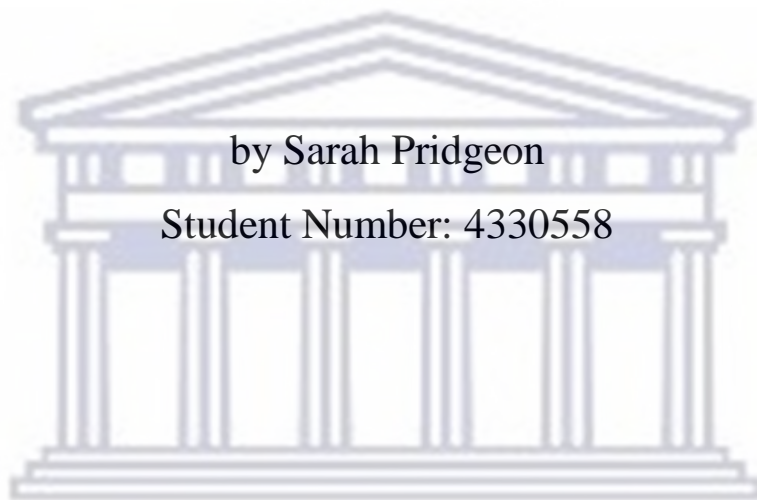


Subjects and Skins: Her Curriculum

– A collection of poems



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Abstract

For the mini-thesis component of my Masters in Creative Writing I aim to create a hybrid creative project that chronicles the individuation of a female protagonist from her infancy to motherhood, as it unfolds across the traditional educational and developmental phases. Throughout this metanarrative the subject's journey will be portrayed using the predominant literary form of poetry, prose poetry, as well as the conventional narrative elements of plot, theme, characterisation and point of view.

Events encompassed within these developmental stages will be portrayed using lyric and prose poetry as the two main forms, although other intra-poetic forms, such as blackout, elegiac and acrostic poems, will also be used emblematically where suitable. The archetypal rebirth type within this *bildungspoesie* will be situated within selected Monomyth stages, adapted from Joseph Campbell's five-point plot subsections of the hero's journey. Within the settings of home/s and institutions (educational and health), the overarching conflict type will be person versus self, explored in a series of vignette-like chronological poems.

In alignment with the respective formative phases that occur within these spaces, and from the perspective of the girl/woman subject, I will explore the following themes: education (informal versus formal), medicine (Western versus Eastern), individual complexes within the psychic structure (shadow, persona, ego, self), and female Jungian archetypes (wise old *woman*, child, *heroine*, mother, animus), as well as the mind/body dualism.

Two significant poetic influences demonstrating the advancement of selfhood using personal subject matter will include the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Other influences of similar theme and genre, explored from the perspective of the girl/woman subject, will include work by Ruth Miller, Genna Gardini and Petra Müller.

As such, I will draw creative context from my own non-literary subject matter, such as year-books, photo albums and other personal records, as well as literary works analogous in form, genre, type and theme.

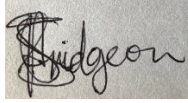
Overall, this semi-autobiographical creative project takes the form of an experimental, hybrid work, accompanied by a critical reflexive essay.

Key words

Education, individuation, identity, medicine, bildungspoesie, poetry, feminism, selfhood

Declaration

I, Sarah Josie Pridgeon, declare that *Subjects and skins: Her curriculum – A collection of poems* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



Sarah J. Pridgeon

7 April 2025

This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor.



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“It is not a garment I cast off this day, but a skin that I tear with my own hands.”
– Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

EPIGRAPH

The Sandbox

To attend to an aged assignment
she must begin with the first draft
and page through the chapters
before the red pen's first mark,
measurements on the wall,
the discovery of birthmarks,
birds perched on a bent branch,
the Rorschach blot of the family that she got.

In this assignment: schoolgirl lyrics from a sandbox,
bleeding with hindsight,
both a mannequin and a matryoshka doll,
buried deep within the sand.

PRELUDE

A Medical Love Story

Stretched across seven days,
it really started in one second:
the unit of a two-phase cardiac cycle; one
contraction-and-expansion of the same heart muscle.
One beat set off this medical love story of he and she.

*

Friday

They met at his res.
He was in his third year at the University of Natal, studying medicine.
She was a practising radiographer at a nearby hospital.

Both liked the anatomy of discos, dancing, camaraderie.
Both arrived without a date at the pre-wedding party.

In the centre of the jostling bachelor herd, in slops and a navy top, he told jokes, lit Camel
smokes, flicked his unruly fringe to the side.
In the thickening throng below the disco ball, she and her friend their tossed big moves and big
hair, black and blonde. Their shoulders shimmied like coins in the Durban sun, peaks of
glistening necklines that derailed the herd.

Swatting away dateless-ness jokes and not one to turn down a dare
he picked a flower from a vase and asked her blonde friend to be his date.
Her friend curtsied below the loud music, placed the flower behind her ear with her wedding
ring finger and pointed to a bar stool in the distance.
He sighed. His friends ridiculed, whistled and clapped.
But when he looked at the bar stool he saw shoes the colour of saffron, crossed ankles, tanned
legs and a pulse of hair.
He nodded.

The gaggle of first-year doctors paused their laughter and peered across.
Firm in his decision, he veered through their cheers, bets being made on whether he'd secure
the nest for a date. Unsteady onlookers joined in.

He paused before her shoes as a boy does before a wishing well.
Placing his beer on the bar table near her arm, he wondered whether her freckles were
refractions of glass. Whether his fingers could hold her dark curls still.

Then he asked, and her brown eyes agreed.

Behind them, the crowd cheered at the success of the night's case study. They replenished
empty beers and raised cups of cheap punch. The ladies clapped, the bachelors stamped

and arm in arm, he and she sang along.

Saturday

He collected her at twelve the next day.

When they walked into the church hall, among dresses and blazers, she was the only woman wearing pants.

But that didn't matter to him.

Dancing with her, he forgot his doctor's rounds, his stethoscope.

Light on their feet, they decided '99 Luftbalons' was their song. He whirled his finger to hail more drinks; he lit smokes, told jokes, caught the garter and paused only during his best man's speech, to look at her brown eyes. And he winked.

The newlyweds drove off.

Tethered cans trailed behind the car, a white tangle of background noise that dissolved somewhere far away from him and her.

Then they grabbed two wine bottles from a table and slunk away to cheers in order to relay biographies and sweet stories into the morning hour.

When her head rested on his woolly chest, he closed his eyes.

Sunday

Pulling her lounge curtain back from the sun, they continued talking of home, of family, academics and anatomy.

She spoke of penny-counting parents, her salesman father, the hours she spent waiting in the hot car during auctions.

His mother was a maths teacher to a shell-shocked father who left her with an army pension and three small sons.

She had a deaf sister, he a communist brother.

They recalled high school. They wished they'd met earlier.

On his blazer lapel was a worth of Scouts badges. In the front pocket of hers, an importance of committee notes.

On his shoulder pads were club colours in three sports, he had the scars to prove it and a fusion of broken bones.

First in her class, she graduated school two years early and competed in Cross Country. They'd met their match, but it didn't matter.

Histories unfolded while the sun slowed across the room.

And they smiled as it reached noon because they knew that nothing could fit together the way medical students do.

*

His first casualty job started the next day in Johannesburg.

Bags packed, she drove him to the station where the Greyhound bus waited like a disciplinarian for his return.

Holding her body against his he said, *Goodbye, Spanish eyes.*

He said later that he didn't propose because he knew she was the one.

And she didn't ask because she knew it too.

And when the bus operator shouted it didn't matter to them. They kissed a last time. Then once again.

And when he boarded he pressed his face onto the window, blew a hot mist onto it, and wrote her name. Through the letters *Sandy* she watched him drive away.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

On night-watches with the moon, she sat in her radiographer's uniform at the communal phone-booth. Her fingertips sifted the corners of the telephone book.

He hadn't called. He'd said he would.

And when she crawled into bed that night she looked over and assessed the couch indent he had left, an impression that the night strained to fill.

Thursday

Five days later she decided to phone a mutual friend in Johannesburg.

From behind the phone-booth her blonde friend listened, chewing gum and wading through the phone book.

She pressed the numbered squares, staring into the webbed cubicle corner. His roommate answered.

"Yes it's me, Sandy. I'm looking for John. Where is he?" she asked.

A pause.

"Alright, then I'll call Steve Biko Hospital, Ward B." And she redialled in agitation.

Ward B answered. But he wasn't on night duty.

"On what number can I reach him?" she asked.

Another pause.

Ward B would put her through to the bed he's in.

The bed he's in? She turned to her friend.

"Oncology ward, Sister Nel here. Hello?"

She faltered. Then asked for him.

"It's me," he said weakly.

And she unfolded when she heard his voice.

"I have something to tell you," he whispered.

After blood tests on his first day at work, the doctor was now a patient. A gland on his neck tested cancerous, and Hodgkins Lymphoma had spread dangerously close to his heart.

“I kept it from you until I knew what it was. I’ll get the full results on Friday. I was determined to manage it on my own,” he murmured.

Her heart beat loudly through the plastic handset.

Friday

She missed work to wait for the call.

He said austere words in the biopsy report deemed the cancer *Advanced*.

He said he couldn’t continue with her.

And she said he didn’t have to.

The eighth day (and afterwards)

For a year and a half they wrote letters. Each envelope a gift in a post box.

