his research made the time travel you seem to be engaged in possible, like, say, quantum tunneling. You would know, for want of a better phrase, if you succeed in knocking him off his course because you would suddenly dis-exist, for want of a better phrase, in fact you would never even have been there having the conversation because he would never have potentialised that event. It’s one reason we know time travel is not possible.’

He remains with his eyes closed and his hands on his thighs, ‘You are belittling and sidestepping my argument because you are scared to face up to the fact you are building a weapon,’ he opens his eyes and looks at me with a sadness on his dainty face, ‘which can kill people.’

‘It is not a weapon, it is a defence system. That’s all I can say.’ Pretend I have signed the official secrets act, he won’t know.

‘I am not going to tell anyone, why would I? And nobody can hear us here,’ he sweeps an arm outwards, then back to his lap.

It could be used to target people. I have drowned the voice that says this. He is resuscitating it. 'It will concern targetting and distance. And I won't be building anything, just working on the numbers.' Will he be like this all the way to Edinburgh? Yes, yes he will. No wonder Katy left him on his own.

'So why did you seem so tortured about it last night?'

This boy. 'Because I have been investigating cutting power for mining and suchlike, and they haven't told me anything directly yet, and you must not tell anyone this, but I think it will be for disabling nuclear weapons in flight, or something like that.'

'And where will the nuke land?'

'Look, I am not the one who will pull the trigger. I have no idea what they want but it won't be anything small enough to use on a battlefield or against people because of the energy requirements and necessary size of the thing.'

'So it's star wars redux is it? From a satellite, from a submarine?'

'I would imagine from a submarine, yes. Or a large plane.'

'Not mounted on a tank then?'

'No. Probably not. That's already been done but they are just not cost effective.'

'And that's where you come in is it? You said you are purifying lasers, intensifying them, maybe that could reduce energy, size and cost.'

'Ok look, obviously I have thought about all this, a great deal, and I do not think that it will be used against people...'

'Yet.'

'... Ok, I get your point that there is no way of predicting how people will build upon one's research in the future, and yes, it may potentialise a hand held laser gun, or larger. But look at it this way; there will always be wars, killings, with conventional weapons there will be more destruction and collateral damage, with a laser weapon, or laser targetting, that will

be reduced thus saving civilian casualties. So in helping to make a better weapon I am saving lives. And if it does render nukes useless then perhaps that will lead to their eradication.'

'That's as cold a logic as I've heard.'

'Also, with the multiple civilian uses military research can be put to, such as mining or construction, health, space exploration, I can take what I find over this contract and implement it elsewhere, after taking the money and helping my family first.'

'If nobody made weapons there would be no wars.'

'There are always sticks and stones lying around, and there are always bad people, gullible people, and the ignorant.'

His right leg has started to vibrate, a nervous energy jerking it up and down, 'Will you be going to Sierra Leone?'

'No, it's purely research, a desk job.'

'Katy said last night that you would be going there.'

'She heard me talking about it with someone.'

He stares ahead still. This scenery has no focus, it is unique in that it can hold the eye for quite some time as one flits around looking for something to register: the yellow-green monocultural fields, their darker green thicket hedges, wires against a grey sky, thin trees in the distance, an empty carpark, a long corrugated warehouse. He turns to me, his eyes widening, 'That's why you're leaving now, they're in a hurry, they want it out in Sierra Leone to test it before the war ends!'

'They don't need me out there. Look, one of the main applications we are investigating is a remotely operated mine sweeper, hopefully that is something I will be working on. That is what they want out in Sierra Leone.'

'Well that's a great project to be involved in, you should have said.'

‘Yes, but there is also a weapon, I think. They reeled me in with the minesweeper idea, then they asked many, many questions about power and range. Then they offered me a lot of money.’ Across the fields at the airbase the RAF fire up their first training flight of the day, the noise is primordial as the plane goes vertical just after take-off and the afterburners rip the air.

‘Weapons developer for the British forces, Her Majesty’s Forces,’ he whistles, ‘that’s quite a thing for a colonial to achieve.’

‘Did you see Katy this morning?’ The gall of this boy, the ignorance is astounding, although I have found it not to be rare.

‘I think it shows just how far our countries have come, moved on. No I didn’t see Katy. Are you and Katy a thing now? You could pop up to see her on weekends I presume.’

‘Perhaps.’ *Moved on...* out of the concentration camps and into the corrugated huts, for which we are meant to appear grateful? So much in this country is appearances. Though taking the obscene amount of money for this position feels like a reparation of sorts. I will return home with enough money to solve problems, get Mother free of Him.

‘You don’t seem sure.’

‘I’m not sure, no. It depends on so many factors, unforeseeable, potential factors.’ The weapon will be a tactical defence system. For defence. It will defend me from economic ravages.

**Swansea, Wales, 2015**

Dear Professor Kagai,

I'm your son. Sorry to drop that on you so suddenly, I realise  
it's a little unfair

Naa naa, not like that.

Jambo Matu! You fucked my mother now here I am

Naa naa, nope.

Hi Matu,

You don't know me, but you knew my mother Katy Davis at university for one night. Now I realise this is kinda out of the blue for you, and I hope you're sitting down, and I guess you've guessed already, but you are my father. I've attached a few pictures of me and her, so you know I'm not some random. Mam says I have your eyes. The first is me when I was born, obviously. The next is me and Mam after surfing in Pembroke when I was six. The proper school one when I went into year seven. One of me playing drums in my band The Undertow at battle of the bands last year and one of us taken from the Western Mail because we're getting a bit of a following now. Here's us on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnpRyq4eRSg>



Yes, we did name the band after the pub you and Mam met at. I suppose that's ok because it's not called that anymore and you aren't around anyway so you don't have to worry. I don't want you to worry about me. I'm fine. I'm happy. But I thought it was only fair that you know you've got a son. Maybe you always wanted one, maybe you have some kids already with someone else. I hope so and I hope you're happy too.

Don't blame Mam for not wanting to tell you, she just didn't think it was fair to emotionally blackmail you into having to look after me and thought it would be ok if you never knew. And she couldn't find you anyway, looks like you ran away. I don't mind if you don't want to meet me

**Yes I fucking do**

I'd like to meet you soon and I've worked and saved up to come to Kenya, so if you're around that would be great

I'd like to meet you and I can send you money for a plane ticket because I've been working loads on the phones, so if you want to just write and I'll send it. It's up to you

We could Skype if you like

Supposedly I cried loads and was really clingy but also was really loud and a show-off because I was insecure. She blames you too. Don't blame her, she never told me that. Auntie Sarah told me that. (At least that's one thing you got right, you fucked Mam and not her)

Why is it you disappeared like that? You know I can't fuck about with girls now for fun because I feel like I have to commit to them forever? I think it freaks them out, it freaks me out. It's your fault

Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to look at Mam when she has to explain to a doctor or whoever that you're not around, and do you know how bad that is when I know they're thinking 'typical black guy', and that now I know I'm that guy too to every white person I meet because I've seen that's what they think even though I can't even pluck up the guts to get off with anyone in case I dump them and that's your fucking fault?

You know what, it's easier to visit him. He doesn't deserve a head's up. And something makes me want to see Kenya, not because of all that 'roots' stuff... Naa, you know what Kweli boy, it is because of all that roots stuff innit? Be honest, you wanna see where half of you came from. Be like that Gina Yashere off *Live at the Apollo*, "\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*". Except yours will be in fuckin' Bridgend.

### Swansea, Wales, 2005

‘Over the falls,’ says Davy, laughing, ‘he went over the falls.’ Ruffles my hair. ‘Wish I coulda seen it.’ Me too, I’d looked cool.

‘How big?’ asks Brancs.

‘Huuge,’ I say reaching my hand up like an answer at school and standing tippy toe and staring big eyes at everyone, ‘double overhead.’ I’m holding my coke in the other hand, otherwise I’d done two hands. I’m holding it like all the men; they’ve got silver cans like posh lemonade. We’re all leaning on the shelves and washing machine and oven, holding our cans. Looks like a big game of rock-paper-scissors, but with only one move. Silver cans look like posh lemonade cans, not Sprite like. But beer smells of bad breath or horse poo. I wanna beer.

‘That huge?’ says Brancs.

‘Double overhead Mam said.’ All the men laugh and ‘woo’ and stuff. There’s eight of them, all wearing hoodies like me, except for Davy in his smart shirt.

Mam comes in to get to the fridge, ruffles my hair, pats Brancs on the belly. ‘Happy birthday,’ men say and hug her, or they get quick cheek kisses.

‘Thanks, ta,’ she says, ‘You all okay for a drink? Food in the front room.’

Brancs grabs her round the shoulders from behind with his free arm and hugs her and says, ‘You’re gerrin on a bit now girl, innit time you found a proper man to settle down with eh?’

Mam squeezes his arm with both hands, ‘Ooh, you been working out Brancs?’

‘Been working with oak a lot; that’s proper muscle, not show-off-y gym muscle some men try for,’ he says, looking at Davy.

Davy puts his beer on the side and breathes in deep, lifting up his arms and flexing his muscles; biceps those ones are. He keeps them flexed and points with both pointy fingers to the door, 'She said the food's that-a-way mate, make sure you leave some for the rest of us though.'

Mam shifts under Branc's arm and twiddles his moustache then hugs him, patting his big belly slap slap, 'Takes proper dedication to look this good eh Brancy boy? Mmm, solid.' She looks literally half his size. They're all laughing. When adults have parties they're like laughing competitions.

'How big was that wave last year Mam? Tell them.'

'We was talking about your last birthday,' says Davy, 'and how this year's a bit more chilled out.'

'How it's nice to have a birthday when you're not stuck in A and E, eh?' says Brancs, 'Takes the edge off being old.'

Mam puts on a different voice, 'Yesss, last year was a learning experience for us all I think. Aged me in preparation for turning thirty today. Means I can party twice as hard now cos I'm owed one.' Brancs and Mam clunk their cans together. Cheers is like a high five for drinks. What Mam's saying is that I ruined her birthday last year, that it was my fault I couldn't surf the big wave.

'You said it wasn't a big one last year though Mam.'

'What, the wave?'

'No, your party. It wasn't *the* big one; this one.'

'Oh Kwel, you didn't ruin it boy; it wasn't your fault,' she pokes me in the belly but I can't knock her hand away cos it's the one holding the beer.

The adults smile and say stuff like, 'No Kwel boy, it wasn't your fault,' and, 'Could've happened to anyone; freak wave like that.'

‘Scariest moment of my life,’ says Mam quietly to Brancs...

*Like on Berry Head on holidays where Mam and Dad said Katy come away from the edge! the panic in their voices pricking the hand wrapping around my insides and pulling me seawards, downwards, following the gulls’ sweeping dives and the salt in the vast, beckoning air. Like in St Andrews on Maiden rock, which I’d always used as a forty foot, igneous cone to mark the East end of my run until adrenaline, challenge and cockiness combined to see me heave onto the narrow summit and feel the pull to the boulders below, again from the waist, my core. It was like that. I remember the pull of it, the gravity of it, before I could see it, before I realised it was coming. And that little laugh to myself like we were still playing a game, me and the sea, as it pulled me over by the waist, falling onto the board I looked comical, in a way, if anyone had seen. But Kweli couldn’t hear me; his little body sat on the board looking around for a point to gauge where he was, looking for me. All that grey, with him lying down before it and starting to paddle towards me, as I pulled myself seawards quicker than I ever could have thought. God the surging drag of it, sucking everything into itself, but beneath the panic some part of me felt such pride in the tiny boy making the hard decision and doing the brave thing, so I had to too. I had to use the speed to reduce the distance between us and paddle at the green-grey noise. As Kwel tried to stand (tried to stand!) it took him and he curled up into it and followed the arc, over the falls, boy under then board into the air. Just enough time to see that before I dived; a press up with strength from somewhere, forehead to the tip, foot down hard and curved spine, pop to the surface, breathe deeply and turn to follow it. Clear sea behind; this was a clear-out set to beat all clear-out sets, and on the striated sea I saw his silhouette for the first of a thousand times; legs like open scissors, but with his arms curled over his head as we taught him. Paddled to him, dragged him onto his board, thumped him hard in the chest, never been taught it, just hit*

*him really really hard. He spat and coughed and spat. I Ripped off my leash, paddled his board in. All instinct.*

... 'And mine!' It was much scarier for me than for Mam.

'Well, between the lip and the trough, when your board was on the face, there was space above and below it. And how long was that old board Davy? Seven-six?' asks Mam.

'Nah; six-eight fish. Loved that board,' says Davy.

'Alright, don't rub it in,' says Mam.

'Looks good on the wall though dunnit?' says Brancs. I think it looks cool on the wall, better than pictures. Wish I could remember what being dead for a second was like. 'I'll join the two halves one day if you like,' says Brancs to Mam. Then he says to me, 'You have to tell everyone who asks how you broke it that it was a shark that bit it,' then he winks.

'Them waves were never seven foot that day though,' says Davy, 'even on The Crab they weren't more than six.' Mam aims a kick at his shins across the kitchen.

'Don't piss on our chips, 'kin typical.' Mam's pretending to be angry, she says 'kin when she's trying not to swear in front of me. Or maybe she's pretending to be pretending not to be angry, but actually is.

'It wasn't a big wave, it was a big shark!' I say to Davy.

He laughs and does a shark face, lots of snappy teeth. Then Brancs says, 'How big was the shark Kwel?'

And I say, 'This big,' and stretch out my arms and do big eyes again, and everyone laughs.

Mam says, 'What would I do without you Kweli bach?' and breathes beery horse poo breath all over me when she leans down to hug my head, 'Love you,' she says in my ear...

*Your concern about secondary drowning is misplaced, there is no such thing, the cough will clear up. My concern is in exactly the right place mate and he will be sleeping in my bed tonight and I'll be watching him like a hawk. Perhaps in retrospect he's a bit too young for surfing in winter. Yes Doc, and perhaps you need to get out more. Never said it, should have said it. He's just as likely to choke on the cotton wool they're all wrapped in. Just how much freedom can you give them? That's been answered: less than Davy thinks. When I was seven I climbed a tree and a branch broke. The canopy receded into the sky as the branch in my hand stayed the same size. Funny the snippets you remember. This is gunna hurt, but landing on leaf covered mud, anywhere else was rocks and brambles and barbed wire. Never since stayed still long enough to hear leaves in a breeze or birdsong, like really hear it. Began to think that they were asking me questions, then stood gingerly like an answer. Made it home for tea. I love him so much that I'll risk him falling.*

... 'You had enough to eat?' she asks. I'm fullup on crisps and guacamole. She's changing the subject.

'Six foot then,' says Davy.

'That's equivalent to twelve, if you're just a sprog,' says Brancs.

'Everything's relative,' says Mam, then looks at me funny, not ha-ha funny like, but not smiling like the men. Kinda like I've just asked her a tricky question, but I haven't.

'What?' I ask her.

'Nothing boy, just your silly old mam,' she says, pushing me out of the kitchen towards the front room. But it's boring in the front room; it's full of relatives.

'It's all relatives in there,' I hiss talk at her, let her know I don't like being pushed out of the fun kitchen.

‘Not that kind of relative, Kwel, but you’re right; everything’s relatives in here.’ She smiles, but with her head to one side, which means it’s not a real smile, like.

What other kind are there? Like Uncle Dougs and Aunty Sarah? Davy said they aren’t actually, literally, uncles and aunts. Like weird Dan? He’s just a friend though, like Brances and Davy and Fran and Carlo, well, maybe not like Davy, he’s literally around all the time.

Nain and Taid are sitting in their favourite spots. Taid’s playing with Sarah’s little boy, he’s found the door crocodile and thinks it’s a toy. Taid’s going ‘Grr, snap snap,’ and the boy’s laughing high and fast and falling over onto his nappy bum. Nain’s talking to Sarah but she’s not hearing her well cos they both keep leaning forwards to each other. It’s cos Uncle Dougs is playing loud music on his decks; it’s reggae, I like reggae. Mam’s always playing singing music with grindy guitars but I like bouncy music like Dougs’. Dan’s stood next to Dougs just watching the discs spin round. S’funny; one’s short and colourful, the other’s tall and all in black. I like hoodies best.

Mam’s running friends are sat on the big sofa, squished together like lego in a box. The room looks funny all swopped around like this. Also, this room doesn’t smell of smoke like the kitchen; Mam’s got smokey friends and non-smokey friends, but Nain smokes when Taid’s not looking at Christmas. I grab a handful of sausage rolls off the table and jump onto Franny on the sofa.

‘Ohh, you’re growin up Kweli, jeez! Gerrus a cheesy pineapply stick will you?’

‘Okay,’ I say, and drop all my sausage rolls onto Kat-with-a-K’s lap, cos she’s wearing a dress and it looks like a bowl shape there, ‘Hold these!’

‘Bl... Kweli!’ says Kat-with-a-K.

I kangaroo jump to the table, grab a handful of slimy cheesy pineapply sticks and kangaroo jump back, I drop them into Kat-with-a-K’s lap again, ‘You look pretty in your dress,’ I tell her. They look different not wearing trackies; they look like girls.



I jump back onto Franny, ‘Ooof,’ she says again.

‘So do you,’ I tell Franny.

‘Cheers Kwel,’ says Franny, ‘don’t we look pretty normally?’

Oops. ‘Yes, of course you do,’ I say and give them the big smile.

‘Typical man,’ says Kat-with-a-K, and eats one of my sausage rolls. ‘Not so pretty now I’m covered in bludi grease.’

‘Why’re you *Kat* and Mam’s *Katy*?’ I ask her.

‘Because I’m Katherine, and I think she was christened Katy wasn’t she?’

Fran waves across at Taid, ‘Ed, Ed! Edwyn!’ Taid’s a bit deaf, ‘Oi Mr Davies!’

‘Yes Miss! Sorry, it’s all a bit loud in yer; all this punk music you kids are into nowadays, you know.’

‘What was Katy christened? Was it Katy or Katherine?’

‘Dunno, she’s not mine. Ask her Mam,’ he says and goes back to playing with the crocodile and the boy, but then looks up with his cheeky face to Mam who’s leaning on the mantelpiece. She slowly shakes her head and chews the inside of her cheeks at him. ‘Snap snap grr,’ he says to the little boy who squeaks like a girl. He is Mam’s dad.

Nain puts her hand on Auntie Sarah’s to stop their conversation, like a pause button on a dvd, and says to Franny, ‘Katy, like my sister,’ then goes back to talking to Auntie Sarah.

Taid looks across at us and says, ‘Yes she’s my little girl, the apple of my eye. Proudest moment of my life the day she popped out. Mainly cos she proves I’ve done it once.’ He does a big wink at Fran and Kat-with-a-K.

Mam goes, ‘Dad, for Christ’s sake! I’m stood right here.’ The girls all laugh.

Nain puts her hand on Auntie Sarah’s again and turns sideways, all stiff like old people do, to look at Taid and say, ‘No, Cariad, she proves *I*’ve done it once.’ I thought she

was ignoring him, she usually does. All the adults laugh really loud and Taid is shaking his head. Are they laughing at him or with him? I thought they were laughing with him, poor Taid. Kat-with-a-K is trying not to spit out her drink and is actually crying. Franny's leaning her head on my shoulder as I sit in her lap and has gone all red, her laughing is wriggling me about. It's making me laugh but I don't want to laugh at Taid. The little boy is looking around at everyone with his mouth open.

I go over to Taid and do fists up to everyone like a boxer and say, 'Don't laugh at poor old Taid!'

Mam says, 'He deserves all he gets boy.'

Taid says, 'Oi, less of the old.' Then he says, 'G'won Kweli, go get 'em!'

So I'm about to start jumping on them all, but Mam stops me with, 'No Kwel,' all serious like, and it's her birthday so I don't want her to sound stressed on her birthday, specially since I messed up the last one, so I kneel down next to Taid with my arm over his knees.

'Poor Taid,' I say.

Kat-with-a-K has managed to swallow her fizzy wine and says, 'Mrs Davies, oh my gosh, that was hilarious.'

Nain looks proud and sheepish at the same time, like she's pretending one or the other, I don't know which. They never call her by her name, they only use Taid's name, not hers, and I don't think she's ever said they can, but I remember Taid saying 'Oh, call me Edwyn.' Weird.

'Kat, don't encourage them, please,' says Mam.

'No, we should, it's better than tv this,' says Franny.

'Who woulda thought it was rated eighteen though?' says Kat-with-a-K. She's talking about what's okay for children, like they did at school; like when I shouted about the crashing

planes and the falling people cos Mam was in the kitchen and she came running in, then turned it off, and I saw her crying listening to the radio.

*Those poor people, those poor, poor people. Run!*

*Everything's changed. Everything's changed and we're all fucked.*

I still remember the dust people and the falling people, and I like that I didn't see more. This is different though cos everyone's laughing, so what are they getting at Taid for? Was he being rude? Rude is funny.

'Hey I like this one!' shouts Taid at uncle Dougs, 'Turn it up,' he says, jerking his thumb upwards, 'reeally loud,' he says. Uncle Dougs smiles like he doesn't know what's going on, but turns the music up anyway.

'That won't save you!' shouts Mam over the song at Taid.

Auntie Sarah's boy doesn't like the extra noise and starts crying. Mam squeezes round the back of the big chair to go tell Uncle Dougs to turn it down. Auntie Sarah grabs Mam's wrist and pulls her down so she's nearly flopped over the back of the couch, 'Tell me they get easier,' she says.

'They don't get easier,' says Mam whilst looking at me and sticking her tongue out. I stick mine out further back at her. 'They get this habit of doing things that you don't expect. Like moving from where you put them down; turn your back and they've gone.'

'Sure I know that one already, now that he can crawl. But why is he crying at the music? He likes reggae, sure he does. Pure autistic, I'm telling you.'

'Children cry at loud noises, he's a perfectly normal, lovely boy,' says Nain, reaching her arms down to pick him up. Auntie Sarah has her leg crossed away from him and makes a face like he's a smelly wet dog or something. The boy cries just as much. He's soooo

annoying. I want Uncle Dougs' headphones on. I jump over to Dan and Uncle Dougs and tug on the earphone lead whilst pointing to my ear. Dougs take them off and puts them on my head. Straight away I hear a different song, then I wonder to myself why I thought Dougs was listening to the same stuff we were, but with earphones on; of course it's a different song! He's listening to the next one. I jump up and down because this is exciting. Dougs smiles and he's happy that I like what he likes. He points at a slidy knob on the controls and winks. I put my hand on the knob and smile *can I?* He mouths the word 'slowly', so I slowly slide the knob over and the new song mixes in with the old one then the old one goes away. Sooo cool. He points at his stack of records and mouths, 'choose one', so I flick through and pick one with a smiley man from the olden days on the cover; black and white ones are old. He's wearing a shirt and his two friends are wearing jumpers. Dougs takes out the disc and puts it on, then he slides the knob over and I hear my choice with the men all humming, then they sing, '\*\*\*\*\*,' over and over. I nod and smile to Uncle Dougs, I like it.

Dan pulls one of my earphones off a bit and says loudly, 'You need to match the speed of that one,' he points at the new one, 'with this one,' he waves his finger in the air around my head. Uncle Dougs nods and points at another knob, a twisty one this time. I twist it and the one in my ear goes really slow, so I twist it the other way and it goes really fast. This is great, I love this, I didn't know you could change the music. After a few twisty twists I reckon it's matching so I pass the earphones back to Uncle Dougs. He nods along for a bit then gives me the thumbs up. This is so cool. The boy's still crying so I tug the earphones again and do sulky face so Uncle Dougs hands me them back.

Brancs and Davy come in and grab some food off the table near me. I dance and poke-poke, poke-poke Brancs in the belly in time to the music, he wiggles his bum and everyone's smiling as we do a wiggly bum dance together, but out of the corner of my eye I see Dan holding the album cover and he points at it to Dougs, then to me and I think he says

something like, 'Looks a bit like his dad,' so I look at the smiley men on the cover and wonder which one he means. Mam's staring at Dan and Uncle Dougs is looking a bit worried cos he's smiling with his mouth but not his eyes now. I hand the earphones back to Dougs and he starts to slide the new song over the old one. I want to know which one looks like my dad and if he looks like me.

'Show me, which one?' I say.

'Dan?' says Mam like a question, sounding worried. She's worried I'm upset, but I don't mind.

'It's okay Mam, I wanna see,' I say.

'He's okay,' says Dan to Mam, and he points at the man in the middle, the one wearing the shirt. Then he says, 'I've got a few good photos of him dancing actually, just the negatives, but I can send them to you when I get home if you like?'

Mam has wide eyes and says, 'Me and Kwel need to talk a little about that first, I think, thank you Dan.' She doesn't sound like she wants me to see the pictures.

Dougs has taken the earphones off again and takes the album cover off Dan and puts it somewhere in the middle of his big records box, 'Does nae actually look like him tae be honest,' he says to me, 'You're much better looking.'

Mam looks upset and I wonder if I should feel upset, but I don't, I just want to know what he looks like, 'Can we get the photos Mam, can we please?' I ask her.

'We'll talk about it once everyone's gone, eh Kwel? Let's discuss it later.'

*It's all surges: embers trace pulses of heat skyward before they slow to rain over us like a blessing; this killer cold forces us closer, clouds of breath merge between us, show our bodies' rhythms; the E frisks my spine in time to the techno thudding through; the crowd heaves as the cavernous bass synchronises everything. We are aligned and dancing. A dark,*

*thin figure appears to our side, silhouetted against the bonfire, blatant in his stillness. He takes our photograph. The flash lingers in my vision as I watch Matu raise both arms and tilt his head back to worship the million suns exploding in my eye as the build-up peaks and the bass drops.*

Mam says *discuss* when it's something bad, but this isn't bad, how can it be? Auntie Sarah and Nain are looking at us over the back of the sofa. 'Dan moment?' asks Auntie Sarah.

Mam looks a little happier and nods, 'Proper Dan moment,' she says.

Dan frowns and smiles at the same time, I feel sorry for him cos all the adults around me are looking at him. 'I took a lot of photos,' he says and shrugs. Then he eats a cheesy pinapply stick.

**Nairobi, Kenya, 1988**

I am terrified. That is all. That is it. In there behind the eyes. I look like I'm melting because I'm zoomed in on my pupils and the surrounding flesh is amorphous and pointless. I cannot look at my surrounds because they don't fit expectation: I don't expect to see myself gripping the sink with urinals behind, this was not the plan. The shitpiss stench helps a little actually; it's grounding, something to focus on. Focus on the base, not the basin, not the hands, nor eyes, nor face, nor speech. Anything but the speech.

Think of the shit that everyone has to do; a more potent leveler than death as it happens every day to everyone whereas death happens only once. I must make a pact with myself to look away and not panic, release myself from this loop I'm stuck in. Time has not stood still. Camaraderie reigns in the corridors outside and I must face them; they will not be scarier now than they have been before. I'll be stood above them and well out of reach, hopefully that is a metaphor for the rest of my life.

I'll take a shit, that might help, at least it means there'll be nothing up there to leak out when I take to the stage: Ladies and gentlemen, I therefore present to you your valedictorian, Matu Kagai, Oh! Well it would be memorable; my friends and peers sent out into the world with one perfect image of What Not To Do With Your Life splattered across their trajectories, haunting their every decision, spurring them on. Perhaps I should make this a conscious decision. It would be an act of sacrifice on my part for the greater good. Jesus did death, I'll do shit. Common is better than special every time. Harambee for ever. Pragmatism is all.

It appears I am actually going to do this. I was right, only such a carnal urge could have forced me out of my loop. I take off my robe, drape it over the cubicle door, crouch over

the hole, prepare myself for the purge. I have five minutes left. This usually takes me, I would guess, about three minutes, then there's the walk along the corridor to the hall, which is what? A minute? God this is cutting it fine. Squeeze for Christ's sake. Oh it's a splatterer, it's the nerves. Has that hit my shoes! Ah this is going to slow me down.

Dropped the speech, from pocket, down hole.

Stay calm. Look, assess.

Dropped the speech, from pocket, down hole.

A choice: take the speech from the top of the valeshitry (but do it quickly as it's starting to absorb) then clean it enough to not be noticed; or do the speech from memory (distinguished guests, parents - opening joke - record number of graduates but we will still help Mister Guthungu with the chairs - thanks to teachers - blah blah - inauspicious start - conjugate 'to be' in six languages but cannot find science classroom - blah blah - heart and head; choose which you follow, then follow it with all your heart - don't mention the bribes, homosexuals, girls in the dorms, three Principles in our four years, beatings). A or B? A for absorbing, B for blah blah. I think the choice is being made for me.

Tap, bucket, flush, hands, robe, go.

The corridor is full of boys in black and white, smelling of starch and Vaseline. I join the flow of mortar-boards and robes. There's Diri, 'Diri, Diri!' he turns.

'Maaatuuu! You ready? You look... nervous,' he says, looking me up and down and I think smelling something.

'What's the MP's name again?' I blurt.

He looks a little surprised, but smiles like this is a funny moment, wanting this to be another of our fun times to add to this year's (and only this year's) collection. He will know, it's his future business to know.



‘Michael...,’ he prompts, with his knife-brows raised above his knife-eyes, balanced above his knife-nose.

‘Kibichii,’ I remember. Oh God this is not happening.

‘He’s not here. Maybe he’s not coming after all. How nervous *are* you?’

‘I’ve lost my speech.’ I feign patting pockets.

‘But you know it don’t you? You’ve probably got it memorised word for word in that dome of yours.’ He flicks the tassel on my mortar board into my face.

‘Yes, yes. Parts of it.’

He seems to see how nervous I am, that this is Not Funny, that he will be guilty by virtue of association with me if I mess it up. He puts his arm around my shoulder as we walk, we’re close to the hall now. He pulls me out of the flow to the window so that we stand looking outside, ‘Tonight we will drink beautiful Tuskers, not that kill me quick stuff. We shall dance like *we’re* the happy label elephants while silhouettes of humans against yellow skies adorn our beverages. There will be women,’ his free hand extends to the horizon, like he’s trying to reach it, ‘beautiful, drunk women. So don’t be scared, mumble through and only say the thank-yous clearly. Who will know, or even care? We just want out into our bright, yellow sky futures.’

‘I want to inspire people with this, it’s my chance to prove myself.’

‘That sounds like two different things. Just rush through it. Nobody even did one last year!’

‘Yes, I now know why. Poor Gideon, probably locked himself in a toilet cubicle.’ I would like to return to that cubicle, lock myself away. This view across the playing field is making me more nervous, far too much space and no football being played. Temptingly empty and clear to Langata Road, then a straight run down to the bus station, then away to anywhere, away and plan further once distance has been gained. Boys, teachers, families

pressed to the windows craning to see the sprinting figure, robe billowing behind him, occasional leaps of joy and the obligatory mortar board into the air. Principal Kipchumba struggling to open the latch and shout ‘You run boy, You run from your future, You’re running backwards, You were never meant for here’; his father shouting ‘Keep running failure, keep running’; his mother giving one of her stares like a laser into the back of his head. He stumbles and falls at break-neck speed with the stupid robe wrapped over his head and his mkundu pointing to the sky.

Mother is here. Father will never be. But here I am picturing him.

‘Come on now, it’ll be over in five minutes. Providing of course you have five minutes of material.’ I stare at him. ‘Just *mumble* if you come across a problem.’ He raises his palms and smiles, like he’s solved my problems. ‘Come on now, we’re going to be late.’

We walk into the hall. I can see Mother sat near the back, wearing a chess board dress, her hair perfect. She waves. I nod and smile, well I think my face smiled, as much as it can right now. Diri takes his seat two rows back. I sit in the front row amongst teachers in sharp suits, and a number of business leaders and community men in even sharper ones. I understand why the English say the heart is in the mouth; I can feel a pulse in my tongue. Unfortunately the tongue steals what is in the heart, which right now, is chaos. A chaos of idioms apparently.

Principal Kipchumba, who has been chatting with the men to my left, approaches the lectern. The buzz in the hall reduces with his every step. When he places his hands and looks up he is greeted by silence. The same silence the same boys made in the exams, except now it is punctuated by fidgeting not scribbling. It is the same silence made by the same boys in the library and study rooms whilst we revised, broken then by the noise of the world continuing around us. The library! The quotation book I used is in the library, opposite end of the corridor. I can leave by the door behind the stage. I know what shelf it’s on; I can be back in

under a minute, the Principal's address will be longer. I can link a speech together between quotations. It will give me a prompt at least, something to fill the silence. It will give me hope, but everyone will see me leave.

Choices. Again my body chooses for me as I find myself creep-walking forward at an angle away from centre stage. Principal Kipchumba sees me as he begins, 'Honoured guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Students,' somewhat taking away the power of his words as he looks downwards at me only. Cannot be helped; this is my trade off, the negative of my positive. I only hope the doors don't make too much noise. They do; creak open, and I feel everyone looking at me not the Principal.

Through, and I'm sprinting down the corridor. The corridor's space is punctuated by doors, windows, posters and signs, and I see them in a way I never could have before as they speed past in a blur. I have never run this fast this close to something. Speed feels wonderfully abnormal, an exception to everything. Relative to these fixed points I am photon; my head a particle, my robe a wave flowing out behind me. I could keep on running through these doors, bookshelves, walls, roads and buildings, and never ever stop. I stop by the shelf I found the quotation book on, next to biographies of dead white people. It's not here. I quickly scan for the biography of Einstein. It is here. I take it. I will sound like an Einstein fan, there are worse things. I sprint back towards the hundreds of eyes, more slowly now as I approach the door, a tip-toe jog to not be heard slap-slapping along. The door creaks. A quick glance up confirms all the predicted eyes glaring. I creep-walk bent double to my seat. Breathe deeply as quietly as possible.

'... for the third year running.' Applause. I join in. Oh God he's finished! No, he's going to continue. He glances at me, 'Success comes from the pulling together of good people towards a clear goal. We are blessed at Karange High that we have such good people, and it has been an honour and privilege to spend these last four years with you.' Applause.

Use the noise to open the book. Quotations? Where, where? Flick flick flick. He's looking at me again I can sense it. A glance up; yes, our eyes meet. His smile for the audience is painted on, I see he knows there's something wrong. We have agreed, through a look, that he will stall as long as possible for me. He is a good man, non-selection of Kikuyu notwithstanding.

Here: opening quotation for me, '*Education is what remains after one has forgotten all that he learned at school*'? Maybe not, it is pertinent but perhaps a bit too confrontational.

Kipchumba continues, 'We are a big happy family here, and it will be all the more sad to see you leave because of that, but all the more enriching of our time together. Our project here is about family, it centres on the family. You boys are a credit to your families and you will head out into the world as ambassadors for them, just as much as for your school.'

Applause.

How about, '*As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality*'? I could extrapolate from this, like the proof for a formula; it is written in such a logical way. But to what end: here we are certain, out in the world we are not; nothing you know is what you think it is? Kipchumba is waiting for the applause to die naturally. It wanes. My brain is on the wane, I have a waning brain. Oh God. I look up at him.

He seems to take this as a signal, 'In light of such, it gives me great pride to introduce to you,' oh God, 'our very own budding genius, a student who has won a full scholarship to the University of Nairobi to study Physics, and not only our,' oh God, 'best ever science student but also our best ever mathematics student, and further to that,' oh God, 'and this achievement cannot be overstated, the best ever mathematics student in the history of the Kenyan certificate.' I'll just take the next quotation I see and work from that. 'Please welcome to the stage our valedictorian for the class of 1988, Mister Matu Kagai.' Applause. Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, students.

Stand, climb steps, onetwothree, smile. Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, students. Face the audience. Haraka haraka haina baraka; take your time Matu. I am actually here now and now I actually have to speak, ‘Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, students,’ nod to each. Diri and Wilf wave at me, there are woops. ‘I stand here before you, on this most special of days, on this stage, here, now, and it is my duty, my honoured duty, to deliver this speech,’ rambling, get on with it, ‘and I wonder: why me?’ Probably what they’re all wondering now too. Principal Kipchumba is standing at a respectable distance to my right, the MP is sat three meters away directly in front of me (he made it then), one hundred and twenty five boys look at me, one hundred and twenty of them either hate me or are utterly ambivalent of me, their family members observe with an expression of polite encouragement. Mother holds a camera to her eye, it flashes. ‘Yes, I did well in my exams, but there are many people here who could have been chosen: Football captain Anthony is one such,’ he is jostled by his neighbours, pushed as if to come to the stage, he laughs and appears to acknowledge my complement, the first communication we have ever shared that is not derogatory towards me; ‘Swimming and chess star Erick is another,’ he stares ahead in silence, a look of *Iamnotcomingupontothatstage* across his face. I really cannot think of any more, who else, who else? ‘And many others.’ Do the joke, ‘Luckily for Mister Guthungu we will still help him put the chairs to the side after this ceremony,’ smiles but very few laughs. ‘He is one of the staff members who have made this journey of ours enjoyable as well as educational. Please share with me in thanking our amazing teachers.’ Applause, look for a quote while it lasts.

Here’s one, no time to waste, ‘Einstein once said, *Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler*. Which actually is what our teachers have been doing so well for us these last four years, enabling us all, most of us, to do well in our exams, and of course in life. So in that spirit I shall move on, I shall move on by, umm, looking back,

paradoxically, but then that quotation is paradoxical, so I suppose it is apt here, now, today on this important day.’ Oh God, don’t look up at Diri. Align book with edge of lectern so it’s parallel. Aligned Einstein. Oh dear. ‘I remember my first day here when brilliant linguist Amos Asuna, who can now speak five languages fluently, spent most of the day wandering the corridors as each class he entered was for the wrong subject,’ vague murmur of laughter, shifting of body positions. Don’t look up at all, just find another quote, ‘We were all similarly confused and, umm, silly back then,’ I look up, Diri’s eyes are huge, Amos looks like he wants to kill me, he holds up six fingers. ‘I felt lucky, lucky to be here at this prestigious school as it was very difficult to get into as a poor country boy,’ ah, don’t say *poor*, Mother will explode, ‘not so *poor* as such, just from a different world back then, just a little, not so little, expanding, umm, Kikuyu homestead,’ ah, ‘not that that makes a difference to enrolment, of course, anymore, I mean ever, with the help of forward thinkers like our honoured guest the Member of Parliament Mister, umm,’ Christ, whatshisname? ‘Umm,’ look to Diri, his mouth in an mmm shape, ‘Mmm... Mister... mmm... mmMichael Kibichii,’ lift hands and applaud toward him. The audience applauds again, politely. Kibichii does not look too happy. Mother is bristling, but clapping slowly. How much time to go? The clock is up to my right, above Principal Kipchumba’s head. I’ve done a minute, argh, four to go. Kipchumba is looking very stoic. I can’t believe I’ve accused the school of tribalism. It is tribalistic though. It is.

Applause is stopping; find quotation, ‘Einstein also said, *If I were not a physicist, I would probably be a musician. I often think in music. I live my dreams in music. I see my life in terms of music*, umm, and I feel the same, as a physicist on my way to university, despite my roots, as such, and we are all like different instruments in an orchestra, each with our own special sound, or talent if you will, and we need the diversity of sounds to make one, special, umm, sound, like a symphony. A symphony of success.’ Look up and smile. Look back down

again. 'A country, or symphony, a symphony that prioritises only one, or two, maybe several, instruments, over others, will not make a, umm, joyful sound. In any case we will be moving on from here on our separate trajectories, bound together forever by our shared experiences which now eclipse what came before, where we came from, and we can now go anywhere and do anything.' Slow it down Matu, breathe, 'But that is not to forget where we came from, we must carry that with us always and gain strength from it, remembering what our mothers and fathers told us on our way here. My mother told me, 'We will always be here for you', look up, she is plank still, 'and my, umm, father, well, he said, umm...' the only thing I can remember Father saying now is 'Which hand did Muga hit you with, right or left?' a shadow swaying by the door, years ago, and nothing since. 'His words to me were, 'Always remember where you came from', umm, so we can see how we move on from here, now, today. We move on separately, but always together in this spirit of, umm, family and learning. So, umm,' look up at rows of robed folk, black ties against white shirts like so many exclamation marks. Flicking through for another quotation, none are forthcoming as the shuffling and coughs become insufferable. I'll have to dredge one from memory, 'As Einstein put it, *Each ray of light moves in the coordinate system at rest with the definite, constant velocity  $V$  independent of whether this ray of light is emitted by a body at rest or a body in motion*, umm, and we can see the analogy here with our own bright futures. To break it down,' keep this going, 'for our purposes today, metaphorically, my point is that ultimately it does not matter what grades you have achieved, or whether you are going to go far, as such, you are still a ray of light, umm, so to speak, as worthy as any other of us who are deemed by society to be more *in motion*, as such, due to one's, our, grades, or indeed background.' Look up, smile. Blank faces and the sounds of people trying to fill the silence: coughs, position adjustment, sniffs. How to finish?