Plans, promises, prognoses and surgery updates folded on white paper in neat handwriting.

By year two the oncologist and nursing staff stared in disbelief at the results of scans, blood tests and analyses: *No Evidence of Disease*.

The young doctor was in remission.

A strong heart, the staff thought. And he was discharged.

Prognosis

With a few bags and a bald patch he re-entered her Durban flat.

And when they married two months later,
his hand in her black hair and the other on her belly,
they were already three.

With two more to come.

CHAPTER ONE: Child

"I wasn't a child at all –
unseen and all-seeing"
– Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*

Dream Catcher

Since her mother and her baby sister were at a playgroup
and her older brother was playing Sega with a friend,
she and her father had left for a Sunday market in the heart of Gaborone.

Beneath the gazebo the table-top was covered with clinking glasses, warm spices
and sleepy afternoon talk.

She lay between chair and people legs with her chest on the orange floor;
her pink shirt in the dirt, her chin on a small fist, the other wrist dangling
over a colouring-in book.

The afternoon tired the market talk to a soft lull.

A marula tree dangled its sleepy pears until a hot wind woke the branch
and with a crack, a fruit rolled off the bough and meandered towards her bare foot.

She sat up and felt the pear skin in her palm,
took a bite and rolled the syrupy granules on her tongue.

In the distance she glimpsed a shredded cloak, bending in the wind. Alongside it,
an old man at a rickety stall beckoned.

Leaving pencils and bitten pear behind, she wandered away from the low chatter
towards the market man.

He held a shimmering mesh net above her head
and she gasped:

wooden lutes clinked above her fringe,
strings of feathers tickled her nose,
yarn threads sang in coral voices to fruitwood shells of pumpkin orange.

Something like a kaleidoscope, she thought, as the feathers drifted away on their threads
then returned to the hoop that held the whole mesh together.

She turned back to the table and shouted, "Dad! Dad! For my birthday?
It's only thirty pula, can I have it? Please."

Later when they walked to the car
she asked her father whether it would it catch all her bad dreams.

He said it would because bad dreams couldn't get through the mesh
and in the morning they'd dry up with the sun.

That's how dream catchers work.

Middle Child

Not from the middle
middled but not centred
(but made from two)
not First, not Last
not sheep not lion not wolf
hodgepodge

living in the second bedroom
middle child mule with wooden head
middle child wild with rooibos eyes, semi smile
middle (not big not small)
not salt not pepper
middle child muscle not bone not blood

middle child says Swear Words
middle child answers "Maybe"
middle child watches Lion King on repeat
middle child hides wooden spoon (for Bad Behaviour)
middle child ties (dyslexic) First Child's shoelaces (for school)
middle child grabs extra party bag for First child
hides Third Child from big flat hands
middle child at the mercy of her impulses
supper time "Finish your food!"
but middle child refuses

middle child manipulator
middle child makes own Middle Language
middle child loud but "brittle"
middle child loses First child's Lego blocks
middle child slams window during Third child's nap time

middle child's porridge isn't "just right"
middle child with scabbed toes and knees
because middle child likes climbing
middle child walks at 11 months
but middle child prefers to run

middle child has "moods"
middle child falls from mulberry trees
middle child descends stairs in Mother's high heels
middle child counts in fives
middle child fights for the Front Seat
middle child hides hairbrush
middle child's hair is knotted and unruly

middle child snoops in cupboards
middle child finds Father's magazines

(and First and Third's presents in top cupboard
with letters from Santa in Mother's cursive)
middle child folds white Shoprite serviettes in thirds
middle child hides dinner scraps in lap for dogs

middle child pinches Mother's stompies and smokes
(Mother saw)
middle child stays awake "past bedtime" for Santa Clause
(Mother said then he won't come)

middle child spies unrest
then middle child behaves her best

so middle child traces a pointed finger around
glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling
middle child tiptoes to Parents' Room
and hears a shout "I'll move out!"
then
"No. We'll try again"

middle child prays with open eyes
middle child keeps bathrooms clean
middle child pretends to sleep
at bedtime during the week

middle child sits with knees together "like a lady"
middle child holds in sneeze
middle child cleans her room
middle child brushes her teeth.
middle child prays with eyes shut tight
middle child steps over pavement cracks
middle child tries white lies

but not even middle child
can get out from the middle
not even middle child
can hold her parents together.

Welcome to the Year 2000!

It was a quirk, she remembers. A family tradition rehearsed after mealtimes: her parents' "favourite piece".

It was a length of glossy dental floss they absent-mindedly passed to each other after meals.

The tradition carried over into road trips, eating out at Spur, and holidays.

Sometimes it was stored in the central console between the two front seats, or in her mother's handbag below their clasped hands when walking.

Other times the coiled strand relocated to their bedside cabinets.

It took turns at the foot of their matching flower-touch lamps, the new ones her mother bought with a stout gold base.

The flowers lit up when she touched the leaf-shaped lamps.

But that evening it lay nowhere. And she had progressed to hopeful loitering when the joke remained unsaid after dinner:

the shared piece and its square plastic, containing metres of white rolled floss, wasn't on the dining table anymore.

The three children ate dinner in front of the TV that night.

But it was she who peeked through the glass window between the TV and the dining room.

She saw how they stood opposite each other, tense as teams tugging a heavy rope, except there was no rope, and it was their eyes that did the tugging.

It wasn't like the game of tug of war she played during school break below the marula trees where two teams faced each other and tugged and heaved, and once one side collapsed forward onto the floor, the other team lifted the rope to the sky and hurraed before the crowd.

Except here, she was the eye of the crowd, and this was no game.

She sat with her little sister and big brother watching Dexter's Laboratory on Cartoon Network. The closed door disconnected the rooms.

Little Emma was playing roughly with her Noddy book, turning the pages haphazardly.

"Noddy! Mister Plod!" she shouted, looking up at her.

Her parents glanced in their direction. Then turned away.

Little Emma pressed a pudgy finger onto the shiny page, looking eagerly into her eyes for a response.

She and the cartoon characters on the TV were the only animated things in the household.

She turned away from her parents and looked down at the page. Emma's finger pushed the corner of Noddy's hazardous orange hair, the same colour as Dexter's on the TV screen. Then her urgent blue eyes.

“Cross Mister Plod!” she insisted, pointing to a picture of Mr Plod with sunken eyebrows and a whistle in his hand. Then she stood up on her short squat legs and waddled across the room to big Daniel.

Daniel faced the TV. He laughed when Dexter ran away from the ghost of a goldfish. He didn’t seem to notice that his knee was bouncing up and down. The dead goldfish chased the cartoon characters through a corridor.

“Welcome to the year 2000!” erupted from the corner, followed by pre-recorded fireworks, bangs, claps and Emma’s squeal.

The mechanical voice shouted again. Emma had found her millennial talking doll, floppy and shoebox-big with a permanent surprise stretched across its face, a subtle button protrusion on the chest case.

“Oh no, she found that noisy toy! We need to hide it again,” Daniel said. He increased the volume on the TV.

Emma giggled and pressed the doll’s chest again. And again.

Dexter running, Emma laughing, Daniel increasing the volume, the millennial doll shouting.

Then a different shout flooded both rooms and hushed all distractions. “Nine years!”

And then it was her father’s foot that kicked the door closed. And her mother walked in the opposite direction.

A car revved, a gate chugged open. Her mother lit a cigarette, wiped her eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

Nine years? That’s how old Daniel is, she thought.

Giggling, Emma wobbled towards her with the doll in her outstretched hands.

“See!” she exclaimed. Her eyes bright with excitement, she pressed the doll’s chest again and beamed as it shouted, “Welcome to the year 2000!”

Emma’s eyes lit up. Not knowing that she would never live with her mother and her father in the same house again.

Sunflowers in June

Chester's screams wreaked from the radio. Linkin Park was in the top 10.
But the car seats were still and filled with the silence of ending school holidays:
she and her two siblings didn't know when they would get to see their father again.

"10 minutes to Klerksdorp, then we'll get some cooldrinks," he said.

Nodding from the back seat she watched the lyrics unravel in the theatre of her head.

Darts of cars shot past.

As she gazed forward the approaching hill unfolded like a scroll,
yielding a field of beaming sunflowers, a children's choir of open mouths.

She whispered to the window, "I always wanted one of those."

Her father shifted behind the wheel, winked in the rear-view mirror.
He indicated left, then lifted his foot to slow the car and the tyres creaked to a standstill.

He tugged up the handbrake, grabbed a pocketknife from the side door and sprang out.
Animated now, he crouched from zooming cars.
Like a comic detective, she thought. And laughed.

He looked left to right with twinkling eyes, then leapt over the farmer's steel wire.

He seized the tall neck with one clenched fist,
and without checking his stethoscope, severed the spine in one smooth stroke.
Then leapt back over the fence.

Chuckling, he slammed the car door. Clicked on his safety belt and started the car,
indicating right he half turned around to hand the sunflower to her.

"I could get shot for that," he said.

Both her hands full, leaning forward she peered into the yellow face, nose to nose.
Her teenage pallor against the yellow face,
her pimply skin and the bumpy brown eyes, not unlike the freckles on her face.

Then she sat back. And smiled again.

The Fishpond

That's where the little girl goes
to the fishpond shaped like infinity
and she sits in the middle bridge between
playing melodies to the silent audience below.
All of them swim above the cement mould her father made
with her and her brother's footprint impressed into it.

She pages through the music sheets
together but loose in a little schoolbook
covered by her mother. Some short pieces; some long:
music sheets chosen by her music teacher
from Disney movies, school and love songs.

She starts on the first page and plays each song until the last because
the fish understood the language of song.

Red Blanket

The middle child was wrapped so tightly in a thick red blanket that she imagined she was a Magic Grow capsule with her arms fused to her sides.

Although the blanket was patterned with black ovals and yellow dots she saw none of it since her forehead was pressed against her mother's neck, against the scent of dirty-sweet cigarettes.

Mother and child were on the porch overlooking a driveway that snaked into the night. To the right was a plumeria tree collared by withering petals.

"Look at the flowers, sweet," her mother said.
And the middle child looked up shyly because most times she was obedient.
And as she did so she thought of a flower bud with waxy petals pressed so tightly together that only little fingers could pry them open,
one petal at a time.

Her mother sighed, rocked her back and forth while they waited in silence.
Except for a muffled cry.
Maybe it was hers?
Maybe her mother was really holding *her* petals together, she thought.
Or maybe her petals were crumpled and her mother was smoothing them straight.

Back and forth.

She frowned at the residual bitter taste in her mouth, thought of the amber vial, how her mother pinched the dropper cap to release tears of earthy herbs onto her tongue. Sad Drops she called them.

Two yellow lights surveyed across the driveway and her mother's arms softened.
Then hardened.
Her mother's hand reached into her pocket for the remote and the gate opened in a slow pull.

Peeking out from the red blanket the middle child watched the motor chain chug its last series of clicks, as it slid to close the slatted gate, patching out the streetlamps in a game of light peek-a-boo.

The car parked somewhere to the left and the engine switched off.

She heard the voice she was waiting for. "Okay, I'm here," the voice said.
Then the familiar jingle of keys before they were muffled in a pocket.
Steps padded towards the porch and she wrestled her arms out of the blanket to reach for the man who walked out from the darkness.

"Couldn't breathe. Again," her mother said, transferring the girl to her father's chest. She put her arms around her father's neck like a stethoscope.

"You gave her Remedy Drops?" her father asked.

“Yes. Brittle.”

Her parents spoke in quiet sips of air,
like thumbed deflation leaks on a punctured tyre.

Her father’s patterned shirt smelled of a foreign laundry detergent, powder blue,
clean and unfriendly.
When she, her sister or brother got sick or upset her father always came back home
to check on them.

And then the Separation was okay.

Clammy and hiccoughing she traced the five-lined emblem on his shirt,
five arms connected by the point at each end to make a pentagon.
It could’ve been five sets of arms.

Because that’s what her family was.

Her hiccoughs petered out and meandered to a stop.
She rubbed her head against the patterns of his chest and tilted her head
to look at the red blanket.
It lay crumpled on the floor,
the shape disfigured.

Dear Diary (About Granny Heart and Grandpa)

i) New House

“We aren’t going back,” Mother said.

We’d arrived at Granny Heart and Grandpa’s house in Welkom in father’s Pajero with all our bags.

Mother said that I needed to be a Big Girl now, this was our new home and she needed to start Work. Us kids must look after one another Nicely and remember that Granny Heart has a Heart Stint.

(Because she was operated on by Doctor Chris Barnard.)

ii) Granny Heart

In between Verimark repeats on the little grey TV

Granny Heart makes the bed: two flowery flat sheets, pillows and a duvet.

Above the kettle is a Weet-bix tin with Cremora in.

Behind that is a round Tupperware with R4 chocolates bought on the 5 for 4 Game Special: Flakes, P.S. and Lunch Bars.

(Hidden from Grandpa because he has Diabetes.)

After nap time Granny Heart fetches her wooden walking stick.

Every afternoon it is the same route and I pick a handful of bristling weeds for her, arrange them keenly, one full hierarchy in my small hand. And give them to her.

But I never see where she puts them when we get home.

One afternoon walk Daniel lost his Lego toy.

He was playing with it above the drain when he dropped it through one of the six eye-slits, face down in the brown mud. No stick could turn it around.

We returned there every day to try again,

but a week later it had washed away. We never saw it again

My favourite is bath time.

Granny Heart plucks plastic butterfly clips from my knotted hair and places them in the soap holder.

We talk about Spice Girl shoes and my friends at school.

Singing *John Brown’s baby’s got a cold upon his chest*,

she rubs Vicks in circles on my chest and on my back.

When we pray Our Father together she never gets one word wrong.

And when I can’t sleep she tells me to think

of a garden with Beautiful Flowers: pink, yellow and green.

But I can never see them.

iii) Grandpa

Grandpa built a mouse house for my birthday from leftover wood.
He messes Ricoffy on his flat, saggy chest. He doesn't like to wear a shirt
but when he does, and he coughs or sneezes,
he pulls a white and navy handkerchief from his front pocket.

His favourite topics are "Your Father" and "That Bastard",
and he spits them out like poison with an index finger in my face.
He spends afternoons calculating sums across bent pages of his pocketbook.
The pen strokes black as Roman numerals.

But where the sums come from, no one knows.

For Sunday roasts, he likes Extra Crunchy potatoes with Thick Gravy.
His weekly joke is to place his false teeth on one of our side plates while we're eating
or pretend his thumb was chopped off. He then bends it inwards and gasps
while beetroot brine drips from his chin,
purple marks that stain Granny Heart's cream tablecloth.
But she doesn't complain.

After three days of searching for the Last Piece,
we break up then pack away the 1000-piece puzzle.
And as we close the lid, Grandpa suddenly finds it in the folds of his seat.

Six of us live in this two-bedroom flat, but no one saw where he put it.

The rules are No Talking during the 7pm News, except
when Grandpa tells us to rub the top of his arm with Deep Heat.
He doesn't wind the tube tail down. He throttles it.

Only switched on for an hour at night (because it's expensive),
I put my hands in between the bars of the gas heater while I watch
a man in a suit, pointing his thin stick at South Africa's provinces.

He can't even point at my house because it's not a map of Botswana.

On Sundays Grandpa tells Granny Heart to fetch the round Tupperware of treats
and we're each allowed to pick a chocolate.

iv) Garden

Last night I dreamt I was a Magic Grow pill.
I grew and grew then burst through the capsule skin
into water. All around me pigeons squawked.
They shattered, then flew away.
As I stood up I saw the garden of our Old Home.

Then the water became mud. I dried up,
veiny cracks spread from my back.

Wing bones or roots, I don't know.

But shading me is the pawpaw tree in the compost corner
where Mother empties pips, skins and leaves and ploughs them into the ground.

I stretch up to grab a green fruit,
but when I pluck it I leave a wound
and from this white mouth milk tears dribble then harden like wood glue.

My friends didn't know I was moving.
And neither did I.

I don't think I like South Africa.

Swallowing

The game the boys in my new school love to play is called “Catch the pigeon”, just like that song in *Dastardly & Muttley* in their *Flying Machines* on TV –

*So stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Stop the pigeon
Howww?*

*Nab him
Jab him
Tab him
Grab him
Stop that pigeon now!*

– and the boys gathered small rocks from the school’s driveway and threw them at the young squib that was me. They made hooting, cawing noises whenever I walked past, their shouts echoed in the girls’ bathroom whenever they saw me go in. They reached their heads into the bathroom and called out, “Where’s the pigeon *now*?” All this because my surname sounds like pigeon with a ‘R’.

“There’s nothing we can do,” the headmaster said. His open palms paralleled the roof. It was “Just a phase”, and it was “Just because she’s new”. You know, “Boys will be boys”.

But there were five of them, and only one of me.
And the days they threw stones at me and told me to fly away
I wished I was a fledging, and that I could.
I wished my mother’s number plate wasn’t B152 AAP and they didn’t call me “aapie”, though I only found out later that I was being called a monkey since the second languages at my previous school had been French and Setswana.

A monkey, a bird. Anything but a human thing. A new girl.

I wished I could retreat to R. L. Stine books, and I did. Preferring the horror of American kids wearing “sweaters” and being chased by ghosts and porcelain dolls.

During sewing class I imagined the doll I was working on was Brent, Phillip or Samuel, or the other boys in the pack, and I would sew their mouths shut. I would be the needle that threaded their lips together, their eyes shut, their hands dismembered.

Many times, nearing my twelfth birthday, I stood outside the gate with a backpack, hoping to be picked up by Hagrid to go to Hogwarts.

I was sure I wasn’t for this world because I was the one that swallowed.

Filled with Columbine hate for those that looked away – teachers, parents, new classmates – I became very good at swallowing “Useless”, “Stupid”, “Ugly”.

I swallowed and swallowed until it filled the storehouse of my body and leaked out.

But when I went to high school, it changed.

I became pretty.

Her Mother, of Course

Her mother, of course it was her,
with three children carried on her back:
the laat lammetjie bewildered, the middle brittle,
the oldest boy wound up and checked out as they travelled.
Of course her mother carried the load.

Of course, she left her husband in another country like an absent protagonist,
and fled to the small town where her parents lived.
Of course, she returned to a job she hadn't practiced in ten years
and pretended to know what she had to do.
Of course, "Fake it 'til you make it" became her motto.

Of course, her husband was surprised, enraged even,
when he got home from his vacation, his wife and kids awry.
Of course, he roamed through the empty rooms answering his own echoes,
kicking the clay foot moulds on the outside concrete.

Of course, the children were teased at school,
their accents weird and "uncool",
their confusion at the Afrikaans word *vakke*, not being a swearword.
Of course, they were too many in a small house:
grandparents, mother and three kids in two bedrooms.