Diri starts to clap loudly, joined by Wilf, and then by everyone else, their relief evident in the volume of the applause. 'Thank you.' Back down the steps, onetwothree, sit down quickly, book on my lap.

Principal Kipchumba returns to the lectern, nods to me, 'Thank you Matu, a very positive and, as you say, *forward thinking* speech. Thank you.' I feel I have said something problematic. This time there is a different conversation in our exchange of glances, there is no agreement, no help. Then he looks to the audience again, 'We shall now proceed with the ceremony, each boy to collect his certificate as his name is called, then we shall remain seated for the closing speech by our honoured guest the right honourable Mister Kibichii.' I look behind at Diri and Wilf, the latter is smiling at me in that painful way usually accompanied by the words 'It will be alright', the former looks at me then places his head dramatically into his hands and pretends to sob, then raises his head and shakes Wilf by his tiny shoulders. I strain to see mother at the back. I fail. I wonder why the rest of my family aren't here, maybe they're outside for the party, it is full in here after all.

\*

I have circumnavigated the courtyard, it has never been so difficult. So many people, and it is so hot with this ridiculous garb on. Whoever invented heavy, black, velvet, academic robes did not live on the equator. Mother is nowhere to be seen. I shall quarter the yard now, looking left to right. An unsurprising lack of congratulations and well wishing from the faces who catch my eye. I shall make do with a couple of nods. Families sip glasses of juice together, hug, have photographs taken with little sisters raised high in their frilly dresses onto be-robed shoulders and giggle under big brother's mortar board, or squeeze faces together, or stand against a plain wall elevating chin and offering just the correct amount of profile for the



photograph that will stand in grandparent's houses. I have not yet had this photograph. I need Mother to take it. I need Mother to take me home, although, actually, I could perhaps stay at Diri's if she has disowned me; invite myself round a month early to Tusker our lives away.

A family group praising in a circle, clapping, dancing together, dominate the centre of the courtyard, through gaps in their swaying I catch sight of Mother's chequered dress. She's talking to people: Principal Kipchumba, Bursar Wellington, Diri's father, some others. I squeeze through sideways past a grandmother, I guess, who recognises me as she rotates and claps, 'Great speech', I thank her with a nod and smile, move on. Then realise she said it in Gikuyu. I glance back, she nods. I nod and move on.

Mother pulls me in close, arm around my waist, so much smaller than me and I've never noticed this before. 'Not a bad speech,' she says with a pinch, always the pinch, 'Not a great one,' and laughs loudly. The others laugh with her.

'I lost my speech, must have fallen from my pocket on the way between dorm and stage.'

'Not an easy thing to do, especially from memory eh?' says Kipchumba.

'Probably rough-housing with Diri, eh?' asks his father.

'Yes, maybe,' I say.

'It's good to see you, how are you doing?' he pauses, 'Otherwise?' they all laugh again.

'Apart from the nervous fatigue after that speech, I'm fine, very good thank you. How are you?'

'Great, we're all good. Looking forward to you coming to stay soon. We're very proud of you, well done.'

'You did well Matu, don't worry about your speech being not quite what you intended, you got your main points across,' says Kipchumba.

‘Yes don’t worry...’ says Mother, with a pause heavy with the force of her personality in this circle of men, utterly in control and primed to deliver the punchline for them, ‘Kibichii has gone to another engagement.’ They laugh again.

‘I didn’t insult him did I? I just can never remember his name, then I was scared of forgetting it, so I tried to avoid using it, then I shocked myself by accidentally putting myself in the position where I had to say it, then panicked, so couldn’t remember it, but then I managed to, so it was alright wasn’t it?’ I need to stop talking now.

Kipchumba smiles politely, ‘I didn’t really notice, it was only a slight pause. He did not mention it, just said we should all be proud of the good work we are doing here.’ He is smiling, but it is not with a warmth like that of Diri’s father, or of the other men, uncles and cousins I assume. We are all smiling in this conversation, all with this facial expression. It is interesting that all snakes look like snakes, whether dangerous or not.

Bursar Wellington speaks in that clipped Afrikaans way, zooming past the vowels to get to each consonant and emphasise it, ‘P’rhaps he gets confused by all the different *Kips* he could choose from now. I know I do,’ he laughs like a man who will make everyone laugh. They do, I do, Mother does, Diri’s family do. But we all do it in different ways. ‘Has your scholarship come through yet?’ he sails off on a different subject leaving any discomfort Kipchumba may feel in his wake, though the Principal’s face remains chiseled by the same slight smile.

‘No, not for a few months yet, Sir,’ I say.

‘Very proud, great achievement,’ he says, then turns to Mother, ‘You must be very proud of him, as we all are. He must get those brains from somewhere,’ laughter.

Mother has never been one for flattery. To flatter my mother one must accidentally do it: ‘Did you know *x* and all the girls are getting that hairstyle?’ (yes she did); ‘We came to you first to ask about *y* business matter’; ‘Wow! *Thriller*, how did you know I wanted this?’

If she sees insincerity, anywhere, ever, she will openly question it. Luckily it's an inherited reflex which I have managed to suppress.

'From books, Mister Wellington, from his many, many books, which we all have so generously shared in providing,' she says.

'Yes indeed, indeed. And he has done so well in his application to learning. He will be writing his own one day,' Bursar Wellington leans towards whomever he addresses, hinging stiffly just above the hip and with no neck movement. He leans towards me, 'He appears to have a plan.' He winks from his podgy face, a pink wink. I am supposedly in kahoots with him now in some way indecipherable to me. I think better of winking back.

'No, no plan as such Sir, just to continue my studies as best I can.'

'Excellent, that is all we can ask,' he says to approval from the others. I need a drink, where's Diri?

Kipchumba has been watching me, with that faint smile, a tip of a snake's tail, he has hardly looked around. I wonder if he's maybe a little drunk, I would be in his position. 'You know I did mathematics at university Matu?'

'Yes Sir.' It's a pity you never taught it then, instead of glad-handing and networking around Karen and Langata, 'I wish we could have had more of your lessons.'

'Ah, I'm too busy, that's the problem with teaching professions; the higher one goes the less teaching one does. With your talent you will be faced with a career choice, research or teaching, where do you think your affinities lie?'

Mother looks at me with genuine interest, I realise that she probably expects me to return to Nanyuki and teach in school, and always has done. I suppose that's my fault as she doesn't know quite how good I am. How could she? 'I would hope to be able to combine the two, but I love the idea of research and theoretical physics,' I say with an unplanned slight bow forwards as if Bursar Wellington's style is catching.

‘Perhaps America for a PhD: Harvard, Yale, MIT?’ Kipchumba says.

‘Oh, yes, well I would love to, but one...’

Mother interrupts, ‘Ati, how long is a PhD? Three years away from us? It’s been bad enough you being here,’ I’ve never heard this sentiment before from her, I’m shocked. Next thing you know she’ll be hugging me, ‘We’ve missed you; that bar doesn’t work itself.’ She pinches me hard on the arm, always the pinch. ‘But if you send enough money maybe I’ll forgive you. Ati, it’s about time you started paying us back for this place!’

Everyone laughs, and this is laughing *with* as opposed to laughing *because*. One of Diri’s uncles says, ‘Welcome to the real world,’ another, more quietly but I hear him, ‘Should take around ten years.’

Principal Kipchumba shifts his weight away from the conversation almost unnoticably, he reaches forwards to shake my hand. I wonder at how strong his handshake is for someone so slight, and at how much store the adult male world seems to place on this. Perhaps I shall rebel in my lifetime by always giving a weak handshake, perhaps it would wrong foot people. I expect it would not improve my standing in any way, so I attempt to squeeze back a little but instantly regret this as he seems to take it as a competition and strengthens his grip. All this in seconds as he bids farewell, ‘Thank you again Matu, and well done with the speech. This is not goodbye, as we will be seeing you again in due course. I only wish your sisters could have followed you here, perhaps there is still time.’ He releases his grip, ‘Good luck in your first year,’ and turns to the others, shakes everyone by the hand wishing them well and saying thank you. Bursar Wellington just raises his hand to wave at everyone, puts two thumbs up to me, and turns to follow the Principal through the throng.

Diri arrives as I’m wondering what Kipchumba meant by my sisters coming here, are girls going to be admitted? ‘I thought they’d never leave,’ he says, sips from a wine glass.

His father squeezes his shoulder, 'You boys are going to have a lot of fun when Matu comes to stay you know? I'm looking forward to it, to re-living my youth, going out drinking and dancing.' He starts up a little shuffle, careful not to spill his drink, grinning at us. We watch him, Diri with a look of horror, me with an indulgent smile, then we look at each other and crease up with laughter. His Father appears to take great delight in this and raises his efforts to get us all dancing. The other three men start clapping, the women dance a little too, laughing. Mother joins in and they all dance towards us, pointing at us, trying to spin us. They're more terrifying than the *Thriller* zombies and almost as nimble. I do the weird claws-up-left-claws-up-right move from the video at Diri, he puts his hand to his mouth to catch the spat juice and we can't do anything for laughing. His family pat us on our backs and shoulders as the dancing breaks down and we all laugh together, they offer congratulations to us both and I feel like my life's about to begin.

Mother's still dancing a little, swaying and clapping to the fourth beat. I feel like I could hug her now, so I don't because it would ruin this feeling as she'd say the contemporary equivalent of, 'Ati! Clothes cost money don't be getting those dirty hands all over them,' as when I was around twelve, so I say, 'Are you going to dance all the way back home Mother?'

And she says, 'Ukiacha unakufa,' looking at me with a shocking lack of the joy she was expressing a moment ago: *If you stop you die*, what is she hiding now? Then she smiles the warmest smile I think she has ever bestowed upon me, to the extent that she doesn't look like the woman I know, takes me by the arm into a strong embrace and I'm lost in the smell of her, of something expensive and floral along with the two ever-present scents I associate with her: wood smoke and beer. Intuitively I bend and press my cheek to the side of her head, closing my eyes to her soft hair, and she says, 'This is not going to be an enjoyable ride home; I've got something to tell you.' So the thought that has been nagging me all day, the

one below the speech fear, and sociability, and relief, rises like a drowned man - Wangiri and Wangari aren't here, Oscar isn't here, Aunt Mukondi isn't here, and it isn't because they're too busy or can't be bothered: it's because of Father, in some way or other. It always is.

### **Llangenith, Wales, 2016**

Karl, Ceri and Paul are already in, I can see them from here. Paul's way out back on his red and green longboard, 'stealing every seventh,' as he puts it, and he does with that long drawing stroke of his, popping up early with his hands behind his back like he's waiting for a bus. I know he feels tall then, enjoying the easy ride as the wave builds, so high above the prone surfers paddling back out. He can look up at the crescent beach and green cliffs before glancing down the line as the wave starts to peak behind him, an arc of white across the bay pushing him rightwards. He'll reach his right hand to touch the wave's face, making little gullies with his fingers, causing spray to rise and join the sea haze against the grey sky. He carves into the mercury, flattening the turn as he enters the trough and he skips forwards - left foot, right foot, left foot - to hang ten with his arms above his head and his back arched. Surfers making their way out, the old boys - Brancs, Carlo, and Davy whoop and punch the air in appreciation of his exceptional skill. He never goes for the big trick when the tube's on, just glides down it in perfect motion. Soul surfer, that's his way.

Ceri and Karl are learning top turns but loving the speeding thrill of cutting out of the bottom turn, back up the wave's face and kicking off the wall in a scream of legs, arms and board. I know it's Ceri because her wetsuit's arms are yellow and her blonde hair looks like spray. Me and Mam and Karl and their Mam and Dad clubbed together to buy her that suit for her eighteenth, and apart from a new guitar I can't imagine what she'd want more. She cried and hugged us all, then put it on, then spilt wine on it. She spent the whole party sweating in it and fuck did she look good, the yellow tubing accentuating the curves of her back, hips and butt and I swear this possibility only briefly crossed my mind when I chose it for her.

She's been a bit funny with me since the party but the last thing I remember is chatting to Karl. Paul's been ok with me so I couldn't have done anything too bad, like. No one's said anything so hey.

I steal Paul's keys from under the back wheel arch of his van and change in it, making sure to hide them again when I leave. I look around to check if anyone's watching and stuff them into the suspension spring. Then I pick up my board and run down the steps at the back of the bay to the beach.

There aren't many out, just us, the old boys, and some lads with English accents, probably students. I love it when it's like this; all dull and grey so the sky merges into the sea. Llangennith's never a great wave but it's always atmospheric. The Magi-tide forecast was for a strong cross-shore, but as usual it's wrong and it's a strong off", makes the foreshore looks like a forest fire, all blown spray with Ceri's arms like flames.

I duck three in a row and join Paul way out back. It's about four foot, five in the sets.

'Sh'mae?' he asks.

'Iawn boy. I locked your van up.'

'Good lad, da iawn,' he glances over his shoulder at an approaching lump, I feel very slow. 'Mine,' he says and he's away on his log and I still have no idea how he gets them that early. I see his head planing right just above the wave's shoulder before I'm blinded by a shower of off-shore spray.

I'm alone now. I can hear Ceri and Karl having a sibling moment shouting at each other for dropping in. They hog waves so much together it's nothing new. I see Davy, having given up trying to coach them, wandering back up the beach, wrapping his leash around his knife of a board as he goes. I see Paul carve out the back of his wave and effortlessly transfer the speed to paddling back out. I bob up and down salty clean and as mindless as a cricket on



a blade of grass. The student lads are nearby and one of them points at me, the other two laugh. What the fuck? What, black guys don't surf? Wankers.

Carlo and Brancs are paddling out towards me and I see Brancs look over at the students. They reach me and sit either side of me on their boards and we rock together on the flow. 'You alright out here on your own Kweli bach?' asks Brancs.

'Yeah, no, I'm fine,' I say.

'They botherin you?' asks Carlo.

'No, they're just admiring my style,' I say. I don't want them to think I need battles fought for me.

'Fuck off,' states Brancs calmly in their direction. They take the hint and paddle in. 'Didn't even bother standin' up did 'ey? Call 'emself surfers. Bloody Londoners.'

'How d'you know they're Londoners?' I ask him

'They're all bloody Londoners inney?' he says, 'They can fuck off back to London too. I blame the internet,' and Carlo nods like he actually knows what Brancs is on about.

Paul joins us, says nothing and catches a wave immediately.

'Good isn'e?' says Carlo, 'Come on.' They catch the next wave and surf it together. Brancs pushes Carlo over near the end of their ride. Bloody funny.

I see them wrapping their leashes around their boards on the beach and heading back up to the car park. I wish I had their time, working as carpenters and board designers and surf whenever they're free. Which appears to be often.

I see Paul's van moving up on the hill.

My face must register the horror of this sudden sight because Paul clocks it as he paddles towards me and flicks a look up behind him to see his van leaving the car park.

'Kweli you twat; my van!' and he's catching a wave in, a sphinx on his board.

‘I locked it,’ I shout. In my head it’s a mantra; I locked it I locked it I locked it I locked it. I pile off after him, catching the next wave straight in and we’re dropping our boards on the sand and sprinting for the steps. I hear Karl shouting from the mush and I point up at the car park as I run. I’m catching Paul on the steps, on the switchback I glance down to see Ceri and Karl full-tilt on the beach leaving a neat line of footprints to glisten in parallel. My feet hurt. I pass Carlo and Brancs shouting ‘Sorry boys’ and dig deep. ‘Where’s the fire?’ I hear Brancs ask. A couple of hundred more steps and I’m gasping for air with guttural rasps and I’m clear and on the flat, through the car park, bare feet flapping on tarmac like a demented Gollum. I’m onto the road and it’s gone, nowhere to be seen. So I’m bent down low crouched with one hand on the road for balance and the other wiping snot away when Paul reaches me.

‘D’you see it? Wherissit?’ he asks. I shake my head, cough hard and spit. I locked it, I locked his beautiful vee dub, hid the key in the spring. ‘Kweli you twat. They must’ve seen you hide the key. Did you see anyone?’ he’s really angry and I don’t blame him. So his family’s rich and bought it for him but he’s never taken it for granted and always shared it as much as possible. I spit again, ‘Dunno mate, I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.’ I hope it wasn’t them ‘Londoners’.

‘You’re really fuckin pushin it recently man, you really are.’ Why, what else have I done? I stand up and stretch and try not to catch his eye. I’ve never seen him like this, he’s never anything other than very cool.

Ceri and Karl reach us and she puts an arm around Paul’s waist and a hand on his chest. She’s saying ‘No way, no way.’

Karl looks at me, ‘You hid the key right?’

‘Yes I hid the key, in the spring as usual.’

‘Well come on, let’s get in yours and give chase!’ I can’t believe he’s being weird at a time like this but he’s right, we should get after them. We turn to run to my car and see Brancs and Carlo on their knees at the top of the steps absolutely catatonic with laughter, holding each other in a desperate effort to keep quiet. It’s all they can do to point at us. We look at each other, wet like seals and panting hard. In unison we say ‘Davy.’

‘Fuckin cunts!’ screams Paul, bending forward to really get it out there. The National Trust car park don’t look too happy about it, ‘You total fuckin cuntin bastards!’

‘Genius, proper genius,’ grins Karl and bows extravagantly at them.

Ceri jumps on them, forcing them the last few inches to the ground then pummels them joyfully, ‘Wondered why you were leavin early.’

They pick her up and Carlo spins her shoulder high and Brancs takes Paul’s head under one arm, Karl’s under the other and everyone’s laughing but I’m just smiling saying ‘Classic,’ and feeling like a spectator.

Davy arrives back, grinning like a skull behind Paul’s wheel, ‘Pasties!’ he shouts and we follow. God I love these old boys. We tuck in watching the corduroy sea stretch to Ireland.

‘Fuckin tossers,’ says Paul with a mouth full of crust.

‘Well we thought you kids needed the training,’ says Davy.

‘Are you packed?’ asks Karl.

‘Yup,’ says Ceri and Paul together.

‘I am, almost,’ I say, ‘just wondering about the boots.’

‘Mine are sorted,’ says Paul.

‘Can dogs smell through Clingfilm?’ I ask. If these boys don’t know the answer nobody will, and I ain’t Googling that question.

The old boys look at each other and take some thoughtful chews. Carlo speaks first, 'Best not to bother really. If the dogs smell it at Heathrow you're fucked. If they smell it in Nairobi, you're really fucked.'

'Safer buying it out there,' adds Brancs.

'Safer not bothering,' says Davy. The other two look like walruses in wetsuits with big black paunches and crazy facial hair; Brancs a groucho 'tache and Carlo a *Big Lebowski* beard, but Davy looks like a navy seal, hard as nails, sleek as a shark and nobody surfs better, not in Wales anyway. UK champ '97 to '99. We all look at each other, we know Davy's right, he's always right.

'How much is it out there?' I ask.

'Ow's yer mam doin'?' asks Carlo. Everyone stares ahead, grinning, knowing, trying not to laugh, waiting for me to retaliate.

I'm not in the mood.

**Nairobi, Kenya, 1991**

‘You spoke to him? You yourself?’

‘He was on the phone in Karanja’s office; we could all hear.’

‘You could hear his voice on the phone?’

‘We could hear Karanja.’

‘So what did not-you say to not-him?’

He swigs, ‘Ati, understand, we did not want to undermine Karanja, we were all silently gesticulating at him. But I passed him a note.’

‘And what did this historic document say? ‘Please Mister President do not interfere with democracy,’ or ‘Nenda kajitombe,’ what?’

‘Well, there was very little time so I wrote ‘No’.’

‘You kept it simple; just a ‘no’ to everything Nyayo asks.’

‘Yes, that was my general aim.’

‘Fewer letters than ‘Fuck off’; quicker to write.’

‘And less chance of misinterpretation.’

‘I would have thought Karanja is a pretty experienced journalist, not prone to misinterpreting simple notes.’

‘The simpler the better. So I did, in a way, speak with the President today.’ His face resumes its haughtiness, after my incisive questioning. It’s his natural resting look: the high cheekbones, sharp nose, and princely height, towering over me on these stools. The surroundings throw his regality into relief somewhat. A bar Maitū would hate: four drinks to choose from, two of them illegal; television playing Notts Landing; nyama choma and the

chips mayai are more grease than either nyama or chips, even the makai drips what I think is fat but I'm hungry and it's cheap and we need fuel for this night.

'Was it actually Moi on the phone? I mean hasn't he got anything better to be doing than phoning you?' And I know this is fun to be taking Diri to the cleaners, and he knows it too, playing along, but I must be careful not to take it too far. He has this way, remember, of suddenly getting insulted, as if he chooses at which point to switch off the fun and take everything personally. We're only a few drinks into the evening so I should be ok for an hour or so.

'It was definitely his office, and he may well have been in it.'

'His 'office' doesn't connote his physical, actual place of work you know? Ati, it's the power of his position, the instrument of his...' Diri clinks his bottle hard against mine. His is nearly empty, I've just opened mine. Oh-oh. I stop talking and wrap my mouth around the rim to stop the spill, just waiting for the fizz into the nasal passages, into the sinuses, and I could have just allowed it to bubble over but I'm doing this for the fun of it too. Tusker spurts out of my nose like golden snot, even though I manage to swallow most of it, painfully. This is not improving our chances of meeting women. Luckily it's so loud and busy in here that nobody noticed. 'I'll get you back soon, but you won't know when. And I reserve the right for it not necessarily being today.' He's laughing so much that I'm not sure he heard. On the tv people stare at each other from beneath impossible hair, juxtaposed surreally with the twangy benga drowning out their infidelities, or whatever they are arguing about. No sign yet of Diri's comrades/colleagues, but he wouldn't have invited them to this place, our local, the easy first stop away from our depressing second thingira in his family's suffocatingly caring house.

'No, but seriously man, seriously, we're scaring these KANU washenzi, there's always someone calling to tell us to go lightly on this politician or that, or to run a story on a

murder of some unknown somewhere as if it's big news, just to reduce the time available for the real political stuff. We've only been live seven months!'

'What did they want blocked this time then?' I manage as my eyes water.

'They wanted us to put a political twist on the plague outbreak. Ati, you're in charge but somehow it is the other guys' fault that virulent microbes attack people.'

'Headline; Multiparty causes illness. Or, let me guess; Foreign bacteria attack innocent, patriotic Kenyans.'

'The line they wanted was that efficiency of single party would speed up vaccinations to the infected.'

'Weak, so weak.'

'Pathetic. Give us the truth and maybe we'd vote for you next time. Si, that's what I should have put on the note!'

'So the atmosphere's good at work? Everyone pulling together kinda thing?'

'We are the revolution; the revolution will be televised after all, the revolution *is* the televised!' He shakes a bony fist into the air and drinks simultaneously, 'We know we're right when they show they're scared. And they could never shut us down now, that would be too blatant, there'd be riots.'

'It's great programming; it's cool. I mean look at the competition,' I nod to the tv behind him, he glances up.

'Sawa, sawa, and just wait, we've got some great CNN stuff lined up,' he says.

Which is all I need. I'm already glued to KTN. I can feel myself being Americanised via a process of osmosis: absorbing the language, the styles, the humour, the rhythms, the sugary sweetness and sex of it. Even the violence. But the screen is only one-way; I watch the Gulf war like a football match, or rather a baseball game, with its statistics and repeats, insulated from those towering plumes and the hell of it. If they reversed the gaze I would be

billed as The Procrastinator: he sees all and knows all, but he does nothing. I should be backing up hunches with calculations because lasers will not emit simultaneously at separated wavelengths by spacing the thickness of the semiconductor layers if I can't show that said atomic layers could be created variously by some sort of crystal growth, and I should not be getting vague on that last point because Professor Ochieng certainly won't be. In three months' time. But I love music videos. I swig my now slightly flat beer. 'Any news on you getting on The News?'

'Naa, they don't want a shifta face on there, reporting from all over. I'll stay behind the scenes, I think ultimately that's where I'm best.'

'Well you should play to your strengths. You should be off to report on Barre's fate, or maybe down to Mandela. Of course you'll always have the excuse to say you don't get on tv because of *how* you look rather than how good you *don't* look.'

He grabs the table with both hands and leans far back, looking up to the ceiling and making a wooh sound, then he pulls himself back in and is smiling, 'Matu, Matu, Matu, help me! But at least I won't be standing in a sewer talking about the plague, eh, eh?'

'That's right, we have to look on the bright side.' I think better of saying that it's only the women who have to worry about looks. Speaking of which, where are they? 'Si, where are these colleagues of yours? I'm going to be drunk and making a fool of myself by the time they arrive.'

'These are people of education and elegance, so obviously,' he looks around the room, 'I would not invite them here.'

He continues to describe them, something about legs, but the barman flicks the channel to KTN and suddenly I'm captivated, captured, by the most beautiful human being I have ever seen, on the tv behind Diri's skinny head: a full-screen face of intense, chiseled beauty, like a sculpture alive and crying. A woman who looks like a boy, in pain and singing



her heart out, all angles and green eyes, with cropped hair adding to her vulnerability and strangeness. But she must be strong to stare out at the world like that; defiant. I can't hear the song but for some intense notes. I must watch Diri's brilliant channel for a repeat of this video. 'Anyway, you're right, let's go,' he says, 'no rest for the wicked.' Me though, I'm in love with this image burned into my head. I want to rescue her.

I don't know if I could ever get used to the city's movement, it's like one giant matatu, bursting with folk and fumes, jostling for position on the congested road. Towards what? Somewhere in the direction that everyone on board needs; not this way, that way; never late or early but rushing, rushing forward and costing different amounts for different people. Colour and noise: we're painted a giant rabbit, a hip-hop loving bunny, bouncing our way from Easty along Murang'a road to the accompaniment of the makanga's whistles and bangs, which I have long ago stopped trying to decipher. We cross the bridge, then into Tom M'boya street as the evening slews into night. I'm thrown by short cuts to avoid some commotion, but Diri says 'Yes, good', I'm not sure whether he meant 'good' to avoid the crash or that it is the right way.

Then I copy Diri in a sudden surge from our hard-won spot out into the cool leaded air. The venal 'Nissan', that's actually a Toyota, but I guess that makes as much sense as the big '14' by the door and thirty plus people on board, bounds into the night, its white tail still visible as we follow on foot. The lights from dukas, traffic, and street lamps seem to throw and bend shapes such that people appear and disappear around me. Some eyes are met, others avoided, but they all seem to be equally as distrustful and guarded as I am. Of course we are two tall men walking quickly, one a Somali, so maybe we have an air of threat about us, and I wonder if this is a good thing; if we seemed more friendly wouldn't we inspire the same in

return? Although I think Dirí's plan of walking with purpose, like we own the place, is a good one.

Dirí pulls some stick and gum out of his pocket and we chew the bitter roots as we pace along. I don't know if it's the shadows of the half-light at this time of day, or the quat buzz, but the city seems closer, more tangible, and gravid somehow. I touch the wall as we zoom along. Then suddenly we're into a bright double doorway, down some stairs and through to a bar in a large hotel. I instantly feel under-dressed, as I also realise that Dirí has planned this in his smart black shirt.

We sit in green leather chairs and Dirí orders cocktails, mine is greenish with a straw, Dirí's has an umbrella and a cherry on a stick. 'To the future,' he says and I echo him. I look around for a screen but this place is too classy for televisions, although they're playing the radio and Janet Jackson can just about be heard. I'm looking for the face in my head again. Why has she engraved herself so on my retina? It's because I feel I know her; she reminds me of someone, though I only know two white women and neither look like her. Perhaps the fala are correct and her green eyes have cast some sort of spell. Or it could simply be the quat.

Four women enter the bar and I can't take my eyes off the woman on the left, who seems to slink to the side as the others greet Dirí and me, and she senses something too because her face is as shy as mine as we greet. She's wearing a green and black necklace and Maitū favours a green and black headscarf, so I think of my mother and wonder why I'm thinking of her instead of something witty to say to these beautiful women. She has an SLR camera around her neck, which is incongruous, and she raises it to her eye and takes my photograph and I have a cascade of self-awareness, at least I hope it's self-awareness not just enhanced drunkenness: I marvel at my stillness here, sat beneath the city as time and humanity swirl around above. All those tales, all those thoughts, each one the equal of me, yet for this moment I get to sense the synchronicity at work: my here and now, my truth, Maa

itū, Maitū, and my name Matu, and the Matatu city, and all this green, and the video eyes, and thank god I'm a mother's boy considering the alternative, and my god I need to escape and grow. I missed the beautiful woman's name so I say 'Sorry', and she says her name is Njoki. Me and Diri, we're going to do big things. In this moment I know this and I'm forming a thought about quanta of spacetime and gravity, but then I enjoy the company of these future folk, these revolutionaries: the look of pride and understanding that Diri keeps flashing me and the little tips of our drinks to each other as the cats that got the cream, but all this, all this revolves and dims around Njoki's face as we drink rivers of cocktails and talk like water.

Swansea, Wales, June 24<sup>th</sup> , 2016

She doesn't hear as usual. I try again, 'Mam, where's my boots?' We always have these conversations, shouting between rooms, even between floors. I told her my GCSE grades from about thirty meters away. I try again, loud enough for next door to hear.

'I've packed them,' she shouts from the kitchen. I know she's in the kitchen cos she's making loads of metallic banging noises and I can smell meat frying.

'Where?'

'In your *blue* bag!'

'Mam, they're both bloody blue!'

This is ridiculous. I put the tee-shirts I've been trying to decide on into the definitely-maybe pile and stomp downstairs. Hash-tag windherup.

'Which blue bag, the main one obviously?' I ask.

'Yes, of course, they're too big for your hand luggage aren't they?'

'Mam, I told you; I'm wearing them to save weight.'

'Well, just dig them out then.' She knows she's in the wrong and smiles at me with her head cocked to one side like she always does when she's trying to deflate a situation. She looks special when she does it, not in a good way. She thinks she looks cute and quirky. But it's annoying how she can still run almost as quick as me, like the last surf-to-towels race at Llangennith I only just won. She's still as fit as me. Wish my mates didn't think so. Ugh, focus.

I'm looking down on her, she's doing her eyebrow wriggle trying to make me laugh like when I was a kid. Why's she think it'll still work now? I'm a whole foot taller than she

is. 'Right, so I'll unpack the whole bag and re-pack it like I was gunna do in the first place,' I say.

'Right you are then boy, gerron with it, tea's ready in twenty minutes.'

'Bloody hell.' Back upstairs. Stomp, stomp, stomp.

We used to live in a bungalow (Indians have the best words: pyjama, chappati, punani, it all sounds so cool, music's interesting too; love the tabla), but since Mam's promotion we've been able to afford stairs. All the extra doors and space makes having to live with her a lot more bearable.

I up-end my rucksack and shake it about until its contents lie across my floor and I can see them clearly, so can finally start making some decisions. Decisions, decisions. The guidebook's dead helpful but I dunno why I went and bought it, all I've looked at so far is the temperature in Mombasa in August, and what did I expect? It says it's hot, funnily enough. It's all online anyway. Nice though, in the shop, all the colourful books arranged in alphabetical order of country, makes it look so easy. Oh, I'll have one Canada, one Kenya and two New Zealands please. Lovely. Whole countries crammed into a bunch of statistics and hints. So relaxing, with the smell of the coffee shop and no stress about revising now. And no more essays, no more spellcheck and footnotes, fuckin hate footnotes. It's all done, dice rolled. Guildford music tech, here I come. Chances of A, B, B are slim though. Clearing, here I come. Don't have to worry until results day. Sixteenth of August; two months away. I've got bigger fish to fry before that...

## Kweli's big packing list<sup>1</sup>

### Defo

Sleeping Bag

Karrimat<sup>3</sup>

Sleeping liner

Flip Flops

Travel Towel

Phone & Charger<sup>5</sup>

Shades

Floppy Hat

Warm Hat<sup>7</sup>

Tee-shirts x 3

Boxers & socks x 3

Wash kit etc.

Inhaler x 2

Malarone<sup>9</sup>

Passport

### Defo-Maybe

2 x More boxers&socks

Travel soap

2 x More Tee-Shirts

Sun Cream

Trainers

6' Knife

Camera

Eighth/ tenth in boots<sup>6</sup>

Guitar<sup>8</sup>

Jacket

### No!!

Letter from Mam<sup>2</sup>

Wetsuit<sup>4</sup>

Waterproofs

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<sup>1</sup> Still can't believe she made me write a list. I hate my name. Just cos my Dad is Kenyan she thinks she can give me any Swahili word for a name. Means 'Truth'. She's such a fuckin hippy, it's so embarrassing.

<sup>2</sup> 'What's this?'

'Letter for you, from me, just in case. Only open it if you have to.'

'How do I know if I have to?'

'Well, if you think you do then you do.'

Like I say; such a bloody hippy. I might open it on the plane. Fuck it, I might even open it now.

<sup>3</sup> If we have to sleep on the ground, I for one want protection from bugs. They're not your basic creepy crawlies out there, like.

<sup>4</sup> No need for a wettie in the Indian Ocean is there? Shit, must add board shorts to the list. I've never surfed in anything that isn't five-mill neoprene.

<sup>5</sup> Karl says we leave phones at home, for the full-on experience, like. I'll tell him I did

<sup>6</sup> Is it worth spending ages cutting a little hole in the insole of boots to put a blim of hash in? Might be safer smuggling a bit out than trying to buy it over there. How dodgy would that be? THE big question of the moment is can dogs smell through Clingfilm?

<sup>7</sup> How cold can it get though, but? It's bloody Africa.

<sup>8</sup> It's the reason Paul's going, so I suppose I'd better try to join in.

<sup>9</sup> Anti-malarial. Can still catch it even if you're on it. Probably won't bother to be honest.

God, I can't concentrate with her banging and crashing about like this. What's the matter with her? She's doing it on purpose cos she's still pissed off at me for the dad thing. What'd she expect? I've always said, come eighteen I'm off to find him. Worevver she thinks don't matter. Though she's pissed off already, like really pissed off, about the Brexit result. What difference will it make? They're all twats anyway. Never seen her so moody.

'It's ready!' she shouts.

I stomp downstairs again. Useful, stairs; handy. She's sat watching *The X-Factor*. If she says one more time that we should go on that shit I swear I'll shove these sausages in her ears and eyes. Probably be more enjoyable for her than watching that freak show. If Paul's right about that label meeting in Cardiff imagine what chance we'd have if they recognise us from *X-Factor*; fuckin kiss of death.

'How many acts can you name from that show?' I ask her.

'Leona Lewis, Alexandra Burke, that bloke in a hat.'

'Not a bad name for a band, Mam. Quite like it actually.'

'Well, I came up with your current one didn't I?

'Undertow? No. It's from Levellers lyrics if you're Paul, Warpaint lyrics if you're Karl, and a graphic novel if you're Ceri. She says she wants to be the heroine in it, supposedly she looks like her. I told you this when we changed it. You never listen.'

'How did you choose it then, where's it from for you?' I know what she's getting at. She's mentioned the name of the bar they all used to hang out in at university a number of times in her stories. She hasn't got any other stories to tell. I'll not give her the satisfaction though.

'It sounds like The Undertones, innit?' I say.

‘Don’t say *innit*, makes you sound like a chav.’ She never gets sarcasm. She leans across the tray on her lap and picks up the remote. ‘What d’you want on?’ she asks.

‘I have a say now do I?’ this will lead to a fight, I know, but I just can’t help myself. Silly innit?

She looks at the guide, top right button with a little white circle on it. Blue pages of crap scroll up and down as she pretends to search. Voices behind the screen spew poisonous guff over some deluded melt, *I think you have a future in this industry, I’m honoured to have been here at the start, so it’s a big Yes from me...* Mam turns it off. The room is still now, and less colourful without the telly reflecting off the magnolia. I always find it amazing how quiet our cul-de-sac is, how these big new houses just swallow sound. Must be the modern insulation.

‘Okay. Okay, say you find him, somehow, whatever. What d’you say?’

‘Put it back on, I was watching that, that girl’s got a bright future.’

‘She sounded just like all the other orange people. What will you say?’

‘Dunno. “Hi Dad?”’

‘And what will he say to that, in your head?’

‘I dunno Mam, cos you’ve never told me any fuckin thing about him, “Say, you’ve got my eyes, where did you get them from?” You never even let me see the pictures that weird Dan took. Did you ever even get them off him?’

‘You have got his eyes and don’t fuckin swear.’ She’s quiet for a moment. ‘No, never asked for them in the end, I thought it’d be... difficult for you.’

If I look out the window she’ll hate me not looking at her. Across the street the tree tops are moving in the wind. On-shore. No great loss not being out on a day like this; no need, yesterday was pretty good fun, and tiring. One of those sunsets is happening where the sun pokes out for a minute as it gets below the clouds. Our house is lit up orange in the



windows of the houses opposite, and the back wall of our living-room has a sharp window shaped shadow complete with cactus silhouettes. For all Mam's weirdness our house looks exactly like the rest of them here. Mind you, you've got to be particularly strange to make your house stand out. If I hold my fork up I can see its shadow on the wall. Wonder if I can make a sausage look like a knob to wind her up. I'm not sure if it would have been *difficult* as a kid to know what he looks like. It's all *difficult*, one more *difficult* thing wouldn't make it more *difficult*. It doesn't add up, bit by bit, it's already there, like; it's a constant.

'What makes you think you can find him? He may be anywhere in the world, just cos he's from Kenya doesn't mean he's gunna be there. As you get older,' she starts, she's gunna go on about how two people can fall in love instantly, or can realise later that they were in love, or whatever bullshit explanation she's made up in the past for my conception not being a total doped-up mistake.

'As I get older I realise just how easy it is to get pissed and shag on a beach.'

'Kwel. I've told you, there was a connection, a special connection, honestly Kwel. Honestly. I was pissed, but it was beautiful,' she's said all this before. I'm not that bothered if they were in love or not, maybe that's more a girl's thing, why she keeps banging on about it.

'Why'd you not find him then?'

'I looked around for him, even hung around the Physics blocks, but I never saw him again. He just disappeared. No mobiles back then you know.' God she's so pathetic. If he'd stuck around perhaps she wouldn't be so crap. She's never managed to hold on to a guy since. I don't think Dougie counts, they weren't an item like, more he was dossing here for a few years. Calling him *Uncle Dougs* says a lot about that relationship. God, he'll probably be here for Christmas again along with *Auntie Sarah* and her annoying spawn. Hopefully I can sit and get pissed with Taid again, that was a laugh. There is Davy, but she was at primary school with him, and he's way too cool for her, totally out of her league. Perhaps I should ask

her about it. Naa, bit weird – “Mam, how’s your love life?” Also it’d be strange to be out surfing when he’s there and think he’s with Mam. If she is shaggin – eww – anyone then she’s doing it when I’m out, which is often, to be fair. Rather not know anyway.

Telly’s back on, discussion over. *I honestly think you’re what this country needs. You’re a real breath of fresh air. Is your Gran backstage? Go on, bring her on, yes, bring her on!*

‘Mam, why are we watching this? It was shit and out of date when it was live. Is there really nothing else on?’

She knows she can’t stop me going. She totally thinks I’ll not find him. The way I figure it is if there’s forty-three million people and two of them have a connection then they’re bound to meet up, the way that cars on Gower lanes always meet just where the cyclist is.

Why’s she stopped chatting? Is this her tactic now; ask harsh questions then pretend everything’s normal? Well two can play at that game. She starts channel surfing. So annoying, flicking from one to the next to see what’s on, rather than checking the guide.

Brexit - cookery - property - cookery - chavs giving birth - Brexit - cookery. She stops on BBC Two.

*...phants are the only other animal known to mourn their dead. The matriarch leads the way, exploring the skull with her trunk. Others follow, with what can only be described as...*

‘See, that’s Africa,’ she points out.

‘Duh.’

‘Hot innit?’

‘Yes Mam, hot. Are you just trying to avoid anything on Brexit?’

‘Will you go on a safari? You could spare some money for that couldn’t you? I might even put something towards it if you’re short. Shame to go all that way and not see elephants.’ Do I say yes and take the extra cash and say we couldn’t organise it for some reason? Am I that person?

‘We’re going surfing, in the sea, not the desert.’

‘That’s not a desert, it’s the Serengeti plains. I saw a documentary once with elephants paddling in the sea.’

‘Well, we may see sharks.’

‘Kweli.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t make me more worried. Google shark bite images, then joke.’

‘We won’t see sharks Mam, we’ll be making too much noise.’

‘What makes you think bad things won’t happen?’ She waves a fork at me. I do think bad things can happen, what makes her so sure of herself? She’s never been to Africa.

‘Bad things can happen here too. Remember when Paul broke his leg?’

‘Yes, I do, and remember who pulled him out? And I won’t be there in Kenya if he, or you, breaks a leg because, apparently, I’m not cool enough to be invited.’ It was cool when she rescued him.

‘We were twelve Mam. He’s not gunna be stupid enough to surf into the rocks now is he? He’s freaking good now. You only do that once. And no, you’re not coming.’