Of course, she trusted her father with her children.
Of course, she shouldn't have since he slandered her ex-husband
to them and anybody else who would listen.
Of course, they all ducked their heads, busy with the objects in their lap
when his temper rose, and the women, her mother and grandmother, did nothing.
Of course, that was something.

Although the laat lammetjie didn't know better,
of course, the children didn't like their new home.
Of course, the eldest's grades were plummeting
and he eventually ran away to live with his father in his senior year.

Of course, the middle daughter grew up an unwanted worshipper,
her hands outstretched and cupped in prayer like an almond.

Of course, their house became a people-less city.
Of course, the town folk shook their heads and looked away.

CHAPTER TWO: Girl

“The best teaching is done inadvertently.”
– Allen Ginsberg, *Masterclass*

My First Valentine

My first Valentine was my mother.

A self-conscious letter left on my schoolbag. I spotted it after class, wedged in between two zips so it wouldn't fly away with the wind or rush of school feet. It was a red envelope, smaller than my hand and shaped like a heart.

I'm still new to this school so it must've been misplaced, I thought. I wanted to go to the teacher to report it.

But when my mother saw me pick it up and head over to the staff room she shouted, "Stop! Stop! It's from me. Wait."

How silly of me to think that the letter of love could have been from anyone other than my mother.

Headmaster

He walked up the steps of the wooden school stage, kicking his feet through the drapes of his black toga.

He flicked on the microphone, tapped his bulbous nose, his star moustache. And harrumphed.

He announced a prayer much taller than he was on “Love”, “Grace” and “Forgiveness”.

Taking folded papers out from his front pocket, he put on his glasses and began the week’s speech on “Intestinal fortitude” and “Failing forward” in exam times.

His index finger wagged in the air after each paragraph.

“Our school is a family,” he stressed.

Sitting on stage alongside him, the prefects smiled and the teachers nodded.

Divided by the height of the stage
the youngest in the hall sat on the floor below the podium,
while the older grades from nine upwards sat on plastic chairs behind them.

She heard a Grade 9’s whisper above her ear.

They were placing bets on break time as they gauged the headmaster’s pages of speech.

The clock ticking above his head, they placed bets on when assembly would end.

But her clenched fists on her tartan skirt reminded her of a different speech months earlier, when she and the other wild girls of Grade 8 were plucked from roll call before the morning prayer.

Together they had waited on the invisible target in his office,
bowing in dread instead of reverence.

His words then had been “Shame” and “Inebriation” and “Unladylike”.

That Monday, as the door of his office closed, his first comment was silence. Then, “You, Pridgeon! Yours is the worst divorce I’ve ever heard of in my forty years of education. Your brother’s a runaway. Your father can’t even pay school fees on time. What will become of you?”

This long gash was followed by assessments on the other girls’ “Reputations”, then guidelines on “How girls should behave in a small town like Welkom”, ending with an harrumph.

The outcome was a month of detention and daily litter parades,
all for a Friday night of liquorice Sambuca that no one liked the taste of.
She didn’t know better. No one talks about booze, boys and menstruation.

And as the school song played at the end when the headmaster was finally seated,
with only twenty minutes left for lunch break,
she clenched her fists tighter and tighter.

Thinking, and swallowing,
now that she was shamed in front of her only friends, a black sheep in this Catholic school,

the headmaster as important as navy and royal as blue,
since hers was the “Worst Divorce” her headmaster had ever heard of,
what then was the best?

My Inside Family

“They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another’s throats.”

– Philip Larkin, ‘This Be The Verse’

Across the street is an outside family.
Their mother subscribes to YOU magazine,
during the week she waters avocado pips propped up with toothpicks,
and after school she waits for her children on the side street, reading.
On Sundays they all pile into the car for KFC’s drive-by ice creams.
Tatty Madam and Eve comics are stacked beside the toilet.
Along the corridor, rectangular framed collages are cluttered with cut-out faces.
And in Grade 8 English class those children picture their father
when they read about Atticus Finch.

I do too, although mine’s an inside family.
My little sister, my teenage brother and I call each other *one, two* and *three*.
We’re a B# on a music scale, an A-grade B-team.
Shoeless the three of us race for the front seat on a drive for ice cream.
Behind the front door house-keys dangle from their collars like loose teeth.
We wear each other’s shirts, and there’s always an accomplice to secrets.
When our father takes us out for a movie during term break, we pack salt and
vinegar spice on SterKinekor popcorn and shovel it past raw tongues.
And when no one’s listening, Vodacom connects me to him via a cool R2
polyphonic ringtone since my brother left to live with him.
Since then we’ve just been three.
And his socks are too big for me.

Across the street, their father reads the newspaper,
while their mother prepare school sarmies in red Tupperware.
For them the “f-word” doesn’t mean *family*.
Together they watch the news, then DSTV.
And their mother changed her surname when she got married.

Mine did too but when I’m called in for unpaid school fees,
classmates with complete families know *That’s the child of a divorcee*.
And during the last break-in, my brother stood in front of my mother, sister and
me with a karate stick while we waited for the police.

After all, I tell myself, puppies are still sold in pet shops.
Everyone knows my mom works two jobs because after school she can never
pick me up.

An absent protagonist means the story is waiting to start.

Everyone has an aunty that can't stop knitting scarves.

We all listen to Gareth Cliff on the way to school,
and since David didn't tell Goliath to pick on someone his own size,
naughty children get locked outside.

All I know is mine's an inside family.

Matric Boy

“Always said I was a good kid
Always said I had a way with words
Never knew I could be speechless
Don't know how I'll ever break this curse

Now the world is only white noise
Frequencies that I can't understand
I can't be bothered with the teachers
Always trying to shape the way I act

Burn it down, burn it down, burn it down, burn it down

I'll set fire to the whole place
I don't even care about our house
It's not the same in here since he left anyways.”
– Daughter, 'Burn it Down'

“And she told me
That she loved me
And she gave me my money back”
– Big Black Delta, 'Huggin and Kissin'

Joseph had a multi-coloured coat. Yours was a navy school blazer.
At mid-term Eucharist I remember Father Spies singing, *Do this in memory of me.*

And when all of high school reached into their pockets for an offertory,
you sat in the back row and didn't touch the basket.

In the end it was you who marked my Bible, you changed the cover from brown to red
and the devil himself couldn't be prouder.

*

Matric Boy,
it started with Grade 8's initiation into high school.
That first rite of passage where matrics got their chance to be real cool,
make their skivvies sing and dance, swivel like rubric cubes.

That was when I met you. Your girlfriend was my skivvy master.

That day she made me and my friends swim on the grass,
pick a male leaf, bring a potato to school, name and talk to it.
And there you were, up on the chemistry balcony, watching everything.

During first break I watched you throw away tomato slices from your mother's homemade sandwiches off the chemistry lab parapet.
You ate the rest then coated your lips with your favourite blue lip ice.

That year the school play was *Grease*.
Your mother, the pianist, was the teacher who chose it. You played Leo, Crater Face, rough as your black leather jacket with your jeans sagging at the waist.
After rehearsals you said goodbye to your matric girlfriend.
Then in the dressing room, you played with the buttons on my school shirt.

Matric Boy, you first kissed me after we walked to the primary school library,
(no, that was my best friend René)
then you took me on a date to Ocean Basket, where we ate prawns floating in butter sauce,
(no, that was my other friend Cheryl)
then you invited me as your date to your matric dance.

Of course, I said yes.
The teachers frowned. But it wasn't yet a rule that Grade 8's weren't allowed to attend a matric dance. And I set the precedent.
You'd kissed most of my friends, but you left your blonde matric girlfriend for me, a little Grade 8 with brown hair and freckles on her face.
And our infamy was documented in a comic in the weekly school newspaper.

You could smell my delicate worship. You knew
my father was estranged and worked overseas to pay maintenance,
and my brother, my best friend, was now a runaway.
You even said, "I'm here for you now your brother has left."
You became the man of my house.

Matric Boy,
you were worrying about Tupac's redemption while I memorised your songs.
You made me a CD with Microsoft Player and labelled it with a fat black permanent marker.
Placed in a devoted order, I knew each song was a secret message for me.

That year we passed notes daily in stairwells while grades swapped for their next class.
One slipped a note into the other's blazer pocket, an oiled machine.
And again before second break, and whenever our school rehearsed for fire drills.

My friends and I visited you at The Dip. Bunking hockey practice,
we wore our mother's mascara and red lipstick.
We gathered around that brick hole behind the Liberty Centre mall
to watch you and the other Matric Boys play with your skateboards:
the whole skater group with long arms dangling over knees in torn jeans.
You flicked cigarette ash into the corner.

For your matric farewell in October, you and your father picked me up in his work car.
I wore a long black dress. It was my first time dancing with a partner.
Later a rumour spread that your ex-girlfriend wanted to throw a plate of food at me
to deter me from you. But you intervened to protect me.

What a pity.
For you, I would've been a modern-day Carrie:
burned holes through all their throats, dragged their loose skeletons across the floor,
lifted them onto the ceiling and washed them all in swine blood.
It was then I should've finished you off.

Matric Boy,
we dated for two years after that.
Our letters piled up in blue cursive until that planned day when your parents weren't home
and you shed your jeans on the floor.
Two sour fish mouths in a tank stared at me while I lay still, your young Juliet.
I should've haemorrhaged but at that moment
your father banged on the door.
So we dressed quickly and you dropped me off at home.

After that, you rejected my worship. Instead
you told all your friends in my Catholic school about your hymen triumph.

Turfed like a floppy disc, how quickly I changed from "The One" to "That slut".

I know I'm no Anne Frank, but you're not much cleaner.

Matric Boy,
I wanted you dead. Dead as your cool grey eyes,
your black shag bangles, your scratched and sticker-covered skateboard.
You left a nasty Oedipus bruise: an imprint of dissatisfaction that still tastes of you.

Matric Boy, your love-bites were birthmarks. You cut once, and then left.
But I bled for three decades into everyone else.
And my sins piled up after you.

The Tunnel

Although she walked home most days after school
it's strange that she hadn't noticed the distant tunnel asleep on the veld.

Strange that after she turned fifteen it called in keen frequencies.
She wondered how often it had been itching in her periphery,
now gleaming: an unimposing mouth open between puddles and pigeon grass.

So she shrugged her schoolbag onto the dirt and bending down, first a step, then a trod,
her muddy footsteps made their way up the tongue of the path.

Deep in the dark was some treasure, she was sure.
Something visible only in her reflections, something that was looking for her.

And she wondered at what point had she eased into some uneasy form.

Watching from the heart of the tunnel was an animal dark as leather.
A bull with one eye.

Cheap

Let me tell you what cheap is.

Cheap is not the R2 popcorn at the school tuckshop,
the green tin of Zam-Buk passed around in Life Orientation
or the Othello jokes about an old ram “tapping” a white ewe.

No. Cheap is the man that shifts behind his tinted car windows
in the corner of the school parking lot.

Cheap, his early arrival to fetch his Grade 10 brother after class.

Cheap is his bakkie’s territory, his racket in the small town, the rattling Bump CDs,
the prepaid cellphones, cramped wallet and pill packets in his cubby hole.

Cheap is his truck’s suspension-lift: the raised station
from where he metes out his sweets to young girls and adults in the dark.

Cheap, his labelled jeans, his taut black v-neck t-shirt,
and the fingers that reach for cash transactions through car windows.

Cheap, the tricks he used on his brother’s new girlfriend
when he “dropped her off at home” and took her all for himself.

Like the cheap gifts, the cards he copied out by hand on Valentine’s Day,
and hand delivered to the schools for all his other girlfriends.

Cheap were the words, “I’ll look after you”, that he used to soothe his brother’s classmate
who couldn’t get home. Responsive to the plea of her last free Please Call Me,
it was a cheap night when he hurried to fetch her.

Cheap was the grimy motel, the accommodation she paid for in skin,
a bargain eased by sweets retrieved from his cubby hole, those little white pills.

Cheap was the excuse she gave the following day for absenteeism,
a story she trimmed weeks after on a school excursion.

Cheap, each text message he sent since, his arm jangling from the bakkie window
as she progressed to matric.

Cheap, those five words, “I know where you live”.

And when the rumours spread, cheapest was her denial.

She told her classmates that *he* was the liar,
but the small town had already claimed her as one of his many triumphs.

Cheap, her rabbit heartbeat from Grade 10 to matric,
sharpest when the school bell rang on weekdays for school’s end
as he waited outside in the parking lot.

It was called Cheap then. Nowadays we call it grooming.

Cheaper

She was everybody's friend, a desert flower everyone liked to taste. And did.
A "bad influence" they called her, smoking Peter Stuyvesant red at fourteen.
But unlike the others she cosied up to uncles with friendly fingers and wet lips,
those old men that giddied to greet you and kiss hello on the mouth.

They called her the "village bicycle". But they never hesitated for a ride.
Because it was she who rode them first. And they liked it, she was never denied.
But whether she liked it, nobody really knows.

They liked her sweet inappropriateness, the Duchienne smile, the big blue eyes
that peeped under men's collars and watched the pulsing neck vein beat.
In line-ups she pulled her school skirt down only to pull it up again later,
her trick that drove the matrics and teachers mad.

Even her friends envied her looseness, her long tanned legs.
They called her a "paper bag girl" because she made any outfit look good,
and she played every game with rules to break, which she did
with her sweet self-sabotage.

But the truth is no one felt freer than when they were with her.
She was every school-girl in a white shirt and tartan skirt
with a secret inside pocket behind the inner zip
that she kept all her secrets in.

Behind every scowl we all knew that, ownerless,
she was the truest Judas.
And we all wanted to be as free as her.

Wild Girls

We walked in throngs,
shirts inside-out outside our school skirts, collars up.
Our wildness demanded a different kind of stealth.
We liked to mistake hesitation for aggression, we jumped over safety nets,
we smoked dagga on the school fields, we pierced our own bellybuttons.
Our pack moved as one.

We pricked up our ears at “career advice” and “your future”.
We smirked at “what do you want for your life” and other whistles.
Far from the lollipop girls, we were the wild dogs.

On the chemistry counter we arm-wrestled the boys.
We planned weekends on m-Xit during maths class,
passed sanitary pads in closed hands under bathroom stalls,
shared Zam-buk and menthol cigarettes concealed within breast pockets.
We braided each other’s hair taut.

Our bedroom walls were plastered with Eminem, Jay-Z and Avril Lavigne posters.
We watched 9/11 together during aftercare.
We regrouped during maintenance orders
and rocky family affairs, re-homing and divorces.
Our men were the teenage boys who defended us – underage in nightclubs,
our friends lent bellbottom jeans and bras from overnight handbags.
Far from animals, we were the wild girls.

Our textbooks were covered in handwritten lyrics.
Songs from The Used, Nickelback and 30 Seconds to Mars. Like those artists
some of us were bad, sad and mad, missing a mom, man or a dad.
Some bonded with sugar daddies, uncles or matric boys.
But together we gnashed our teeth at outsiders.
We were the wild girls.

One day our LO teacher played a VCR on Gateway Drugs and abortion
when one of us was pregnant, the father silent in the front row.
Jay’s dad had an affair with their neighbour for five years and kept it secret,
but her mother began eating as much as she could, sneaking Thinz to keep the balance.
Invitations to Mmaputi’s mom’s for chicken feet and pap stopped
when her husband didn’t return after his Wednesday taxi meeting.
Buhle’s parents slept in separate beds and her teenage sister was pregnant again.
And while Rene’s mom was working at CNA, her stepfather fiddled with her school skirt,
so she sliced her knuckle on the biltong cutter and still wears the scar.
No one promised us a safe world.
But we were the wild girls.

Wolves in school uniform
we sat in Wimpy’s smoking section after school
counting dirty brown cents for the cost of one shared Coke with six straws.

After class some painted their nails Bovril black to match their school shoes,
some hung around the neighbourhood park dancing to cell-phone tunes,
some left for the shebeen to buy papsak and Potency.
Wild dogs, we were “that class”.

We created our own family and memories.
We snuck into the haunted hospital to meet the ghosts.
And since our issues were every taxi’s emergency,
we arrived in one for the Grade 11 school ball.
For Sports Day we dressed as policewomen, then snuck into Club Underground
that evening where black girls taught white girls to dance.
Unrehearsed, but in sync, we were all too fast.

We fought for ‘Closing time’, our Grade 12 farewell song,
since the unholy lyrics of “whiskey and beer” were frowned upon.
That didn’t stop us from singing along. We won in the end
and played it at our last assembly for the whole high school to hear.

We strode out of the hall after our last exam,
wrote in red pens on our white school shirts with pink bras underneath,
swinging our French plaits, African braids and ponytails in freedom.

The whites of our eyes united us,
the ink on our shirts belonged.
All through high school, we kept each other warm.

Rock songs from the 90s,
we were the wild dogs.

CHAPTER THREE: Nineteen

Handing Over

Waking up after the car accident with a nurse's hand on my shoulder, I know what I am. I am a paper-doll chain. My folds topple over like an accordion.

I am a string of paper girls, linen white and paper crisp, my edges neat and pared out by the great cookie cutter.

Sure, I'm not missing any limbs, only organs.

But I don't remember the hands that carried me from the roadside scene on a stretcher to a bed that slid like a tongue back into the mouth of the hospital.

The hands that took me to a recovery ward where my sister cried, my brother paced, my father and mother waited with their hands over their mouths staring at the middle child: smaller, whiter than she ever was, with knotted intestines.

Her mind now a child's, her spirit a teenager's, her hands – someone else's.

My First Tattoo

“The accident,”
is the story friends and family told me every time I asked.

“The accident,”
is the phrase doctors around me repeated in whispers and nods,
the phrase that followed my every thought like redacted emanata.

“The accident”
is a crack in my timeline,
thin as the marks on each of the R2 coins my mother paid for the hospital parking.

“The accident”
is the answer and the question all in one.

And months after my discharge I take charge. I look at my body:

the thin skin of the neck that runs up the arm to the wrist
and the inky channels below it; the scars, like ships in the ocean,
scattered from the sewn-in drips, my belly’s patched slashes,
the intercostal tubes on my ribs, the aftermath of flesh-sewn neatness.

And since you ask,
that is why I got my first tattoo:
to mark my own body myself

with something new.

The Philosopher

James

It was early January at the University's tutor training.

During the midday break she and other Humanities students loaded dry sandwiches onto small plates then wandered to the ground floor, below a smoker on the balcony. Bored of the discussion on a learner-centered approach she sniffed the cigarette smoke and checked her watch to see if there was time for a smoke before session two.