‘Is it cos I’ll embarrass you in front of Ceri?’ She thinks she knows stuff, she just doesn’t get it.

‘Paul and Ceri are solid Mam, and I don’t have that sort of thing with her, we’re just mates. You can be mates with the opposite sex you know?’

‘She’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen and you’re saying you don’t notice?’ Of course I notice, but it’s not like that.

‘We’re a band, and a crew, it’d be a terrible idea. Why you trying to stir it up with me and her anyway?’

‘Just don’t want to see you miss an opportunity, that’s all.’ What the fuck’s it got to do with her? Fuck’s sake! Just cos she’s desperate, eww, and single doesn’t mean I am.

‘I’m not gunna get an opportunity, and if I did, not that I ever could, I would never do anything! Stop projecting.’ I don’t lecture her on her love life.

‘Of course you could, if you wanted. You could get any girl, if you wanted. You eating that last sausage or can I have it?’ she says, doing her ignoring thing. She leans herself over, hooking her right toe under the bookcase, steadying her tray with her right hand, extending a fork with her left, almost to my plate. Oh no you don’t. I eat it quick, stuff it in in one go. She laughs. Can’t speak; too busy chewing, so I open my mouth at her. She wrinkles her nose and points the remote at the telly. She’ll always deflect by goofing around and pretending to be happy; such a wind up.

Her phone bleeps, it’s been doing it all day. She and her mates are all over Facebook with Brexit rants. Note to self; un-friend Mam on Facebook. Insta’s where it’s at anyways, and Snapchat; keep her ignorant of those. ‘Jesus,’ she says to her phone, ‘can’t believe it. Sarah says she’s just found out her parents both voted Leave. Can you believe that? I’ve always thought they were sound when I’ve met them. I tell you, if Mam and Dad voted Leave I’m gunna hit the roof. D’you think they did? Oh God this is shit.’

Bit of an over-reaction. ‘Dunno Mam, probably. Taid’s always saying “Buy British” and stuff.’

‘Christ, you think? Naa, he’s too clever; why would anyone sane vote to leave? It’s insane, that’s what it is.’

‘Yeah.’ Why’s she freaking out so much? I mean it’s not like anything ever changes anyway.

‘You don’t seem too bothered? It’s your generation I worry for, you’re the ones who’ll miss out on everything we could do you know?’

‘Like what?’

‘Like free movement, and good exchange rates, plenty of jobs, education grants, loads of stuff.’

‘Plenty of jobs? Jokes Mam, jokes.’ This will wind her up, ‘There’ll be more available now we’re banning all the immigrants.’ Smiley face.

‘Kwel, don’t joke, it’s not funny. There’s already been attacks on people today in the street. One Asian family had their shed burnt down!’

‘Same shit different day Mam.’

‘Kweli. What if they burnt our shed down?’

‘I wouldn’t have to mow the lawn.’ I do manage to escape doing that most of the time to be fair.

‘You’re taking this very lightly you know. It’s your generation that’ll suffer.’ Then she eats her food for a bit, occasionally scrolling her phone. She stops and looks at me, chewing.

‘What?’ I say.

She swallows and says, ‘You voted didn’t you? You and all your friends?’

This could go very wrong, ‘Yes, of course. Dunno about the others.’

‘Remain yeah?’

Jesus. Yes of course I *would* have voted remain *if* I wasn’t surfing all day then could have been arsed to walk to the... voting place. That Farage looks like a right twat. Why’s it not online? ‘Mam! What do you take me for?’

‘It’s the apathy of the younger generation that’s the problem, if they all voted we wouldn’t be in this mess! Did you know Hitler got voted in with twelve percent of the vote? That’s what Jen just put. It could happen again you know?’

‘They’re not quite that far right Mam.’

‘Not yet, but we’ve just given them free rein to head that way. Well, *we* haven’t like, but... ah! I want *my* country back! Bastards!’

She really is taking this badly, ‘Don’t worry Mam, it’ll all blow over. There’ll be another vote and it’ll be fine.’

‘I don’t think there can be Kwel, not without riots.’ She looks back to her phone.

I check mine. Message from Ceri:



I off to live in Scotland  
u coming?

Do they do music tech?

nerd

nothing will change

dunno  
dont like it  
doesnt feel right

feels far right

zactly  
u okay?

yeah why?

u know all the racial attacks n stuff

theve not found me yet

sorry htt if u need

okay

love u

u too

Jeez. I watch the tv.

*...to dispel the myth that they get drunk on the marula fruit, despite appearances to the contrary. So, if not intoxication, then what...*

*...gun crime in South Africa. Even so the regulation of private taxis in Johannesburg will be a major focus of any campaign...*

‘All about Africa today. I would love to go sometime. You be careful out there though eh?’ She places her tray down to the side of her armchair.

‘Don’t need to be careful, we’ve got Paul.’ He is a bit of a loose cannon though, to be fair.

‘You’ve also got a stunning blonde attracting attention.’

‘Thousands of tourists go there every year with no problems, stop being so negative.’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full. I’ve hoovered this carpet. And Paul is a...’ she thinks for a second, ‘difficult kid. Dunno about you going to find your father, he’s never had a father, or a mother for that matter, and he’s grown up with them. All he needs is a cuddle.’

‘I can’t imagine him cuddling anyone.’ I can’t. He hugs me sometimes when he’s pissed. He might cuddle Ceri in bed, afterwards like. I wonder if he’s gentle with her. All that pent-up aggression. Maybe that’s why they’re close, maybe she gets off on him needing her. Maybe she likes it hard. ‘He gets on alright with his mam.’

‘She’s a funny fish. Always smiling. Never trust anyone who’s always smiling. Stepford Wife. You know *Stepford Wives*?’

‘Like *Housewives of Orange County*? Plastic?’

‘Yeah, that’s it clever Kweli; *plastic*.’

‘Plastic.’

‘If they’re plastic, what would I be then?’ Now you’re asking.

‘Fibreglass.’

She looks at me for a moment, joining her hands and tapping her index fingers together so they look like that church in that children’s song, ‘So I’m brittle and poisonous?’

‘Pretty much,’ I say, smiling to take the edge off a little, ‘I meant you’re fast like a glass board,’ I did, honestly. I prefer this version of Mam, maybe I’ve cheered her up with the whole ‘this will blow over’ thing.

‘Oh, that’s good. Thank you.’ She places her elbows on the arm of her chair and her chin into her hands, then extravagantly crosses her legs, looking at me. ‘You; now you are, hmm.’

‘Steel?’

‘Nooo, no, no. Hmm.’

‘Oak?’

‘Lycra,’ she slaps the armchair.

‘Eh?’ Eh?

‘You’re also fast, versatile, very modern. And you’re cool.’

‘Dunno about the lycra, makes me sound like a creep. Or a cyclist.’

She picks up her tray from the floor and stands to collect mine. She starts to sing, ‘\*\*\*\*\*’ then she must realise what the next line is and stops herself. ‘Good song that,’ she says, ‘not their best though. I did tell you I saw them in Barrowlands when *The Bends* came out?’

‘Yes. You have mentioned that, now and again, like.’ I would kill to see that now. She’s all embarrassed clanking around in the kitchen, trying to cover it up by continuing to hum it, awfully, as if she hasn’t just walked into a trap of her own making. I follow her and see her scrubbing away as I lean in the doorway. I finish the song for her, ‘\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*,’



‘You do Kweli, you do,’ she scrubs away, glances at me twice. ‘Christ, I knew this vote would upset you, it’s the first thing I thought of this morning when I saw the result.’

‘So why didn’t you sing it?’ The vote hasn’t upset me, haven’t even noticed. You’ve upset me. You’ve fucked me off cos I realise now that you see me as different otherwise you’d have sang the line. It’d be easier if you’d just sang the line, cos then I’d know that you fuckin believed I fit in cos you hadn’t noticed the implication.

‘It didn’t work, that’s all. Just would sound a little, you know, insulting?’

‘Yes it is a little *insulting*. Would I belong better in Kenya? I’d be a plastic African out there. Plastic Cymro here.’ Can’t win.

‘Is this why you want to find him? You belong here you know, if you want to, with me and your band and all your mates and Nain and Taid, we all love you.’ She carries mugs from the drainer to the cupboard but they’re still dripping wet, then realises and puts them down on the side, then opens a cupboard and looks into it, leaves it open, then goes back to washing up. ‘Half the country may be racist, but we are most definitely not.’ She tilts her head and looks defiantly into the sink. Has she only just noticed this now? Seriously? Now, because of this vote? What about looking around you, what about noticing faces and body language and positioning when you’re out with me? I suppose she suppresses it because she can.

‘Yeah. But<sup>10</sup> ... Yeah.’ What can I say? ‘It’s not that Mam, I just feel the need to find

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<sup>10</sup> Nain: “It’s a good thing you can’t blush”.

Taid: “He can blush, they do blush you know”.

Sarah Richardson, year nine: “Fuck off home”.

Sarah Richardson’s friends: “Hahaha”.

Karl: “You get less time to hide, I’ll only count to fifteen, make it fairer”.

Police: “And where are you heading to at this time of night? Driving licence please?”

Mam: “Why did they pull you over, what were you doing wrong? Don’t bludi speed Kwel, it’s dangerous!”

Mr Bell, PSHE lesson, year ten: “I wonder if we could ask you for some insight into diversity Kweli, from your perspective?”

Every-fucking-one: “Can I touch your hair? I love your hair; is it springy? Can I touch your hair?”

him sooner rather than later, before I become more, dunno, like, fixed?’

She’s drying her hands on the towel and moves closer to stroke my arm, ‘You can be whatever you want to be.’

‘I’m worried about whoever and wherever right now Mam.’ She looks a little wet eyed, not quite tearful, kind of vulnerable.

‘Well, yes, you go Kwel. Do what you need to do. But I don’t want you randomly wandering round a huge country you know nothing about.’

‘It’s alright Mam, if I can’t find him, or someone who knows him, then I won’t bother. If you could recall his surname and get his photo off weird Dan that would be a great help too.’

‘I really don’t think he ever said it, sorry boy. Wanna panad?’

‘Yeah, tea’d be good ta.’

Not hard to find the bastard when you’ve got three variables to narrow down – Physicist, Matu, Lasers – they triangulate, make a point, and that point is Pwani University, Kilifi, Kenya. C.V. on there clearly stating his Doctorate from St. Andrew’s Uni, ’92 to ’96. Unfortunately, no picture on it like some of his colleagues. Better not to call or email first, I’ll just turn up. Will he leg-it if he finds out about me? Yeah, probably. I would. Will I have a go at him for leaving? Yeah, definitely. After that, I’ll just see how it goes.

### Croydon, England, 1996

This looks like a setting from one of those awful British comedies we used to get; a red-bricked suburbia. There are regimented lawns in front of every house. I assume it was a prosperous and aspirational area before the war, but now it seems run-down. This may be attributed to the fact that a large section of the original street is missing, replaced by my destination; a prefabricated, grey panelled, five storied business hub. In truth it is much like many Nairobi buildings and is in a better state of repair, but here, in contrast to the houses' domestic tone, it is gratingly vulgar. I don't know why I was expecting a military building; thinking about it, a sub-contractor would operate out of this sort of place to cut costs.

A square vestibule houses a receptionist. 'Matu Kagai, here to see Mr Winkworth, Aeronautical Futures.' The plastic sign behind her informs me there are seven other businesses here. One also deals in futures, four purport to offer solutions to things.

I'm wondering if Cleaning Solutions is a service or a manufacturer when she says, 'Top floor, turn left. They are expecting you,' and she nods her head towards the lift. In I go. No music, thank God, but there is a mirror. I straighten my tie as I feel heavier, stare at myself without blinking. Is there anything in my eyes that has changed, anything someone would notice for example? No, of course not. The walls begin to bend behind me. I blink, wipe a tear with my knuckle, it would not look good to arrive looking teary. I feel lighter and the doors open.

One step left and a man in a dark blue suit minus jacket extends a stripy arm, 'Matthew, may I call you Matthew? Good to meet you. Tea, Coffee?' He powerfully shakes my hand, doesn't seem to notice in any way that there's a wet patch on it, his stride is unbroken. He is thick-set with a broken nose, very closely shaved jowls tuck into his collar.

He turns on the dense, pale carpet and gestures for me to head this way. This is definitely not the place the lab will be.

‘Good to meet you too Mr Winkworth.’

‘Oh, that’s not me, dear God no, no I couldn’t handle that sort of pressure,’ he says loudly as he opens an office door. The tea or coffee does not seem to have been an option after all as we’ve whisked our way past the small kitchen.

The office is small, good view, but utterly sparse: a desk, a computer and phone, one cabinet in the corner with a printer, two chairs, same hard carpet as the corridors. Making his way round the desk is a very short, thin man in a black suit. He wears thick black glasses and I would hazard he is fifty, hard to say. ‘Mr Kagai, pleased to meet you, take a seat.’ He moves quickly back to his chair and I sit.

‘Pleased to meet you too Sir.’

‘Two coffees please Hamilton,’ he says, looking at a form and aligning it squarely with the edges of the desk.

‘Of course,’ says Hamilton and closes the door.

‘Kenyan?’

‘Yes,’ I say. He inspires short answers.

‘I was in Kenya in seventy eight with The Gurkhas. Point Lenana. Good training.’

‘That’s the area I hail from...’

‘Good. Shouldn’t be a problem.’ Good, I think. What problem might it not be?

‘I am going to say one thing, a fact, freely available. The continuation of this interview will then be contingent on your signature at the base of this document,’ he spins the document round to face me. I read the words Official Secrets Act at the top of the page and look back up. ‘A few years ago the Vienna Protocol was adopted multilaterally to prohibit the

ues of antipersonnel laser weapons designed to cause blindness. This is a fact. However, electro-optical countermeasure systems are not restricted.’ He stares, sitting bolt-upright.

I realise I am now meant to sign. I lean forward to read. I now understand that it is an offence for a Crown servant, a government contractor or a notified person to disclose any information about security, intelligence, defence or international relations without lawful authority which leads to the damage of the national interest in the particular way, or ways, specified in the Act.

‘This is, of course, a formality; there is no need to actually sign as you are now a notified person. However, it shows willing.’

I glance up, nod, turn the page. I see the punishments: maximum two years’ imprisonment and unlimited fine. So if I leave here now I can’t tell anyone about this, or this place. Wow. I really want to know what sort of thing they are designing, curiosity killed the cat. This version of this cat is still very much alive. Alive and poor. Ultimately I’d be very selfish not to sign as so many will benefit from the money.

The door opens and Hamilton brings in the coffee on a small tray, ‘I put the milk in a jug as I didn’t know how you take it,’ he says to me.

‘Thank you,’ I’m saying as Winkworth speaks over me.

‘There is only one type of coffee, Hamilton; coffee.’

‘Sir,’ says Hamilton.

There is a knock from a side door I had assumed was a stationary cupboard. Winkworth says, ‘Come.’ A young man strides in. He’s wearing a crisp white shirt with epaulettes and black trousers. He hands over a folder, nods to me, then exits. While the door is open I see a few other uniformed workers at desks. Winkworth opens the folder, glances inside then closes it. He hands it to Hamilton. ‘File,’ he says. Hamilton executes a stiff nod and turns to go. ‘Wait,’ says Winkworth and looks to me. I look back at the document, such a

neat and small thing. I sign it. Winkworth's eye movements signal to me and Hamilton. I hand the document to Hamilton. 'File please,' says Winkworth.

'Sir,' says Hamilton and leaves us alone.

'In return for the remuneration specified in previous correspondence we need you to re-calibrate extant laser weapons to deliver a field of sight-suppressing intensity rather than a beam of directed light. We need the delivery system to be compatible with multiple platforms and easily mobile. Once this project is near fruition we need you to work with the synthetic telepathy team to create an area denial weapon which combines with the visual disturbance device. This needs to be complete as soon as possible. Questions?' says Winkworth, both hands flat on the desk. Yes, I have questions. It's not fatal though, the device is not fatal. Thank God. What to ask first?

'When you say "as soon as possible", can you be more specific?'

'I want it delivered tomorrow. If it's not delivered tomorrow then fewer lives will be saved. Clear?'

'Yes, yes perfectly. So if I do complete it in, say, a month, then I will only be paid for that month?'

'The remuneration is as described in previous correspondence. Mr Kagai, I cannot keep every employee's contract at the forefront of my mind.' I think he means that he doesn't know, and therefore doesn't care. And it's worrying that it's not there on the desk in front of him. I suppose they have me in a corner now. He is staring intently at me.

'Synthetic telepathy?'

'A sound based weapon.' Wow.

'A directed force or a, a... 'telepathy'? As in inside the mind?'

‘This is what you will be discussing with that team. Whichever works most effectively within the confines of the Vienna protocol and other parameters to dispel crowds or to keep an area free of people. Clear?’

I think this is clear. I am beginning to think that I actually back the idea morally. In the final balance a device that disturbs people rather than gasses them or shoots them with rubber bullets, or worse, is surely preferable. And as I’m not going to stop any authoritarians from using such things, at least I can give them something less... violent to use. ‘Yes, clear. Thank you.’

‘Good. No time to waste. Hamilton will answer any further questions you may have on your drive to your lodgings, day to day logistics and so forth. We will meet again soon.’ He stands and we shake hands across the desk. ‘You will find him in the office opposite. Good day.’ I thank him as he shows me to the door. I step outside and he closes the door behind me. I still hold my coffee, I hate black coffee, so I head to the kitchen to pour it away.

Hamilton is in the kitchen. He looks a little shocked as I step in. ‘Biscuits,’ he says with a mouth full of biscuit. He offers me the packet. I take the top one. ‘All good I trust?’

‘Yes, thank you. I think I was expecting it to go on a lot longer, somehow.’

‘No, he doesn’t mess about, but he knew what he was getting.’ It is disturbing how an investigation into me and my background is evident in their lack of questions. Hamilton smiles, in fact I haven’t seen him without one yet. ‘Right, back to business,’ he says as he pops a final biscuit into his mouth and collects the folder and my signed document together. Again he wheels on a metal heel as if he’s enjoying how slippery his shoes must be on this flooring. He raises the documents in his free hand and beckons me to follow. We head back to his office, which is slightly bigger than Winkworth’s and lighter as it faces the sun. It is no less barren though, apart from a framed photograph on his desk which I can’t see.

Hamilton drops the folder on his desk and sits heavily into his chair, it rocks back. On the forward rock he reaches out and places his coffee on the Official Secrets Act. For some reason the result of the obvious momentum and liquid combination that I am prediciting seems entirely absent from his thoughts and some coffee spills onto the paper. He makes it worse by then placing the cup down before he lifts it up. Consequently there is a neat brown circle around my signature. 'Blast,' he says. 'Not a problem,' smiles at me, then some internal argument throws doubt on his initial assessment, 'is it? No, Winkworth said it was a formality.' He smiles again. 'Doesn't look good though does it? Official and all that. Disrespectful.'

'Who will see it?' I ask.

'No, no, not fair on you; casts you in a bad light, first impressions and all that,' he says and picks it up. 'I'll print you a new one.' He stands, 'Admire the view,' he gestures to the window, 'I'll just nip to the main office, won't be a tick.'

Rooftops, tv aerials, communications masts; all colour leeches by the grey sky. Lines of streets towards a vanishing point obscured by the moisture in the air merge into a close horizon. If I hadn't just traversed the green country I would think that England continued like this to the sea. Turning away from the view I see the photograph on his desk is of his son, I assume: rugby ball clutched to chest, in full flight down the wing of a private school field, his facial features beneath the twist of muddled desperation are recognisably filial to Hamilton.

The folder that was handed to Winkworth is on the desk, is it titled 'Field'. I guess this will be the numbers on the calibration of a device for the field effect, interesting. I should be handed these in due course.

This office could house around six people. Why is it that there are serving military personnel working here, navy I think, yet there is an attempt to make it seem civil? Why is it not exclusively MoD and housed in a base somewhere? The only reason I can see for this is



economic; the results of the research are commercially viable. This does disturb me. A buyer would then need to see proof that the devices, weapons, work. How would they get this proof?

My body is compelled by a non-conscious decision and I move back to the desk and look at the folder marked 'Field'. I pause my hand, think. The reflex was caused by this word. I need to know what is in there. I need to know how much time I have. Where is Hamilton? I listen just shy of the open door for any movement in the corridor. No sounds other than the muffled noises of the office two doors down. I stick my head out into the corridor, look left and right; empty, quiet. I come back to the desk, leaving the door open to better hear an approach.

The red folder opens to reveal a brown paper folder printed with the words Top Secret. The seal is broken. I lift the flap to reveal a photograph of a face. Close the flap again. I move to the window and open it, slide its aluminium weight to the side and lean my arms on the unforgiving edge. I look down on an empty grid of carparking spaces. I have a metal taste in my mouth, breathing in deeply does not explain it; the smells are greatly diluted exhaust and, strangely, woodsmoke. I think of Maitu but this is a different flavour smoke, more acrid.

Consider the data of the photograph: a black boy... young man? Boy. A close-up. First reaction was that he was dead, lying on leaves and someone's arm, a white, muscled arm. But perhaps not. The arm was gripping his hair to hold him upright, jungle foliage behind him. His mouth slightly open in the manner of unconsciousness, his skin reddened, burnt. But the eyes; the eye. One closed, but with no squint, no creases to the side, suggesting it is stuck shut. The other open, almost lidlessly wide, no iris, with only a vague impression of a pupil, and red, entirely red. On the white frame of the photograph I think there was a date and two sets of six numbers, probably co-ordinates. I must steel myself and look again. If I open it slightly I will only see the edge and the numbers. I take a pen and a *Post-it* from

Hamilton's desk and fold back the flap. I write down the numbers. The date is eighteenth of November, just a few weeks ago. I realise there are many more photographs below the first. I pause, listen. I pull out the second one and stare for a while.

A door opens down the corridor and Hamilton's voice calls, 'Thank you.' I slide the photographs and folder back together and stand by the window.

'Any luck?' I ask as he enters, using as much effort as possible to make it seem effortless.

'Oh yes, yes. Great efficiency. It's cold with that window open, not thinking of jumping already are you? That feeling doesn't come for at least another month.' He laughs briefly.

I laugh a little, 'Ha, no, just some fresh air.' I slide it closed and take the pen he offers to sign the fresh document. He takes the folder and places it in a large metal cabinet, using a key to lock it from his keyring. He has stopped smiling and his body language seems more subdued. Perhaps I'm just being paranoid. Perhaps he's realised his mistake in not locking the folder up first.

He sits and rocks again, takes a document from a draw below his desk, 'So Matthew, the nitty gritty.' He hands me the paper, it's my contract. 'Let's go through this together, shouldn't take too long, then it's off to Salisbury, we'll be there by five. I know a good pub for scrum, my shout.' The smile's back. 'Are you an ale or a wine man?'

Wine. Wine glass. That's what the second picture makes me think of; a broken wine glass, contents loosed over a red earth. Again, just one eye. 'Neither really. Whiskey, Scotch. A huff and a hauf perhaps.'

He looks at me over tiny wire glasses, 'Indeed.'

## Heathrow, England, 2016

If the band thing doesn't work out I'm coming here to be a baggage handler. I've seen the light in the shape of heavy objects. Piece of piss, like; just throw stuff onto the right conveyer belt. Didn't start well though, my handler life, as the bloke the other side of the plastic skirt gave me the finger when I waved at him. Just banter though innit. There'd be loads of bants driving around on them articulated luggage trucks, weaving between jumbos. I'd definitely end up on the conveyer into the hold like, that's just a given. Jokes though.

If they do stop me, and they do ask me to take my boots off, and they do see the little fold in the heel, and they do glance up at me before peeling it back with a latexed hand and the tip of a pencil, when they see it's empty, does that then give them every right to perform a cavity search, even if I tell them it's only spliff and we already caned the lot on the way here cos we, luckily, bottled it? Fuck, the dogs will smell it on us now like! Won't they? I am not paranoid, this is fuckin' real, and I am paranoid, and I think I'm gunna start giggling; I've got that tickly feeling which isn't good cos if I laugh in front of these fuckers, which will be funny, which won't be fuckin' funny, then I am getting buggered by some bastard's arm in a white shirt with sleeves rolled up, and, if I'm lucky, a jar of vaseline in the equation. If not, not to worry, the amount I'm sweating will be lube enough. Christ, they are carrying full-on machine guns! Patrolling in pairs, but I bet it's not them you've gotta watch it's the cameras following them. Don't look around for the cameras, well not obviously anyways. Fuckin' calm down, stop biting your lip, just keep your face straight and don't, whatever you fuckin' do, do not make eye contact with Karl, don't even look at the scrawny little twat with his skinny white legs hanging out the bottom of his short orange shorts. Orange. Fucking. Short-shorts, "Cos it's hot, like, in Kenya." Freak.

I know a kilogram is equal to a litre of water you arrogant plastic bitch, I only asked what to get rid of because how the fuck am I going to get rid of anything here when I've got nowhere to put it and I've only packed the things I absolutely need in the first place? And offloaded the guitar to Kwel, need to practice this. 'Where do I put anything I need to get rid of then?'

'We can destroy it here Sir, or you could perhaps post it back to your home address, the post office is located between check-ins 305 and 6.'

Destroy it? Great. Thank you. If I actually gave a shit and could be arsed, you and this airline would be getting a right fisting on *Twitter* right now. A towel weighs what? I can bin that. Take these shorts off, at least they're not fucking orange, and swop them for the jeans, bin the shorts.

'Please use the restrooms if you need to take such extreme measures sir.'

'I *am* wearin boxers for fuck s... Ow!' Ceri really hits me, like really hard in the arm. Yeah thass right, side with the woman. Can't take a pair of tight boxers can she? Frigid bitch. This had better not be a sign as to the way this holiday's gunna go; takin clothes off in a toilet cubicle and tryin not to drag them through the piss on the floor.

It's the nothingness of this place, I think, that's getting to me. It's the way that nobody here belongs here. I bet even the frequentest of fliers, who might reckon that they know it and feel sure of themselves, only actually know one or two check-ins and the cafes nearby. And that corporate stuff is generic anyway so they could be anywhere really. It all looks so concrete and solid but everything here is flowing away to somewhere else. All these different cultures sliding past each other with just a glance, probably wondering what weird clothes everyone else wears, or how much they hate each other, or if they're hated, or if the Muslim ones are terrorists but then blocking that thought because it's shit and it's scary, or really they're just

worrying about weight limits and timings and ignoring all the humans. How many people are alive now? Six billion? Or have ever existed? And here I am looking at just these people here and now, like, just these people in the whole of history. It's so small, we're so small. Each of these travellers are important in my life, each and every one, especially the ones I make eye contact with; those beauties are as good as best mates. I need a drink of water.

The workers here will be on weird shift patterns, even worse than on the phones, and just wanna piss off home asap, as anyone does. Especially after having to deal with us arseholes. Karl's at the next desk trying to see where his luggage has gone and appears to be waving it goodbye. Kwel's about five people behind me standing like a statue and staring at his phone, occasionally glancing up, swivelling his eyes around the ceiling, then straight back down again; never could take his spliff. And my dumb fuck boyfriend just stropped off to the bogs to get naked. Should've hit him in the head; such an arrogant, self important prick. Now she's looking at me, 'Good morning, passport and booking number please.' Fakest smile and voice ever.

'Sorry about him. He's a prick.' Not even a flicker on her screen, the smile stays. 'You dealt with him in a very professional manner. Excellent service.' Probably thinks I'm being sarcastic. What a shite job she's got, I mean I've got a crap job but I don't have to deal with the arseholes face to face like this. She's probably hard as nails, and her armour of make-up and smile is serving her well. Apart from kohl, obvs, I have owned less make-up in my life than what she currently sports. And she must have a headache with her hair like that.

'Did you pack your bags yourself?' Thought they asked these questions later.

'Yes. Well, with *him* like.'

'So did the bags ever leave your sight?' Ahhhh feck.

'No, no I would never leave *him* alone with anything important.'

'So, did you pack the bags yourself?'

‘Yes,’ I think she just threw me a lifeline there, solidarity sister!

‘Well you’ve got four kilograms spare if you want to stand to the side and wait for Mister Hargreaves, he may be able to place some luggage in yours,’ she smiles like I’m being forgiven and saved. Which I am. So I nod and smile back, drag my bag away a little and lean on the desk.

Karl’s leaning on the next desk, shouts across, ‘You’ve let me through and I can vouch for her, she’s ok that one,’ then he does a click-click thing with his tounge and puts a thumb up. Short orange shorts for fuck’s sake, at least he’s got rid of his luggage and can’t man spread whilst sitting on it anymore. ‘Yes he’s with us’, says my blush. Kwel’s still staring at his phone like he’s planning to become a part of it by smashing it against his forehead. I’ll check mine.

Message from Kwel:

dogs smell smoke on us???

only on u ☺

where P???

bogs

fuck fuck

no no

no no what?

fuck fuck

y in bogs???

wank

he got gear???

dear authorities - i do not know  
this person

fuck off!!!

rude

mayb i chang too no smell smoke?

that look sketchy

Kwel finally looks up at me, if I was in a firing squad I imagine my victim might have his facial expression.

chiiiiiiiii!!!!

He looks down at the vibration then starts typing:

i look stoned???

no mate look fine

tru?

how they no u not norm a  
goggle eyed freak? x

noooooo!!!

jus messin x

Paul arrives back by ducking under all the zig zags of the queue fences, I don't think he said sorry once. 'What'd you bin?' I ask him.

'Towel, deodorant, toothpaste, socks, one t-shirt.'

'You're gunna be nice to be around then, in the hot heat.'

'I'll wash in the sea every day, and I got other shirts. Be alright, I can buy all that other stuff out there.'

'You gunna say sorry?' I manage to whisper in his direction.

'What for; you fuckin hit me.' He's knelt pulling the straps tight and tying them together on his rucsac, since he's putting so much effort into closing it it'd be a shame to have him open it again.

'Not to me, to her.'

‘Why? She’s being the fascist, she doesn’t have to be like that you know, she could’ve just let it through. One fuckin kilogram. There’s only one type of good fascist you know?’

‘She’s just doin her job; she doesn’t need twats like you in her face.’

‘I don’t need you backin’ her up. Carry on like that and you’ll never have your twat in my face again.’ What an arrogant fuck, I swear he hates women. I mean that was kinda violent, up close and whisper-hissing into my face. That was basically sexual violence. He turns to drag his bag to the desk. I drag mine after him.

Paul’s bag goes on the conveyer, followed by mine. The check-in girl isn’t smiling now, just hands over the boarding passes and passports, and I sense a real feeling of unease from her towards Paul, obvs, but also towards me, like, she thinks there is something wrong with me, like, *I am wrong somehow*. Not just in the wrong, but fully not right, not real, just, like, ignorable. I nod and smile at her. She looks away to her keyboard and types. I’m being dismissed, erased, ‘have a nice life-ed’. I thought she was on my side.

Paul walks over to Karl by the shops, I suppose I should wait for Kwel. I look at him standing tall in the queue, he’s already looking at me. He smiles as if he’s trying to console me. I realise the queue are steadfastly not looking at me, even though I’ve stopped just to the side and am facing them all. I realise me and Paul are one of them couples: we’re *that* couple in the street, in the pub, on the plane, that you don’t wanna be near, just in case like.

Phone buzzes: Kwel again.

u ok? x

yup

what he say?

nothing

u look angry

rbf

?



i always look like this

u look cute angry x

u stoned

i htt if u need

can't even

He's next in line and looking nervous, but at least he's not swivelling his head around anymore, just being weird and cutesy by phone. I feel pretty stoned but, cos I'm nervous I'm sorta overriding it with adreneline, maybe he gets all para instead. He's always a bit of a worrier. I've just noticed something: for once he's not the only black guy in our vicinity; there's loadsa Kenyans in the queue. Weird, never seen him like that before. I'm gunna stand out in Kenya, we all are, well, maybes Kwel won't, dunno. I'm so fucked off with Paul cos I was so excited and now I just wanna avoid him. We should be getting closer together on this trip, but maybe I'm getting to see him in a different light and that's good. Truth is good. He's just all bark, he wouldn't actually hurt me.

He appears at my shoulder, 'Who you textin?'

I feel heat in my neck, suddenly, like I'm doing something wrong. But I'm not, 'Only Kwel.'

'Why? He's standing just there. You are allowed back to the queue now you know?'

'Yeah, just waiting for him.' I'm looking ahead, kinda at Kweli but basically anywhere other than Paul cos if I do I'll show how angry I am and I don't want to argue in front of everyone. Paul's looking down at me and giving Kwel side eyes.

'What's he textin?' There's a tone, a definite tone. He's jealous of his, and my, best mate. Fuckin child.

'He's proper skyed and para, I'm just trying to help him calm it down.'

‘Let me see.’ Jesus he wants proof. What does he expect to see? Why did Kwel text that ‘you’re cute’ stuff, and how does Paul know to worry that Kwel sent stuff like that, is it some sort of sixth sense between alpha males?

‘I’m still tampin about you so no, you can’t just take my phone, nothing of mine is accessible to you until I no longer believe you are a twat.’

‘Tampin? You’re such a chav. What’re you pissed off about? It’s wasn’t me being a twat, it was the desk bitch.’

I will not explode, if I do he has won because he loves that feeling of having such affect on people, then he’ll back down and blame the shouting on me and say I’m violent and uncontrolled. Deep breath, ‘She was just doin her job. You tried to take your shorts off in front of her...’

‘I was tryin to save time for the people behind; swappin shorts for jeans to save weight,’ he’s faking an innocence in his voice, a palms up shrug, a slight lean back.

‘You don’t strip in a public place! Then you got angry with her. You’re so embarrassin to be around sometimes you know? I mean, what were you thinking?’

‘Not worth you gettin angry with me though is it? Just to protect her.’

‘That’s not what I was doin.’ I look up at him, ‘You really don’t get why I got angry.’

‘Was that a question?’

‘No.’

‘So you’re telling me what I think now.’

‘No, I just want you *to* think, like, just for once.’ I’m straining not to shout at him, and to keep this pretence that we’re just chatting and waiting for our friend.

‘Well,’ he says, ‘sounds like you’re telling me to not stand up to shit just to save your embarrassment. That’s not me is it? And it wasn’t you, or at least I didn’t think so.’

‘You are not standing up to the fucking capitalists by getting angry over the baggage rules with some poor feck who works there all day to help people like you, us, who have paid shit loads of money for the privilege. Possibly a privilege that she can’t fecking afford herself.’ I can’t avoid making my points without jabbing my right hand up and down as I speak.

He’s giving me his charmer smile, it appears as I begin to rave, ‘You’re hot when you’re angry you know?’

I’m surrounded by men who think I’m a cute little girl stomping her foot. And I hate that he can appear so angry one moment and then switch to flirting the next. Cock brain. ‘Get angry with *Expedia*, not her.’

‘You know we’re gunna come back with songs to kill all those fuckers, songs that’ll start the revolution, so they can take our money cos we’re gunna get our payback later,’ he puts his arm around me and squeezes me close, ‘that bitch will be first against the wall.’

He’s unable to see, let alone accept that his behaviour is that of an arrogant, over-privileged wanker. It’s not his money it’s his little ol mam’s. But I have to choose now, right now, to accept this part of him and bury it in order to have a nice holiday and enjoy the good stuff about him, or to burn it all here and spunk a grand up the wall along with my first real relationship. I don’t wanna fail after only two years, that’s pathetic, and it’s not like we’re all burnt out; there’s still so much we’re good at together. Just think about the music and the sex, what else, after all, is there? I lean into his body, ‘Twat. Che Hargreaves. Paul Guevara. Sorry I hit you.’

He squeezes really hard, ‘That’s ok, gave me a semi anyway.’

‘You should have asked me to the bogs with you then.’

‘Plenty of time for that on the plane Babe.’

‘Obviously, that goes without sayin.’ Fantasy number three is back on.

Working hard at keeping face non ‘goggle-eyed’ by narrowing eyes, but making sure they’re not too narrow as to look shifty. And just as it’s my turn to drag this pig bag and Paul’s guitar forwards to the desk and the beckoning shiny lady, blydi Ceri and Paul turn away all cuddly and she’s slinked her body in against his so there’s no gaps and they stumble giggle their way over to where Karl went, so I’m all alone now.

‘Good morning, passport and booking number please.’ Here we go, smile and hand it over. It’s sweaty where my hand has been gripping it, but she scans it quickly and asks for my luggage. Scales flash up ‘23kg’, get in! She smiles and I realise I’ve smiled, ‘Good packing,’ she says. Is she flirting, is that flirty?

‘Took me long enough,’ I’m being normal, a normal passenger, this is good. Stickers ripped and stuck and pig bag trundles off behind the plastic curtain thing. Group guitar follows and I hope its neck doesn’t snap in the hold.

‘Well, it paid off. Have a lovely trip,’ she says. I really like her smile, one of those that lights up a pretty ordinary face and makes her pretty hot.

I take my passport and boarding card from her perfectly manicured hands and the moment she turns that sexy smile away and greets the next passengers is the moment I decide to say, ‘At least I didn’t have to strip.’ The way I say it makes it seem like I tried to rhyme with her, I think, didn’t it? So she looks back to me, and the passengers pause because they think they’re interrupting something, which they are, don’t pause for fuck’s sake, and her face is a firework display of emotions and decisions. I think the thoughts that explode within are: Did he just rhyme that on purpose? Is he attempting to maintain a conversation because he thinks he’s *in* somehow? Did I give him that impression? If so then men are stupid. Is he mad? Is he on drugs? Is he referring to the idiot who just tried to take his trousers off or is he making a joke about strip searches? Does he know the idiot? Is any of the above charming or

cool? No it is not, but it is quite funny that he did it and I can't wait to discuss this with my colleagues and have a laugh. Now he looks embarrassed, so I will just nod, raise an eyebrow, continue with my job and say, 'No, that would be bad.'

So she does and I say, 'Thanks. \*\*\*\*\*,' which is something you say in such a situation innit, when you rhyme by mistake? I mean I've heard it lots before from somewhere. From Mam! Blydi Mam says it, croaking in an American accent, I can see her doin it now. I'm flirting using phrases from my Mam. Christ.

The passengers are in earshot and the dad says, 'He's still cool with the youth,' and grins at me. This is getting weird, does he mean *I'm* still cool with the... what youth? His kid, who's about twelve and trying to disappear? They are all wearing khaki. The Mam's nodding and smiling, still, and there's moments passing when I think I should be saying something but I'm just gripping the desk. I feel my hair move as I twitch away to look at the hot attendant who allows me to see she is suppressing a laugh, in a cute way, then turns to ask the khaki family for passports etc. She glances at me. I wink. She sucks her teeth and continues with her quick handed check-in movements. I'm starting to move away, my arm leads by shouldering my hand luggage, luckily the last thing I notice is a sly grin, just a little one, cos I'm still looking at her. Still looking, just for a second, and I'm gone. I'm so cool and she's so hot. Maybe she'll be here on the way back.

Big windows, big sky. You can see the stack, count the seconds... twenty five. Fuuuck. You won't get me in one of them things. 'Hey Paul, you won't get me in one of them tin cans with wings, look at 'em.'

'Cool. Can I have your seat then?'

'What number's yours?' asks Ceri.

‘50 C,’ I tell her.

‘He’s not near us anyways,’ she says, ‘we’re in row 52.’

‘Kweli through yet?’ I ask.

‘He was just at the desk when we left,’ she says.

I can’t sit like them, we’re gunna be sat for hours up there, need to patrol around, keep that thrombosis at bay. I wander back to see if Kwel is through.

There he is, ‘Oi!’

He turns, ‘Iawn boy?’

‘Ie,’ funny speaking Welsh in England, exotic, ‘gor lew. You got through ok then?’

‘Yeah, shh, yeah I did,’ he says whispering it loudly, like someone’s gunna overhear.

‘They can’t arrest you for already being stoned you know, you could just pretend that you’re weird. Shouldn’t be too hard for you.’

‘Funny. Stop talkin about it now then eh? We’re through and clear.’

‘We’ve not gone through security yet boy, that was just check-in.’ His face drops, not that it was up in the first place like. Funny the stuff you know and the stuff you don’t. I guess his mind’s elsewhere: in his boots, on the trip, Ceri’s arse. I’m not bothered, it’s all jokes anyway. People worry too much about things like that; it’s not like anyone can see inside your head, you’re always safe in here. ‘You’ll be fine,’ I tell him.

‘Yeah, course. No probs. No problemo. Dim problem.’ He’s curled his lips in.

‘C’mon, even if they do pull you, they’re not gunna find anythin are they?’ He’s worryin about the smell and the dogs again. I know it.

‘No, but it’ll be embarrassin, you know; watchin you lot wander through while I get escorted into an office.’

‘Why would anyone just pull you and not us? They’ll ignore you.’ He looks well stressed now, annoying, wish he’d get off my buzz.