The bell rang suddenly and everyone started. Above her someone swore. She looked up at the second floor. Beside a No Smoking sign was a figure hunched over the balcony.

His chin tilted down, his eyes level and focussed. She thought he must have been contemplating his own silence.

After a few minutes he broke away from an apparent trance, flicked a cigarette onto the pavement floor close to where she stood. Picking up an old backpack, he flipped his hoodie forward and shifted to the entrance, leaving a puff of smoke in front of the sign.

Before the afternoon session began, the course convener called out from the attendance register, tutors grouped according to their subject major. When she moved onto the Philosophy trainees, he responded to "James".

A name both hard and soft.

She liked

She liked that he disliked pineapple on his pizza, and sipped German beer. She liked the gap between his eyelashes on the left lid, and each time she asked, the different stories he invented that caused it.

She liked that he skipped ahead of his interlocutor, an effortless gatekeeper of topics and punchlines. He withheld pauses between jokes to charge the party – now loud, now serious, now imitating accents like Robin Williams. She liked to call him "sass mouth" since, like a jug, his bottom lip pouted.

But most of all she liked that his only wish was to be immortal.

Songs

He left soccer practice early on Sunday afternoons, arriving at her student house with cigarettes, a night bag and sour worms. Waiting in the driveway, he picked her up and piggybacked her all the way to her room.

They watched series on weekends: 'Vikings', downloaded by one of his many soccer friends. And at the end, and then again at the beginning of each episode, he hummed low and slow to the intro song.

She'd make an inelegant supper of rice and mince, which they knew wasn't great, but they ate it anyway since they also knew it was just the interlude.

They shared shoulders in the cold, touched feet in the Bloemfontein heat using sheets in summer and patched blankets in winter.

They made their own shrine and spent hours in it, the soft tips of his fingers traced the scars on her stomach, arms and ribs, learning every mark and freckle as she lay still. He wrote messages on the slate of her back, playing "Guess what it says" in the dark. Taking turns, one mouthed the letters out as the other one wrote.

When she couldn't sleep she'd wake him up and he nestled her into the soft of his chest, his arm like a wing pressed against her back. He'd sing her songs by Johnny Cash and lull her to sleep.

Valentine's Day

She arrived at his mother's driveway, arms filled with crimson balloons. He stood bashful against his scooter and the twinkling of the pool.

She opened a pop-up heart card. In it he called her "fiery and red". He'd always said she could destroy people with her passion.

Later she wondered if he meant her or him.

Something

Their first breakup of many was his Facebook message to Jade, his colleague from the Philosophy department. A curious reply of, "I do".

So she scrolled down to his message, read it naked while he slept on the pillow.

"Guess the cat's out the bag. You now know how I feel about you."
The message wasn't to her.

A Slip

A year later she was 24, dressed as a pink Powerpuff Girl at his Comic party 21st.
And the drama unfolded like clockwork.
At 9pm he started to slur, by 10pm he'd jumped on the table, and during his father's toast everyone raised their glasses and he raised both and slipped backwards on the tablecloth
and from somewhere across the surface a hand grabbed his shoe at the same time she did – green fingernails on his ankle while her pink nails clasped his boot.
A sudden surfeit of triangles, she knew those nails were Jade's. And the text was from her.

Matches

He said, "You're not good for me."

She couldn't compete with his arithmetic tongue, his snags that lapped between pauses.

She said, "We're our own tragedy."

And he'd dismiss her tactics, her acrobatics – hair flicks and flirting sprees until they collided in one bright outburst.

She was tired of deleting their Facebook photos.
He was tired of picking up his own crumpled notes.

Grey College Ball

She wore a lilac dress from a Truworths sale. He wore a blue suit, removed his beaded bracelets.

Early for the college ball, she from tutoring, he from part-time teaching, he closed the door and offered her his arm.

At the language teachers' table they discussed René Descartes, Anne Sexton, the Beat Generation, and the awkward silence after the MC's joke about having five wives.

Stars

He called her "elegant".
He said that he thought of her when the stars peaked in the sky, his tanned hands framed them above her eyes like a stencil set he shifted from left to right.

The Hill

Fleetwood Mac played from his back pocket as they trekked up the hill of the botanical gardens.

She hummed along, following him with eyes half-closed, soft as a girl blowing bubbles that drift into the wind. Faint weeds brushed passed her knees as she listened.

Following his steps, foot by foot, in her head she turned over the years and memories, the graduations, birthdays, shows and dances. Each frame a whole movie.

Resting in the space between them and the summit, he said,
"You know, Lindsey Buckingham wrote 'Go your own way' about Stevie Nicks.
I bet he enjoyed watching her sing it at each show."

And then, "You know, I could never be your friend." And he left the hill.

Ferris Wheel

Two years later they met again, simple as a blue and white Facebook message.
Her request was a photo of a Ferris wheel, their annual event, and a question mark.

To pick her up, he'd arrived in his mother's grey car
with the same gap between his dark eyelashes.

Starting their catch-up, he said he'd failed his Philosophy honours, but he had a new tattoo and a driver's license.

She worked an office job and tutored in the evenings.

They didn't mention dates in-between, continuing plain talk as they walked side by side on the circus show grounds.

With a soft smirk he watched her cross-question the mahout about the chain around the camel's mouth. He flicked away his Marlboro and muttered, "I know you so well."

And although her hands were much smaller than his he folded his gently around hers, a big envelope for small letters.

At the top of the Ferris wheel they recalled their university vignettes of slammed doors, fists, frowns, lost notes, the occasional crying on the floor. And then their favourite songs.

He announced he'd be leaving to teach English in China soon. She didn't share her plan: to find her own kind of immortality.

And for the first time, they allowed the night to end on its own.

It was as simple as dropping and walking past an un-developed polaroid.

Weaver Nests

I remember my grandmother teaching me about African Masked weavers.

“You see,” she said, pointing to the weaver shredding a nest. Sticks and hay floated to the ground.

“The males spend three days building a nest for his mate. Selecting the finest twigs... I watched him collect them. And if it doesn't match her standards, he tears it down again.”

Healthy

Learning Outcome 1: The learner is able to make informed decisions regarding personal, community and environmental health.

Learning Outcome 3: The learner is able to use acquired life skills to achieve and extend personal potential to respond effectively to challenges in his/her world.

(*Department of Education, 2003: 20*)

*

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by impairing levels of inattention, disorganization, and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity.

Diagnostic criteria:

A. Deficits in intellectual functions, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience, confirmed by both clinical assessment and individualized, standardized intelligence testing.

B. Deficits in adaptive functioning that result in failure to meet developmental and sociocultural standards for personal independence and social responsibility. Without ongoing support, the adaptive deficits limit functioning in one or more activities of daily life, such as communication, social participation, and independent living, across multiple environments, such as home, school, work, and community.

(*American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 32-33*)

A soft click escaped from under the oak desk and ambient music dispersed through the air like dandelion seeds. Withdrawing her hand from the switch under the desk, psychiatrist, Dr de Beer, picked up the silver pen and returned to notetaking.

Above the psychiatrist, now bowed to her written pages, a bird perched on the windowsill and began grooming itself. An orange beak pecked at its chest feathers.

“An existential crisis,” Dr de Beer muttered above the muzak and continued writing.

The girl in the seat before her began fidgeting a little less than she had earlier.

Leaning slightly forward she tilted her head to the side to make out the sloped writing.

The words “dysregulation” and “trauma” glowed from within the neat nests of paragraphs before the psychiatrist brought her hand down on the top page like a sluice gate.

The girl shifted back in the chair and averted her gaze.

The doctor’s hand travelled across the page. She added a prompt full stop then she put her slim pen down with an exhale. Her grey gaze steadied on the girl’s face for the second time since she had sat down an hour ago and began recounting reasons for why she was here, in a psychiatric hospital.

“Your task is to identify your metaphysical animal,” the doctor said. “Some animal you can relate to. This will ground you.”

Then she smiled and pushed her chair back and smoothed her lilac skirt.

“When you return tomorrow, you’ll tell me what your animal is. In the meantime, we’ll start with mood stabilisers. See you tomorrow.”

In one smooth sequence Dr de Beer had walked the girl out, placed a new blue file on the receptionist’s counter and slipped back into the room with a click of the door. Muzak leaked from underneath it.

The girl decided that she’d consider her assignment after a refreshment. Crying and purging is thirsty business, she had found. So she poured herself a cup of tea in the ward’s lounge area. Reaching for a pink lady apple from the adjacent bowl, she noticed a group of staff members watching her from the kitchen doors.

I know what they’re thinking, the girl thought.

She wants to be Healthy.

But Healthy has all her organs and Healthy weighs enough to donate blood.

Healthy wasn’t stapled together multiple times in the ICU.

Far from the three-day spree of no sleep that got her here, Healthy can fall asleep at night.

Healthy doesn’t feel fleshy flashes of her intercostal draining tube.

Healthy doesn’t smell hospital sanitiser in every room during Road Accident Fund interviews.

That’s why Healthy isn’t in a psychiatric complex. And she is.

The university counsellor had acted quickly, pulling tight strings to place her in the psychiatric complex.

In between casual comments about the weather and the university calendar, her index fingers dialled the complex, secured a room and confirmed Dr de Beer’s availability.

All the while, an undulating smile stretched the counsellor’s face, latched from the left to the right ear, below wide unflinching eyes.

So, why was she here, the girl wondered?