‘Yeah, right,’ he says then looks around us at the kiosks of shit, ‘Let’s get a big Toblerone, that’s traditional innit?’

Now he’s talkin, ‘That’s better Bruv, feed them munchies.’ We delve into aisles of pure colour, like at the services but on a crack-steroid mix. Kwel’s gaze is all over the place, I guess the eyeline visual merch isn’t designed for the para consumer. He is however stroking everything like wheat in *Gladiator*. Toblerones would be like brail screaming. We weave through groups of posh teens with *Expedition Challenge* t-shirts. I’m stuck behind Tilly and Jonesy who are blatantly checkin out Kwel by the way. So lucky with women and he’s not got a clue. They do look about fifteen, but. Remember some company tryin to sell us expeditions in school for four grand, we’re doin it for less than half that, just like Davy said. And we don’t have rules. Suck on that *Tanzania ’16*. No fuckin rules. Awesome.

Kweli stops at the CDs, points at *Best of Bob Dylan*, looks back at me and taps it, ‘Bob Dylan’s still cool with the youth: that’s who Mam listens to. Meh.’ What the fuck’s he on about? So jokes following a stoned person round a shop.

He’s buying two huge bars now. Funny. ‘You hungry?’

‘One for me, one for a present,’ he says.

‘Who for?’

‘Your shorts; fatten them up a bit.’ He looks at me dead pan, ‘Nobody you know,’ he says in a ‘don’t ask’ kinda way. Bit stoopid thinking he can drag that all round Kenya in the heat and bring it home.

‘Why’d you not get it on the way back?’

‘Cos we’d be back,’ he says. No reasoning with some people.

### **Watamu, Kenya, 2016**

Way out to sea is a squall but the rain is vertical, not the forty-five degree angle we're used to seeing in Wales, and the sky is a deeper blue with just some whiteness around the rain. That is the bluest blue ever. And that's what... India I'm looking towards? Wow. That's the Indian fuckin' ocean. A whole other ocean. There's a line of surf about a mile out, then I guess it's the continental shelf, Africa's edge dropping deep. I'd love to look down it. Maybe we can get a boat out there, or paddle boards out, or swim. Maybe Paul would be up for it. Is that the surf, the only surf? It's bloody miles out. That'd be remote surfing that, proper out there. Psyched though. Psyched.

Starving though, proper hungry. Where're the others at? Fuck it, I'm not wandering about on my own. I think there's some nuts left, and a bit of water, I'm gunna get so skinny if this is all we manage to buy; stuff touts wave at us from under bus windows. Bet we paid way too much. Funny how they'd shout in English to the others and Swahili to me. Well, not funny really, but good I paid less. Good Davy recommended having small change handy just to pay for shit out of your pocket. Funny how Karl handed over a thousand note expecting change, shouting Oi out the window, leaning over me. Wonder if oi is universal. And the street kids running up to the windows and just plain begging, that one with some fuckin' thing growing on his neck, like proper what the fuck was that? Bags of fatty skin round his neck, fuckin' crazy. So many of them limping or with fingers missing, and Ceri saying they're maimed by parents to make more money. Bollocks, seriously? This country is insane. I mean look at the shower in here, there's wires hanging down around the shower head. I ain't going in there first, I'll wait 'til Karl goes, suggest politely that he smells a bit. Probably will work. Can I brush my teeth in this tap water? Would it be ok if I don't swallow it? I'll



just use a bit of the left over bottle. Why am I scared of going and buying something? Just get a grip, have a dump, have a wash, chill in the verandah shade eating the nuts, finish off the water, go for an explore. What the fuck could happen? The beach looks chilled, there's no-one around the other huts. Just chill man.

I need to relax, deserve to. It was so knackered that journey, I feel empty, cleared out by all the vibration and noise. Wicker chair, feet up, eat and drink. That breeze is amazing. It's warm and it's coming off the sea. Nothing warm comes off the sea in Wales. It's air that's travelled over all that ocean, maybe even from India, maybe I'm smelling diluted India. Particles of dust from another continent, air that someone there has breathed out. It smells of the sea, but different somehow, stronger. Like a stronger sea. I guess it's the heat. Not that it's all that warm, I'm a bit cold if anything. Maybe I'll have a rummage through Karl's stuff, see if he's got any snacks in his bag. I could eat the Toblerone but that's my father's, though I feel a lot less like I'll actually meet him now I'm here. In fact the whole plan seems a bit mental. Good thing I didn't tell anyone, other than Mam.

*Karl says Where's your daddy Kwel? but Mam says that my dad is a long long way away over the sea and land, further than France, like, so Karl says Where? again, and I says the name I don't want to say, Kenya, then Karl spends ages slowly spinning his world lamp saying names of places: Texas, Ontario, Greenland, Finland, Russia, Russia is huge look, Mongolia, Mongolia! hahaha we laugh at that one, China, Japan, Pacific, California, Mexico, Texas, You already said that one, and he stops and says It must be a long way, then puts his hand on my shoulder and I cry a bit but look down cos he's up sat on the bed and can't see, but I get snot so I wipe it with a sleeve and he says It's ok, and I says Not everyone has a dad anyway and he says No, not everyone anyway, and you can find him if you want one day anyway, and I says Yeah, when we can drive and stuff and he says Yeah. Eggy bread!*

*shouts his mam and he jumps off the bed but I tap tackle him and overtake but he grabs my leg and I pull him all the way down the hall to the kitchen.*

Maybe I should text Mam, tell her we're here ok. That bus ride was insane. The roads are insane. Why don't people care that they might die, I mean what the fuck? And the wrecks in the ditches on either side, are they not a clue? Tards. It's chaos. This place is chaos. Not here, like. This is the opposite of chaos, this is calm. Breeze and palm trees and beach. I'll move in a bit, go and put my feet in the sea, the ocean, a different ocean. That's like a spiritual thing, to do that, to touch a different ocean. Makes me feel like I'm on Earth more, I'm somehow more of an Earthling, dunno. It's big anyways. Oh wow, can't wait to see the stars, they'll be different here.

Can't really see much of the beach sat down in this recliner. Must get me one of these. Look at the way the thatch roof interweaves, they've bundled handfuls of reed together into logs like. Is that a spider? Oh my fuckin' christ, look at the size of that fucker! If it moves I'll run. Fuck this shit. What if there's more? What if they're in this chair? I should always check, not in Mumbles now boy. It's fuckin metallic and sharp, it's pointy and green. It's amazing. Fuck in hell it just moved, I'm gone.

Duck and run down to the beach, but relax now, people might see you. Just walk calmly, no-one's seen I don't think, all the other bandas are empty. Banda ghost town. Sand's warm on my bare feet, lots of bits around though, could be anything: sea bits, tree bits, rubbish, animals, insects. Should go back and get sandals, and money for some food and drink. Naa, I'll find Karl and he can get past the monster in the roof. I'll be able to see more from the shore and look back or along, maybe they've all gone for a walk. Jesus! is that a snake? Fuck, no it's a lizard, biggest lizard I've ever seen, but running from me which is

good. Must've been a foot long at least. And green, why's everything green? Duh. That's two wildlives in one minute, I hope I don't keep up this rate.

The beach opens out and it's beautiful. No surf, but beautiful, with a bit of a chop on the surface from the stronger wind down here. It's like I imagined, but there's more to it, so much more than that ideal of palm trees and blue skies. The sky isn't a uniform blue, it gets lighter closer to the sea. To the south there's a much bigger squall much closer than the one I could see from up in the banda. The sea looks rough beneath it and I there's down drafts swirling on the surface. The sea is also many shades, from near black through to turquoise, I guess depending on its depth, and it's got real movement to it. I can see shore rips from here. There's fishing boats working, zig-zagging landward of the reef, with men all leaning out and running back and forward on board. Unlike in the promo photos I get a sense from their body language that they really need to find fish. Yes, that's the difference; it's urgent, there's urgency and movement, so much of it, so much real life. There are many more people off to either side, and one guy in like military style wear, khaki, with a gun on his shoulder just up to the side of the bandas, looking bored. He doesn't acknowledge but is looking at me. Guess he's our guard. That's the real shit they don't show you on the brochures. Hope we don't need a fuckin' guard. Also reckon he would've seen me running and screaming, hope he found it entertaining.

Way way down the beach, maybe even in the edge of that squall, I think I can see three people who might be Karl, Ceri, and Paul. It's much busier down there. I'm feeling cold and hungry, maybe I should just head back up and sleep a bit. Don't reckon that spider will have moved yet though. Fuck. A chilled walk along the beach won't kill me, probably, and the spider probably could, and I can go put my feet in the sea now. Wow it feels nothing like The Irish Sea, like, it's warm. That's insane, it's like a bath. Oh, more wildlife, a weird jellyfish, better not get touched by that. Ah, no, it's a condom. Brilliant. Why is it whatever

beautiful place I go there's used condoms? Romance innit. Fucking in romantic places like beaches or National Trust car parks. Just in a bed would do me right now. And there's Ceri in my head.

*Karl says Coming ready or not but I am ready cos I've got my cape and if he looks in here he'll just see the cape wrapped around me, and I'll hear him coming cos of his robot cardboard. Ah! the door opens and it's creeping Ceri catwoman and I say Shh, go away and she's giggling too loud and says No, Let me in so I have to so she is quiet. Then she says Hide me in your cape too, and she ducks under my arm when I pull the door closed and into my cape so we're squished so close I can smell the pizza on her breath and her mouth is up against my neck and it tickles, all warm, wet breath, and she whispers Nuhnuhnuhnuhnuh-nuhnuhnuh Batman! She's warm like a cat and I look down to her and say Shh again and she kisses me on the lips then bites my lip and I say Ow and she says Meow and scratches, pretend like, on my chest and I think I'm gunna explode but the bedroom door opens and Karl klunk klunks in and pulls open the cupboard and says Found you, then, Kweli's got a boner, Kweli's got a boner! So I chase him to his room, not to catch him, just to get away from Ceri.*

Can't see them so much now, if it was them.

There's two local rasta guys walking this way. I hate this feeling of not knowing when's best to look up and say hi, it's long corridor syndrome but it's actually worse in an open space. Close now, and they don't look particularly friendly. The short one's got the proper tam on, the tall one's got dreads past his shoulders. Both wearing baggy jeans and flip flops, neither of them smiling. Proper rough faces suddenly remind me of those Gs in Paul's party, these boys got skin that looks like it's been in the sea for years. That look too, that look

is questioning me, they're sizing me up. Maybe they think I'm Kenyan. I'll look out to sea, to that tanker on the horizon. I can sense they're looking at me still as they pass, and know they're talking about me even though I can't understand. They've passed, I can speed up. They're trouble, I can sense trouble, just a plain, like... darkness.

'Hey, Babi!' one of them says, then laughs.

I turn to look. The other one pushing his laughing mate away says, 'Wa gwaan Bana, sasa?'

Ah fuck. I'm looking like a complete twat, still walking sideways-backwards. I try a kinda shrug and say 'Jambo.' Hakuna fuckin' matata mate.

The laughing one's going 'Jambo, jambo, jambo,' and pushing his mate back.

The bigger one's going 'Si tourist? You American? Want kush, miraa? Eh, eh?' and his face is serious, palms facing me and out to the sides. I can't run I've just got to smile this one out. I glance up to the guard, see if he's seeing this. He's looking at his feet. Bad idea. 'Don' worry 'bout that man, him gun na work. Old man now.' The laughing one stops laughing and stares up at the guard, one hand on his mate's shoulder, hard staring. 'No worries Bana, this beach is aall legalized. Hookup later, there gwan be shower. You come us first Broda, we got pure, pure ganjaa, ganjaa fo yow bandaa,' and he points up to our fuckin' banda. 'Nipe thou sasa, now, me bring it later, punch bag, trust, trust.'

Like fuck I trust trust. But that wasn't a question, and I haven't got any money on me. I shrug, pat my pockets, 'I've got nothing on me,' can't say it's in the hut, 'my friends have it all, down the beach.'

'Sawa Babi,' says laughing boy, though he's not laughing now and I don't think that was a question either. I guess I'm 'babi' and 'sawa' is what? See ya?

'Sawa,' I say and they both laugh and turn away, though not before the big one points at me and winks from a dead fuckin' eye.

‘Baadaye,’ he says, ‘Later.’ What is behind eyes like those? It’s something strong and it ain’t ganja and it’s definitely not charm.

I’m walking quick, too fast for how hungry I am, I feel a bit dizzy, probably an adreneline/ hunger combo. I feel like they’re watching me still, but I don’t want to turn around to check. What can they do if I keep speeding along? I kick on the edge of the rubbered sea. Here the water’s clear and the sand’s white and it stretches beyond me south to Tanzania and further, so much further to the Cape and all them big tubes and great whites. How is it I sense the hugeness of it? This massive land north and west and south of me, and the sky to India, and I’m on the edge of it all between the land and sea, bare footed connecting. No condom or yardie can take that feeling away. The distances of it. I’m such an island boy.

*I’m running with Mam and Davy on the beach and Davy’s fast cos I just about catch him at full speed rhedeg nerth fy nhraed next to Mam but he’s got an extra gear, got lots of them says Mam, and he zooms ahead, laughing, C’mon Kwel, C’mon, and cos I’m tired and cos it’ll be funny I windmill my arms and kick out my legs and stumble fall into the water, into the soft sand in the water where the mush rolls out and leaves the foamy bits flopping like dirty bubble bath but I don’t care cos it’s funny, like, and I get some on my head and face like a beard, like Sïon Corn, and lie on my back looking up. Mam and Davy stand against the sky like giants looking down at me and laughing so happy Mam doesn’t even tell me off for getting dirty foam on me and I say Ho Ho Ho and Davy says You look like a black Father Christmas, and I think the beard is white innit? and Mam gives Davy her look but he doesn’t notice cos he’s reaching up into the sky with both hands and I know he’s going to tickle me and he roars Rahhh! and tickles me ‘til I have to roll over into the sand onto my belly and wriggle away.*

There's more people around now: small groups of tourists, women mainly, like Mam's age or older, wearing flouncy blue or pink things fluttering in the wind, and local men trying to sell them stuff, loads of green, black, and red stuff. Some are walking away and chatting at the same time, some are stopped and flirting like, with the sellers, all giggling and touching. The sellers are letting them, leaning into them. I get it: fat or old, rich, white women on holiday and young, fit black men. Poor black men. Beach is full of poor black men, selling stuff. And me, what do I look like to all of them? On my own, I'm dressed different: got a white Volcom shirt on, skinny Levis, 'fro not dreds or cropped. Also this feeling I've been getting since we landed, from the outside airport crush, to the bus ride, to this beach, this feeling is that I'm blending in. For once. I'm not standing out, like these shiny white people, so few of them if I just scan left and right quickly, there's so few of them, and they're just in groups, little gatherings. Like looking at a negative of me back home. All these black lads I'm passing are looking at me then deciding something, something like he's not from here, but he's not worth the effort compared to the rich whiteys, they're hedging with me, hedging their time.

But two are looking up from their packing, they're kneeling and packing some leather suitcase, and they're near my walking line, down here by the sea. Little kids are playing in the water, with their dad I guess, and some locals. Nice. Fun. The two lads are standing and they smile as I approach. One of them extends a hand. Nothing like them yardies these boys. I'll try my Swahili again, 'Jambo.'

He genuinely seems delighted to see me, 'Salama, habari?' he says and takes my hand, turns it into a shoulder clasp. So I'm doing this now; shoulder clasp with both of them, like a mate. We're mates now, everyone can see. 'Na wewe? Unatoka wapi?' he's asking,

and I shrug and he's still got hold of my hand and moving it like we're slowly shaking hands, which is a bit weird but also kinda nice, says, 'Where are you from?'

And his mate says, 'England; no Kenyan says jambo, and Americans only speak English.' His accent's strong, but his English comes quick and easy. He packs a small red wooden box, a stick, then metal rings into a tote bag with Tate Britain on it.

'Wales,' I say, but they might never have heard of it, 'next to England. British,' I point to myself with my free hand, like a twat.

'Ah, yes, I know, yes. Bale and Ramsey, Allen, Vokes, Davies, Collins, the bearded one, who's the keeper? Hennessey. What's your team? Swansea, Cardiff, Port Vale?'

Port Vale, Port fuckin' Vale? How the hell? 'Yeah, fam, wow, Swansea, Swansea, that's my town, where I'm from.' This is so freakin' weird, but. The smiling faces, they look my age, they can't be older than twenty, and behind them is a blur because I'm in this space of faces like mirrors and footy talk. It's getting colder, the sun's going in behind that squall. I want these boys to be friendly after the yardies and tell me what to do and help me cos I'm starving and cold. 'Where are you from, what're your names?'

'Ephraim,' says the one holding my hand, 'and Michael. We're from Nairobi, originally, but we travel for work. It's going to rain, d'you want to come for a coffee?'

Fuck yes. 'Yes, that'd be cool, thanks. It rains in Kenya?'

'Of course,' says Michael making me feel like a bit of a dick, but I guess sarcasm doesn't translate, 'you've come from Wales to get rained on in Kenya. But it's a higher quality rain here.' I laugh. It did translate, these boys get me.

It's got darker still and the locals are rolling up their wares into cloth bundles and packing up their little tables. Some make for trees and bushes, others have crouched over their small area and opened umbrellas. My new BFFs start up the beach towards the closest big hotel entrance, Ephraim having finally let go of my hand. They hurry, like rain is scary.



We get to a table in the restaurant courtyard and the lads get the parasol thing up. Then it rains.

This is rain. Quality rain. Huge drops exploding on impact. Instant rivers. The noise is intense, and I realise there was a feeling building up to this of stress, like when you're trying to ignore the desperate need of a piss, like on the bus here, and this is the release. I also realise I'm grinning and the lads smile back. I reach out to the rain and it's warm and soft, and fun! Not like back home where you feel it wants to make you ill, tries everything to get into your system. I step out into it and am instantly soaked, water pours from my hair across my face, I look up and it's like swimming. I step back into cover, laughing. The lads laugh, happy I'm enjoying their rain. I'm dripping onto the floor as I join them sitting at the table, luckily the chairs are plastic. 'I needed a shower.'

Michael leans forward, 'You never seen monsoon rain before?'

'Na. I've seen heavy rain, almost this heavy, but not warm, never warm.'

'Wales is cold, no?' asks Ephraim.

'Yeah, pretty cold, most of the time. It can get up to thirty degrees though, sometimes, for a day or so in summer.'

'Good for crops, very fertile I imagine,' says Michael. He's my age and he's asking about crop yields. I should know about this stuff really. How come I've never even thought about this before? Isn't it all imported anyway?

'Yes, very green. Lots of potatoes.' I think. Luckily a waitress appears with a face so blank she could write our order on it. Except it's dripping wet. They ask her for coffees, I heard the word latte I think. She doesn't say anything, just little 'mms' and no nods. I get the feeling they know her though, and she's pissed off she's got to serve them.

Ephraim turns to me, 'Latte?'

Oh-oh, I've got no cash. Crap, they'll have to pay. 'I've got no money on me, I was looking for my friends, they've got some. Or I can pay you back?'

'It's fine, sawa, I'll pay. You get the next raa.' The waitress turns into the rain and walks as quickly as she can in her tight black skirt. 'It's fine, we work here often. Also they have proper coffee and we get money off.' They slide palms off each other and flick the last bit. These two are dudes.

'What work do you do here?' I ask.

'We're the band. Sometimes,' says Ephraim. Then he opens the suitcase on the floor and there's two instruments inside: a ukele and what looks like a single stringed violin. 'We spend as much time here as we can; it's good tips.'

'What music do you play? What's that called? Do you write your own stuff? I'm in a band,' I say, and I know I seem like a freak but I've hit the motherlode here, Paul's going to shit.

Ephraim starts playing the violin thing with a bow that looks like a hacksaw, with the butt of it pressed against his body. It's got a natural distortion, like a violin but with a growl. He changes pitch by pressing on the string with his other hand and it raps out a staccatto two note thing. Michael expertly finger drums the table edge like it's a tabla. I'm mixing the rhythm with the rain beating around us and I suddenly feel utterly safe and in the right place. Ephraim stops and the rain takes over its solo again. 'It's an orutu,' he says, and I think he's moved by how much I was obviously into it. 'What do you play?'

'Drums, and guitar, but drums in the band. And I can mix.' I mime the sign language for scratching.

Michael pulls from his Tate tote that little red box and the stick and rings and hands them to me. They seem really old, like antiques, and the box is covered in tiny dents. 'It's our percussion instrument, a nyangile.'

‘What, you hit the box with the sticks and the rings together?’ I hit the box with a stick and it sounds resonant, hit a ring and it clangs.

*Who’s idea was a drum kit? says Uncle Dougie and everyone laughs as I bang bang bang tshk tshk dum-dum! Taid’s idea says Mam, and Taid puts his thumb up to me and smiles and wiggles his thumb so I bash bash harder and everyone goes No no Kweli bach or covers their ears and it’s really funny. Mam says It’s alright for you, you can’t hear anything anyway, so Nain says There, what’ve I bin sayin’? and Taid goes Dunno, can’t bloody ‘ear you, and everyone laughs more, but Auntie Sarah’s babi cries and pulls off his green party hat so Taid looks at me and puts his finger on his mouth, so I tap the drums all quiet and Uncle Dougie says That’s good control Kwel, well done, he’s goin’ tae be a rock star, so I say Goodnight Glastonburyyyy and everyone laughs again and the babi cries more, then Nain takes him off Auntie Sarah and goes There there babi bach and the babi stops crying and pinches Nain’s nose, and the whole time I’ve been going dum dum tshk tshk dum dum tshk, but really really quietly because I’m good.*

‘Yes, hit the box, but the rings go on the box and you hit them too.’ As he’s saying this he slides off a flip-flop, puts a ring on his foot, places that foot on the box then holds the other ring on top of the box by his toes. With his free hand holding the stick he starts hitting the box and ring in an afro beat, two hits on each, synchopated into threes, well complicated, and the rings must vibrate on the surface of the box because there’s this brilliant buzz taking it to another level. I really need a sample of this. I really want to play it. Ephraim taps him on his shoulder and points at me, I nod and must look excited. The hypnotizing stops and he hands them to me. I put my already bare foot into the ring and grip the other as Michael did, foot on box. I try to match his rhythm as it’s still in my head, but it’s maybe a bit advanced

for me yet so I slow and try to get the sounds out of it. They watch with great interest and allow me some time to get going. I can feel what it can do so try to just be funky with it. It works and starts to sing, and occasionally I get that awesome buzz off the box's surface. Ephraim starts to make rhythmic 'Uh' noises, funky fucker, and Michael drums on the table edge again. The waitress returns with our coffees and places them on the table. She straightens and stands here for a minute, between me and Michael, opposite Ephraim. She's motionless and expressionless apart from her left index finger is tapping along against her leg.

Ephraim gets going on his violin thing and we sound awesome. He starts singing, way back in the throat, and I can hear the rhyme in the words. He's grinning at the waitress as he sings. She's watching my hands. Then she sharply turns away. Ephraim stops singing. We carry on a short while, I have no idea how long as I have lost all sense of time. Ephraim says, 'The rain is stopping,' and we all stop playing.

I can feel the sun on my back and there's mist rising everywhere. The evaporating rain has that burnt water smell, Mam calls it ozone, but I don't know. Every smell here, no matter what it is, is stronger than at home. Must be the sun heating everything, that's my theory.

'Si, that was good,' says Michael, 'you are a shit-hot drummer, know your stuff eh?' He gives me the palm slide, finger snap, and I hope this is as real as it feels.

'Thanks, but I'm nowhere near as good as you.' That coffee smells good. I drink and instantly feel the energy. What have I been running on? I've only eaten a small bag of nuts in twenty four hours.

'It's good to jam eh? To experiment,' says Ephraim. I love their accent, every letter seems pronounced; X-Pe-Rrri-MenT.

'Yeah, love to jam. Love this thing, what's it called again?'

‘Nyangile,’ says Michael.

‘Yeah, love it. It’s giving me ideas.’

‘What’s your band play, do you write your own stuff?’ Ephraim asks.

‘I’d show you on my phone if I had it with me, and if there was wifi, but it’s punk really, verging on pop-punk if I’m honest, but don’t tell the others I said that.’

‘There is wifi,’ says Ephraim handing me his phone, iPhone 5S. He unlocks it and I search us out on Soundcloud. Hmm, 506 hits, better. I choose *Drawing a circle*, I reckon it’s our best. They lean towards the speaker and listen with real focus. Michael downs his coffee and shakes the drips out of the cup. He places the phone in it so it’s amplified. Not a bad idea. We seem really basic compared to these boy’s stuff, very unskillful, even Paul. I guess it’s just different priorities, though I’m not sure really what ours are. What mine are.

An we’re drawin’ a circle  
Nothin’ comes in here nothin’ can hurt us  
Yeah we’re drawin’ a circle

Screams Ceri at the end sounding tinny in the cup, not really doing her power any favours.

‘It’s tight,’ says Michael generously, nodding. He runs a hand through his short dredds, ‘It’s got real power. Good drumming.’

‘Thanks man, thanks,’ I say.

‘Yes, it’s good, listenable, not like the punk bands in Nairobi, the gutteral style,’ says Ephraim.

‘Yeah, I caught some of them on YouTube when I was researching this trip. But thanks fam, we wanna be listenable otherwise what’s the point? We came here for two things,’ three things, but that can wait, ‘to learn new musical styles and to surf.’

‘Ah, well we can help with one of those. Hey we already have. We should meet up and jam, ati how long are you here?’ says Ephraim.

That's a good question. I realise I've been feeling restless up until now, and I don't have to be. I don't have to have anything to do, I could literally do nothing all day and that'd be fine. It'd be really cool, I could just nyangile all day. 'Dunno, I guess a week or more maybe.'

'Excellent. We can get a supergroup going, international potential,' says Ephraim.

'Yes, sawa, sawa. Did you bring a surf board here?' asks Michael.

'No, we thought we'd start here and move south to Diani beach, there's hire there and probably in Mombasa. But if we just focus on music that's fine by me, and probably with the others. And we need to watch the sea for a while, get to know it.'

'Very wise. We'll take you out to the Blue Bay headland, this evening maybe, you can see a bit more from there. More coffee? Some breakfast maybe? Don't worry about cost, we'll cover it,' says Ephraim.

'Yeah, that's great thanks, defo yes to both.' I have so landed on my feet after a tough start. My bare feet. Those yardies probably won't come and find us anyway, probably won't remember me, they looked fucked. What a day it's been; from fear to, well, happiness I guess, and I haven't even had breakfast yet. Ephraim stands and walks inside to the bar that I can only just make out from the shadows inside.

'What bands are you into from UK then? Who is good right now?' asks Michael.

'You realise I won't stop talking now yeah?' He smiles and nods. 'I'm well into Young Fathers, they're a Scottish band. There's a Welsh folk band called Calan. I'm getting into grime more, not proper followed it 'til now but Kano is awesome, Wretch 32, Stormzy of course, but I'm watching the Fire in the Booths more than listening to albums, apart from Kano's...'

'No punk?' he interrupts.

‘Yeah, no not really just now. I mean there’s bands about, lots of them, but I’m just not feeling it. Grime’s the new punk anyway, the whole d.i.y. thing, the rebellion, but I enjoy playing punk and writing the lyrics, just the freedom of it, like, y’know?’

‘Yes, I just wondered that your skills are wasted a little on punk. You should write a rap. Maybe.’ I’m about to say that punk brings out an aspect of my character that nothing else does, and that I love playing it live with the band, and we’re here to do just that; find a new sound, but he looks past me toward the beach and quietly whistles inwards. I turn to see Ceri with Paul. Walking close behind them is Karl, he’s talking with the smaller of the two yardies from earlier. ‘Maybe you’re in the right place,’ he says. ‘Do you know these guys?’

‘Yes they’re my friends, they’re the band.’

‘Bore da, you’re awake then?’ says Paul.

‘Thought I’d get a coffee, meet some people,’ I nod at Michael, introduce him to everyone.

‘Dw i’n hoffi coffi. Hi Michael,’ says Ceri pulling up a chair and giving Michael a full force smile.

‘Hi,’ he says, but is flitting his attention between Paul and the yardie.

‘Sasa Michael,’ says Karl and shakes his hand.

‘Ah fit,’ says Michael, looking a bit entertained.

‘I’ve been learning,’ says Karl to me.

‘First time for everything,’ I say.

‘This is Sam,’ says Karl.

‘Sasa shoga,’ says Sam to me and grips my shoulders as I sit in front of him, like we’re old mates. I look up and can’t see his eyes behind shades, which is scary cos I can’t tell if he’s worse or not. But he’s looking at Michael as he speaks so I’m not sure who he’s talking to.

Michael chin juts and says ‘Salama’ quietly, it’s worrying how withdrawn he seems but the others will just think that’s how he is.

‘Sam’s gunna get us sorted,’ says Karl, then sits in Ephraim’s chair. ‘Hey Sam, what’s ‘shoga’ mean?’

‘Friend,’ says Sam. ‘Him, you, him, him, all shoga,’ and his face breaks out a crack-teeth grin.

Ephraim returns with the waitress who’s carrying a tray with more coffee and what looks like sausages and egg. She places it on the table, looks at no-one but Sam and turns away quickly. Ephraim seems to be hanging back a little.

Sam watches her go, says, ‘Baadaye shoga, later,’ and makes a show of high fiving us all, even Ephraim and Michael give half-arsed attempts, but they don’t refuse.

‘Did not like him,’ says Ceri as she watches Sam move on down the beach.

‘Hey, shoga,’ says Karl to Ephraim who shakes his hand and looks around us to Michael who shrugs.

‘Hey,’ says Ephraim.

‘No, nobody likes him,’ says Michael to Ceri, ‘but do not fucking show it.’

‘Hey Karl,’ I say, beckoning him over with a finger like I need to whisper something to him.

‘Sup?’ he says leaning down to me.

‘I think you may need a shower Bud, jus’ sayin’,’ I whisper.

‘Oh, right, right. Cheers like. You had one?’

‘Yeah, feel much better for it. Now pay for this brekki and I’ll pay you back.’ He does his two finger pointing and click-click-wink thing towards the whole table and says, ‘I’m payin’ kids, I’ll be daddy,’ as he walks to the bar, and now I’m thinking of my father.



**Nanyuki, Kenya, 1997**

Borrowing is like a wedding, repaying is like mourning; I borrowed this man and kept him away from this woman and now is the repayment, in full, for him at least. He stands with his hand on the casket for these photographs as if he is trying to tell her it will all be fine, or perhaps to hold her down from rising up and demanding payment from the photographer. Her shape is little different in death, solid and squat, and I swear I can feel her judging me even more than in life, for keeping her boy away, the boy who took himself away and stayed away of his own accord long before I was around. Her wooden stare, it follows me through every angle in the garden.

I move to escape inside, though she could always see through walls and now will be no different. Matu does not watch me go, thronged as he is by distant relatives with stone faces for the flash. So sorry for your loss magnificent woman always an inspiration. Another man begins a tale before the casket as Wangiri's air-freshener hisses to cover her mother's escape. She is still finding a way to get under my skin. I know so few of these people but they all know me, or their version of me. I feel like a Nandi bear in plain sight; nobody's ever seen me but they know what I look like and that I'm a monster.

I photograph a large gathering by the buffet table. Click, wind-on. The predictability of the process is calming: first the aperture; then the depression of the index finger to balance the light, which I intuit correctly most times; then the focus twist until the half circles un-blur, mainly intuited; then the wait for the moment, that glance, that silhouette; then the shutter's bounce, a little slower here because I have no flash; and as I feel the resistance of the film against my thumb, the same weight every time, I see the picture emerge from the stop bath. This will be dark, I think, so the black suits will merge and the lillies will flash and, if I have

this right, that man's eye will be the only thing with a distinct edge, as he saw me and realised he was to be immortalised. The world is better filtered. But they know me by my camera I think, this glass and metal shield hanging over my heart. They think it shouldn't be here, that it's intrusive, that I'm not the official photographer so why should I be wielding such a thing. How are they to know that it is me, because it's a strange life to have one's heart, mind, and eye all in one metal box? And earnings; Odinga and his entourage will pass through Central and I need to be there to hop on and follow. This funeral is providing a welcome rest from the manic election trail though, I must say, quite the contrast. We may even be able to share a bed now that she's gone, I don't imagine his father will care either way.

Will I be enough? When Mother passed I had everyone, we had each other. Matu has just me. His sisters are both timid, withdrawn people. Wangari squeezed his arm, but perhaps that was an attempt to move it from the casket to avoid stains. Perhaps people with overbearing mothers turn out timid, especially mothers who constantly and pointedly praise and heap affection on the son, even when he's lifetimes away and doesn't notice. As with any funeral of a Great Kikuyu Matriarch there are people here who I bet even Aunt Mukondi doesn't know, haunting the edges of the rooms and garden with their grieving faces until they feel that enough grief has been imparted to warrant some sustenance. Maze I'm feeling morbid! Even for a funeral. It's the parallels though, the echoes. I must eat.

I reach an arm behind the man who I have just immortalised and take an ear of maize. He turns in that staccato way of old people who now only bend in two places, and twist in one, to face me. I am hindered from taking a bite because he is so close I worry he would be sprayed. 'Shikamoo?' I ask.

He raises his fried okra and nods as he chews. I look down on his pate as it catches the light. ‘Nzuri, nzuri,’ he mumbles. He makes a show of swallowing as if to say “There, I am ready to talk”.

‘Generous buffet,’ I say.

He nods, ‘They have always been so here,’ he says. Then, raising his voice and straightening up somewhat, ‘Makena knew how to treat a guest.’

Those nearby say ‘Yes,’ and ‘She did, she did.’

With the room listening he continues, ‘Once I came here for birthday drinks, to the bar with friends and family, for my fiftieth, when I was young,’ appreciative smiles all round, ‘and she brought us complementary wine, French I recall. We thanked her for that then and I thank her for that now. Blessed be.’

I join with the others in blessing her memory. Then a woman from her place against one wall speaks, ‘When my boy was very young I was passing here and he would not stop crying, teeth trouble, you know, and I was worried because he was disturbing everyone and I felt I had to hurry by. But Makena was on the verandah, gathering glasses and she said “Sister, bring your baby in here, I have something for him,” so I followed inside, and not one man there complained because we were with Makena, and she poured a fresh shot of whiskey and mixed a drop of water then took a clean cloth and dipped a corner in the whiskey and gave it to my boy to suck, and he instantly stopped crying. I thought maybe he wouldn’t like the taste, but she said “Here, take it, and enjoy the peace”, and I did, I enjoyed my day because of her. She knew that the alcohol would help the pain; me, I never even thought. Very clever and caring woman. Blessed be.’

‘Yes, very clever woman,’ says the man in front of me, as we all echo the blessing. There seems to be no imminent eulogies as some begin to speak to their neighbours again. He has a soft, friendly face, and I hope now that I have done him justice in my photograph. I

flick through my mental contact sheet, and I don't think he will recognise the expression I caught him with.

'Can I take your portrait?' I ask him. I will take a dignified portrait.

'Oh, yes, yes you can,' he fumbles around with his plate trying to put it down. I take it for him and place it on the corner of the table. 'Are you the official photographer?' he asks.

'No, not here. I am a professional though.'

'Very good,' he says, looking nervous and trying to assume a pose then changing his mind and attempting another.

The background is dark and the mourners will blend together if I keep a shallow depth of field, he will stand out. I step back a few paces and beckon him into the light. He obliges and just as he looks at me I take it. It will be a good one, his face is open and he is looking directly into the lense.

'Excellent, thank you,' I say.

'Oh, I wasn't ready,' he says.

'It's very good, don't worry. I will send you the result, perhaps to here and you can collect it.'

'Yes, thank you. It will give me an excuse to come to the bar. My name is Mwara,' and he shakes my hand in the most gentle way.

'Njoki,' I say, 'I am Matu's wife.' Why I feel I have to lie I don't know. Easier I suppose.

He says, 'Yes I know,' in a way that makes me think he knows that actually we're not married but is being kind to me. 'It must be nice to have him back from Scotland.'

It is. Or at least it was for a while. 'Yes, good to be together again.'

'Did you see Scotland?'

‘No, no too expensive, but also I’ve been away often myself, with work. I’m a journalistic photographer, freelance nowadays.’

He regards me with an expression between surprise and respect, ‘Have you photographed any famous people or events?’

‘I was very lucky in ninety to be in Cape Town with my father when Mandela literally walked past where we were staying, obviously with tens of thousands of others! But I climbed a small tree by the road, leaned down and took some shots. I got lucky with one and through my father’s contacts I managed to sell it.’ I never get tired of this story.

His eyes widen as I speak, ‘That is amazing, I have been photographed by the person who photographed Mandela.’ He smiles broadly then seems to realise where he is so contains himself a little. ‘And what were you doing in Cape Town? Is it true that it is the most beautiful African city?’

We were escaping Mother. We were covering Mandela’s release for The Standard, but we were escaping Mother. ‘Yes, it is true. One morning the mist from the sea evaporated and for a few minutes everything was covered in tiny glistening diamonds.’ And I was up early enough to see it because I’d woken from a dream about Mother and she’d told me everything was going to be fine, and she wasn’t shaking anymore. So I saw the mist clearing and the diamonds and truly believed that.

‘You have a photographer’s eye I see.’

‘Thank you. It was lovely to meet you, I’ll send the photograph here in about two weeks, goodbye,’ he shuffles to the side a little for me as I begin my rush for air out front, away from all these people. There are too many parallels for me.

‘Goodbye, yes,’ he says.

The verandah is cooler, still full of people though. I can’t bring myself to step off and away from all this, along the road back into town, hop on a mat’ to Nyeri to await the Odinga

carnival. Matu will have to move soon and when he does he'll need me. I should stay as the dutiful wife, wait faithfully for him. Faithful. That's not a word I want to conjure with just now; I'm conjuring enough ghosts, no need to summon devils too.

I am not one to believe that ghosts don't exist outside, or are burned away by the sun, because I am never free of mine. Now I have two mothers haunting me, so it makes no difference what I do with my thoughts. The cheek of Makena to name this lodge "Kirinyaga view" when one can't see the mountain. Faith may move mountains but belief sticks them where they don't exist. The view is lovely nevertheless, a peaceful lane with just enough life kicking up and down to happily sit and watch the world go by: eucalyptus, baobab, pine, many flowering plants that Matu will know the names of, all lending their scents to the mountain air. It is always so fresh here.

I watch a bee fly past, in a straight, purposeful line. Mother always said that bees communicated with each other by flight, that's why sometimes they seem so chaotic, othertimes so direct. We watched them speak, she interpreted so faithfully. The shock of her striking one in the room. She had changed so. Grief is shock, that's why I still shake on the inside. Perhaps that's why she shook.

The bee zooms past Old Matu, sat in his corner. He's looking at me. I'm scared of his grief; what does one say? To lose a parent is a normal, pre-ordained thing. To lose a child, well, there can be nothing worse. It would seem that nobody else knows what to say to him either as he is sat alone, a small circle of space around his corner. Probably what he wants. He is wearing a pristine light blue suit, three piece and expensive looking. He raises his stick and points at me then flicks it towards him. He smiles a lovely smile with creases around his eyes like river deltas. I sit next to him and I feel like a child now, I don't think it's solely because I'm so much younger, I just feel something inside me give way.

'Why do you look so sad little Njoki?'

‘It’s the funeral, you know?’ I stumble out and realise the pretence of it as I do.

‘Ha, Njoki, Njoki. I know what she was like with you. Nobody could ever be good enough for her prince. Don’t worry, she had a good eye for business, the best, but not for people. Don’t worry, Matu will always wander, you will follow your work, important work, more important than that silly little dreamer’s! Perhaps one day the paths will join, nothing to be sad about. So, why are you sad?’

This short, solid, baobab man always confounds my expectations of his riika. I always thought that life was plotted for people and the elders hold the map and dictate the route. Many do, but this one, this one gives you the map and says “Go, fill in the blanks”. ‘I am sad for Matu, and you, and the others.’

‘She will always be with Matu, don’t worry for him. He had a wonderful mother and with his imagination he probably always will. As for me I have watched her life through, from beginning to end. A priveledge. Not many people get to do that.’ He watches me as I squeeze my hands between my knees to fight back tears, ‘Sorrow is not the enemy little one, sorrow is your comrade fighting with you. Sorrow is memory. It took me many deaths and two births to understand that.’

I don’t want to have to understand that, ‘Guka, I don’t think...’

He interrupts with a hand on my hand as he looks past my shoulder, ‘That’s right, don’t think. Look, here they come.’ I hadn’t noticed the taxi pull in. The driver opens the rear door and helps an old pastor out. The other door opens and out steps a man in a suit who looks like he has never worn one before, and, most strikingly to me, looks like Matu if Matu had been dessicated then beaten until he lost a few inches. The driver looks at each man as he utters condolences. Both black-clad men move towards the house. The driver takes a step with them and helps the pastor onto the verandah. The pastor thanks him and continues

inside, offering blessings to those nearby. The other man digs into a pocket and reluctantly hands over some money.

‘Two people calling themselves Father,’ says Guka, then a curse word I don’t understand, but it sounds almost like a spell. People near us look very uncomfortable. Matu’s father stands a brief while after the taxi has gone, surveying the front of the lodge and swaying slightly. He looks over to Guka and away again. He lights a cigarette and walks through the breach created by the pastor, which, in expectation of him, had not closed. Murmurs rise.

Guka is looking ahead to the top of the pine trees. I look at my hands still squished between my knees, ‘So, that’s Matu’s father then. I always wondered.’

Guka remains still, ‘Yes. Idiot of a man. Was a good farmer once, well, good at resolving border disputes into his favour. Good with a machete if you know what I mean. But never a match for my girl.’ I see him breathe in deeply, ‘Then, no good at being a host. No good at gambling. Very good at drinking. Still, at least he turned-up.’ I follow his gaze to the pines and we sit a while together in silence. After some minutes he knocks back his rum, slams the glass down. I startle out of my thoughts about how we pass things on, about death, about children yet to be born. ‘It is time, we don’t want her to be late. She lived and died hurrying, so let’s get her buried quickly.’ He stands and offers me his arm. I take it and he leads me into the lodge. I’m not sure who is aiding who. The mourners part for him and the respect is tangible, like a heat. They follow behind, through the bar and out into the garden. Behind the casket, from where we approach, are tables full of flowers. Guka chooses two and hands me one of them. Matu and his sisters turn to us as Guka hits his stick a few times on the casket, ‘Come on, let’s get going,’ he says like he’s organising a family outing.

Matu cannot speak but gathers his flower and takes my other arm. Aunt Mukondi does the same with Guka, and the twins follow with their four children. Their husbands,



Matu's father, and a few other men struggle with the casket. 'Everything has changed,' says Matu to himself I think, although it was loud enough for me to hear. The pastor opens the side gate to the family's close fields, at the far end of which is a raised area where many small, clean stones have been gathered, which in contrast to the red earth, shine in the sun.

We arrive at the edge of the stones. In the centre the grave is prepared. Guka is looking across the far fields, across the forest, up above a thin haze to the sharpness of Kirinyaga. One can see the mountain from here. 'In sight of Ngai,' he says. The pastor steadfastly ignores him and busies himself with holy water and prayers. Aunt Mukondi and other lay folk assist him. Guka turns to face the crowd who fill the field down to the gate and are still arriving. The singing and wailing subside as he begins to speak, 'My daughter's heart was so big it killed her in the end. Nothing from the outside was strong enough to do so,' he pauses, and everyone is as silent as they can be. I hear muffled sobs, engines on the road into town, some birdsong, the breeze in the pines beyond the field boundary. His head is down for the first time since I have been with him. He is still holding my hand so I squeeze a little. He looks up and continues, 'She leaves behind strong, beautiful children, a successful business and charitable foundation, and the happiness of her memory. She has led the way, as she always did, always first, always hurrying against time, always fighting time,' he pauses again, his jaw clenching, his grip tightening. He looks up again and proclaims loudly, 'Always fight, never yield!' Then his breath seems to fail him and he leans on me a little. We turn and he plants the stem of his flower in the earth by the grave. I do also. It is now time for others to speak as they plant their stems so we huddle to the side and listen to how much his daughter meant to everyone. Matu seems stronger, although he still hasn't spoken.

By the time she is buried the singing is loud and a forest of flowers grows around her. Guka and Aunt Mukondi lead the way back down to the lodge. Matu stands near me as we watch everyone file back inside. It will be dark soon. 'She was the best mother anyone could

ever have, I love her dearly,' he says and finally plants his flower. He looks at me and shrugs, 'What more could I say?' he asks with a wan smile. He wipes his eyes with his sleeve and inhales shakily, he appears to have reached some kind of equilibrium and calm now. 'Will we continue to fight?'

'Yes,' I say, 'don't think you are off any hook.' But this is not the time to be arguing about faithfulness and commitment. I move closer to him and place my forehead on his chest, he puts his arms around me. I look up to his tired face, 'I think we will be fighting for a very, very long time.'

### Croyde, England, 2016

I'm thinking of buses like cave men thought of comets, probably. It's not just me is it? I mean everything *is* actually going wrong or over the edge or under a bus. And not just a big bus with lies written across it. I mean, that was the first one, screaming bullshit into a pliant media, but now I'm thinking of buses as portents of doom. They come in threes don't they?

Bus Number Two: 'Let's escape it all,' said Davy (don't think about how we're basically doing what we normally do but five hours away surrounded by different accents on slightly better waves), and the first thing of note to happen on our mini-break was a flying biker, no bike, just the horizontal biker and a noise like a chainsaw. I leapt out of the van, Davy said something about gloves and checking around whilst I threaded my way through the paralysed traffic and was over too quick before I had time to think. I think, though now I remember hoping there was no blood, no dislocation, that someone else would get there first, although I didn't slow so that says something about me and my stubbornness. I also think there was something else.

'Stop thinking about it,' says Davy from inside the van. He's lying on the bed and I'm lying on the grass outside, staring at the whitest clouds drifting across the bluest blue like in the opening to the Simpsons. 'Let's go for a shower then down to the pub eh?'

The biker hit the side of a bus with *X-Men: Apocalypse* advertised on it, truthfully I presume, and slid down to the tarmac. The sound was so new; it's just not a sound you hear is it? Leather-clad flesh into aluminium panel. Horror film faces stared, not one of them moved to help. Driver comes out...

'Yeah,' I say.

And the driver came out and looked down at the guy's distorted form and collapsed to the floor himself, in two stages, clutching his chest with one hand and sliding down the door handrail with the other. I dithered between the two wondering which to help first. Davy arrived behind me just as the biker started to scream-moan, moan-scream, and said, 'You check the old guy,' pointing at the driver, and I felt relief and gratitude to him for making a choice, but there was something else, something harder to reach.

I need him to stop hassling me for a second. I need some space to think. I need the sky above me as opposed to the van's roof because it's what? Open? Vacantly awaiting my thoughts? Non-judgemental? Pure? I don't want people around me: humanity, British citizens. I'm liking the sounds of gulls and the children playing swing-ball on the pitch opposite, but we should have gone to France; nobody voted Leave there, although I wonder if more than one in four of them would have.

'Come on then,' says Davy swinging his feet down onto the grass beside me. He drops my towel over my head and I see it fall in slow motion for a second, arcing and billowing a white edge across my vision before removing the light and replacing it with a meadow fresh smell. The daisies and grass I'm lying on do not smell like this. I could smell the driver's breath, mints and flask tea, and his skin was so malleable and lightly stubbled, so intimate, so suddenly intimate with this old guy's floppy face in my hands and head tilt-chin lift back and watch the chest how the fuck can I tell if it's rising or not beyond the toes the biker is propping himself up on one hand has his helmet off and is swinging it at Davy and primal screaming don't touch me who hit me

'Stop thinking about it,' says Davy to the towel.

'Why's it always me first on a scene?'

'What?' he says, probably due to the towel. It's getting warm under here.

'It's always me having to do first aid.'

‘Because you’re quick and you’re brave,’ he says. I can tell he’s about to remove the towel because his voice is much nearer and I feel the vibration of his feet adjusting through the earth. I keep my eyes closed as the light turns my eyelids red. But I wasn’t brave, I couldn’t bring myself to do mouth to mouth or even start the compressions. I couldn’t decide how nearly dead the guy needed to be. I was waiting for him.

‘Davy?’

‘Yeah babe.’

‘I don’t think I’m a good person, like, deep down, ultimately.’

‘Well, we know you’re not a bad person don’t we?’

‘No. Do we? I haven’t thought about Kweli all week till I was kneeling over the driver, made me remember seeing him out cold down by Shit Pipe.’

‘It’s been a busy week though, you’ve not been off *Facebook* and *Twitter*, you’ve not been yourself really, to be honest.’

‘No, but that’s it Day, it is myself; this is myself.’ He’s not normally seeing the good in people, he’s normally far more grumpy. Funny, I once took that for him being the strong silent type, then for a having a healthy cynicism for all aspects of life, now I think he’s plain old grumpy. However he does always see the best in me, and hasn’t been moody for a while recently.

‘The Katy I know would do this, yes, you’re right. The Katy I know would run towards trouble to try to help, then beat herself up over it cos she, lemme guess, didn’t help well enough?’

That’s not it. I mean I am a perfectionist but I realise that in such a chaotic situation I couldn’t have done much more. Well, I could have actually given CPR, but the paramedic said there wasn’t anything I could have done to make a difference anyway. But a tiny bit of help would have made all the difference, maybe, just a few percentage points, like by three

point eight percent or so. These calamitous buses are looming and merging into each other through this mind fog. It's all about small margins. I need to be alone, get out on the waves. Perhaps Davy's right, perhaps this isn't me. 'The paramedics were nice though weren't they, saying there was nothing we could have done?'

'Yeah, and they were right you know? Our job was to keep them alive, you can't be a bad person on that scale now can you?' I can tell he's not beating himself up about this at all, even though he didn't even get close to the biker, only calmed him down until he sat propped up against the rear wheel and then slumped. Davy crouched and watched him the whole time never touching him once. How long was it?

'How long was the whole incident, from crash to ambulance, d'you reckon?'

'About five minutes, they must've been close.' So basically I ineffectually pushed the guy's chest for about three minutes then. What was I thinking? Why am I stuck on this?

'They carried on with the driver didn't they?' I sit up and meet his eyes, 'In the ambulance; they carried on resuscitating him didn't they?'

'Yes, of course.' Davy'd know, he's a surf lifeguard after all. He's a good person. 'The other people helping him won't be thinking this you know?'

'What other people?'

'That teenage girl, with the massive hooped earrings, you know? The one doing mouth to mouth whilst you did the chest. You don't remember?' he says slightly surprised and concerned. I'd be concerned.

'Like *Staying Alive*,' she said, 'ah-ha-ha-ha, Staying Alive, Staying Alive. That's better.' I remember her, coaching me the rhythm, which I knew but needed her to remind me, or help me. She looked like one of Kweli's friends. Could have been.

'She was good, she was awesome.'

'She was, she helped get people over to help me. Proper loud voice she had.'

I needed the driver to be more dead to press harder on him.

‘I remember as I ran towards the biker, Davy, I remember hoping he was dead. And I didn’t remember that till just now, and I didn’t remember the girl. What the fuck’s the matter with me?’ Davy shuffles forward on his knees and wraps his arms round me, and I’m not even crying but I am shaking. I need the sky and the space around me so I have to push him away, though I know how it’ll seem.

‘Fine, ok. You have a think, I’m off for a shower, then we can have a nice walk to the pub and a pint yeah?’

I nod. I stay sitting upright because if I lie back I think the world will tilt. I hear him flick the towel, slide the van door shut – slightly too hard maybe, not too angrily maybe – then flip-flop away to the shower block. My hands are cold and numb and I can’t breathe in far enough, or out far enough, not sure. When did this happen last? Day after Kweli was born, then for around two weeks until what I once thought of as me could just fade away into his eyes. When I came back into focus I was fine again, re-focussed, energized. With Dougs and Sarah and Mam as house help I could spend hours skin to skin with my warm boy to feel our heartbeats regulate each other. All the predicted stress evaporated as our new reality formed together. If I could cast my voice back to myself then, to the me of Mam and Dad’s disappointment in my career, and the me shocked by their recoil on seeing their brown grandchild, knee-jerk boomer racism across their faces before they rescued the situation with some baby talk. If I could hear me now, back then, I’d kneel beside my single bed and gently stroke my hair whilst I slept, whisper that it will all be fine, that he’ll help you to do it, he’ll tell you what he needs and you’ll know; just listen to Kwel and trust him, trust yourself.

I breathe along with the distant waves, beyond the jumbled rooftops of Croyde and the tourist shops selling beach tat and ice cream, and I edit out the people, the splashing masses on the shore, to focus on the white lines gliding constantly shoreward in parallel arcs.

I flop down onto my front, chin on hands just above the tickling grass and my eyes follow the convex curve of the campsite meadow away and over the steepening drop into the town below. Gulls soar on thermals, dive in and out of my vision, occasionally twitch a wing to accelerate towards some suddenly sensed opportunity. If I concentrate on the birds I begin to feel their patterns are more than reactions to random variations in air temperature, or maximisation of opportunities for food or sex, it feels like they're trying to tell me something in the same way that bees or ants communicate with each other. Why me? Probably cos I'm the only one watching, or mental enough to understand them. Probably need to stop seeing omens and portents really, can only lead one way.

Bus Number Three: Like magpies – *three for a girl* – on Ceri's *WhatsApp* vid to show they made it. She must have her hand outside the bus angling it back; the boys have stood on the seats – respectful of where they are, embarrassing lads – shoved their heads up to the narrow opening at the top of the windows, look like a bunch of dogs in cars with their hair being blown around, almost believe I can see lolling tongues. Paul's first, then a pane behind is Karl, then Kweli at the back so I can only just make out it's him.

I watch it repeat and repeat and repeat.

Ceri kept cropping out Paul's whooping head and turning the lens towards Kweli. This is either because Paul was annoying/embarassing her with his shouting of 'Fucking freedom, woo-hoo!' over and over; entirely possible, or she wanted her brother more included in the shot because she was sending it home for their mam. Or, most likely I think, she wanted more of Kweli in there, either consciously or subconsciously. Whichever, Paul is in her bad books and Kwel is taking her attention.

Paul is a fucking liability. What is it about teenage boys, or maybe men in general, that makes them think it's okay to act like dick-heads because the chief dick-head is acting like a dick-head and they want to what, emulate him? Seek his approval? Don't they stop that



behaviour after year six? Obviously not. Around view number twenty I start noticing a local guy on the side of the road staring daggers as they sped past above him. The difference between their clothing was stark; all wearing tee-shirts but one faded pastel, the others neon; one covered in red dust, the others teflon clean. It's the relative movement that's stuck with me though; the way he receded out of shot into the haze of exhaust and dust cloud as they sped towards their little adventure, buzzing on potential. Matu would explain it better than me, but that movement I see is through time too; the kids on the bus are still kids at eighteen and nineteen, allowed to be naïve and free, the man fading away into their distance seems around their age but has the look of agelessness, like a ghost.

Matu. When I saw the three lads hanging out the window I initially mistook Kweli for Matu, for a gasping split second. I then somehow blended him into the background by assuming he was some local lad they'd met, hence the fact they'd thought it okay to stand on the bus seats; cos the local was justifying it. This questions too much about me. This current Brexit shockwave that keeps aftershocking through, multiple times a day, is nothing compared to the tsunami of maternal failure that's fast approaching my shore: Kweli does not look the same as Matu; Kweli does not look like any other young black lad; Kweli has escaped my seemingly suffocating urge to deny him any access to his black past in order to get a fix on who he is in the world, and why the hell would I be doing that? Why is it I ignore undercurrents in my psyche, drown the distant voice saying bad things? Like: you want the biker to be dead to make things easier for you; you want Kweli to be able to ignore half of himself to make it easier for him... for me. I've raised him as white and bleached anything that might have troubled him, as if somehow he'd stay that way; untroubled and fitting in. Colour blind? Colour deaf and dumb more like. No wonder I'm so obsessed with this vid, for the first time in his life half of my son is suddenly visible and invisible to me at the same time; it's like a trick of the light.

\*

We've escaped buses for now, walked down to town from our perch on the high campsite and I feel like I'm walking in my own view from earlier, like I'm still up there watching and playing a *SIMS* version of me, navigating myself around through steep short-cut alleyways to avoid any bus-able roads. I wrap an arm around Davy's waist as we walk and he pulls me in tight, now I don't have to make any navigational decisions. Davy's surprisingly chipper considering we've kinda argued and he's been involved in a trauma incident today. I wonder how he deals with it, something along the lines of; problem over, dealt with, move on. He's also in a good mood cos he's gunna meet up with some of his old competition mates later so can't be looking vulnerable amongst all that alpha surf dude shit. I really hope it's not too alpha cos that's very much not the vibe of *our* mini-break *together*. Must also factor in being over forty doesn't lend itself to getting shit-faced and still being able to surf well the next day.

The pub's pretty full with tourists, like us I suppose, but there was a time when you could tell who was a surfer and who was a norm, until surf scene style became ubiquitous. I don't know if alcohol's a good idea just now, might spin me out a little too much, but Davy's sidestepped to a side bar to beat the queue and is probably ordering me a pint. The barmaid looks young. I think she's saying about how it's just food at this point, and Davy's giving her the charm I can tell cos she quickly pours him two pints then glows in his attention. Men actually get hotter with age cos they finally lose the dick-head vibe and project (not necessarily achieve, mind) something approaching competence. The barmaid glances at me as Davy hands me my pint, that instant look up and down taking in style, weight, boobs, hair, face, make-up/ no make-up, age, threat. Her downturned mouth shows I've been found

unequal to the silver fox. We slink away to a pillar with a spare beer ledge before the main queue notice us. Wish I could sit down though, how old am I?

The landlord has fallen for the usual seaside pub décor: lobster pots, glass buoys, hints at rigging and piracy, nets, an ancient wooden finless Mal. It feels like we're leaning against the main mast and I can't find my bearings. I'm adrift because none of this is real, there's no north star for me now, no salient points. This is the first place we've been out to since the vote and I'd have fitted right in amongst all these people ten days ago because they seem like my people. Now, I can't help but feel threatened that every one in four of them is a narrow minded, racist bigot. And how would I know because they're all wearing the same clothes as me? Not a polo shirt with top button done-up, flat cap, wax jacket or thirties' hair style anywhere. And yet a quarter of them are twats.

'Have you text Kweli yet?'

I show him the video Ceri sent me, 'Yes, but I've just got this in reply.'

'Looks like they're fitting right in,' he says, thinks a little as he swigs, then, 'Isn't that the same as one of them buses you had up in Scotland? Same colours.' Christ, the things he notices and remembers, yet he forgot, genuinely totally forgot my birthday twice. Fucking twice. He's right though, we took one of those Fife Stagecoach buses to Crail when he visited to try to find the smuggler's ladders. Couldn't find any ladders and ended up fucking in a cave. Crazy times. Probably why he remembers.

I wonder what he means by 'fitting right in', or whether he realises what he might have meant. I'm super sensitive right now. He seems to have noticed someone coming in over my shoulder cos he's straightened and his face opens as he raises his free hand. He keeps it raised and clasps his mate in that arm wrestle way that men do nowadays, 'Jack you old fucker, how you doin?'

Jack's slapping Davy's shoulder, 'Yur still a beast eh mate? All that free gym work paying off.'

'You've gorra when you're our age avenyou?' It's funny how Valleys Davy gets when he's speaking to English people. 'You remember Katy?' turns to me then hugs Jack's partner and excitedly starts blathering away to her. She's immaculate, I guess I just did the judgement look: she's toned and tanned, mid-thirties, elegant and relaxed in a black shirt and skinny jeans. She throws her head back and laughs loudly at something Davy says to her, then wags her finger playfully in his face. Davy's high fiving a few more lads who've come in after Jack, they look more like us; bit scruffy.

Jack says, 'Of course, couldn't forget,' pecks me on the cheek. Jack's like a slighter version of Davy but with curlier hair and a bar piercing through his ear. I remember him from parties down here after comps, has that swagger that comes from being the best whilst still being friendly and easy to talk to. Sponsor's dream. Jack says, 'That's Sofia, I'll introduce you,' so the plan is the women chat whilst the men drunkenly reminisce.

She's lovely, of course, super warm smile and touches my arm. We've been left to lean together on the main mast. All I want to do is ask her about her kids. She almost certainly has no kids. 'How're you?'

'Well, so busy, you know? Just so busy. You know how they leave you to do all the editing, like, think they've done all the work by surfing and walking along the beach with the wetsuit unzipped, though it does make a good thumbnail don't you think?'

'Yes.'

'Though it's the van-life collection that gets all the hits, and we're getting shed loads of completely different merch and placement offers, stuff I never knew anything about before, like shower systems and expanding insulation, I mean who knew?' She's taking her

phone out and her glass tilts menacingly as her thumb, very bony thumb, turns the brightness up.

‘No, I mean, you wouldn’t would you.’

She starts scrolling through their channel, ‘But we won’t include anything without thorough research first, into the company and its ethos and beliefs. I mean we couldn’t represent any negative end point stuff or anything which isn’t fully conscious, you know?’ I notice many thumbnails feature her in a bikini or Jack’s six pack.

‘Oh, solar showers. I had one of those once.’ She pauses on that one... *1.5M views*, Bloody hell! They’re laughing together in the shower, all wet, happy, sexy, fun.

‘Jeez, connection’s so slow out here,’ she suddenly pockets her phone, ‘Anyway... Iceland?’

‘The shop or the country?’ What’s she on about?

‘Davy’s not said? We’re planning a surf trip to Iceland. *C-Skins* have a crew lined up, this one guy’s ay-may-zing with a drone. Can you imagine the shots out there?’

‘Yeah, stunning landscape, always wanted to go.’ Why the hell has Davy not mentioned this?

‘We were thinking about the look, so important to have the look,’ she touches my arm again and fishes her phone out, ‘See, how we were so basic in our earliest shoots, no idea about tone or even – look, look, see that camera shake and framing, terrible, I shudder! – or even narrative. Now we’re into close ups, details, and long landscape shots, you know how that works with the juxtaposition, see here... and here... It’s sooo much about the landscape; that’s the star. Well, that and the van. You can sell anything by setting it in the right landscape don’t you think? Makes it almost spirtual.’

‘Yes, totally; very pro. Beautiful.’ It is. I’m glancing up to Davy who’s almost close enough to grab, but he’s engrossed in chat with the lads.

‘Anyway, we wondered about asking Davy along, for the feel of it. You know; gnarly old soul surfer, face that looks good in black and white,’ she says this with total sincerity, which I’ve noticed after my laugh.

‘Yeeeeas. Not sure about the soul bit, more of a scowl to anyone else in the line-up. You’ve got the gnarly and old bit right though. When’s this for? You’d better get all your travelling in before Brexit.’

She scrunches her face up, looks cute, voraciously gulps down the last of her wine, shrugs, ‘Never going to happen. Anyway, we’re shipping the van to Halifax, Nova Scotia, meeting up with it end of August, then we’re overlanding to Tierra del Fuego motherfuckers,’ waves one arm in the air like she’s just heard the drop in a rave, ‘take our time, take years. Then we’ll head to Tokyo for the Olympics in twenty twenty. It’s our twenty twenty vision,’ she winks. ‘What do you want, wine? I’ll get us a bottle,’ arm touch, ‘save our space.’

She weaves away barward. I’m free to lunge for Davy’s shoulder, pull him back to me as his mates all yell and laugh at his attempts not to spill his pint. ‘What the fuck?’ I ask him.

‘What, ‘what the fuck?’’ he hedges, trying to maintain his banter smile.

‘Sofia just told me. Why didn’t you blydi say anything, thought you couldn’t trust me or something?’

He looks defensive with a quick downturn to his mouth, then casts a weird expression I don’t think I’ve seen before in all our time together, a kinda wince-smile-frown, ‘Thought you’d kill me maybe, if I said; I know how strongly you feel about it and everything.’

I do strongly dislike his track record of organising surf trips without me as he still won’t tone it down to accommodate my standard, ‘Well you have set a few precedents in our time.’ I lightly punch his belly, smile, let him know I’d be up for coming on this one as it sounds fun.

‘Like what,’ he asks with a quick shrug.

‘Oh I dunno, let me see... there was Morocco, Bali, Portugal, even Cornwall.’

‘What?’ he says leaning down to me a bit, ‘What are you on about?’

‘You know; what you and Sofia talked about.’

‘Brexit?’ he says, then he flushes red and his eyes dart to the bar. He takes a long swig.

‘Iceland.’ That voice I suppress, the one that tries to tell me the things I ignore, things I don’t like, I feel it’s about to scream. There’s something very wrong with how guilty Davy’s acting. He was saying something to Sofia about Brexit, she wagged a finger at him, he laughed. What did he say? ‘What d’you mean ‘Brexit’?’ He’s swigged again, is that buying thinking time?

‘Oh we just discussed it last time I saw her, you know. But yeah, yeah Iceland; I was gunna ask you about it, but what with the crash and everything it just didn’t come up.’

‘You never discuss Brexit, you’ve basically ignored it.’

‘Did with her, well you’ve seen what she’s like, never shuts up. Speak of the devil.’

Sofia places a bottle of red on our shelf and leans in next to me. ‘We’re just sayin about Iceland,’ Davy says to her.

She says to me, ‘You must come, we’ll have such a laugh,’ arm touch, ‘we can hang around in hot springs whilst these macho schmucks can freeze their bollocks off and risk their lives surfing past icebergs to earn money to spend on us,’ she slides her arm around my waist and sticks her tongue out at Davy. All this is happening in slow motion. My feet feel rooted to the ground, my hands look too far away as I reach for the wine to pour another one. Sofia flirtatiously clinks her glass next to mine, ‘Yes please.’ She won’t know me by the end of the year, probably never see me again after Iceland, yet she’s assuming some sort of intimacy. I guess she treats everyone like this. She’s taking a selfie of us, with her mouth open like she’s cheering.

I'll see if I can divert her to what she and Davy may have been on about, 'I'd love to go, probably be the last place we ever visit before Brexit happens.' I keep my gaze on Davy, he gulps more beer, looks towards the lads.

Sofia says, 'It'll never happen,' then emphasising each word with a finger wag in Davy's face, 'Never. Going. To. Happen.'

'We'll see, we'll see,' says Davy, with a quick glance at me before barging back amongst the lads. My cold spine tells me it was a guilty glance.

'Protest vote, quiet cute when you think about it,' says Sofia as she clinks her glass on mine like we're celebrating something.



### Watamu, Kenya, 2016

This is the way it'll happen:  
 MJ, dancin, then trappin,  
 so white line numb we'll be tappin  
 out our own beat proper messin  
 with my head because our essence  
 was never tested like we've never  
 even sexted, she's not my sister  
 and we're not like fuckin Lannisters,  
 but this whole thing's got me vexin  
 and stretchin our parameters,  
 least one thing's non-debatable  
 man's pen is fuckin seminal.

But we won't exist til I commit  
 and risk eclipse but that's seismic  
 can't take that hit can't take that hit  
 so fuck this shit just fuck this shit  
 like Melania Trump, like a dildo blunt,  
 like an asteroid impacting Uranus,  
 that's twice as barren and full of gas  
 (like the Shell in Sketty not her or my ass).

Wait... I'll get my mind out the gutter  
 and all over this beat like cocoa butter,  
 mmmm smells funky,  
 like cheese in my muntered freezer,  
 like James Brown or King Kunta,  
 like P with Dot I can't lose this rot,  
 man's brain's so wrong so shake your feet  
 and move your booty like a 90s freak,  
 like an old skool cutie with Jordans sneaks  
 and jump sisterfucker jump sisterfucker jump  
 ('bout as G as Sweet Baboo dancin to Betty Boo in the jungle with Baloo).

Where was I? oh yeah,  
 stuck in this corner with my torture,  
 Dizzy with thoughts of how to approach her,  
 don't wanna scare her, man-like a spectre  
 should be like Skepta - get better known,  
 should be like Kele to break this block

and party and freak but I'm just a geek,  
 not Childish no more, that's long gone now,  
 I'm the Don of introspection,  
 the contemplation bore,  
 the facilitator of  
 face-time  
 pauses...

awkward as:

your mam and my mam and random man's cum on their mammary glands and she knows that you've seen it flickin through her phone pics at Christmas bit pissed and you could have pretended that nothing had happened without her side-eye so you speed up your swipes from the left to the right and you're dying inside cos there's no confiding this kinda shit, and nothing will ever be the same again...

Ok, maybe, not quite that awkward...

See, silence is just distance in time,  
 so fuck it I've got bigger fish to fry  
 lookin for my face in every face on the planet  
 got my ticket for the orbit  
 got myself transported  
 but we're all so muthafuckin split,  
 bomb vests, Fukushima bricks,  
 man's Geiger waitin for the click  
 tick tock tick tock apocalypse,  
 as the final fish falls from the sky  
 I'll be trippin like a blind man,  
 chasin a hurricane to find the eye.

'You wrote this?'

'Oi! get out of my stuff. Karl. Karl? Oi. Did you read it?'

'Bit of a departure.'

'It's just a few thoughts like.'

'You thinkin of leavin us and goin solo?'

'No, never. Just wondered if I'd be any good at rappin like.'

'Av you gorra beat for it? Or d'you reckon on workin it into something?'

‘No, naa, it’s just ideas like.’

‘Some of it’s a bit weird, bit strange, but then so are you so it’s fine.’ He’s being a bit weird, stood there dripping in a towel, probs lost all the insect repellent off his skin. He’s got a weird rib-cage. Anyways I hope he’s not got all the references and I’m pissed off with him for reading it, hope he doesn’t realise it’s all about his sister. How could he not though? He’ll either ask me directly now or pretend nothing’s happened.

‘Who’s the girl in it? The sister?’ Bollocks.

‘Oh, you know, just thoughts. You’ve got to have something to hang it all on yeah?’

‘Yeah, yeah Fam, but why’d you go all weird and incesty with it?’

‘The point is she’s not my sister, but *like* my sister, you know. It just allows for some freaky shit; freaky is funky, right?’

‘Yeah, Fam, yeah... Not anyone we know though no?’

‘Dunno what you mean, course not, naa.’

‘Okeedokee then. The dad bit’s good like. I mean, it’s all good, get me, but the dad bit’s the best. I like that bit.’

‘Thanks.’ He’s a good mate, he really is, ‘Thanks Bruv.’

‘And the Mam bit? Your Mam never, I mean you never saw...’

‘Fuck’s sake.’

‘By the way, you got to have a shower boy, it’s an experience! You got to dodge the wires on one side and one fuckin huge spider on the other. Love this place.’

For fuck’s sake. ‘I’ll just swim in the sea thanks, take my chances with the jellies.’

‘That sort of attitude, Kendrick, is not gonna get you the girl of your dreams. She might, you know, have a thing for men smellin nice. You know, she might have mentioned it once or twice. Just sayin.’

‘Yeah, thanks. Thanks for that. Thought I was more of a Childish Gambino to be honest.’ He’s a good lad.

‘Come to think of it you look a bit like him. Don’t fuckin rap like him though. Stay behind the drums. At the back. Like a goalie. Safe pair of hands, you, don’t be gerrin ideas.’

‘Underappreciated, that’s all I’m sayin. One day I’ll walk, then we’ll see, then we’ll all know.’

‘Drum track, 909, that’s all I’m sayin.’

Fuck’s sake. ‘You ready to go?’ He’s still got his towel round his waist. I can hear the music from the shore, the nyangile calling me. The smell of dodgy kush, good kush, but I know what it’s fuckin cost, and not just in shillings. I s’pose it’s all dodgy really, all rolled and smoked bad karma. To be brutally honest the thing really calling me is the deep voiced laughter of other men and my need to ensure it’s not directed at or joining in with Ceri in any way. I’ll have a shower in deet, that’s the style for me.

Karl whips off his towel, I just manage to look away in time, Jesus. He pulls on some khaki shorts and a dark green vest, ties a red bandana around his head and says, ‘Ready.’

‘Ready for what? Combat duty in Vietnam? You’re gunna get bitten to fuck like that.’

‘Naa, I’m immune. Garlic pills, keeps off the vampires.’

I wondered what the smell was.

## Commentary

### A Nervous Novel

Nervous System writing, what is that? It is writing that finds itself implicated in the play of institutionalized power as a play of feints and bluffs and as-ifs taken as real in which you are expected to play by the rules only to find there are none and then, like a fish dangling on the hook, you are jerked into a spine-breaking recognition that yes! after all, there are rules. And so it goes. Not a system but a Nervous System, a nervously nervous Nervous System.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Taussig

1.

Medical anthropologist Michael Taussig's concept of nervous system writing came to him on his return to Sydney from the Putumayo area of Columbia. He was trying to make sense of the chaos and violence in the agri-business, cocaine growing, animistic world he had just left. Trying to write it down, translate his experience, mediate, which is to say impose order upon it, systematize: 'we have order – the other doesn't – I saw the graffiti on a ferry stop in the harbor. *Nervous System*, it said, ominous in its enigmatic might. A sign from the gods? A system on the verge of a nervous breakdown?'<sup>10</sup> He was reading a British Consul report on the colonial atrocities of the 1912 rubber boom, '(T)he violence was too much to read, my mind shuts off, has to be exaggerated, but now it's not violent enough, whoa! where am I going with this, with myself?'<sup>11</sup> Here we see the simultaneity and bi-directionality of the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf: Writing Apotropaic Texts* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

Nervous System at work, the split meaning in/of the/his nervous system's 'breakdown'. He means *both* the breakdown of order through the violent land grab of the British, setting in motion events leading to the chaos of the Columbia he just vacated *and* his own breakdown from the experience of, and reading about, that violence. It was a split in his ordered consciousness caused by a split in the social body. The question then became, how to write so as not to reinforce the violence of the area or the damage to his own psyche: '(W)hat sort of story can cut across and deflect those violence stories, this being every bit as much a question of art and of ritual as it is of social science?'<sup>12</sup> It is a question that cuts to the quick of ethnography, an anxiety about the ethics of participant observation and therefore the entire anthropological project to authoritatively represent the other, a project powered by and informing the colonial hubris of definition and containment. Social science's adoption of the objectivity of science was a 'magical' act as intricate as the rituals it sought to 'explain', says Taussig: 'to claim the rhetoric of systematicity's determinisms and yet except oneself is an authoritarian deceit, a magical wonder', to combat which Taussig posits a writing which is 'contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented', which necessarily is 'no less systematically nervous than the NS itself'.<sup>13</sup>

I need that kind of writing. I need to 'write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes'.<sup>14</sup> *Splitters* formed as a natural result of living and working with Kenyans in Kenya and discussing the world. That is to say, a *cultural* result, as nothing human is ever simply natural, and my interest is in the point where cultures meet. This leads to the unavoidable fact that I'm the filter through which these world views flow, as Taussig might frame it: it is my nervous system reacting to the systems of nervously proprioceptive

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Taussig, 'I'd like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes', *New writing* (Clevedon, England), 2019 (16: 4), p. 400.

culture, trying to position myself in place and time necessarily through that spacetime's positioning of me. And I love writing, so I write. The inspiration becomes a memory subsumed into the narrative imperative, the following of a word with the next possible word. In the space before each word is the nervous system's hum, a cacophony of possibility, out of which comes the next, hopefully correct, word.

If it is true that 'fieldwork involves participant observation with people and events, being inside and outside, while writingwork involves magical projections from and through words into people and events', then what happens to Taussig's model if we transpose it to fiction? 'Can we say, therefore, that writingwork is a type of fieldwork and vice versa?'<sup>15</sup>

Research question 1: When a white male author chooses to represent racial others and diversity how do concepts of authority and authenticity interplay with context, and can adopting the process and method of Taussig's Nervous System writing aid such creative writing across race and culture?

2.

Where Taussig was mindful of not worsening the state of Colombia's state of terror, or his own, by summoning that violence through its representation, I am mindful of the same process in my writing across race and culture leading to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms 'epistemic violence', the remote project to 'constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity'.<sup>16</sup> It is such violence to which I refer in this commentary, a double edged sword, or 'two-handed engine', whereby a real-world violence – physical / emotional /

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'From A History of Postcolonial Reason, From Chapter 3. History [Can The Subaltern Speak?]' in Vincent Leitch et al (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 2115.

psychological – is magnified through its propagation in text or image, thus reinforcing the asymmetric power which led to its initial use. This is the fixing and kicking of the Nervous System in play, to which this later work by Spivak speaks:

(I)n this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. From birth to death this ‘natural’ machine, programming the mind perhaps as genetic instructions program the body (where does body stop and mind begin?), is partly metapsychological and therefore outside the grasp of the mind. Thus ‘nature’ passes and repasses into ‘culture’, in a work or shuttling site of violence [...]: the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

Spivak elaborates here on that part of epistemic violence found in the act of translation. She finds the term necessary but wanting, so this is ‘translation’ with a ‘catachrestic’ slant, where the social and ethical human subject is created in the process of translating, not just across language but between selves. This begins in infancy, as the above citation refers to, which means it has a sensate, physical root; the infant ‘shuttles’ from nature to culture via phenomenological experience.

It would appear logical to assume that The Nervous System too attains knowledge through some kind of embodied epistemology, which it does to a degree due to processing sensory information between culture and individual and back again. But there’s more to it than that: ‘(T)his is not to indulge in the tired game of emotion versus thought, body versus mind, recycled by current academic fashion into concern with “the body” as key to wisdom’, such thinking is paradoxical, says Taussig, because it leads to ‘an intellectual containment of the body’s understanding’, instead, the NS attains knowledge not through language ‘but

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<sup>17</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Translation as Culture’, *Parallax*, 2000 (6:1), p. 13.



*image*, and not just the image but its *tactility*', it is '(N)ot what the neon says, but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt'.<sup>18</sup> This is Taussig building on Walter Benjamin's work concerning the mimetic faculty and the dialectical image as 'bodily matter awakening memory, awakening collective dream-time in our era of mechanical reproduction, pressed upon me as both method and a programme of practical enquiry'.<sup>19</sup> These images – in forms not restricted to the optical – are parcels of meaning and history containing 'fleeting instants of possibility which flash up in what Benjamin designated "moments of danger"'.<sup>20</sup> For Benjamin, the receiver of the image briefly and shockingly perceives the historical context and dialectical reality of its content, thus potentialising something between personal change and political revolution. For Taussig, there is the apotropaic possibility for healing of the body or mind and the social body: 'words become things pulling in the body – my body, your body, and the body of the world'.<sup>21</sup> This parallels Tsitsi Dangarembga's defiantly hopeful aim for the outcome of *Nervous Conditions*, 'My awareness of this paucity of happy endings in African literature was silencing. It seemed that to reproduce the trauma without a form of victory over it would embed the malaise and bring it more firmly in being.'<sup>22</sup>

Following Benjamin, via Taussig, I have been captivated by the siren call of the elusive 'dialectical image' and its theoretical potential via the instant mediation of historical and cultural knowledge to impact the reader and bring about change, so elusive in fact that it is 'virtually impossible to succeed'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 147. My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Taussig, 'I'd like to write something.', p. 401.

<sup>22</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga, Writing as Witnessing: The Tambudzai and Nyasha Trilogy, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32:4, (2020), 467-470, DOI:10.1080/13696815.2019.1704700 p.468.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 8.

Research question 2: To what extent do perceived asymmetrical relationships in race and culture between reader, protagonists, and author negatively affect any empathic prosocial effects elicited by image or text?

3.

The concept of the dialectical image has been gleaned from many different sources because the work in which it was going to appear – Benjamin’s ‘Passagen-werk or Arcades Project’<sup>24</sup> – was never finished. This ‘magnum opus’ may have been ‘an elaborately woven net designed to catch a dialectical image’, ventures Anthony Auerbach.<sup>25</sup> The form such images would take is speculative now:

it is not at all clear whether such an image belongs to material or to virtual reality; whether it is something more like a picture or a perception. Nor is it obvious how we should distinguish the hypothetical dialectical image from figures of speech such as metaphor, or from literary forms such as the Denkbild (thought-image) upon which Benjamin modelled his writing.<sup>26</sup>

I take some clarity from these images being *dialectical*, that is they contain debate or ambiguity within them. They must suddenly expose the wider historical processes that situate the perceiver leading to their understanding of their own socio-cultural or political context. I believe that this is theoretically possible, and feel that it could be on a scale from a single

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap Press, 2002)

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Auerbach, ‘Imagine no Metaphors: the Dialectical Image of Walter Benjamin’, *Image and Narrative*, 18 (2007) <[http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking\\_pictures/auerbach.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/auerbach.htm)> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 2019], paragraph 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 1.

word to an entire novel. However, I think it is missing something. If it happens then it does so through empathy; as Suzanne Keen says, ‘strong concord in authors’ empathy and readers’ empathy can be a motivating force to move beyond literary response to prosocial action’.<sup>27</sup> If an image in text has such a motivational effect on the reader to inspire action or change then I suggest this is from some moment of peak ‘concord’ between author and reader. Conversely, if ‘(T)he position of the reader with respect to the author’s strategic empathizing in fictional worldmaking’<sup>28</sup> is asymmetrical, then the ‘prosocial action’ or the ‘apotropaic effect’ may never transpire. I venture that of Keen’s taxonomy of strategic empathizing techniques *Splitters* is using ‘Broadcast strategic empathy’ which ‘calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations’.<sup>29</sup>

For a piece in the *The New York Review* Zadie Smith quotes lines from the nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson – ‘I measure every Grief I meet | With narrow, probing, eyes – | I wonder if it weighs like Mine – | Or has an Easier size’ – of which she says:

This gets close to the experience of making up fictional people. It starts as a consciousness out in the world: looking, listening, noticing. A kind of awareness, attended by questions. What is it like to be that person? To feel what they feel? I wonder.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Keen, ‘A Theory of Narrative Empathy’, *Narrative* (Columbus, Ohio), 2006 (14), p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>30</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction’, *The New York Review*, Oct 24, 2019 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021], paragraph 11.