Perhaps her reality had split.

She flicked her cigarette off the room’s balcony into the precinct below. The aftermath of ashes floated onto the human-sized chess set, settling between the queen and the bishop. Plotted around the black and white set, grey patients like feeding pigeons, hobbled around for their morning walk, pecking invisible crumbs.

#Coolgirl

She likes the words Wild, Natural, New and Forever.
She likes to say them, taste them,
one at a time and with gusto, in between
layers of Revlon foundation on her face,
Mac matte lipstick on her lips,
Bobbi Brown eyeliner around her eyes.
And with each repeat the mirror sees another freckle fade,
as she presses dresses into her chest, swivels
then bends before the mirror.
This way, then that.

Snap – a new post.

#

Blinking through a last DKNY spray on her cold collar bones
she posts another – #Funnygirl face – for her followers.
With phone in hand, she drapes her pinched limbs in a denim jacket
and heads to the Uber.
Seated, she scrolls through photo collections,
delights in the folder of #Journey phases.

#

She slides out of the car and onto Cubaña's purple carpets.
For #Wildgirl the street is a smiling stage and the clubs are dressing rooms.
At the bar she reaches for the Savannah handed to her.

The first sip fizzles
then the bubbles tingle with each refill and float up
to the top of her fingertips, like possibilities.

#

She joins a crowd of people, elegant as a rotating ballerina:
some have fringes that never quite flick away,
some have significant coughs that never quite dissipate,
while others display smiles stuck like Tetris blocks
before the rest that hang in the monochrome background
like dusty truth suits.

As the lacquer on her lips thins
she threads loud vowels into trendy topics,
relays iconic wines and good times – anything to feed her night hunger.

#

In the morning her eyes settle on the middle of a white ceiling
and trace the curves of a dark watermark hidden behind a chandelier.
This concerns her more than her saturated hair,

the single earring on her pillow
and the tumble of sleeping strangers around her. Spills
of clothing and ash mottle the room:
upside down shoes, a crumpled sock, incense and tissues,
a speaker, cards and evergreen splinters of glass.

Before the bodies stir and their faces sharpen
she peels her limbs from the clumped musk
and steals outside to an Uber.
Who told her to live so fiercely? she wonders.

#

On such Sundays when she gets home alone
she recalls her first real dream: a litter of white kittens.
The three she couldn't save, and the three times
she tried to save them.

CHAPTER FOUR: Twenty-five

“Rejoice! The broken are the more evolved. Rejoice.”
– The Beast, *Split*

Ode to Chester

“The face inside is right beneath your skin.”
– ‘Linkin Park, ‘Papercut’

For Chester Charles Bennington (1976-2017), lead singer of Linkin Park (1999-2017)

The day you died I realised I had one regret in life,
I never watched you live. When you were the one who kept me breathing as a teenager,
plugged into my ventilator, a portable CD player from a second-hand shop.

Like me, the device was faulty. Two AA batteries fell repeatedly
out the back latch, and I’d grab them in the sand and reload the compartment, stuck together
with Prestik and Clicks plasters. Then I’d put my headphones back on and from number 1,
restart your albums, those abandoned by my runaway brother.

After the start-up jingle I’d increase the volume.
First a hum, then the CD revolved under the lid. And as it did
I twisted the button rope swing I sat on, round and round,
raking the orange ground with my toes for momentum.

I can still see the silver disc glinting with me in the sun as I twisted the swing into a strangle.
I timed my unravelling with the chorus, my head bent to my shins.
I wanted the suspension because, like you, I was also crawling in my skin.

With you I’d spin through tracks from Reanimation, Hybrid Theory and Meteora
into the blurry garden. And cleansed by nightfall, I could re-enter my front door
with sand clustered under my toenails.

On MTV I watched your aural taxidermy:
you shocked the static crowd into a mosh pit, the flint
chain on your pants clawed against your legs.
Your hands grabbed for something only you could see above the audience

Your voice peaked with plea and artillery
and then your masterpiece: a 17-second scream.

You were the pyre that burnt on stage to feed the stifled.

You were my outsider.

And you never knew there was a teenage girl on a button rope swing
screaming with you, sealing your voice in between palms and ears,
bent over and bloodletting, like you,
in a lonely garden
in Welkom.

The Hypnotherapist

Teachers need to ask themselves the following important questions concerning their assessment practices when planning their assessment activities and strategies:

- What concept, skills or knowledge is to be assessed?
- What should learners know?
- At what level should learners be performing?
- What type of knowledge is being assessed? Reasoning, memory or process?

(Department of Education, 2003: 26)

In the grey of his voice the hypnotherapist tried to hide his suggestions,
but his aftershave overpowered his words and his touches were timed to the ticks of the metronome.

Tick. Tock. Tick.

Ten minutes in he tapped her shoulder to gauge her drop,
but his touches wound her up like wind-up doll. Strung up, she couldn't stop.
She thought she saw the cue, but she couldn't jump off.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.

A few months after the great reset of her car accident she realised that,
among many things, she had forgotten what sauce she liked with her chips.
The bottles on the table – brown vinegar, All Gold, mayonnaise – lined up like school children waiting for instructions.
All were viable, but what were her preferences before she had lost consciousness?
What tea did she drink? How did she laugh? Which sibling sat in the front seat?
What cigarettes did she buy?
And what did she want from life?

Discharged for months now, she was passengerless and impatient.
Even a crooked shadow was more honest.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.

When she had made the appointment with his receptionist she'd imagined,
after some tasteless antidote of suggestions, that she would travel through frictionless-ness
into the space where bread softens back into dough, birthmarks reshape themselves, lead
singers are replaced and birds are freed from their white envelopes.
That she'd remember what she was
before she had woken up plugged into a catheter and IV drips, in just a regular pillowcase,
before she was as sanitised and square as hospital walls
That she'd return to the hours before the midnight
she transformed into a patchwork princess, a Frankenstein-girl,
to when she was nineteen and her only outside scars were hockey injuries and a stove burn.

She'd return to the chapter before the surgeons had given her a 10% chance of surviving, before her siblings missed their exams, with parents and friends rotating at the outpost of her hospital bed like sentinels.

To before her stomach became a stairwell of thirty-four staples that held her together from sternum to pubic bone.

Before the page of the ugly rebirth: when she had woken up atrophied, in the arms not of her mother, but of the steel hospital bed.

Before she was reborn an adult girl.
Before she learned to walk again.

Tick. Tock. Tick.

She knew what it is to be starved.

She was prepared to consume every word the hypnotherapist said,
fluid and final as a baby in formalin.
And she would reawaken to the clean scent of herself.

Instead, she woke to the caw of a hadeda,
and the hypnotherapist's suggestion that her past self was no prerequisite for her future.

Facts (from the Volksblad)

Her friend called that morning in 2019.

“Do you know you’re in the Volksblad? Some reporter shared your photo and medical records – A 10 year late Road Accident Fund claim. It’s very detailed,” he laughed.

And so it was.

The story she’d left behind had returned to visit her.

The main image was her Facebook profile, a photograph taken at her best friend’s wedding.

The one she sent to her mother.

En-trailed below it, however, was the story of her insides from the medical specialists that examined them: the facts, the damages, of the decade old event resurrected in Afrikaans.

Facts for anyone who could read her story,
without her voice.

Things

Scarf

She travels from neck to neck
resisting knots, ties and other connections.
Anything binding, she shrugs off like a second hand coat.

Leaves

She's restless on the autumn floor.
She shifts past doors,
and scatters at the clap of any outside force.

Rose

She bows her neck on the lip of the vase.
Her toes soaked in old water,
they've forgotten it's cold inside.

Tea

She spills into the saucer.
The underside hides a family stamp of inheritance
but the down-facing spoon is her anchor.

Holder

If anything, she's a wooden block for knives,
a collection of slits,
a pincushion doll with silk trimmings.

Fern

She's an unfolding fern.
The painful unhinges of fringes
drip down on the ground

Doll

New as a mannequin
she's layered like an onion.
And she undresses herself.

Dust

She is several dust devils' whirls
sliding nearer,
but just out of reach.

Unplugged

She's a whirring washing machine.
Except she's unplugged: the cord,
entrails the floor from the power source.

CHAPTER FIVE: Wife

September Proteas

Guests flapped folding fans in the midday heat of the wedding ceremony.

She arrived thirty minutes late in a white dress with red hair, red nails and red lipstick. Pressed close to her chest was her bouquet, a fist of protea faces that gazed around like geishas, resting their necks on the bough of her arm.

She stood at the start of the aisle with her chin up and a parent on each arm like a trophy she'd won, the reason she smiled as she walked down the aisle.

The dark sunglasses lifted, the guests smiled.

They headed towards the man that was a few words short of being her husband, the man who had driven twelve hours to fetch her from a small town without flowers and bring her to Cape Town.

The audience of fynbos and proteas witnessed their "I do's", before they left as husband and wife with blue honeymoon eyes

and the protea fists opened in smiles.

Little Bird

#1.

“The internal curriculum

Processes, content, knowledge combined with the experiences and realities of the learner to create new knowledge. While educators should be aware of this curriculum, they have little control over the *internal curriculum* since it is unique to each student. ... It is often very enlightening and surprising to find out what has meaning for learners and what does not.”

(Wilson, 2025, emphasis added)

Miscarriage

/mɪs'kærɪdʒ/

noun

noun: miscarriage; plural noun: miscarriages

1. the spontaneous or unplanned expulsion of a foetus from the womb before it is able to survive independently.
2. an unsuccessful outcome of something planned.