When we approach the world and fiction in this way it parallels the approach of autoethnography to ethnographic projects. Stacy Holman Jones et al. delineate four main characteristics of autoethnography:

(1) purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices, (2) making contributions to existing research, (3) embracing vulnerability with purpose, and (4) creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response'.<sup>31</sup>

Research question 3: Can an autoethnographical method interrogate authorial bias vulnerably and sufficiently enough to reduce the gap in empathic reception across race?

There follows a fictocritical investigation into the creation of *Splitters*. I take fictocriticism to be: 'mixing theory with fiction, allowing story, anecdote, and description to acquire the weight and wings of theory unbound'.<sup>32</sup> Following Benjamin via Taussig I use a montage of autobiography, critical theory, ethnography, allegory, literary criticism, Socratic dialogue, irony, fiction, citation, and poetry to evoke the experience of writing *Splitters* and discuss its potential reception. Because this is an attempt at Nervous System writing, systematic analysis is no more or less valid, or systematic, than the correspondences evoked by poetry: no more or less imaginatively written than the novel itself: '(T)hus all social analysis is revealed as montage'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Taussig, 'I'd like to write something.', p. 400.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 6.

## Keeping it mimetic

Now the strange thing about this silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made up is that it appears to be where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially created, and occasionally creative beings.<sup>34</sup>

Michael Taussig

1.

I was trying to write Kweli's rap. Because a young black lyricist is expected to rap, or to have that option in their quiver more than any white counterpart, perhaps. He would either rebel and reject that, or, being a DJ, a lover of music and an inquisitive guy on a journey of discovery, give it a go. At least these are the expectations and convolutions that I perceive and reflect rather than deny or deflect, hence nervously reify or confirm as much as explore or deconstruct. So I slid down an edifying rabbit hole of rap and came upon a stand-out performance by Kano<sup>35</sup>, the opening salvos of which run, 'This is real n\*\*\*a lyrics | fake n\*\*\*as can't look in real n\*\*\*a mirrors | I know who I am and he knows who he isn't', followed by a visceral evisceration of the competition in an exploration of his own status vis-a-vis grime's history and British race relations, 'I was in the upper class queue, posh ticket | Staff told me, 'Sorry, sir, you're in the wrong position' | Bigot idiot didn't say fuck all to Richard | So fuck all the riches, you can't fool the pigment', positioning himself within the successful/relatable problematic of the well paid rapper from the ends, exploding the argument that racism and classism are necessarily contingent, whilst being fully aware that

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (Oxford: Routledge, 1993, 2018), p. xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Kano, *Kano - Fire in the Booth*, online video recording, YouTube, BBC Radio 1Xtra. March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VTllrpEG1M>> [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> Jun 2018].

his iconic status ('When mic's on, I'm icon | When mic's off, I'm icon') depends upon his ability to represent East London in the way that grime's story, of which he is a key author, demands it from within – the majority black young rappers on the streets of East Ham, say – and without – his majority white, global audience who pay for such an authentic sound.

In the writing of this I notice how I've slipped in the notion of authenticity. This slip is important as it signposts potential bias in appropriations and representations of socio-cultural phenomena or alter identities. In this case I've concealed that the freestyle is not typical of grime, in fact it exemplifies a development of Kano's style and was timed to promote his album *Made in the Manor*<sup>36</sup> which incorporated pop, soul and hip hop, as well as a few more old-school grime tracks. As one follows Kano's progression the more variation one sees from grime's origins, but zoom out and he sits firmly within that genre, he even raps as much, 'Teenager told me about grime | Kiddo, I lived it', the past tense implying a creative evolution away from the centre he helped establish. Both I and Kano's teenager (and Kano himself) place him correctly and incorrectly within grime, a dialectic which is a function of scale, which shows a deeper epistemic slippage. But I'm not there yet; more sliding is needed.

I need to say how Kano's opening lines impact and split *Splitters* before it had fully formed, why I've spent the last four years with their reverberations. I'm nervous about them, their resonance and immediacy to my writing task, *this* writing task as much as to Kweli's rap. Such nervousness is exemplified in this node of *Splitters*' difficulties: a confluence of text, context, influence, form, and intent. Kano's freestyle positions Kweli's rap instantly, providing a felt critique.

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<sup>36</sup> Kano, *Made in the Manor* (Parlophone, 2016).

2.

I identify my nervousness and this reminds me of Taussig's project, his lifelong hunt for Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, 'swathes of mimesis',<sup>37</sup> and the apotropaic power of writing:

The writer looks the history in the face at the receiving end of a chain of storytellers and has for a brief moment this one chance, the one permanently before the last, to make this intervention in the state of emergency, before the writer's story is swallowed up in the response it causes.

That is what I call Nervous System writing.<sup>38</sup>

This 'state of emergency' is the norm, say Benjamin and Taussig, with the elusive dialectical image being the shock therapy 'intervention' for the body politic; a pause *of* thought.

Further nervousness: America suffocates itself; Covid 19 breathes everywhere; lives and stories (and writers) float in bubbles. Benjamin's state of emergency is embodied via a synaptic snap of filmic overload, the broken taboo of violent death on screen, on every screen; a real shock to the Nervous System, ramping up the tensions between different bodies world-wide. Pause for thought. Rewind to 2016; Kano tries to teach Kweli something but he can't hear for the white noise of my filter. Kano doesn't really, he's performing realness, really lost in his flow, telling his story, following the rules of the genre to redefine the genre.

And here I am now, swallowing up Kano's response to the state of emergency, systematising his nervousness by *this* act of analysis which threatens to take all that creative, vitriolic momentum and allegorise it, categorise it into a genre further dissipating its pre-

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Taussig, Palms, *Mitos Mag*, (Feb 2018) <<http://www.mitosmag.com/palms>> [accessed 31<sup>st</sup> Mar 2021], paragraph 2.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 9.

critical force. Benjamin said dialectical images are ‘dialectics at a standstill’, they are the relation of ‘what-has-been to the now’ and ‘the place where one encounters them is language’, such images appear in ‘a flash’ and potentialise ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’ through the *embodiment* of ‘non-sensuous similarity’ by means of the ‘mimetic faculty’.<sup>39</sup> Could it be that each of Kano’s rapid-fire montage of images have such an impact on me as to reclaim and re-write the socio-cultural past held within me through the mimetic magic of sensing the un-sensed? Because I remember empathy; I know that I felt the flows of power, hegemonic and emotional, that Kano expressed during the synchronic ‘now-time’<sup>40</sup> of reception, ever diminishing with each replay, yet quanta of sensed-understanding remain: the joy of performance, the humiliation of and resistance to racism, the Eastendedness, the love for family, and the swirling mass of discourse and feeling that is Kano met the swirling mass of discourse and feeling that is me in a suspended dialectic and I felt a shift on many levels. Alternatively/additionally it could just be that I matched Kano’s ideal viewer at that moment in time. Either way, on the issue at hand, why I watched the freestyle in the first place, I felt that Kweli’s rap was pivotal to his development and to my understanding of that. Of course I found that I could not look into Kano’s ‘real n\*\*\*a mirror’, the question then became: could Kweli? Could the image on the surface of that mirror be mimetically re-cast?

### 3.

The mechanics and speed of the reproduction of Kano’s art would probably be inconceivable to Benjamin, with the instant notification and consumption of these images from Newcastle

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<sup>39</sup> Anthony Auerbach, ‘Imagine no Metaphors.’, paragraphs 28 – 31.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Charles and Peter Osborne, ‘Walter Benjamin’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter, 2020), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/benjamin/>>, [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2020], paragraph 80.



to Nairobi. Now reaction is commodity and the ‘revolutionary chance’ is reduced to shock value. There’s no time for a revolution, just a *like* and a *sub* and, if really moved, a *share*. All this takes the ‘flash’ of the pre-critical reaction, the held breath and shed tear, and commodifies it, capitalises upon it. The lumpenproletariat are no longer lumped together, are diverse and variously educated, especially in rap. If there is a revolution from this it is an internal and personal one. Feasibly this is the point, the mechanism by which Benjamin imagined a caesura in the state of emergency; an individual experiences the dialectic of history in a moment of clarity and internalises an opposition to it. ‘Maybe there is no such thing as a dialectical image’<sup>41</sup>, and no rap or other work of art comes close to it if there was. If it happens ‘in language’ then we no longer have the time to hear it, if we only receive inside our bubbles then we will never be challenged by it, and if there are so many images mechanically reproduced and endlessly available then they are relativised and dilute anyway. We can’t all stand before *Guernica* all day, one has to book a slot.<sup>42</sup>

4.

If there is an image with that kind of power to affect then it must exist with such before words, nervously speaking somewhere between the amygdala and the temporoparietal junction; between fight or flight and the place where we reason ‘about the contents of another person’s mind’<sup>43</sup>. The temporoparietal junction is where language is processed, where we recognise self from other, other from self; that part of the nervous system where Taussig’s system flips the information coming in to the information going out; the architecture of the mimetic faculty where reality is cognitized and projected back onto reality. I would

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony Auerbach, ‘Imagine no Metaphors’, paragraph 1.

<sup>42</sup> Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, Oil on Canvas vols (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofía, 1937).

<sup>43</sup> R. Saxe and N. Kanwisher, ‘People Thinking about Thinking people: The Role of the Temporo-Parietal Junction in “theory of Mind”’, *NeuroImage* 19 (2003), pp. 1835–1842 <doi:10.1016/S1053-8119(03)00230-1> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 2020], p. 1835.

conjecture that any Benjaminian dialectical image needs a jab of adrenaline for the self to be affected by it to the extent that Benjamin claims it might; empathy and sympathy don't dig as deep as self preservation. If so then the affective power of any occurrence translated by document or art into image is scaled away from the centre of the discourse or hegemony it represents; the Nervous System needing its kick as much as its fix.

5.

Alan Kurdi dead on a beach.

6.

The murder of George Floyd.

7.

Both the above have challenged the power structures to which they symbolise the ultimate subjugation. Both defy mimesis at the point of that challenge. Once the image is within language, as the eye moves from the photograph or video to the surrounding contextualising text, the power to affect is weakened; in that way of the sign we begin to think about it through what it is not. No longer the actual sadness and horror of the actual happenings, they are image and able to be thought around, then image and able to be written about; first personal then historico-political. At the moment of witness, of first sense, and through that sensing, they are the centre of the hegemony for the witness. Until experiencing the *now-time* of the above images, respectively I knew that exploitative inequality in Euro-African economics leads to dangerous migration and death, but I could ignore it; I knew that racism within law enforcement leads to death, but I could ignore it, because the benefits of those systems of oppression are normalised within my Western, white world and any complicity is

diffuse until the ‘flash’ of recognition, at first nervous then cognitized, internalises the hegemonic system, essentialises it to the personal.

8.

Here begins a slide akin to the one I mentioned in the opening section, because I – and you too I’m sure – can’t linger on those images; we slip off them along something like Taussig’s mobious strip of a system:

(B)ecause if you write about violence, I found out quickly, if you are serious, it sticks to you no matter how hard you try to get the drop on it. Worse still, you so easily make it worse. How come? After all, common sense would tell you that writing is one thing, reality another. How could one bleed – as they say – into the other?<sup>44</sup>

The same is true of reception; those images can’t stay in our conscious thoughts for long as they exist outside language, for a short while, until they become a symbol and can be used to speak with, a process of which *this* writing act here is a part, diffusing any empathetic response by placing it at a remove in text, a mechanism which leads to a numbing acceptance.

‘How come,’ asks Taussig, does the writing about violence ‘bleed’ through the representation into an other’s or the writer’s experience? Well, as Keen, Preston and de Waal might have it, through empathy via the temporoparietal junction in full mimetic effect; ‘Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal propose that witnessing or imagining another in an emotional state activates automatic representations of that same state in the onlooker, including responses in the nervous system and the body.’<sup>45</sup> I would say that this response is

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.

scaled proportionately to the distance of the receiver and the levels of remove – camera to keyboard to the image you’re now seeing – such that witnessing George Floyd’s death we don’t feel what he felt, or seeing his murderer’s blank face we don’t feel what he felt, but from both we sense the pull of the void.

9.

I am writing about violence, physical and epistemic, which is partly why I’m so shaken by Kano’s opening lines; after all, what is the referent for Kano’s sign system ‘Real n\*\*\*a’? In Rap’s use I suggest it encapsulates a history from the black Atlantic slave trade to the figure of the ‘field n\*\*\*\*r’,<sup>46</sup> to the Black Panthers to lynchings and now to George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, and everything in between, including, as poststructuralism would have it, its opposite; All Lives Matter, the white fragile response that runs something like, ‘well *they* use it so why can’t *we*, I thought *they* wanted equality?’ Its use by rappers and in everyday conversation delineates identity and resists hegemony through its symbolic heft:

‘N\*\*\*a authenticity’ is important to understand, therefore, because it can be tied to images of strength and resistance to the mainstream from the Black Power movement [...] ironically, it is exactly in conscious Hip Hop that we can see the clearest connection between Black Power imagery and the legitimacy found in the figure of the Bad N\*\*\*\*r.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kehinde Andrews, ‘From the ‘Bad N\*\*\*\*r’ to the ‘Good N\*\*\*a’: An Unintended Legacy of the Black Power Movement’, *Race & Class*, 55 (2014), 22-37, <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0306396813508268>> [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> Mar 2019], p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

What would be the referent if Kweli used ‘real n\*\*\*a’? Since rap can trace its origins along a line of cultural resistance and oral tradition back to Africa – ‘For me, “keepin it real” means being true to the rich legacy from which rap music emanates [...] It is a legacy that may go as far back as the griots of West Africa and the ancient societies of Egypt’<sup>48</sup> – then how mimetic can Kweli be to the real rapper Kano, who still performs authenticity from a position of authenticity to maintain authenticity? In the literary space, if Kweli was to use n\*\*\*a in his rap, as Kano does, it would fit. An astute (ideal) reader might notice he doesn’t use it amongst his white friends so would know that he would be claiming an identity there; it would stand out in the rap written with a confessional sensibility purely for himself, contrasted to the lyrics he writes for his band or how he speaks in everyday conversation. As Andrews says this would be an identity resistant to white hegemony thus signalling a structurally interesting conflict in the final chapters with his white upbringing and friends, perhaps even foreshadowing an ending where this newfound confrontational/resistant black identity triumphs. If he doesn’t use it the same reader would notice – being an ideal reader and equally knowledgeable of rap as Kweli, and noticing of the young Kweli’s musing on ‘what’s a normal word’<sup>49</sup> in the second chapter – that this aligns Kweli with ‘conscious’ rappers such as Akala and signals that he is either agreeing with the black movement to remove its use and/or feels peripheral to rap’s black centre and wishes to be authentically himself.

The implied author with the first option would be black, no? Because anyone writing a novel in and of our time would be aware of something like Akala’s Oxford Union address, where he answers a question about what he thinks about the use of ‘the n-word’ in rap, ‘it has

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<sup>48</sup> Baruti N. Kopano, ‘Rap music as an extension of the Black rhetorical tradition: “Keepin’ it real”’, *Western Journal of Black Studies*; Winter 2002; 26, 4; pp 204-214, p. 204

<sup>49</sup> *Splitters*, p. 21.

so much blood attached to it for me; it means what it has always meant, it is a term of white supremecist genocide'<sup>50</sup>, or of Toni Morrison's Nobel speech, '(O)ppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge'.<sup>51</sup> Any white writer using 'n\*\*\*a' could be read as re-appropriating the appropriation thus defusing its power to resist whilst reinvigorating/maintaining its oppressive history, all the while citing literary space as inviolable, as if it exists outside all the other floating spaces where the social happens, forgetting that, as Robin DiAngelo would have it, 'the forces of racial socialization are constantly at play'<sup>52</sup>.

10.

I'll look again at this rap node with the hope that it's not simply an extended metaphor featuring Kano's 'Real n\*\*\*a mirrors' and Kweli's only real existence as a reflective narrator, because inside that hall of mirrors lies the real-world danger of the naturalization of observed subjective experience supplanting real life, or to put it simply: white writer reinforces white understandings of black experience. This would be the hegemonic ordering of dis-ordered, endlessly faceted life, what Taussig would call the Nervous System 'getting its fix'<sup>53</sup>, which makes my nervous system jumpy. It's not a good thing to be in a hall of mirrors, especially when you extend the metaphor further to conceptualise the 'colonial mirror'<sup>54</sup> via Lacan and Fanon to Said and Bhabha where a white self libidinally fetishizes a

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<sup>50</sup> Akala, 'Full Address and Q&A, Oxford Union', online video recording, YouTube, Oxford Union, Nov 26<sup>th</sup> 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUtAxUQjwB4>> [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> May 2019], 1:09:16.

<sup>51</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Nobel Lecture 1993', *World Literature Today*, 68 (1994), pp. 4-8, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40149835>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019].

<sup>52</sup> Robin DiAngelo, 2019. *White fragility* (London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books), p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Gail Ching-Liang Low, *White Skins/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 191.

black other such that, 'In the exchange of looks the black man is alienated from himself',<sup>55</sup> this being the Nervous System fixing colonial power, again, through another act of white epistemic violence.

11.

But is there a way out? Taussig paraphrases Nietzsche, saying that, 'we destroy only as creators... What he means is that in analyzing and interpreting we implicitly build culture itself', not only in criticism but in fiction too, 'what is also meant is the blurring of fiction and nonfiction, beginning with the recognition and appraisal that this distinction is itself fictional and necessary'<sup>56</sup>. Within this blur there is an opportunity, advises Gail Low, if we 'recognise the instability of the divide between fantasy and reality, fiction and facts' then we may 'begin the difficult and painful task of constructing alternative futures'<sup>57</sup>. All is arbitrary, it could go either way, as is the process of the tumbling, flipping Nervous System, but to acknowledge the nervousness in the process of writing allows us to work with it:

Nervous System writing aims at being one jump ahead of the rules of rulelessness but knows at the same time that this is a doomed pursuit. If it is true that there is a mythology deposited in our language, Nervous System writing aims not at exposing that mythology but at conniving with it.<sup>58</sup>

I connive to connect Kweli with Kano with myself with the reader in a subjective representation of a projected reality via all the tricks and flicks of narrative, the biggest trick of all is knowing when and how to pull back before the system fixes again. Because what I

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Gail Ching-Liang Low, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 10.

include becomes fixed, and what I leave out becomes fixed, and if there is one 'ruleless rule', one fact in the myth at this point in post-colonial-eco-critical-racialised-now-time, that I have been at pains to use as a micro allegory of the decisions involved in *Splitters*' creation via a singular word that has such power as to be a dialectical image in its own right, it is that a white writer can't use the word 'n\*\*\*\*r'.

12.

Then it slides again because if ...

A: ... the real author was black they could use 'n\*\*\*\*a' in the rap and remain unchallenged as to its mimetic accuracy or authorial ethic. The result of its omission by this white author could go as follows: if the reader is very knowledgeable of rap they might see its localism combined with its rejection of grime sensibility in favour of an American style and take away that it is idiosyncratic and a knowing reflection of Kweli's liminality; further characterisation, all well and good. This fix may allow the fiction to flow past with the real author remaining hidden, however I feel that any reader will be sensitive to the dynamic of white author/ black protagonist from the start and be anticipating, or alert to, discord here. This exposed author disrupts the mimetic success of Kweli's rap, which questions the authenticity of all the characters in all settings as they are all reflective first person narrators. Then, for me, a further nervous kick occurs: this exposé reveals the mimicry in the fiction, the way it 'connives' with both the 'mythology' in the language surrounding hip hop and with the fact of its inclusion into the form of the novel. The form is varied – rap, script, lyrics, lists, letters, stream of consciousness – intended to interrogate authenticity and interrupt any definitive authorial intent. In order for there to be a semblance of coherent social fact, some 'real' world occurring through time, these forms are meant to 'flash' by – because 'is not speed essential to the attentiveness of reading (and writing)? Benjamin writes that the



semiotic quality of language becomes mimetic thanks to the speed with which we scan the words on the page'<sup>59</sup>. This pacy read obscures by abetting mimicry, by merging symbols into quickfire images, but this sham is revealed as such if suddenly slowed, inviting further suspicion towards the author.

B: ... I don't use it then the little goblin sat atop DiAngelo's fourth pillar of whiteness ('that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of colour deserve'<sup>60</sup>), taking up the space recently vacated by a removed statue, wearing a sombrero<sup>61</sup>, drinking from an 'I *heart* the UFF' mug<sup>62</sup>, will initiate an unwarranted conversation:

Shriv (as good a name as any for a fantastical satirical character in a Socratic dialogue): You can write whatever or whoever you like, you know? They can't stop you; it's your right, anyone's right.

Me: Umm... who are 'they'?

Shriv: You know, they say 'n\*\*\*\*r' to each other all the time. What are you going to do, make them speak like an *Eastenders* character?

Me: Well I'm not going to keep asterixing it out, Kweli either uses it or he doesn't.

And 'they' don't use it all the time. Not all black people use it, and many have stopped using it for many reasons. Kweli may never have felt the need to use it, or felt it distanced him from his friends.

Shriv: Privileged is he? Like you. You're creating a black protagonist with the social

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 143.

<sup>60</sup> Robin DiAngelo, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> 'Now, I am a little at a loss to explain what's so insulting about a sombrero,' Lionel Shriver, 'Lionel Shriver's full speech: "I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad"', *The Guardian*, Tue 13 Sep 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 2020].

<sup>62</sup> 'If an interviewer dropped by to do a profile, I'd make sure to balance idiocies: one of us would get a William of Orange mug with its awkwardly drawn white horse, the other the tribute to the Easter Rising', Lionel Shriver, 'Whatever you write will get twisted', *The Spectator*, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2018 <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/whatever-you-write-will-get-twisted>> [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020].

mobility *you're* used to. You know most of them are poor, living in tower blocks and council flats don't you? Your black characters are just like you, but we're asked to believe they're black; there's nothing authentically African or black British about them. Come to think of it you've also made him love punk, which is as white as opera!

Me: Bad Brains? Willard White? Anyway, how do you know what authentic blackness is? And what's 'African'? 'Tower blocks', how stereotyped is that?

Shriv: Based on the majority, and just giving two singular examples kinda proves my point. You're whitening your characters to make them easier for you to write. Then, to hide their inauthenticity, you're taking a black mannequin, covering it with glue, and throwing a bunch of black cultural tropes at it. You shouldn't even worry about 'authenticity', it's fiction. Your readers should understand that.

Me: Middle class success is not exclusively a white thing. Neither is tower block life exclusively working class by the way, the reason you think black equates with tower block is because that's the media's portrayal. And those tropes you mention, like any, are used or worn to create identity. The important thing to know is whether they're chosen, projected, or enforced.

Shriv: Well you, white boy, are choosing them, projecting them and reinforcing them through your lense, so you're hardly helping are you? You may be taking shelf space from actual Kenyan or black British writers.<sup>63</sup>

Me: It would be good to think that this novel would add to the conversation on

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<sup>63</sup> 'Statistics in The Bookseller showed that out of thousands of books published in 2016 in the UK, fewer than 100 were by British authors of a non-white background', from, Elleke Boehmer and Erica Lombard, 'Publishing, the Curriculum and Black British Writing Today', *Wasafiri*, 34 (2019), p. 118.

diversity, encourage all writers to reflect the world around them. Perhaps it gives an angle on diversity from a white perspective that is seldom seen.

Shriv: Perhaps you need a quota.<sup>64</sup>

Me: Funny. But you know full well that I don't; your ability to make that a joke is a privilege.

Shriv: Oh don't give me that white privilege crap, I'm privileged because I work hard, just like anybody else.

Me: Your last clause pretty much defines white privilege.

Shriv: Look, Sonny Jim, just because somebody is, say, 'a gay transgender Caribbean who dropped out of school at seven and powers around town on a mobility scooter'<sup>65</sup>, it doesn't mean they should get published ahead of somebody who is white and has written a better quality work.

Me: Not necessarily, no. But who decides what's 'better quality'? Gay transgender Caribbeans or white Oxbridge graduates working at daddy's publishing company?

Shriv: Your stereotype is extreme as mine.

Me: Is it?<sup>66</sup>

Shriv: Whatever. You're evading my original point: literary freedom should exist.

Not write what you know, but write what you can know.

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<sup>64</sup> '(d)iversity doesn't lower standards. Quotas do': Lionel Shriver quoted in Alison Flood, 2018, "'Wilful misreading': Lionel Shriver replies to critics in diversity row", *The Guardian*, -06-22T14:59:40.000Z <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/22/lionel-shriver-replies-diversity>> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Lionel Shriver, quoted in Mark Brown. 2018. 'Hanif Kureishi steps into row over Lionel Shriver's diversity comments', *The Guardian*, Fri 15 Jun 2018 15.05 BST <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/15/hanif-kureishi-steps-into-row-over-lionel-shrivers-diversity-comments>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2021].

<sup>66</sup> 'Publishers sometimes believe that publishing more diversely means compromising on "quality" [...] notions of "quality" are not as universal as they may think. In fact, supposedly universal notions of quality correlate strongly with a particular education and class position. The monocultural nature of publishing leads to the reproduction of this narrow version of "quality".' From, Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente. 2020. *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (London: Goldsmiths Press) <[https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking\\_diversity\\_in-publishing\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf)> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2021], p. 38.

Me: It does. And I am. But I need to listen first, not get all riled and insulted that someone of a different cultural background, with different norms and valorisations, may criticise my representation of them. For example: if a Mexican tells you it's offensive to her for you to wear a sombrero, in, say, a keynote speech at a literary festival, it's because of your Disneyfication and objectification of her culture, even before you use it to mock and belittle that offence. You can't then tell her it's just a hat to keep the sun off; she knows that, it's there, in *her* language, in the etymology of *som - brero*. Then you've got the gall to simultaneously take affront at being told what you can't do whilst denying whiteness as a force in culture. There are two ways to approach a representation of an other's culture: either by understanding that person's/culture's sign-meaning system, or by stripping their meanings from any signs or symbols and replacing them with yours; as in the wearing of a sombrero at a tequila party in order to get drunk on tequila as opposed to its use as a sun-shade or to signify the wearer as a charro or mariachi.

Shriv: Don't tell me what I can and can't do; you're part of the problem. There's no choice in your proposed binary: in *adopting* the meanings we *strip* them of context to use in our text. It ultimately boils down to why. Why did you bother to write a novel with black protagonists anyway, and risk doing it 'wrong'? Got lots of 'black friends' do we? 'Virtue signalling' are we?

Me: When I started it I was in Kenya, so it would have seemed strange to not write black characters. Why are they main protagonists? Well, they started out as such. I hope they're not stereotyped. At least they're not token.

Shriv: Have a diversity olympics medal. The culture police will arrest you for either

not including a diverse cast or for the crime of cultural appropriation. You can't win.

Me: Well, either I write an all white novel, in an entirely white setting, which mirrors certain times in my life, or I write a narrative with racially diverse characters, which reflects other times in my life. So I made a decision to write different races. Tokenism is when you sketch a waiter, say, and happen to feel the need to describe his skin colour. Four dimensional characters come from research and observation with an openness to understand and respect other life experiences and cultures; from a starting point of vulnerability and wanting to learn, not of ticking diversity boxes to be seen to be doing so.

Shriv: So now you're a hippy. Although you blather about respect when you've turned me into a goblin, dehumanised me, and to suit your ends have removed any nuance from my arguments and taken quotations out of context.<sup>67</sup>

Me: You mean I've stripped you of your self-definition, used you as a symbol for the application of whiteness in the literary scene by turning you into a satirical cartoon as a foil in a Socratic dialogue? I thought all was up for grabs in Lit-World.

Shriv: I, the real I, understand the irony; I'm all about irony<sup>68</sup>. But at least let me point

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<sup>67</sup> "I can't imagine your reading comprehension scores are quite that low. So we're dealing with what I can only call malicious misinterpretation. No writer can defend against wilful misreading", Lionel Shriver, quoted in Alison Flood, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> 'Refusal to recognise a cheesy knickknack as tongue in cheek reveals what would seem an awfully un-Irish po-facedness. It's not the Americans who have no sense of irony.' Lionel Shriver, 'Whatever you write will get twisted', *The Spectator*. Shriver seems to have an inability to empathise combined with a gauche interpretation of irony. This did not go unnoticed in the Irish press: 'the UFF-UDA is a pro-UK terrorist group in the contested Six Counties which took the lives of hundreds of Irish men, women and children during the course of the 1966-2005 war. Such memorabilia is usually sold to help fund its activities and subsidise its gunmen and bombers, past or present', 'Lionel Shriver, The UFF Mug and British Terrorism In Ireland', *An Sionnach Fionn*, Apr 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 <<https://ansionnachfionn.com/2018/04/16/lionel-shriver-the-uff-mug-and-british-terrorism-in-ireland/>> [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020].

out that this whiteness thing that's all the rage at the moment is divisive and tautological; if I reject it that's because I'm imbued with white power due to the colour of my skin. That removes any chance of debate and does exactly the reverse of what it's ostensibly for by racialising right and wrong.

Me: No.

Shriv: What do you mean... oh, I get it; you're silencing me.

Me: How does it feel?

Shriv: I'm ever so offended.

Me: DiAngelo's conception of whiteness is useful as a self-diagnostic tool, use it with an open mind and suddenly it's not tautological, if anything it's therapeutic. I concede that I've mistreated you to make a crude point about representational power and appropriation. This twisted homunculus of you is an injurious image, for satirical effect. Is it on ethically higher ground than, for example, the published image of a black woman stripped of agency and kept humiliatingly on a leash in a near future New York?<sup>69</sup> Such an image *could* be read as symbolic of how whiteness is exercised *if* the author evidenced any such sympathies. Conversely, if the novel satirised non-white ethnicities and insinuated that a decline in white status would be a bad thing, and the author had previous of belittling racial offense, then, hypothetically speaking, I would say your newfound goblinness is minor. So bugger off, I've got a deadline, and a word count.

Shriv: I can't, the council bolted me down. Bit of a rushed job.

Me: Please take that sombrero off then, it's out of cultural context and you are

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<sup>69</sup> 'Avery had found her parents' practice of keeping their charge on a leash a ghastly violation of an adult's civil liberties. Yet the nylon strap was invaluable for tugging the woman downstairs', from, Lionel Shriver, *The Mandibles* (London: Borough Press, 2016), p. 342.

definitely not wearing it with respect.

Shriv: Well you should know, you put it on me.

Me: Touché.

Shriv: You can't go, I haven't yet resolved your white psycho-guilt-drama about

whether or not Kweli would say n\*\*\*\*r. Stop asterixing! Think of your

freedom! Artists don't compromise! Tarantino wouldn't asterix!<sup>70</sup> You're

pathetic; you don't even write it out properly when you're quoting, where's

your integrity? Your readers have already seen it in their mind's eye anyway,

you just made them do that. What if they're black, how do you think you've

made them feel? Hey! Don't go, you'll leave me to the mob! You let Kweli

and Karl banter the word *gay* around, what ya gonna say about that? Come

back, I'll end up in the river!

13.

So I wrote Kweli's rap, his very own dialectical selfie. It is a mixture of hip hop styles,

mainly American, of the rapper from outside its centre, like Lil' Dicky and Childish Gambino

– 'This dark-skinned art student with light-skinned advantage'<sup>71</sup> – middle class rap, which to

earn its rap chops as oppositional and disruptive is an amalgam of social observation and

bragging about sexual exploits, cartoonish in its portrayal of divergence from the accepted

norm – 'I used to always get a boner at my physical, Sway | If this is cultural appropriation

what can I say?'<sup>72</sup> To give his rap a sense of place, of localism, I also mimicked rap from

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<sup>70</sup> David Cox, 'Has Django Unchained Defused the 'N-Bomb'?', The Guardian, -01-14T17:26:56.000Z 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jan/14/django-unchained-n-word>> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021].

<sup>71</sup> Donald Glover, 'Childish Gambino's Epic Freestyle on HOT97 for Rosenberg', online video recording, YouTube, HOT97, 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKB66pjw-JA>> [accessed 18th Dec 2016].

<sup>72</sup> David Andrew Burd, 'Lil Dicky Freestyle on Sway in the Morning', online video recording, YouTube, Sway's Universe, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzgjlZqS3Y>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020].

just down the road to Kweli in Newport, the self depreciating comedy of Goldie Lookin Chain, ‘When my cupboards are bare and I’m not Hip Hopping | You’ll see me down there, doing my shopping | Baneswell Express, Baneswell Express | It’s like a mini Mart, you get more for less’.<sup>73</sup>

I decided Kweli would not use the word n\*\*\*a for two major reasons. Firstly, as a white author, physically writing the word feels a disrespectful act. Secondly, nervously, and mindful of both Low’s ‘constructive futures’ and Morrison’s powerful statement that ‘(N)arrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created’<sup>74</sup>, I am hopeful that in its omission is its ghost, visible behind the reader’s shoulder in this mirror world, such that the copy, at least, does not do that particular violence. ‘Nervous’ because this may be a homeopathically weak dilution, and I may be naïvely optimistic of its apotropaic potential. I am creating the potential here for a subtle type of exorcism at the same time as a subtle type of violence, though both effects may switch like an alternating current at any time and with any reader. As Kweli traces Matu in the hope of some kind of unity and clarity (‘chasin a hurricane to find the eye’)<sup>75</sup> he knows that we are all ‘split’ between states of being and that it is indeed a ‘silly’ and ‘desperate place’ here between the ‘real and the really made up’ where we are both embarked upon this hopelessly hopeful search, in equal measure trite and worthy, for the other through the self.

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<sup>73</sup> Goldie Lookin Chain, *Baneswell Express* (1983 records, 2013).

<sup>74</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Nobel Lecture 1993’.

<sup>75</sup> *Splitters*, p. 205.



## Altered ego

I see writers as constantly embarking on their own mythical journeys. Thus I view the process of writing as a call to change: *We start to write a book in order to become the person who finishes the book.*<sup>76</sup>

David Mura

I am not Bengali, or old, or old and white, nor was I in the Second World War, we could go on and on [...] There are surely moments in *White Teeth* that do not work, that do not feel correct to the people who feel themselves represented, but then again a book is not an act of representation, not purely, [...] it is a kind of experiment in communication.<sup>77</sup>

Zadie Smith

1.

I held back from reading *White Teeth*<sup>78</sup> when it came out, partly because I wanted to feel I was not falling for the hype – I'd wait until it had all calmed down – and partly due to dentophobia, just in case it had something to do with dentistry and not something to do with race.

2.

George Washington's dentures were never the wood of folk lore: bone looks like wood after a while. He would pay slaves for their teeth, and I can't imagine he wanted old teeth that

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<sup>76</sup> David Mura, *A Stranger's Journey* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2018), p. 8. Italics added.

<sup>77</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Fact Or Fiction? Michael Chabon and Zadie Smith in conversation', online video recording, YouTube, Rancho Mirage Writer's Festival, Feb 11th 2020 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjO\\_L4hEMIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjO_L4hEMIA)> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan 2021], 20:00.

<sup>78</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

perhaps had fallen out naturally. There's so much to digest from this image. How were the teeth extracted and under what duress? A ledger of 1784 showed he paid six pounds and two shillings for nine teeth; how freely were the teeth given and the money spent?<sup>79</sup> How did George feel inserting human teeth into his mouth every morning? How did they taste? Did his tongue explore them and sense the commonality or baulk at the disjunct between their form and his muscle memory? That common image, the dollar bill, becomes dialectical when thinking of the tension between Washington's Mona Lisa smile and the knowledge of what is beneath. It is the basic building block of America, a quantum of the materialistic American dream, and invisible across its obverse is a silently screaming image that enslavement was not 'ancillary to American history but at its very roots'<sup>80</sup>. What is the mechanism that preserved the myth that the dentures were wooden? Into what system did that most nervous of places slot?

3.

My grandmother had all her teeth removed at the age of twenty two, as was the fashion in nineteen thirties Northern England. She always sucked her teeth in, literally, when something bothered her. She didn't speak much. Every time a black or Asian person appeared on TV I'd hear a *ffsst* from her chair (always the same chair), 'Too many darkies around nowadays.' Mum or Dad would laugh it off; 'Oh Nell, good grief.' Mum shouted at her when she used the n-word in front of me. Mum once used the phrase 'You're a n\*\*\*\*r in the wood pile aren't you?' – the history of which is at once too easy and too hard to trace – to a mixed race kid in her school who'd done something sneaky. She came home from work utterly

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<sup>79</sup> *George Washington and Teeth from Enslaved People*, George Washington's Mount Vernon Memorial ([n.d.]), <<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/health/washingtons-teeth/george-washington-and-slave-teeth>> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018].

<sup>80</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'How to Steal Things, Exploit People, and Avoid all Responsibility', *The Atlantic*, Oct 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/the-road-to-reparations/373578/>> [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019].

distraught, angry with herself and wondering how she'd never worried about it until it just popped out; 'It was just one of my mum's sayings, along with...' and she listed similar phrases, all vernacular, all the trickle down effect of the power of Colonial Empire into the language of the everyday folk. Dad's friends would often mock because he was a tad darker than them and had black curly hair, 'Touch of the tar brush', I'd hear. 'Dad what's a tar brush?' 'Never you mind, they're being rude.' Laughter all round.

Many times I'd hear laments for the death of the British Empire, quite heartfelt. My Aunt gave a long talk – triggered by Thatcher's re-invasion of the Falkland Islands – about how she remembered the globe in her primary school being 'three-quarters purple'. She seemed genuinely sad for my future welfare. Years later, after college, at a large family gathering at my parent's house, fuelled by an Indian take-away and Cobra beer, I caused a family rift by shouting at a cousin who refused to eat the 'Paki dog food' to 'Get out of my fucking house!' I was admonished for causing a scene. It was all blamed on the drink, just to heal the rifts. And there again was a tooth motif: my Aunt's false teeth fell out in the fracas.

4.

Heading from Moshi to Nale Muru to start the Rongai route up Kilimanjaro watching the world go by was not a passive action; one needed to brace against the buck and yaw of the Tata coach, which always seemed to have hard edges everywhere. It's a long enough journey to fall asleep, if one can pad the gap between seat and window. Our expedition's teacher banged his head on the metal trim of his seat after a particularly bouncy section, cracking a tooth. The thing with those coaches, or perhaps with their drivers, or the state of the roads, or perhaps with the whole situation of ferrying fifteen English sixth formers with local lifetimes of wealth inside a metal bubble, is that they must not stop. This meant I had to rummage through the first aid boxes for the temporary filling, read the instructions, mix the cement,

and fill the tooth whilst rebounding off everything near me and trying not to puke. We settled back to watching the rural borderland between Kenya and Tanzania judder past. It did not feel too remote as small homesteads, hamlets and villages passed by. We stopped at a small school to distribute pencils, notepads, and footballs collected by our school's community for just this purpose. Students posed with local kids. The kids said 'muzungu'<sup>81</sup> often and explored our student's hands with theirs, fascinated by their skin. After fifteen minutes the driver and guides hurried us back onto the coach. The road was so bad that the local kids jogged alongside for at least another half hour.

The late light deepened the tones of the earth towards a red I had never seen before. The road steepened, trees became smaller, and the driver threw the bus into the incline to beat the inevitable and sudden equatorial sundown. The road was unpopulated for long stretches. Then I became aware of gatherings, as we neared a hamlet, where people were behaving strangely; all seemed sad, or scared, animated or silently staring. Many turned away, or covered their faces with one hand and extended the other towards us, pronating it. The driver and guides spoke quickly and seemed to be arguing. People spoke to them, running alongside and gesticulating. We slowed for a bend, at its apex around ten people stood watching us pass. Central to them, pinned out by stakes at each limb, was a man. Later, the few students who witnessed this, told me they hadn't actually seen him, that they had focussed on the driver shouting angrily at the gathered people. Understandable; the shadows were long and undulated, the blood from the machete wounds and the malformation of the torso blended him into the ground. He looked like the dust-covered roots of a baobab tree, but for his x-shape and the way his teeth were arranged across his chest. They couldn't possibly have been white, but I remember them shining. Our guide explained later that the dead man was a cattle

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<sup>81</sup> Trans: variously 'White devil', or from 'zungu' meaning dizzy, so one who wanders aimlessly. Also, in discussion with my Mount Kenya colleague Isaac, he ventured the belief that the Muzungu was a malevolent spirit of pre-colonial times that had white skin, blue eyes and red hair. We discussed the ramifications of this possibility when imagining first contact.

rustler, pinned out as a warning to others, and that we weren't to worry: he was a Kenyan, Tanzanians would never do such a thing. I worry that I never have nightmares about this, only about a dark beach and a huge wave, or the common teeth-falling-out dream.

5.<sup>82</sup>

On the level of what we might call conscious intention, it is clear that Benjamin was aware of the connections between Freud's conception of dream images and his own theory of the dialectical image.<sup>83</sup>

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A lyric that gnaws: from hearing it soundtrack *I May Destroy You*,<sup>85</sup> to witnessing the video with its finger on the ectopic pulse of mental health – an NHS aesthetic even before Covid took hold – over and over in some portentous way it drags me into the zeitgeist of anxiety.

*I May Destroy You* is perfectly suited to the moment; it is possibly the most emblematic show of 2020. It examines how, by avoiding the truth, we pass fear and

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<sup>82</sup> 'This dissociation from context is not to be overcome by introducing the author's own organizing outlook. As part of the ascetic discipline that Benjamin adopted, he allowed himself only to order the quotations and add certain specific comments and forbore from taking an interpretive standpoint that would integrate the fragments'. From, Eli Friedlander, 'Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and the heightened intuitability of history', *Dibur Literary Journal* 3, 2016 <<https://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur/walter-benjamin-arcades-project-and-heightened-intuitability-history>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2021], paragraph 10.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Ley Roff, 'Benjamin and psychoanalysis', in D. Ferris (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Companions to Literature) pp. 115-133 <[doi:10.1017/CCOL0521793297.007](https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521793297.007)> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020], p. 132.

<sup>84</sup> Easy Life, *Nightmares* (Island Records, 2018).

<sup>85</sup> *I May Destroy You*, dir. by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (BBC Studios, 2020).

suffering on to others. It reminds us that everyone is vulnerable, that nobody is entirely above avoidance or self-delusion. It makes the case for facing even those truths that, when confronted, might reveal an altogether different reality from the one we thought we inhabited.’<sup>86</sup>

‘Everyone dreams or has nightmares about changing skins, about the death of loved ones. A phantasm that has no other acting out except writing. A novelist is someone who finds words for his or her phantasms, to the bitter end. It's not the novelist's ideas that should occasion any astonishment, but perhaps the stubbornness required, and the patience. Write? Why? If there's anything 'bad' in literature, perhaps it's to shy away beforehand, to recoil from the phantasm, and be afraid of it.’<sup>87</sup>

‘Trying to keep the balance between self and other in a sane realm, keeping yourself because you are you and not the other, but communicating with the other.’<sup>88</sup>

6.

Alerted by Binyavanga Wainaina’s satire of European or American representations of Africa in literature, to not look at the continent and see ‘dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead bodies’<sup>89</sup>, I have battled against the inclusion of such nightmarish images. Equally, I have hesitated to include facsimiles of the extreme kindness

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<sup>86</sup> Carina Chocano, ‘“I May Destroy You” Is Perfect TV for an Anxious World’, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 29<sup>th</sup> 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/i-may-destroy-you-hbo-michaela-coel.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>> [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021] paragraph 9.

<sup>87</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, ‘Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing’, *L'Esprit Créateur*, 50 (2010), pp. 70-82 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26289664>> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020], p. 79.

<sup>88</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Grand Union: Zadie Smith with Jennifer Egan’, online video recording, YouTube, 92nd Street Y., Dec 20<sup>th</sup> 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtPrrSaavVA>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021], 49:28.

<sup>89</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina, ‘How to Write about Africa’, *Granta* 92 (2019) <<https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021], paragraph 10.

or beauty that I have experienced in Kenya – ‘Readers will be put off if you don’t mention the light in Africa. And sunsets, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky’<sup>90</sup>. I thought it best to allow free rein to the process of filtering personal experience into a fiction, rather than equivocating and avoiding primitivising or romanticising which ultimately is patronising to both my experience and to Africa. However, doing this invites Wainaina’s further criticism that ‘many writers use the continent cynically to *examine their own light*, or their own liberalism; and the end result is often books that treat African characters as cardboard cut-outs; exotic backgrounds to their own quests’<sup>91</sup>.

Writing a novel is a deep self indulgence, a split psyche scattered across the page in the hope that another connects, or the vain hope that at best they have a good read. It seems common sense to say that autobiography, being more self expressive, is consequently more true, authentic, real, worthy. But doesn’t this boil down to memory and distance? How did Wainaina remember every item that spilled from a ‘garbage can’ when Mrs Karanja kicked it, a list that represents Kenya in 1978 from ‘KCC milk packets’ to ‘Dax pomade’?<sup>92</sup> I am not sure I could perfectly list twenty items from twenty years ago, but I could in time conjure them to represent where I was. These twenty items are rendered as fact now, but were they fact then? Surely he made them up, to a point, in the same way that I invented Kweli’s inventory. To the reading eye Kweli’s list is indisputably made-up, being fiction, yet is intradiegetically ‘true’, whilst Wainaina’s could be questioned as to its diegetic accuracy, but due to the primacy given to the first person witness, the memoir, however distant in time, there is a suspension of disbelief which blends and accepts imagination with fact. This is

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., paragraph 13.

<sup>91</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina, ‘Writers Who have Influenced Me’, *Crossing Borders archive*, <<http://www.transculturalwriting.com/radiophonics/contents/writersonwriting/binyavangawainaina/writerswhohaveinfluencedme/index.html>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020], paragraph 2. My emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina, *One Day I Will Write about this Place* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 19.

ironic because the fiction is read as less objectively true yet may be more so, and the autobiography may be vice versa: '(A)s if autofiction isn't entirely rhetorical, entirely fictional, entirely designed; it's not more true than fiction, it's a different form of fiction'.<sup>93</sup>

Wainaina's seminal signature list, 'How to Write About Africa', sounds a warning bell, fires up my nervous system, checks my white privilege; am I using Africa to 'examine my own light'? As I am arguing that fiction is fact split through the prism of an author's nervous system, ultimately therapeutic before being received as anything edifying, then I must concede that *Splitters* is a twisted autoethnography, a solipsistic fictocriticism, a fever dream of wokeness, sweating out all that white guilt whilst simultaneously causing more. And if it has an edifying function, then what is taught and what is learned? Tempting as it is to leave that question open, as answers are to be found in the triangulation between author, reader and text, it demands an answer from me as the first in that triumvirate. It says that fiction is a good space, as Zadie Smith says above, to 'experiment in communication', to have a conversation. This is another way of saying that the answers are to be found in the triangulation between author, reader and text, so what is learned is that the field of possible reactions collapses to the individual reader's, which is unpredictable and nuanced, instant, then hindsight, which will 'pull facts to its present demand; it is the dental brace that will reshape your jaw, your resolve'<sup>94</sup>. This metaphorical trigeminal reshaping flashes signals back and forth between reader and author, ideal reader and perceived author: this is all made up; it's not real. I don't have to care about the real when mimicking a packing list, but the reflex fires when the nerve is exposed, when something out there and back then stimulates in here and right now, such that I do have to care about my nightmares, and the reader's.

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<sup>93</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Grand Union: Zadie Smith with Jennifer Egan', 1:02:32.

<sup>94</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina, *One day I will write.*, p. 59.



8.

After Kilimanjaro our expedition's project was to teach I.T., English literature, and P.E. at the central high school. The expedition from the previous year had gifted fifteen computers, but the staff said that they had never worked. Our I.T. wizards quickly figured out that the charitable gift had been interrupted along the line somewhere as there were no actual computers in the casings: fifteen monitors, keyboards, mice, with no working guts. The second shock of the day followed as we were asked to join the whole school in the courtyard to witness a caning. From the rear of the silent, blue cardiganed gathering we viewed an outdoor stage. Our students either treated it as a form of extreme entertainment or seemed genuinely stressed and upset. A girl of around twelve was marched onto the stage by a teacher who explained loudly in English why the girl was there. I have no idea what he said, as his accent was so strong. Our assigned teacher whispered to me that this was for our benefit as it would normally be in Swahili. The girl faced the crowd and was caned across the back of her thighs ten times. She vomited after the eighth strike so there was a brief pause. In equal measure, all Kenyan and English students watched or turned away, but there were no voices until the girl shouted in a ritualistic manner, 'I am sorry', before marching off the stage. Morning break followed and all the students began playing. Those nearest to us turned to speak with our students. Our other staff member, a trainee teacher from South Africa, recently emigrated to Britain, took a large bag of sweets from a pocket and started handing them out. She was instantly mobbed and the packet snatched from her hands. Kids grabbed sweets and fought each other for them as they ran away, except for one who'd taken his first bite and snapped a tooth. He spat blood and tooth fragments as some of our students tried to help him. Our teacher stormed past me saying, 'Fucking kaffirs. You give and all they do is take, take, take.' Her power in that situation to remove herself and fly back to Britain was illustrated in the manner of her leaving, weaving quickly between school children, waving a

hand in the air as if dismissing mosquitos, her language was shot through with a patronising prejudice, an unveiled vestige of post-apartheid race relations. Her khaki-clad body<sup>95</sup> moved freely through the parting crowd, camouflaged, innoculated. I never saw her again.

9.

Upon returning from Tanzania I worked at an outdoor education centre on the edge of Dartmoor where, in the off season, my friend and colleague Rob would bring in homemade cannon and muskets: dense, heavy things. We'd shoot holes through propped up scaffolding planks from a hundred metres away, whooping, deafened and momentarily senseless from a noise so sharp it was felt as light inside the skull. The planks would cartwheel across the field. On one attempt Rob lit a slightly too short fuse and the detonation happened closer to him than he would have liked. He manically spat out a filling as we laughed and gasped in the aftershock of the sound-wave hit.

I asked how he came to have such things. He answered, 'You know I grew up on a farm?'

'Yes.'

'Well, it wasn't a farm. It used to be, but the MoD bought it and gave it to my dad. He developed weapons for them. It was a safe house.'

'Jesus. Why?'

'He designed laser guided machine guns, like Gatling guns, but with lasers. They got sent to Sierra Leone after the civil war to test them out. They were ambushed and it killed all the attackers in three seconds. He said it was like a red mist in the jungle. That's all I know, but he got scared and they sheltered him here.'

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<sup>95</sup> 'The absence of a racial marker means that the character is by default white', from David Mura, *A Stranger's Journey*, p. 24.

I don't remember the exact wording of that conversation, but I remember the images 'three seconds' and 'red mist', as Rob did, as his father did; a small eidetic echo, a flash of colonial power inequality in microcosm. It stayed with me, such that at a Christmas party a few years later, a friend of my dad's, an ex-para, happened to mention he served in Sierra Leone. Uninhibited through alcohol I asked him if he'd seen any experimental weapons, any laser weapons. He looked surprised and asked how I knew about that. I told him about Rob's dad. He said he hadn't seen the Gatling gun, but they had been issued with a succession of new weapons to try out as they rounded up what was left of the West Side Boys in the few years following the officially recognised end of the conflict. They had to video and photograph the results.

10.

Matu formed here: he sprang from my reading of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, instantly acquired the back story from these stories above, then merged into conversations with the Mount Kenya guides I was working with at the time. He then appeared, over there back then in Kenya, where I didn't actually see him serving morning coffee to tourists, but for some reason felt compelled to do so. He was partly inspired by Egan's Joe, the son of a Samburu warrior who danced for tourists, then emigrated to New York via engineering at Columbia, 'becoming an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions)'<sup>96</sup>. Joe exists within a paragraph thirty five years ahead of the chapter's present, a projection of Egan's time play where she animates in pinball fashion sketches of varied futures. Her parenthetical, stereotypical grassland lion encounters shown above appear tongue in cheek, a gentle pricking of the stereotype through a rational fashioning of a life

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<sup>96</sup> Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), p. 65.

wherein a clause concerning ‘robotic technology’ can coexist in a sentence with one concerning grassland lions. In doing so she avoids what Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche calls ‘the danger of the single story’<sup>97</sup> where a Western author fixates on signifiers of otherness, such as coexistence with lions or images of pastoral charity-worthy poverty, and uses them in the stead of character development. Egan is knowingly using this stereotype in order to expand its scope. I get it; we saw in Tanzania with the Maasai homestead we worked for, Maasai men and boys scanning the grassland for lions, protecting herds and homes. And there were lions – we saw ten – the men would communicate their movements by mobile phone. The stereotype is based in reality, but Egan is showing that it doesn’t define that reality. Joe became an engineer, so our Maasai guide Ephraim traded cars and owned a football team. He was just as likely to be on his phone selling a player – while standing in silhouette against a Serengeti sunset (for doing so he charged a dollar per camera pointed at him) – than watching out for lions. We spoke about Victor Wanyama playing for Celtic, and why the Kenyan obsession with football never translates to African cup of nations success. He offered me thirty cows for one of our female students, said she had ‘good teeth’. I could not tell how serious he was. Our driver, a Kikuyu from Nairobi, informed me that the Maasai always did this sort of thing to tourists; that he’d put his spears away and change into Western clothes the minute we drove off; that he wished the Maasai didn’t exist as they were ‘parasites’ on the Kenyan economy and lounged around doing nothing all day whilst their wives did all the work; that if it were down to him all Maasai would be ‘sent back to where they came from’, which he seemed to think was Somalia, because they ‘held Kenya back’ and he did not approve of their image on tourist brochures and guides. He told me that thirty cattle was

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<sup>97</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘The Danger of a Single Story’, online video recording, YouTube *TEDGlobal*, July 2009 <[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021].

around thirty thousand US dollars. I said that Ephraim's family was way richer than mine. He did not believe me.

11.

### **Tanzanian Football**

On a red field his children play football:  
White shirts, black trousers, bare feet. He wears  
second-hand Reeboks, I wear brand-new Vans.

He smiles and asks for my Facebook. We watch  
and we smoke. We share my ipod. *Leftism* plays  
by Leftfield; Afro-left.<sup>98</sup> Eventually he asks,  
'Why did my ancestors not invent things?  
Why were they lazy under trees? While yours  
invented roads and trains and slavery?'

He looks at me. The quat is kicking in.  
I fight to contain a shiver, a buzz to my fingers.  
'Your ancestors were the first to make steel,' I say.  
'Yes. And now we must modernize, industrialize,' he answers.  
'But only to the extent that we let you?'

He stubs out his cigarette in the red earth.  
'This music is not African,' he says.  
'No. It's an impression,' I say,  
as we rise to play football.

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<sup>98</sup> Leftfield, Afro-Left from *Leftism* [on CD and vinyl] (Hard Hands records, 1995).

## Ego

The writer can't plunge into the depths of a character if she is hiding from such depths within her own psyche.<sup>99</sup> David Mura

These characters should buzz around your main hero, making him look good. Your hero can teach them, bathe them, feed them; he carries lots of babies and has seen Death. Your hero is you [...] <sup>100</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina

All this talk of image and subconscious. I mean, I have explored somewhat already, but there's always more isn't there, there's always something below?

Is this that space where Smith says we can have a conversation? Is it a safe space? The therapist doesn't get to tell the sufferer that the space is safe. There is no such thing as a safe space. Not even a womb: I've counselled a student who attacked a pregnant teacher with a chair when he was nine, killing her unborn son. He wants to kill himself; I asked him not to. He wants a re-set button. How deep does he need to go to find that which lies beneath, some kind of bedrock? I don't think there is one. How can he forget himself to re-invent himself? Who does he speak to in his head: him back then, or him now trying to erase him back then by remembering? This sort of thing 'sticks to you', as Taussig would say.

So this is scary, I'm nervous. But here goes, because I feel that I've been skirting something – floating on a surface – maybe. I need to dive deep. I need to, as they say in rap, 'go in'...

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<sup>99</sup> David Mura, *A Stranger's Journey*, p. 231.

<sup>100</sup> Binyavanga Wainaina, 'How to Write about Africa', paragraph 8.

mentioned rap why? because it's so phallocentric and that's important because  
it's to do with violence and language, is this too deep?

pull back

go in

into the images beneath that

pain on a green welsh playground punched to the floor kicked Fuck off Saes cont Fuck off

Saes cont ewch adra<sup>101</sup> swung back and his jaw had an extra bit to the side

a tooth

I know he's shouting Mam but he's just saying aaaaaa

I got the cane on the last day of the cane

pull back

go in

Mount Kenya crystal cold conquered blisters and sweat attacked at the end

big guy battle cry of mzungu! charging us

already got blood on him how mad was he?

machete in the air threw sand in his face

how mad?

blank eyes screeching mzungu as lumberjacks saved us they dragged him away

beat him until he stopped moving bought them beer wild party in their banda

spiders in the rafters two single beds chair carved out of hash

lumberjacks laughing

played marbles with their kids on the porch in the soft morning

air blue to dust to the colour of forgetting

go in

pull back

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<sup>101</sup> Trans: 'Fuck off English cunt, go home.'

## Being otherwise

Most of us have love for, and interest in, our own lives—our ‘own people.’ Our lives are nonfiction. This is my family. My neighborhood. My body. My reality. Fiction, as a mode, shared this love and interest but always with the twist of, well, fiction. It was always interested not only in how things are but also in how things might be otherwise.<sup>102</sup>

Zadie Smith

The novel is significant [...] not because it presents someone else’s fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.<sup>103</sup>

Walter Benjamin

1.

Within the huge historical currents of his time Benjamin perceived one ribbon to be the decline in oral storytelling and the rise of the novel. In a reverse of this – and I suggest that this is indicative of the contemporary socio-political surge of populism and localism – Smith senses a movement away from fiction (back) towards the retelling of authentic experience, ‘(E)mbarrassed by the novel—and its mortifying habit of putting words into the mouths of others—many have moved swiftly on to what they perceive to be safer ground, namely, the supposedly unquestionable authenticity of personal experience’.<sup>104</sup> Marie Darrieussecq

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<sup>102</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 22.

<sup>103</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’, in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. by Dorothy J. Hale (Blackwell, 1936), pp. 361-378, p. 373.

<sup>104</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 8.



noticed this movement ten years ago, ‘In our times, truth is all the rage, a truth identified with the Good. What seems to be disappearing is the very possibility of reading and understanding what a novel is’.<sup>105</sup> Jennifer Egan, in conversation with Zadie Smith, says of this movement, ‘if this really is what fiction has to be then I actually can’t write fiction’.<sup>106</sup> I noticed this trend in a postgraduate seminar eight years ago, where, in answer to a question about whether or not someone could write a convincing female character if one were not a woman, the majority of students opined that one could not, and the question seemed unambiguous. I offered that this would mean we could only write convincing characters similar to ourselves, then, logically speaking, we could only write autobiography. The resultant discussion concluded that anyone could write any character though they might never convince by seeming hollow; they would not ‘ring true’. Expression trumped imagination and mimesis; this sample of English department postgraduates decided that we should stay in our lanes. There is here a nervous vacillation, where the legitimacy of any representation is conferred by a critical flicking between seeming and being... what? True? That something seems more correct due to witness and lived experience; that you can, as Taussig puts it, ‘get the story behind the story and out-story it’.<sup>107</sup> Narrative butts up against discourse, and how do you tell the difference?

## 2.

For Benjamin, stories are made of real stuff, ‘(I)t is [...] characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – *and this is the stuff that stories are made of* – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death’.<sup>108</sup> He sees a distinction between oral storytelling as a craft – the storyteller as artisan, journeyman, counsellor – and

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<sup>105</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, ‘Fiction in the First Person.’, p. 71.

<sup>106</sup> Jennifer Egan, ‘Grand Union: Zadie Smith with Jennifer Egan.’, 1:02:04.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p 9.

<sup>108</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 368. Italics added.

the loneliness of the novelist, '(T)he novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others'.<sup>109</sup> Distinct from the collective, with their stories at a remove in a physical book, Benjamin's novelist acts with less authority than his storyteller. Taussig explains this, '(A)t one point [...] he suggests that the storyteller borrows his authority from death, Benjamin says death sinks the story into nature, or, to be more exact, into natural history'.<sup>110</sup> The 'nature' in question is the storyteller's real life, which can only attain 'transmissible form' at the moment of his death. The form this takes would seem to be the dying's life flashing before their eyes as 'a sequence of images [...] as his life comes to an end [...] unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself'.<sup>111</sup> These images are 'the stuff that stories are made of'; the real life that flashes its own dialectical images, subconscious rather than historical, but also an attempt to merge the individual into the collective with a way to speak about doing that.

Here death is the black hole to our constellations of stories. It is the ultimate reality above (beneath?) and beyond claims of witness or sense, such that Wainaina can mock Western writers' references to dead bodies as an attempt to claim some 'real' Africa in their pages, and I can reference it to relativise all other claims to truth value; after all, our nervous systems exist to keep us alive before we can search for any meaning. That bloody road bend below Kilimanjaro had no meaning for me, nor for this novel, because I was utterly other to it, could not relate to it. I still haven't. But there was a moral to the story: I understood my distance, my position of privilege, sensed the structure in the system around me as solidly as the hard edges of the Tata coach. So when I read Benjamin exploring the differences between

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.364.

<sup>110</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Corn Wolf*, p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 368.

storytelling and novel writing, the Kilimanjaro road bend flashed as an image, unheralded and unbeckoned:

(T)he ‘meaning of life’ is really the center about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself *living this written life*. Here ‘meaning of life’ – there ‘moral of the story’: with these slogans novel and story confront each other.<sup>112</sup>

The machete wounds are no more or less relevant for my representation of Kenya in the novel than a drug related stabbing at a party is to my representation of Swansea: the former did happen, the latter could have happened – probably has done somewhere to someone; it is all part of the ‘perplexity’ confronting the reader as she imaginatively projects a possible reality onto the (her) real. The confrontation for the writer lies at the boundary of lived experience and fiction, the sort of grey area where the nervous system’s vacillation is most prominent: this is autobiography – Benjamin’s ‘story’, the subconsciously stored, partially accessed flashes of memory in the form of images – versus mimicry.

3.

Smith exposes my montage in the previous chapters as being not only a delve into formative experiences but also a plea for the authenticity of *Splitters*. In Benjamin’s terms, was I ‘telling’ stories garnered from journeys, shaping them with craft, then allowing their moral to impact un-filtered? If so, then as previously cited, Smith has little truck with the idea that autobiography is necessarily mimetically accurate, nor that fiction is necessarily

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 372. Italics added.

autobiographical, and she builds on this to offer – contrary to Benjamin – that such nebulous ungrounding is a good thing:

Fiction was suspicious of any theory of the self that appeared to be largely founded on what can be seen with the human eye, that is, those parts of our selves that are material, manifest, and clearly visible in a crowd. Fiction—at least the kind that was any good—was full of doubt, self-doubt above all. It had grave doubts about the nature of the self.<sup>113</sup>

These ‘grave doubts’ echo yet counterpoint the ‘perplexity’ that Benjamin claims a novel’s reader experiences; the very thing that he saw as a moral problem, or at least a problem in the ability of the novel to impart a moral. Such uncertainty comes from the reader ‘living this written life’. When Benjamin states that the novelist ‘cannot counsel others’, it is because of his moral-is-to-true-story as meaning-is-to-fiction dichotomy. Benjamin’s novelist creates a *perplexing* fiction removed from a real social situation, a space where people would listen to a story together and discuss it, ‘(A) man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated more so than any other reader’,<sup>114</sup> therefore his novel reader is unable to attain the levels of empathic exchange presumably such kinship would facilitate. Smith alludes to a visual foundation of identity, something the campfire storytellers and listeners would probably share, some sort of unified group of unified selves that Benjamin laments the loss of, out of which comes a simple authenticity.

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<sup>113</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 10.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p 372.

There is a parallel here with the way that rap and grime create a community, one that Kweli has piggy-backed upon to examine his position. The tellers of this popular form of spoken word could be seen as the modern incarnation of the Benjaminian storyteller, authenticating an identity and conferring upon a diverse listenership some impression of belonging; '(G)rime artists consciously produce and reproduce their identities through their performances, as individuals, as representatives of a music scene, and of local, national, and translated communities.'<sup>115</sup> But of course, in *Splitters*, this is just an impression; it makes no difference that much of *Splitters* actually happened, from raves on wintry Scottish beaches, to the documentation of fatal wounds caused by experimental weapons on West Side Boys. According to my reading of 'The Storyteller', the fact that these are autobiographical stories and hearsay does not increase the novel's authenticity or validity in any way. According to Benjamin's argument this is in part because the death that authenticates any meaning the reader derives from the novel is that of the character's, not of the storyteller's, and partly because the irreality of fiction is unable to carry a moral.

Smith echoes similar thoughts on biography here, at the other end of Modernity and for very different reasons, that just because it happened in the writer's life it doesn't lend legitimacy to the novel:

The only thing that can decide the fitness (or otherwise) of a book for me is this mysterious belief, which a writer can't summon by citing her copious research or explaining to me that all of this 'really happened.' Belief in a novel is, for me, a by-product of a certain kind of sentence [...] The sort of sentence that makes me feel –

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<sup>115</sup> Ruth Adams, "'Home sweet home, that's where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from": Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London.', *Popular Music and Society*, 42:4, (2019) pp. 438-455, p. 362.

against all empirical evidence to the contrary – that what I am reading is, fictionally speaking, true.<sup>116</sup>

Later in the essay Smith examines this exchange from the writer's angle asking, 'Can I use what I feel to imagine what the other feels?'<sup>117</sup> Can imaginative leaps of empathy cross consciousnesses? It – truth, authenticity, the success of a novel – is all about belief in a sentence that makes us *feel* that something is true. *Splitters* attempts this through the co-option of storytelling elements, from the dream exchange between Matu and his grandfather to Kweli's rap and the band's lyrics. These sudden changes in form are an attempt to suture authenticity with mimesis through their digetic orality, and an attempt through that suddenness to craft a dialectical image, the two forces at work being the truth of its irreality and the reality of its pretence.

4.

'Nairobi 1991': written from a memory of myself and my friend Simon's trip to Kenya in 1994. All images, flashing. We started the night in a greasy bar eating chips mayai, with 'Notts Landing' on the bar's television, discussing whatever it was we discussed back then. Women, for sure, travel plans maybe. We ended the night with cocktails in a colonial bar in the centre of Nairobi, where a young Kenyan woman took my photograph with a heavy Pentax SLR, smiled, then left. Strange. The night felt dangerous, probably was as we drunkenly hopped on and off bouncing matatus, kept a momentum to feel safer. As such it has engrained itself, and I explore it like a tongue on a broken tooth: *Can I use what I feel to imagine what the other feels?*

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<sup>116</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Fascinated to Presume.', paragraph 29.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., paragraph 12.

Matu and his Somali friend Diri discuss politics and plague over beers and chips mayai. I have changed names, heritage, skin colour. Major changes, so my nervousness kicks in: is it right? Is it faithful to the physical events of the night: timings, street names, etc? In 1991 there was an outbreak of plague in Kenya. There were major changes to Kenyan television as KTN started broadcasting and challenging Moi's single party power. Sinéad O'Connor was everywhere.<sup>118</sup> A woman takes Matu's photograph and he says she's incongruous in the colonial bar. The image flashes. The proximity of Njoki to Matu's newfound obsession with short haired pretty white women; O'Connor's image burned into his mind.

My Kenyan friend Daniel feeds back, 'There is nothing racially incorrect and the cultural situations and conversations are proximate. The highlighted words are commonly used and apply to the time context they were meant to appear'.<sup>119</sup> Great, thank you Dan, but... Benjamin's storyteller is there for all to see and hear and learn from, face to face, *mano a mano*. In the telling culture is reinforced and reinvigorated. His novelist is lost because the author and reader are implied and unknown. In this bar scene I am taking autobiographical experience and turning it into fiction. Fine, says Dan, everything is 'proximate'. I take the surface, skim along it at pace, blur it with the speed of quat, so the reader adds the depth, makes any connections. Njoki snaps at my memory with an image of Matu; my consciousness investigating itself, as the woman in the bar did way back when, trying to capture something of me implicated in the surface of the image, taking it away to use it somehow. There is something about the consciousnesses flitting around these images where I sympathise with Benjamin's lost novelist: I get tied up in a knot of spacetime – Njoki looking from me at me via Matu looking at Njoki expressing my/his surprise now back then – then

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<sup>118</sup> Sinéad O'Connor, 'Nothing Compares 2 U', from *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Ensign/Chrysalis Records March 1990).

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Gathoga, personal communication via Microsoft Messenger, 8<sup>th</sup> Jul, 2019.

the reader comes in, implied and actual, projecting themselves through these lenses and catching a glimpse of myriad things. One of which may well be complicated or clarified by wondering why the white novelist is attempting to project black consciousnesses from entirely different life experiences. In this flipping of the real and the imaginary there is a charge caused by the imbalance between them which surges, relays, hegemonic power between text and context. This imbalance is caused by the oscillation of belief in the proximity of the copy to reality, but also in the validity of, and perceived reason for, the attempt.

This is a confrontation as old as criticism: Plato versus Aristotle; the dutiful relation of truth against mimesis; '(M)orally, this is intolerable; politically, it is dangerous: we no longer know who is speaking, and we are moved, according to Plato, by fictional narratives that distract us from our duty'.<sup>120</sup> The storyteller can be didactic, because their experience is authentic, so much so says Benjamin that it is proven at the moment of death. *Splitlitters* is not so palpably didactic, but it speaks to that which may be: discourses of the postcolonial zeitgeist such as nationalism, whiteness, or race relations.

5.

'The Storyteller' is bleak. From the opening passage, '(W)as it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battleround grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?'<sup>121</sup> to, '(W)hat draws a reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about'<sup>122</sup>, the tone is one of loss and remove, indicative of Benjamin's Europe. It is unsurprising then that against this backdrop he saw oral storytelling as a lost craft, a link to not only a simpler more innocent time, but to the hearth-

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<sup>120</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, 'Fiction in the First Person.', p. 71.

<sup>121</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 362.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 373.



side warmth of other people. To associate folk knowledge authenticated by experience, grounded in nature – or as Taussig interpreted it, a ‘natural history’ – can lead to an essentialist view of a place or group, or more politically expedient, a group’s place. The group in question for Benjamin was the proletariat, not any culturally defined in-group, and he was setting that against the bourgeois novel reading classes, hence the valorisation of the knowledge and authority of storytelling and the scathing tone taken towards the rise of the novel. Smith discerns that the novel has returned to earth after its lofty experiments in communication with a contemporary demand<sup>123</sup> for stories told about culturally defined in-groups by members of those groups:

what insults my soul is the idea—popular in the culture just now, and presented in widely variant degrees of complexity—that we can and should write only about people who are fundamentally “like” us: racially, sexually, genetically, nationally, politically, personally. That only an intimate authorial autobiographical connection with a character can be the rightful basis of a fiction. I do not believe that.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> For example:

‘User6305183 Aug 2016 13:30

How would you suggest one should write of a culture which is alien without cliché or stereotype? I am male, 50 and white and would like to write about a young Bengali girl. The responsibility feels huge; do you think the task is insurmountable?

ChimamandaAdichie User6305183 Aug 2016 13:59

I think the first question is: WHY do you want to write about a young Bengali girl? There are still wonderful stories to be told about 50-year-old white men. If it is feeling unsurmountable, perhaps that’s a sign.’

From, ‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – your questions answered on the Obamas, motherhood and feminism’, *The Guardian*, Wed 3 Aug 2016 14.40 BST, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/live/2016/aug/01/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-webchat-half-of-a-yellow-sun>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021].

See also:

‘There is also an ethical question here: When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl, is it an act of empathy, or identity theft? When an author pretends to be someone he is not, he does it to tell a story outside of his own experiential range. But he has to in turn be careful that he is representing his characters, not using them for his plot.’

From, Margot Kaminski, “‘Little Bee’”, by Chris Cleave’, *sfgate*, First Published 4:00 am PDT, Sun March 15 2009, updated: Feb. 8, 2012 11:17 p.m., <<https://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Little-Bee-by-Chris-Cleave-3168139.php>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020].

<sup>124</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 8.

Benjamin mourned the loss of ‘the ability to exchange experiences’,<sup>125</sup> which he saw as in decline due to the dehumanising aspects of modernity and the collective trauma of the First World War, symptoms of which were the rise of the novel and the fall of folk storytelling. It is fascinating to see Smith articulate a near-counter argument whereby the novel (‘fiction’) is perceived to be in decline due to a popular(/ist) urge for stories of a culture authored from within that culture, and it is this circumscription which reduces the exchange of experience in fiction. She also adopts an obituary tone for fiction, and reconciles this with the observation that ‘(E)veryone, politically and personally, has a right to the ideology of separatism. It is the hard-won right of the political realist and the student of history’.<sup>126</sup> Writing using this rhetoric, whether it be from Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche or Lionel Shriver, would seek to ‘contain’ identities towards whatever political expedience required; the systematising of a nervous reality, either contra to the prevailing hegemony or to support the status quo, purposefully or via neglect. This is done through language, says Smith, and her discussion of this exemplifies her arch-Nervous System style; her awareness of the multi-directional flows of power through discourse and the arbitrary nature of their base. For her, language is ‘right there, within our grasp, and we can effect change upon it, sometimes radical change’, so it becomes the ‘battlefield’ of culture.<sup>127</sup> She states that we have both agency and restriction with the terms we use:

(T)he terms we choose—or the terms we are offered—behave as containers for our

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<sup>125</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 362.

<sup>126</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 30.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., paragraph 6.

ideas, necessarily shaping and determining the form of what it is we think, or think we think. Our arguments about “cultural appropriation,” for example, cannot help but be heavily influenced by the term itself.<sup>128</sup>

She asks us to consider what the effects would be if ‘cultural appropriation’ were rephrased as ““interpersonal voyeurism” or “profound-other-fascination” or even “cross-epidermal reanimation””.<sup>129</sup> Smith is mindful of just how arbitrary these ‘containers’ are but also of their potential power, how they can *actually* contain and restrict in the real world; ‘(A)s it is with language, so it goes with culture: what is not used or wanted dies. What is needed blooms and spreads’<sup>130</sup>. Here is Taussig’s ‘physical whallop’ striking again, and where Benjamin and Smith come full circle across Modernity: the image – whether via Benjamin’s Storyteller’s mortality, or the poststructuralist effects on cultural practices of Smith’s ‘terms’ – is physically grounded. And this is the thing: image happens, so Smith’s ‘fiction’ is just as integrated with the real as Benjamin’s ‘story’, reading is just as active an activity as listening around a campfire and discussing tales from afar from ‘the trading seaman’ or local culture from ‘the resident tiller of the soil’<sup>131</sup>, or feeling part of a diverse and subversive culture when consuming rap lyrics. However, these images are exchanged through language, parcels of effect such as ‘real n\*\*\*\*r’ or ‘cultural appropriation’ or ‘Mammy’<sup>132</sup>. So it is easy to see why Smith, with her personal experiences of reading such containing works as Mitchell’s, can empathise with counter-hegemonic works; ‘(T)hose who are unlike us have a long and

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., paragraph 6.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., paragraph 7.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., paragraph 8.

<sup>131</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 363: these are his archetypal storytellers.

<sup>132</sup> ‘(T)he damage Mitchell did with her notorious “Mammy” character was substantial: she placed a fresh dose of an old poison into the culture that still exists and reached even me, aged twelve, in my little corner of London, looking for some form of cultural reflection, any kind at all’: Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 19; Smith reflecting on Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*.

dismal history of trying to contain us in false images. And so—the argument runs—if we are to be contained by language, let that language at least be our own'<sup>133</sup>. I am 'unlike' Smith, though I share her sentiments on fiction. I am approaching this novel from deep within the hegemony (British, cis-gendered male, white, middle-aged, middle class) so it means something different when I stand for the freedom of mimesis than when Smith does. A counter-hegemonic voice within the hegemony is only such when viewed from within the discourse, seen from outside it may be just another Western white male wanting the freedom to do what they will. So the Nervous System fixes and my nervous system kicks, the anxiety of representation leads to a nervous novel, one as vulnerable as I can make it, one that flits between certainties, asking the reader to do so too, which may be where, on this sympathetic level, something happens. Something changes.

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<sup>133</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Fascinated to Presume.', paragraph 20.

## Masks

[...] how to write the Nervous System that passes through us and makes us what we are – the problem being, as I see it, that everytime you give it a fix, it hallucinates, or worse, counters your system with its nervousness, your nervousness with its system. As far as I'm concerned [...] this puts writing on a completely different plane than hitherto conceived. It calls for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented [...] <sup>134</sup>

Michael Taussig

1.

In 'The Storyteller' Benjamin is taking his Platonic duty as a revolutionary in the face of rising capitalism and fascism seriously – rejecting the frivolous, unedifying novel, championing one mode of cultural resistance for the oppressed – and merging this with his thinking on the dialectical image. As Taussig comments, for Benjamin '(Y)ou've got history and then you've got the story and then you've got the image, and it seems like the image trumps everything else'.<sup>135</sup> Benjamin was concerned with the perceived decline in the communicability of experience; 'Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?'<sup>136</sup> The sense is of the individual body affected by societal forces, how the individual is situated within the historical dialectic, but unable to tell stories. There is also this deeper sense of getting to grips with something shattered: the inability to speak, post-traumatic Europe, these images of life only authenticated by death, thus how can we write

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> Michael Taussig, Fictocriticism 2010, European Graduate School Video Lectures, Feb 15th 2011 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkzrxvDhDak&t=2900s>> [accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Mar 2021], 55:10.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

about experience? Well, with the image. Benjamin merges the images of lived experience – subconscious memories, the stuff of real life we use to tell stories – with his notion of the dialectical image – ‘(D)ialectical images counter the threat of preservation (tradition) by virtue of the interruptive force they are understood to impart to experience as a consequence of the instantaneous temporality of the now, or what Benjamin famously called now-time’<sup>137</sup> – this is that they appear in a flash. He fits Freudian subconscious images *flashing* before one’s eyes upon death into the narrated experiences (stories) of the storyteller using this idea of now-time. The storyteller’s images have the power of the dialectical image because they will do for the storyteller upon death, so they do have now (as ‘now-time’ is concertinaed), thus they have more than just authority, they have ‘interruptive force’, they bring about change.

It is little wonder, reading Benjamin, that Taussig, a lifelong scholar of his, would conceptualise something like the Nervous System after reading such passages as,

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>138</sup>

Perhaps it is this sort of prose image which led the anthropologist to think on the apotropaic potential of writing and the dialectical image: ‘(I)t was from Benjamin’s work that I was encouraged to think about the possibilities of NS [*sic*] writing as incantatory spells of mimetic-realism’<sup>139</sup>, because, surely, with that image of the ‘tiny, fragile body’ juxtaposed

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<sup>137</sup> Matthew Charles and Peter Osborne, ‘Walter Benjamin’, paragraph 80.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 362.

<sup>139</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 6.

against the industrial warscape, Benjamin not only elicits sympathy but actively seeks to intervene in Modernity's turn away from a pastoral innocence. Of Putumayo Indian shamanic curing rites in Columbia Taussig writes, '(A)nd so it was explained to me that the healer passes on an image, the "painting" as it is called there, to the sick person, who seeing it, gets better', he says these images lie 'at the cornerstone of power and representation, the space between art and life involved in the healing of misfortune'.<sup>140</sup> This is just as relevant for the intermediary role of the ethnographer concerned with the power of his representation of power in a personal and political sense – the syntax of which statement reveals the Nervous System at work as it flits between meaning – as for the reader who is influenced:

And so I got to thinking – passed on to me, and from me to you, how does this apply to my practice as a mediationist – and yours, as a reader – given the possibilities and even neccessities for reconceptualizing the power of imageric and magical thinking in modernity?<sup>141</sup>

And I got to thinking, how does it apply to the mediatory nature of creative writing? Can I use 'judicious "quoting" of the real'?<sup>142</sup> Since the 'rites of style are everything – words pressing into and impressed by the sensuousness of their referents, the power of arbitrariness of social conventions battling it out with the physical whallop of their effects',<sup>143</sup> could I not use anything I find, is it not a free-for-all? Yet in that acknowledgement of style being everything I sense a nervous caveat, heightened by the term 'physical whallop'. Taussig returns to this mechanism between language and culture time and again in his work,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

especially the way that writing feeds back into culture; ‘the curious activity wherein mine became but the latest, contiguous, link in a chain of narratives sensuously feeding back into the reality thus (dis)enchained’.<sup>144</sup> That sensuous ‘whallop’ is what I worry about when I write not just about an other, but from the first person point of view of an other; the potential for epistemic violence vitiates the hope that I can ‘use what I feel to imagine what the other feels’.

2.

‘Nanyuki 1984’: Wainaina warns against the inclusion of violent images as an attempt to claim some ‘real’ African experience. But I *saw* it, witnessed it: I was *there* goddamit. And here comes the Nervous System’s flick: I *experienced* it. The nervous system senses, creates image, turns image to words. I slot in other images and... ta-daa: novel! I try to contextualise, counter-point, obfuscate violence, but still include it: it may not have been a hand, it may have been a goat’s ribcage; Liverpoolian gangsters did go through a phase of ripping people’s eyelids off, at least that’s what I heard, that was the story. I read somewhere that it eventually makes you go blind. I’ve been attacked with a machete, kicked, spat at, and held at gunpoint in Kenya. And I was on ‘holiday’, a tourist. Perhaps it was because I was on ‘holiday’, perhaps that’s the point:

in literary writing, the asymmetrical location of the writer and the reader results in a practice of consumption in which complexity is flattened, nuance reduced, and — most critically — the very aestheticism of literary practice is largely erased through its absorption into an ethnographic discursive apparatus which can only homogenize

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 7.



through a seeming imperative to educate, indulging the epistemophilic drive of the *touristic gaze*.<sup>145</sup>

This gaze is, according to Madhu Krishnan, an end result of Western postcolonial criticism's reading of African literature as ethnographic information, as opposed to as an aesthetic engagement. It is the narratological version of the real thing. In the 'asymmetrical location' of reader and writer in the practice of production – of writing – is complexity also thus 'flattened'? I hope I am not flattening the cultural landscape with a solely ethnographic or touristic gaze, and this worry parallels what Benjamin saw as the modern need for information above the need to communicate experience, the novel being guilty of exemplifying this for him.

Perhaps my *actual* postcolonial gaze was the problem: many times in Tanzania and Kenya I received a particular hand gesture into my face. 'Why was that?' I asked Maria. 'Because they are protecting themselves from the blue-eyed demon within you,' she answered, 'that's why they call you *mzungu*.' Perhaps my moving in spaces where white people were never seen elicited these reactions; physically crossing borders into non-tourist areas. Now that my biography contains these asymmetrical meetings, my writing does also. Those flicking gestures writing a warding spell into the air were the apogee of Nervous System writing, apotropaic against an amalgam of the magic of colonialism's systemic ordering of power and the hex of the *mzungu*, and felt as such. Away from the tourist routes, the safaris and community projects, out of the Out of Africa tours, is a populace who remember the MauMau, who *were* the MauMau, and who do not appreciate the presence of a descendent of the aggressors. That symbol, though written in the air, impressed itself upon

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<sup>145</sup> Madhu Krishnan, 'When is Biography Fiction? Life Writing, Epistemophilia and the Limits of Genre in Contemporary Kenyan Writing', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 55 3 (2018), Issue published online: September 1, 2020, pp. 361-375 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418808836>> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Dec 2020]. My emphasis.

me, and is here reproduced in your mind in whichever way you wish to imagine it (a kind of sign of the cross, with wiggled fingers and a flick as if of wet hands).

Some kind of magic then, as is the kick of the Nervous System here as I realise I've reproduced a colonial form: a people, undifferentiated, heathen, antagonistic, who are pressed to my need without any consent. So, a re-fix is required: who knows who is or was MauMau? The majority of the people we passed or spoke with were welcoming and polite. Often the people performing the warding would also play with it, as with a flame, by asking for our blue-eyed gaze then laughing and squirming when we looked at them. My friend Tom uses 'MauMau' in his Facebook name, as do many of his friends, and he's as outward-looking a Kenyan as there is. As I write *Splitters* I constantly attempt such re-fixes. For example, on the level of characterisation, drug-dealing 'rastas' are juxtaposed by friendly and creative musicians; violent British gangsters appear alongside young DJs with eclectic tastes. Stereotypes exist inasmuch as they appear to on the surface, exploration beneath is possible with such counterpoints or by nuancing behaviour or expectation. However this is only true as far as experience or research reaches, the outer limits of which are sensed like a hand towards a flame.

3.

And this 'surface', what is it? Then, what is beneath? Identity anchored by a sense of belonging: behaviour by a sequence of experiences. So how does a writer mediate such arbitrary yet treasured stuff? If we take it that consciousness itself is a metaphoric, almost narrative thing whereby 'an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism – something it is like for the organism',<sup>146</sup> and

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<sup>146</sup> Thomas Nagel, 'What is it Like to be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), 435-450, in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183914>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2021].

think on ‘(I)t is obvious that I cannot experience what it is like to be you, but I can potentially have a complete explanation of how and why it is possible to be you’,<sup>147</sup> then representation is always going to elide lived reality, let alone nail an other’s identity and experience, and it is ‘obvious’ that this is the case. We can see the identity but we can’t see that which builds it; the other side of the skull is inviolable. This is one of the great draws of fiction; to see across that barrier, to hear the voice inside somebody else’s head:

Funny the stuff you know and the stuff you don’t. I guess his mind’s elsewhere: in his boots, on the trip, Ceri’s arse. I’m not bothered, it’s all jokes anyway. People worry too much about things like that; it’s not like anyone can see inside your head, you’re always safe in here. ‘You’ll be fine,’ I tell him.<sup>148</sup>

4.

Taussig, riling against the reification of colonised, museum-ed identities within anthropology wrote:

(T)he search for identity through the many circuits of mimesis and alterity ends at this point in our history with the conclusion that, finally, although there is no such thing as identity in any grand sense – just chimeras of possible longings lounging in the interstices of quaint necessities – nevertheless the masks of appearance do more than suffice. They are an absolute necessity.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, ‘The hard problem’, *Philosophy Now*, 99 (2013)  
<[https://philosophynow.org/issues/99/What\\_Hard\\_Problem](https://philosophynow.org/issues/99/What_Hard_Problem)> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2021], paragraph 6.

<sup>148</sup> *Splitters*, p. 161.

<sup>149</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 101.

Here we find the paradox in Nervous System thinking: the Nervous System, the mechanism for the embodiment of knowledge deep within us, detects surfaces. This is relevant to creative writing because it supports what Smith says about the veracity and impact of a certain kind of sentence, one that makes us feel even though it is a chimera. Further to the depth of consciousness implied by surface behaviours there is also power *in* the mask, not only behind it:

the mimetic faculty carries out its honest labor suturing nature to artifice and bringing sensuousness to sense by means of what was once called sympathetic magic, granting the copy the character and power of the original, *the representation the power of the represented*.<sup>150</sup>

These spells Taussig works with – apotropaic, sympathetic – can backfire. Because as much as I could say that *Splitters* succeeds in communicating something valid enough for a reader's consciousness to explore and consequently grow – apotropaic, I would have achieved this by mimicking reality through a montage of language, perception, and time to create a copy – sympathetic. That the representation gains the power of the represented leads to Benjamin's 'perplexity' for the reader. If the representation is perceived *as if* 'real' then that does two concurrent and contradictory things. First, it interrogates so destabilises the homogeneity of the original because it implicitly asserts that signifiers of identity are performed or displayed phenomena and therefore not essential, and secondly it may reify those accessible aspects of culture or identity into stereotypes and tropes.

However well rendered the copy may be it has the potential to undermine the people whose lived experience actually produces such surface phenomena. This is analogous to

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. xviii. Italics added.

David Chalmers' conceptualisation of the 'philosophical zombie' which Annaka Harris summarises, '(I)n theory, I could act in all the ways I do and say all the things I say without having a conscious experience of it, much as an advanced robot might'.<sup>151</sup> If, as Nagel, Chalmers, and Harris believe, consciousness functions as an epiphenomena to the physical, beyond yet of the nervous and other bodily systems, then it is not difficult to assume that we could perceive other consciousnesses as untethered to a physical body. It is disconcerting to be replaced by a map of algorithms, it destabilises the self, belittles experience. In day to day life this is generally not a thought anyone has, but when reading literature one's head is filled with philosophical zombies, sometimes we may even fall in love with one of these hollow word golems. We could sense in a text the voice of any number of minds, and, caught-up within a narrative analogous to that of our own consciousness – *what is it like to be? what is it like to be?* – project experience back into the world, that is we proprioceptively add psychological and emotional depth to the surfaces of the textual image; we *use what we feel to imagine what the other feels*.

This becomes a real-world hegemonic issue when these p-zombies become cultural zombies, when the consciousness animating them is doing so from experiences other to them. As Darrieussecq warns, '(T)he audacity of the imaginative writer who smuggles text across the border between brains, this melding of the imagination and the first person will always strike the defenders of literature-as-reflection as an illegal act',<sup>152</sup> this is irrespective of how well the 'smuggling' is done. So the Nervous System acts as energiser coursing through the signifiers, blinking open their eyes into a restricted PoV, jerking their limbs into action: on one hand, from this entropy comes the potential for a meeting of cultures and selves, on the other the potential for caricature and closure. In the asymmetrical relationships of

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<sup>151</sup> Annaka Harris, *Conscious* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), p. 19.

<sup>152</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, 'Fiction in the First Person.', p. 77.

postcolonial race relations, with all that carries emotionally, it is problematic to ‘smuggle’ cuckoo-like my white imaginings of black experiences into a consciousness represented in the first person. However, having made the decision to write a multi-racial narrative, reflective of the history between cultures, then to do so with the obvious trickery of the first person PoV forces me to confront this history head-on. The circumscribed space of the narrators allows for more interpretation so feels a more vulnerable and open position than what could be an obfuscating omniscience.

## Conclusions: the continual risk of wrongness

In front of a book you are still free. Between reader and book, there is only the continual risk of wrongness, word by word, sentence by sentence. The Internet does not get to decide. Nor does the writer. Only the reader decides.<sup>153</sup>

Zadie Smith

What we share most because of colonialism is that Greek word, *trauma* [...] Our greatest shared loss occasioned by a violent and hubristic encounter was each other. We lost each other.<sup>154</sup>

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

1.

David Mura asks, ‘Whom is the narrator telling her story to?’<sup>155</sup> This is a huge and elementary question which divides into two levels: who is the implied reader, and who is the voice speaking to within the text?

*Splitters*’ implied reader is an experienced one, asked to do a lot of heavy lifting: spotting details, links and references, filling spaces in dialogue, imagining setting and characters from scant description. They understand British cultural references whilst being well travelled and capable of knowing or implying the meaning of snippets of other languages. They can follow code-switching so know that in the Kenyan scenes the locals are speaking Kiswahili or Gikuyu to each other, and they follow the logic that all languages are

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<sup>153</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, final paragraph.

<sup>154</sup> Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Derelict Shards & The Roaming of Colonial Phantoms*, *The Elephant*, 6<sup>th</sup> Nov 2020 <<https://www.theelephant.info/long-reads/2020/11/06/derelict-shards-the-roaming-of-colonial-phantoms/>> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> March 2021]. Italics in original.

<sup>155</sup> David Mura, *A Stranger's Journey*, p. 135.

therefore not italicised to avoid any primacy or othering effect. However, as we go from structural or aesthetic aspects towards the political, the implied reader becomes more elusive. They would have empathy with the concept of divided selves, and would probably be open to cross cultural experiences. They would have an interest in interrogating race and wonder how the white author will handle black protagonists, consequently they could be of any race but each would bring a different expectation. The expectations each reader holds will taper the suspension of disbelief respectively; each will hear the narrators' voices differently.

I believe the choice of present, first person, reflective narrators allows for a stark representation of authorial decisions within the various consciousnesses at play though the text. Kweli's strands of identity variously show themselves, as they do with all the narrators, in conversation with his external world and with his organising consciousness. A voice questioning others and questioning itself, speaking with itself, demonstrates a split self so presupposes that identities are contingent, arbitrary, floating things. Through its near relentless application this becomes didactic, speaking to two ideal readers: one who feels validated by this contingency and one who feels challenged by it (this may happen, following the logic, within one person).

This process aligns with Taussig's 'apotropaic' potential of writing, but I have no naïve expectation that it will definitely change anything ('[A]s if fiction could argue itself into a reader's belief system!'<sup>156</sup>). Although there is the hope that it could, as Keen states:

Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques—such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states—as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening

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<sup>156</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Fascinated to Presume.', paragraph 16.



readers' minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism.<sup>157</sup>

There are also many empirical studies on reader response, such as Dan R. Johnson et al.'s study on participant's race boundary perception after reading a story about a counterstereotypical Muslim woman, concluding that, 'reading narrative fiction appears to ameliorate biased categorical and emotional perception of mixed-race individuals'.<sup>158</sup>

However, it is an important caveat that this report does not mention whether the readers knew the author was Shaila Abdullah or what her racial profile or cultural affiliation was. It would be illuminating to see a similar study investigate the effects on empathy and self-other merging if the perceptions of group affiliation between author, protagonists, and reader were taken into account.

## 2.

Because the reader of *Splitters* would be aware of the distances between author, narrator and themselves, their notion of what is authentic will come from the harmony or discord between their self-image and the images projected from the text. As David Mura calls attention to, 'unlike with those gathered around the original campfires, we storytellers now come from many tribes, and our potential readers also come from many different tribes [...] the dialectic between the storyteller and the listener/reader is far more complicated now'.<sup>159</sup> This relationship is further complicated because we don't just read and write from and to different 'tribes', but from and to multiple selves.

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<sup>157</sup> Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', p. 213.

<sup>158</sup> Dan R. Johnson, Brandie L. Huffman & Danny M. Jasper, 'Changing Race Boundary Perception by Reading Narrative Fiction', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 36:1 2014, p. 88.

<sup>159</sup> David Mura, *A Stranger's Journey*, p. 135.

*Splitters* is typical in this regard of a 'postcolonial' novel; '(T)he fractured self, and the related image of the individual within whom (or space within which) a national or cultural divide is surmounted, is a common feature of postcolonial writing'<sup>160</sup>. Kweli inhabits this 'related image', engaged on his hero's journey to find some kind of unity for his fractured identities: half black Kenyan, half white Welsh. Further, since identity is 'just chimeras of possible longings' these fractures are both contingent on where he is, who he's with, and how he feels. Further, both 'halves' do not carry an equal weight of either history or of potential for belonging; they are not greater or lesser pieces of his identity scaffold, no more or less than being a son, only child, musician, or being single, middle class, or introverted. As Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor says, 'although I am Nairobi and Kenya born, bred, formed and identified, the Occident has and does inform and influence me; this is an intrinsic part of the multiplicities I contain, I live my paradoxes with ease'.<sup>161</sup> Being a young person Kweli hopes to be able to live his 'paradoxes with ease'. When we encounter him he does not yet know what they are, only that he contains 'multiplicities', and he embarks on a quest to find how he is informed and influenced by them.

These floating identities cannot be grounded. I have deliberately avoided using the rhetorical device of linking identity to setting in order to manufacture an authenticity for Kweli. When we first encounter him is surfing on a beach, a liminal, shifting place; his mother even signposts this, '(H)ow can you own the sea, Kwel, eh? How can you own the sea?'<sup>162</sup> On his arrival in Kenya he is alone on the beach. Most of his description of setting is of the seascape, whereas the land is only rarely mentioned, '(T)his massive land north and west and south of me, and the sky to India, and I'm on the edge of it all between the land and

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<sup>160</sup> Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited : Writing Wales in English* (University of Wales Press, 2004) ProQuest Ebook Central <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bangor/detail.action?docID=449522>> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2020] p. 154.

<sup>161</sup> Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Derelict Shards*.

<sup>162</sup> *Splitters*, p. 23.

sea, bare footed connecting'.<sup>163</sup> Matu's introduction is slightly more embedded in place, but there is the feeling that it is transitory. I have attempted to ground him in Kikuyu land, beneath Mount Kenya, but he is profoundly aware of his imminent departure, and, being written in first person present, any description of place is contingent on his imaginary flights or his interactions, thus he does not seem held by his space.

Contrast this to Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *Dust*, where it has been said of her:

(S)he is a child of the desert who understands that the dunes, the rocks, the mountains, the wells, the cattle, the sun, the moon, the stars, the winds that carry the stories and secrets of ancestors who lived in these lands. Like the histories of Kenya, the desert of Turkana is complex and intense.<sup>164</sup>

*Dust's* Odidi and Adjany crawl into a cave in Turkana, northern Kenya just prior to their discovery of the skelton of Hugh Bolton, a British colonial officer and their mother's lover:

Mostly they slithered on the hard, cold ground, dark skin tones blending in, inching forward on knees and hands [...] *There*. The imprint of the world's first record of laughter – open-mouthed toothiness carved into ancient rock. Pictograms. Space shimmering in between icons.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> *Splitters*, p. 169.

<sup>164</sup> Jalida Scheuerman-Chianda, "'Dust' by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor – review", *Africa in Words*, 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 2014 <<https://africainwords.com/2014/01/30/dust-by-yvonne-adhiambo-owuor-review/>> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020].

<sup>165</sup> Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Dust* (London: Granta, 2014) p. 12.

Their bodies blend in with the dirt, the dust, of the ur-Kenya, a land North of cosmopolitan, agri-business Kenya, with a disputed border amongst vast wilderness. There are pictograms, origins, the first record of laughter. An officer of the British suppression of the Mau Mau lies decaying inside the aboriginal landscape; an allegorical image if ever there was one. Owuor uses the geography of the Northern Territories to both anchor her protagonists to the land and explore through counterpoint Kenya's tumultuous postcolonial process.

*Splitters* was originally titled 'To Split The Sky', after these lines from Peter Finch's *Real Wales*:

Walk the route taken by many thousands of earlier generations and something of them will surely seep your way. And if they were able *to split the sky* with a wave of their wands then, if you hang around long enough, then so will you too.<sup>166</sup>

There was a romance there, the kind that sells novels through the commodified gaze of landscape and its association with an authentic somewhere or some people. *Splitters* is not like that – 'we're all so muthafuckin split | bomb vests, Fukushima bricks'.<sup>167</sup> It takes place in airport lounges, school rooms, front rooms, garages, pubs and bars, or beaches; all crowded with bodies and dialogue, with voice and orality. Characters interact with setting by moving through it, with very few exceptions. Nothing is grounded, everything floats in that space between author and reader, autobiography and fiction. When Matu says 'stories told in the evenings feel better somehow: the way the stars are close and the old tales' deep-deep roots extend through my chair into the garden',<sup>168</sup> the tale he actually tells is in his dream state, a blend of Kikuyu myth and a pop-scientific version of the Schrodinger's cat thought

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<sup>166</sup> Peter Finch, *Real Wales* (Seren, 2008) p. 69.

<sup>167</sup> *Splitters*, p. 205.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

experiment. Even though he speaks of ‘roots’ he takes the story in a very different direction, so any assessment of authenticity will be by means other than via place.

3.

Autoethnography – writing culture via the self – brings about a change in the self. It has to disrupt the precondition in order to allow space for the next. As a personal process this project has been edifying and difficult in equal measure, and I’m still unsure as to how far along that journey I am. But this is a good thing; it should always be unsure, nervously reactive and proactive. Owuor’s provocational opening address to the 2020 international conference, ‘Colonialism as Shared History’ in Berlin ended with the words:

Your insanity, its tenacity do not matter to us anymore. With this in mind, apart from the basics of meet and greet, and the cool pragmatics of settling your 400-year old outstanding business debt to us...Please... Leave us alone. *Just leave us alone.*<sup>169</sup>

An unequivocal plea, although one made in full knowledge that it will not happen, and with many suggestions as to how a dialogue may come about:

Are the under-40s represented here? Listen. Flee! Run! Tear away from the elders of another generation, figuratively and metaphorically. Physically too. On your way out, raid the libraries, and pick out the literature that they ignore. Distil these, and evolve a new grammar of action and thought system as you ruminate on the poetry and

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<sup>169</sup> Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Derelict Shards*. Italics in original.

prophecies. Go beneath the surfaces and evolve a method to guide your original quest to restore humanity to wholeness.<sup>170</sup>

Somewhere between Owuor's protective, therapeutic isolationism and Shriver's white, idealised free state of Nevada in *The Mandibles* is a space for coming together. This is a new space; there is barely anything 'post' about colonialism: my father can remember lynching stories on the news from the USA; the British Paras unilaterally used Sierra Leone as a live firing test site just ten years before I started writing this novel. If Owuor expresses the pain of a wounded people in the present tense then there must be a space for healing without anymore intervention from the guilty party. Creative writing has the potential to be a space for the future of cross-cultural interactions to occur, but only if it is seen as a process, contingent, vulnerable, discursive and open; only if it mimics the unknowability, the wrongness, the impermanence of real life.

I feel that answering Owuor's call for the colonisers to 'evolve a new grammar of action and thought system' must be a process underpinned by vulnerability. There are projects that have done or are doing this, such as Oxford University's Writers Make Worlds,<sup>171</sup> Lancaster University's Crossing Borders,<sup>172</sup> or Exeter University's World and Postcolonial Cultures Research Group.<sup>173</sup> These projects' 'grammar' or 'systems' are open and dialogical, and it speaks of their relative newness that the lexicon of this shift from 'Postcolonial' to 'World Literature' is still searching for a neologism to suit its 'global' scope (witness above, Exeter's all-bases-covered approach to the title of its project). Such vacillation shows the will to not commit the mistake of systematising categories of otherness defined in relation to English Literature. That we still use the prefix of the discourse of

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> <<https://writersmakeworlds.com/about-the-project/>> [accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 2021].

<sup>172</sup> <<http://www.transculturalwriting.com/radiophonics/index.html>> [accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 2021].

<sup>173</sup> <<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/postcolonial-cultures/>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021].

progress ‘post’, and that we don’t just use the qualifier-free ‘Literature’, is illustrative of a system nervous of change. To change we must be vulnerable. If English department graduates become the literary gatekeepers defining the shelf space of tomorrow, there needs to be an understanding of the biases which inform that definition. Research projects such as those above need to become the faculty, not just temporary addenda.

4.

Zadie Smith mentions an experiment she undertook, ‘I once wrote a novel about an imaginary, multihyphenated British-Jewish-Chinese boy. It was love and interest that motivated me, but my love and interest was located in the other’, and how she is resigned to the thought that ‘by his existence he is in fact oppressive, simply because he is “taking up space” where a “real” half-Jewish, half-Chinese fictional character might be’.<sup>174</sup> She knows the implications of that “real”; that he will remain ‘unread, unbought, unloved’, instead of being read and completing his ‘absurd fictional role in this world’.<sup>175</sup> This may well be Kweli and Matu’s fate, to float out there (in *here*) in that incongruous place between (my) life and their own field of possibilities. If we use a method that necessitates vulnerability, then perhaps, given our history, that is exactly where they need to be: un-seen and un-set, walking the Mobius strip in opposite directions, waiting for the light of a synapse to enter the world. And if it never finds them, then at least they have changed me. That may be enough, for now.

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<sup>174</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume.’, paragraph 22.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., paragraph 22.

## Original contribution to the field of Creative Writing

‘Splitters: A Nervous Novel’ has shown what creative writing discourse can gain from interdisciplinarity, in this case building upon Michael Taussig’s *Nervous System* work, which in turn re-invigorates Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image. It is an original contribution to knowledge, specifically a new synthesis in the field of creative writing methodology, to take an autoethnographic and fictocritical technique and apply it to the writing of a fiction. To my knowledge the *Nervous System* has not been used for a fiction of this scale. This practice-based research akin to ethnography necessitates a vulnerability in the author when working across an asymmetrical hegemonic and racial gap, although many fictions have been written across race and culture there is a contemporary decline here; *Splitters* stands as an experiment in mimesis, empathy, and imagination in the current climate of ‘identity politics’ and expressive fiction. This contributes to the exploration of new implications for identity and power in Literature.

The form of the novel is experimental and therefore original in three crucial ways. First, it attempts to create dialectical images in text; sudden bursts of recognition which can act as accelerators of empathic exchange. Second, chapters zig-zag across time as they merge to the final meeting of Matu and Kweli, they often match length, pace, tension, concerns – most obviously in the two opening chapters – in an indirect narrative linkage between the two protagonists’ arcs. Thirdly, places are confined or liminal, landscape is symbolic and rendered through the protagonist’s interactions with it. The novel is ‘grounded’ instead in the body, using senses to embody location. This avoids the commodified gaze of landscape, which in turn disengages identity from place leading to an anxiety of belonging which destabilises essentialisms, and contributes to creative writing research and practice focussed on place.



## Appendix

### Synopsis of *Splitters*

#### *Chapters not included in the selection in italics*

Chapter	Narrator	Action	Developments
Nanyuki, Kenya, 1980	Matu	Nairobi boarding school discussed between Makena and Aunt Mukondi. Matu's flights of scientific fancy shown. Guka ('Grandfather') and twin sisters introduced. Muga canes then punches Matu in school.	Matu established as a dreamer, his naïveté established by the disjunct between his thoughts and the surrounding action. Matu's love of mother and distrust of father shown. His father's alcohol problem and ensuing family tensions shown. Kikuyu:Luo tribal tensions shown. These splits in family and in society begin the underlying threat of 'splitting' throughout. Introduction of the theme of how words can define or contain. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (the more precisely you know the position of a particle the less precisely you can know its momentum and <i>vice versa</i> ) introduced as a theme and metaphor – Matu shown to frame people as 'particles' – for both Matu's imminent departure to Nairobi and for belonging/migration.
Swansea, Wales, 2004	Kweli	Kweli and Katy get ready to surf, Davy goes to surf on his own. Kweli preoccupied about what is a 'good' or 'bad' word. Kweli's enthusiasm sees him caught in a rip tide and taken out to the big waves.	Kweli-Katy bond established. Davy shown as peripheral through his prioritisation of his own enjoyment over Katy's birthday surf trip. Kweli's need for a father figure and male role model established. Kweli's adventurous personality shown. Further thematic link to how words contain or define through the 'good/bad' word discussion, the evidence of localism in surfing, and the racial insults Kweli has suffered already. These, combined with Davy's untrustworthiness, maintain the underlying threat of 'splitting'. Links made between Matu and Kweli by parallels between first and second chapters (length, pace, absent father figure, interest in what words mean, cliff-hanger ending).
St. Andrews, Scotland, 1996	Katy	Katy is stuck in a bar after a university lecture with Dan. Katy meets Matu after overhearing him discussing his weapons research post on the phone. 'RAF' – as Katy perceives them – watch Matu and Katy. Katy's friends arrive and they leave together for a rave on the beach.	Matu nears completion of his PhD in laser development. Matu shown as already world-weary, also showing signs of using alcohol. Katy shown to prioritise fun and socialising over work. Slight undertone of threat hinted at by the presence and attention of military personnel, and Matu's choice of thought experiment. Dan's autistic traits and confrontational nature established. Matu's blackness noted by Katy (consciously and non-judgementally) and Dan (unconsciously and judgementally). The theme of how words contain and define is examined in Dan and Matu's exchange and linked to race.
Swansea, Wales, 2015	Kweli, Ceri, Karl's song lyrics	Kweli and Ceri flirt whilst songwriting.	Kweli and Ceri's closeness shown as he allows her to play with racial stereotypes in fun. This will be called into question when the form allows for Kweli's internal reflection (in his emails, in his footnotes). First change in form here with Karl's lyric, then the script dialogue, brings the reader's attention to the

			crafted nature of the work and the words as containers theme.
Nanyuki, Kenya, 1980	Matu	Matu dreams whilst unconscious. He exchanges stories with his grandfather. He awakes to find Muga punched him.	Threat of revenge violence from either Matu's grandfather or father tinged with tribal element. Schrödinger's cat story and Matu's description of himself as 'not sure' furthers themes of splitting and the confinement of definition.
Swansea, Wales, 2016	Ceri, Karl's lyrics	Kweli's band practice in Paul's garage. Ceri and Karl argue, Ceri and Kweli act as pacifiers.	Tension shown between Paul and Kweli. Ceri shown to think of Kweli very fondly but platonically. Ceri thinks of Paul's dad being 'split open'; splitting as a good thing allowing change.
Nanyuki, Kenya, 1984	Matu	Children's football game. A rabid dog chews a piece of meat the children think is Muga's hand. Matu falls out with Oscar accusing him of spreading untruths about Muga's fate and his father's or grandfather's part in it.	Gossip about Muga's fate. Oscar's prejudice about Matu's twin sisters revealed. Muga was most probably fired for punching a student but the gossip, linked to Matu's father's and grandfather's revenge thoughts, show just how possible and potentially accepted violence between Luo and Kikuyu is. The prejudice of the fala – ('primitives') as Matu calls them – and the tribalism shown as push factors for Matu's rejection of his homeland.
Swansea, Wales, 2016	Kweli, Kweli's lyrics	Party where Karl drunkenly announces Kweli's love for Ceri. Gangsters scare Kweli and Karl.	Kweli and Karl's friendship shown as strong. Kweli's obsession with Ceri becomes apparent. Tension with Paul furthered. Presence of professional gangsters 'from Liverpool' hints that they are further up the supply chain thus seeding the thought that something more is happening here. They are looking for 'Ted' who we later find is Paul's alias with them. As in the previous chapter, the threat of violence is just below the surface. Kweli's lyrics act autobiographically giving us more depth to his character and background. The discussion as to what to write brings attention again to the theme of words and their containing or defining effect.
Leuchars, Scotland, 1996	Matu	A hungover Matu waits for a train to his new job, he remembers having sex with Katy. Dan quizzes him on his morals.	Matu alludes to guilt as he mentions 'one face'; Njoki, who he feels he has betrayed with Katy. That he does not dwell on it shows he is averse to self criticism, mainly because he knows he was too drunk and sees his father in himself. Matu's ethical dilemma regarding developing weapons explored with Dan after it becomes apparent he let slip too much to Dan whilst drunk. It seems Matu is trying to convince himself that the weapon may be defensive.
Swansea, Wales, 2015	Kweli	Kweli's abandoned emails to Matu	Kweli's true motivation for tracing Matu; to see where 'half of' him comes from. His frustration and anger shown. Kweli's hesitancy with Ceri explained and blamed on Matu.
Swansea, Wales, 2005	Kweli, Katy's flash-backs	Katy's 30 <sup>th</sup> birthday party. Discussion with Davy and friends as to what happened to Kweli after the big wave. Dan tells Kweli and Katy that he has a photo of Matu if they would like to see it.	Katy's closeness to Kweli and her protectiveness of him shown. Kweli becomes very interested when Dan says he took photographs of Matu, he asks Katy to allow Dan to develop them, the innocence of his interest contrasted with the Kweli of the previous chapter.

Nairobi, Kenya, 1988	Matu	Matu gives the valedictory speech at his high school graduation ceremony but accidentally drops the speech down the toilet beforehand, he then ad libs and accidentally brings up tribal tensions. Dirí introduced.	Matu's big day only attended by his mother due to his father's arrest for criminal damage when drunk. His mother's adherence to social norms and saving face contrasted with her emotional turmoil with Matu's father; finally, she cannot protect him any longer. Matu's friendship with Dirí shown. Contrast between Dirí's fun loving, caring father and Matu's absentee father. Tribal rivalries and attitude to the Kalenjinn (Moi's tribe) shown.
Llangenith, Wales, 2016	Kweli	Kweli and the band surf with Davy and his friends. Davy steals Paul's van as a practical joke. Paul overreacts and Kweli worries.	Kweli shown to be feeling insecure. Tension grows between Kweli and Paul because Paul knows of Kweli's feelings towards Ceri. Kweli feels an outsider. The idea that they are thinking of smuggling hashish sowed. Davy warns against it. Kweli's respect of Davy shown.
Nairobi, Kenya, 1991	Matu	Matu and Dirí out on the town in Nairobi. They meet Njoki.	Dirí expresses the sense of modernisation and progress felt in Kenya at the time, oppositional to Moi's single party. Matu is swept along by Dirí's energy. Matu meets Njoki who noticeably takes his photograph. The motif of photographs speaks to the theme of certainty and uncertainty: Matu is pinpointed (his position is known) at moments where he feels happy and that he belongs or makes connections.
Cardiff, Wales, 2016	Paul, Ceri, Karl, Kweli	<i>Label meeting in Cardiff for the band. Unbeknown to the other members, Paul is approached to sign a contract alone.</i>	<i>Paul's desperation for money shown as he worries about his father's gambling addiction and bone cancer. He had been trying to arrange a drug deal with the Liverpool gang as 'Ted' – to smuggle heroin from Kenya – but if he can sign then he will go the lawful route. His internal worries are not communicated to the others, instead he becomes more antagonistic, showing the same pattern as he hates in his father. Karl suspects Paul may be about to sign alone after seeing him in the corridor with the label boss Twm when he said he was going for a toilet break. Ceri and Kweli's fun banter is mistaken by Paul and Kweli as flirty. Paul feels betrayed but conflicted as he loves his friends.</i>
Malindi, Kenya, 1995	Njoki	<i>Matu meets Njoki at Dirí's place for christmas in Malindi. They discuss how to live their lives together and escape Matu's sense of duty to his family</i>	<i>Matu feels guilty having earned money but spending it on a romantic christmas with Njoki rather than at home with his ailing mother without her knowledge of his holiday. The couple argue over Matu's inability to escape and Njoki's freedom and success which Matu is jealous of. These two conflicting factors – his duty to his mother and his desire for freedom – become the reasons he takes the MoD job to develop weapons. He also incorrectly suspects Njoki of infidelity.</i>
Swansea, Wales, June 24 <sup>th</sup> , 2016	Kweli	Kweli and Katy eat dinner together on the day after the Brexit vote. Katy and Ceri express concern for Kweli. Katy is distraught at the outcome of the vote.	The Brexit vote exposes the different reactions and lived experiences of Katy and Kweli. Kweli is angry about how Katy never noticed racial prejudice before. Ceri expresses her worries for the same reason, Kweli is more forgiving of her. It transpires Kweli did not vote, preferring to surf instead, he

			hides this from Katy. The splits in families are shown to be exacerbated by the vote. Kweli mentions Dan's photograph of Matu again and how it will help to find him. Katy gives him her blessing to trace his father, and the 'letter' she gives to him to open in an emergency is actually Dan's photo of Matu.
Croydon, England, 1996	Matu	Matu attends a briefing for his MoD job. He sneaks a look at photographs of similar weapons' live firing effects in Sierra Leone. He is very disturbed by them.	Matu is very disturbed by the images he sees of injuries in Sierra Leone caused by weapons of the ilk he will design. The white arm holding a black head alludes to colonial power relationships.
Heathrow England, 2016	Paul, Ceri, Karl, Kweli	The band go through check-in, each narrates a section. Paul and Ceri argue then make up. Paul has given Kweli a guitar he wants to use to smuggle heroin back. Kweli buys a huge Toblerone for Matu.	Paul shown to gaslight Ceri. Ceri wonders why Kweli is 'cutesy' to her in text and why Paul specifically worries about that. Kweli buys a present for Matu but clearly has not told the others that his plan is to find him.
London, England, Malindi Kenya, 1996	Matu	<i>Matu is on the tube to Heathrow, having slipped away from his handler in Salisbury. He is scared by a man who follows his every move up to check in. He flees to Diri's house in Malindi.</i>	<i>Matu arrives in Salisbury but resolves to leave straight away. He sneaks out during dinner with his handler Hamilton and jumps on the first train he sees. On the London-heathrow tube he is stared at by a man who follows him all the way to his gate, then is told to 'stay safe Mr Kagai'. This traumatises him and he remains paranoid. He makes it to Nairobi, then Mombasa, then to Diri's house near Malindi. A British army truck drives past Diri's house twice after his arrival, although Diri assures him this is normal.</i>
Watamu, Kenya, 2016	Kweli	Kweli walks the beach and makes friends with some local musicians. He meets some threatening locals who try to sell him drugs and know exactly where he is staying. Kweli remembers episodes in his life triggered by the present.	Kweli enjoys meeting Ephraim and Michael and listening to the music they make. As he begins to know his Kenyan side more he remembers formative moments from his childhood: of racialisation, of his love of music, of his friendship with Karl and Ceri. He is scared by the 'rastas' who try to sell him drugs and know which banda he's in. They know this as Paul's contacts have set them up to meet. Paul is still considering smuggling as the record deal is not lucrative enough. Kweli is nervous about attempting to find Matu, he decides to wait a while.
Nanyuki, Kenya, 1997	Njoki	Matu returns for his Mother's funeral. Njoki takes photographs and is invited by Matu's grandfather to be next to him throughout. Njoki remembers her family. She forgives Matu.	Matu's mother is remembered. Njoki speaks with his grandfather and is consoled. Matu is stunned, silent and tearful. Njoki forgives him his fling with Katy, feeling they are meant to be together.
Croyde, England, 2016	Katy	Katy and Davy go on a post Brexit vote holiday. On the way they attend to a road accident. Katy describes	Katy is already disturbed by the Brexit vote and further disturbed by the accident and her reaction to it. She is then open to the realisation that she mistook Kweli for Matu, then for a local, in the video Ceri

		Ceri's video from Kenya. Davy's old competition friends turn up. Katy is surprised Davy has agreed to an Iceland trip. She realises he voted leave.	sent her from Kenya. Then the further realisation of how she has tried to hide his black side for him to fit into her definitions. Something Davy's friend says makes Katy realise he voted Leave so she feels betrayed.
<i>Malindi, Kenya, 2007/8</i>	<i>Matu, Njambi</i>	<i>Matu, Njoki and Njambi shelter in Diri's house for the Kenyan December-January election riots</i>	<i>Matu tells in flashbacks his life from his mother's funeral until now, as his family and Diri shelter in Diri's house. Njambi, now 7, narrates the violence and the adults attempts to keep them safe. Matu and Diri paint 'ODM' on the outside wall (the rioters' affiliation) as Njambi and Njoki keep lookout in different directions. Other than that excursion they remain inside for 3 weeks. Njambi is worried that the adults want to move and she'll lose her school friends.</i>
<i>Watamu, Kenya, 2016</i>	<i>Kweli, Kweli's lyrics</i>	<i>Karl discovers Kweli's rap lyrics in his journal whilst they get ready for the beach party.</i>	<i>Karl notices a change in Kweli and worries he wants to leave the band. Karl indirectly tells Kweli he is happy that Kweli is in love with his sister. The lyrics explicitly refer to splits in identity linked to major global events and anxiety in a lack of belonging.</i>
<i>Watamu, Kilifi, Kenya, 2016</i>	<i>Kweli</i>	<i>Evening beach party. Paul decides not to meet the dealers so the beach party turns violent as the 'bad rastas' search for him demanding payment. Kweli, Karl and Ceri escape into a passing taxi and head to Pwani University.</i>	<i>Paul tells Kweli what he has done and says he'll hide in the banda. Kweli warns him that they know which one it is. As they search for somewhere to hide Paul asks Kweli about his feelings for Ceri, but before he answers fully the gangsters arrive and threaten Karl and the Kenyan musicians. The gangsters are high and shoot the bonfire with a handgun and chaos ensues. Paul hides in the sea. Kweli runs to protect Ceri and Karl runs to the road where he hails a taxi. Karl summons the others. Knowing nowhere else, Kweli says 'Pwani University', hoping that Matu might be there. Kweli realises the futility of arriving on campus late in the evening. He reaches for his mother's 'letter' in his back pocket. Karl sees the contents (Dan's photograph from the St. Andrews beach rave). Within a minute Ceri has stopped the taxi and runs back to help Paul, Karl quickly wishes Kweli good luck and runs after her. Kweli continues to Pwani campus.</i>
<i>Kilifi, Kenya, 2016</i>	<i>Matu</i>	<i>Matu arrives for work, Kweli spots him having opened his mother's 'letter'. They meet.</i>	<i>Matu arrives and sees Kweli sat on a bench where he spent the night, Matu thinks nothing of it. Kweli then approaches him and holds out the photograph. Matu recognises himself in Kweli's eyes, then looks at the photograph. Matu invites Kweli into his lecture, to make conversation he asks after Katy, Kweli says 'oh, so now you check on her'. Kweli sits at the back. Matu remembers his valedictory speech and feels more nervous now. Kweli exudes hostility. Matu nears panic thinking of how Njoki will react. Matu takes Kweli, who seems calmer now, to his office. Kweli relays the night's events, then goes silent. Matu calls Diri and others to help. Njambi arrives for lunch, stares at Kweli, screams, cries, then embraces</i>

			<p>him. Kweli cries too. Njambi hails a matatu and they go to look for Paul and the others. She frantically messages friends, one of whom is Ephraim, who is with the band in the bar where Kweli met him. Matu watches as Paul hugs Kweli but can't hear what they say. Kweli introduces him and Njambi. Matu feels lost. After greeting everyone they all sit together for drinks and play music and sing. Matu texts 'I have a son' to Njoki.</p>
Rhossili, Gower, Wales, 2018	Kweli, texts with Njambi	Kweli, Paul, Ceri and Karl surf Rhosili after Paul's father's funeral.	<p>In lieu of scattering ashes, Paul paddles a long way out and throws one of his fathers boats in a bottle as far as he can. They discuss the future. Ceri is at Edinburgh university, Karl is an apprentice board shaper to Brancs, Paul and Kweli gig and still try to get signed as a band. After surfing Kweli receives texts from Njambi asking about arrival times. Paul and Kweli have saved money to go back to Kenya to visit, they have some gigs lined up by Njambi.</p>

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