“Can you hear it singing,
this bird that never flew?

Its song is longing.

It sings for you, for you.”

– Alan Spence, ‘Little Bird’

#2.

For her, things happened in threes.

She was one of three children. Three was the age she was happiest, her home filled with laughter. And three weeks before her 33rd birthday she had saved a bird that flew into her window.

And today, in the year of 2023, would be her third visit to the gynaecologist.

She’d planned to be a mother at 33. And she was *with child*, a semi-secret that only her family, husband and doctor knew.

Her secret had freed her from the trivialities of present projects and daily life. Funny that she’d once titivated over whether to buy winter socks at Pick n Pay or Woolworths; odd that she’d frowned over repeat grammar errors in student papers. This secret swelled in her womb, filling her with chimes, baby elephants and blankets patterned with small blue boats.

For her husband it was the extra lift in his side smile, the glimmer in the corner of his eye. Like a freckle or scar, it was a mark that hadn’t faded since he had seen the plus sign on each of the three pregnancy tests. This secret made him gaze softly into the future beyond stock calculations and site visits.

They had plans. They'd decided to forego the popular 'gender reveal' parties, preferring to discover the baby's sex at birth. Their families had already bought baby clothes, yellow, white and cream. Grandfather-to-be was designing a wooden cot, and inherited names were first tried and then discussed. Great grandmothers furiously knitted scarves for their very first grandchild, fussing over shades of grey and the size of the bib. Grandmothers-to-be unearthed old boxes of baptism gowns, wooden toys and engraved spoons while relaying family histories.

The gynaecologist said there were three things he needed to check in this scan. In the examination room he ticked each important point off his long fingers: the amniotic fluid, the placenta and the baby's growth.

That morning her husband touched the wrinkles around his eyes. He said that being an old father didn't matter to him now. With his tilted smile and proud, pronounced chest he observed the doctor switch on the ultrasound and rouse the screen. He seemed pleased even to stand back while the medical professional took over, relieved that this wasn't his project to oversee.

The doctor narrated each form on the screen. Explaining the check-up process, he steered his gloved hand, guiding the probe gently around her womb. Her husband winked at her and squeezed her toes. Exhaling easily from his pleasure-filled chest, he beamed at the screen.

She knew that he could see himself throwing a ball across their lawn, little legs dithering in one direction to fetch a red ball. She'd sweep back a curtain of dark hair while laughing, then wipe their child's mouth with a *jammerlappie*. She could already hear the chorus of laughter from friends and family sitting on the pool steps, the tinkling of ice in their glasses. They waded their feet in the water while he and his best friend discussed business projects, taking turns to rotate the chicken. In the corridor, next to their wedding photos, beside framed bouquets of proteas and orange pincushions, she saw an additional photo framing the three of them. A family photo.

The doctor turned the probe below the white sheet.

"Yes, fine... That's one," he nodded and took a screenshot. *Click*.

The scan pecked around her uterus, pausing in corners. For each check he paused, his long fingers pointing to demonstrate the crumpled sheet on the screen of white amoeba blobs. For each confirmation she and her husband nodded without question.

"Yes, yes. Fine, the second one..." He paused, another *click*. The doctor pressed buttons to save snapshots, record measurements.

Then he leaned forward to zoom in, the light grey of his sparse hair shadowing the fine lines on the screen.

"Now let's check for the growth," he said, leaning in a little further.

"Mmmm," he murmured, and continued prodding.

During the silence, she stared into the screen.

She thought about the bird she'd caught that morning. Stunned after colliding with the glass, it whirled around on the ground. She had leaned forward with her fingers outstretched to collect

it. She shrouded its awkward, small form in an old towel. She noted the frail heartbeat, the moth-like pulse in its chest, the flickering of bewildered eyes. Below the left bent wing was a bare patch, strange colours glistened along the tips of the fuller feathers.

Migration is a mystery that experts can't properly predict, her biology teacher had once said.

She'd let the little bird loose in the corner of the garden.

"You see, the baby's growth needs to occur proportionately to its size." The doctor's commentary resumed to her right.

The prodding had ceased.

From the foot of the bed her husband nodded quickly. "Okay?"

The doctor inhaled fully, his white gown rose up to the low ceiling. Then his shoulders fell like a sluice. He gave an empty cough.

"We need a blood test, to check this, the LH levels. Then we reassess."

"What's LH? What do you mean?" her husband asked, now frowning.

Suddenly doctor, husband and wife seemed to form an obtuse triangle.

"Two of the three checks look good. But the growth, in alignment with the timeline... The lutenising hormone levels will confirm if the baby's growth continued." The doctor peeled off the pale blue gloves, one finger at a time. He crumpled then tossed them together into the dustbin.

Click. His long fingers flicked off the projected screen.

"You see, in the first trimester, one in every three, four women miscarry... We need to anticipate any outcome." The doctor looked down, paused. Then looked up at them.

"My own wife had a miscarriage. These are more common than we realise..." he continued kindly, placing the probe in its holder. Then pushed his chair back.

Across a vast ocean of white sheet, her husband's chest had collapsed.

"Should the blood tests confirm this", the doctor sighed, "we can schedule an evacuation on Monday."

She realised there were no windows in the room and she couldn't see the sky.

#3.

Three days later she woke up. Without child.

#4.

Hours before the operation was scheduled, she had found the little window bird. At the top of the low stack of building blocks near the washing line, a furl of grey feather tufts frayed in the wind. Closer, in the hollowed centre of the concrete blocks, the bird's form lay motionless, the slight talons on each claw curled inward like a fist.

In the operating theatre that morning, while the staff prepared in silence, she replayed their families' responses. She had never had to un-tell good news before.

My first grandchild... her father wailed into the phone before her stepmother excused them and terminated the call. After that, communications were text messages.

Deliberations over family names had ceased. There was no more talk of cots, colours and clothes. And the baby chair she'd bought lay sideways in the bottom of a solitary cupboard, fixed as a curse.

Her husband had waited with her in the hospital room. After she dressed in the blue patient's gown, she unclipped her earrings, removed her wedding ring.

"Give them to me, I'll keep them safe," he said, pulling his hands out of his pockets.

Stretching forward, he offered a bowl of cupped palms. Inside, the skin folds were compact like the muscles of a heart, pressed tight enough to seal water-drops within his palms. He was determined not to leak a drop.

And before she was steered in the direction of the theatre, he folded his arms over her like wings, briefly holding the whole world down. Then he watched her hospital bed drift away, his hands dangling at his side.

In the sterile theatre the doctor's eyes crinkled behind his mask. He squeezed her shoulder gently. To her right, the anaesthetist put a transparent mask over her face, patted electrodes onto her chest and back, then began to count down from ten.

An hour later she lay in the recovery ward. Her thoughts milky and fumbling:

Would she have to fill this medical history out in every patient form to come? Was she ever a mother if she had miscarried?

#5.

When she got home, large vases cluttered every surface. Lilies, roses and baby's breath. Photo frames refracted glimmers of lively shades on the wall.

Family and friends had hand-delivered meals that cluttered the inside of the fridge. Later, a delivery arrived from her sister with packets of lasagne, hand cream, more flowers.

And that night her breasts, knowing they'd been misled, had begun to un-swell. She lay in the quiet night, both hands holding her chest.

Overseeing the bed, a vase of proteas tended to her with their faces of symmetry. Their delicate swells of white and red kept quiet company.

Beside her, her husband was already asleep. His wrists and knees drawn into his chest, shaped like a foetus.

And she knew he was dreaming about their little bird.

Fraud

She's an English teacher who confuses the words *lettuce* with *cabbage*, and *fact* with *fiction*.
She even signs a different signature on every formal document,
She eats lunch alone in the women's bathroom, sitting cross-legged, chewing a sandwich
on a wooden lid,
and after school she gives different names on different days to the Starbucks baristas
then ambles around the Goldfields mall cheerfully, with her New Name cup.

On her cellphone notes she uses *NTS* interchangeably for *Notes To Self* and
Neurotransmitters.
She wishes her phone's flight mode could deactivate her parasympathetic nervous system
because she never allows herself to be bad at anything.
And when her phone won't stop ringing she tells spam callers:
"Didn't you know?
The woman you're looking for has gone missing."

She has the pleasure of being hired at her own alma mater
yet unlike her lesson plans there are many of her own scenes she's never analysed:
when she planted seeds in places she knew they wouldn't grow,
feigned foreign accents to evade conversations with strangers,
timed delivery collections for just before the shops close,
and how, as a student, she had arrived an hour early and still managed
to walk in late for a first class.
Sometimes she wonders if she's the only member of her own Neurotics Anonymous.

The problem is when she sleeps,
after she's weighed the cost of progress with the suspense of living
and examined the infections of regret. And the antiseptic of sunlight is absent.

Rizla-thin eyelids closed, that's when parasites wriggle in the dark,
those putzi flies tickle between eyeball and lid like freed infections.

So she repeats her name to the empty room and asks the big questions:
Why is my every nightmare staged in high school?
And for how long have I been living as a fraud?

Car Parks and Parts

“Madam?” the ragged man says (or asks)
he smells of old clothes left in the sun
he’s approached her three times
(or did she approach him?)
because (she knows) she appears lost
because she’s returned to the same parking level
(of the same parking lot)
because she left home at three and now it’s five o’ clock
(unless her watch stopped)
because it’s started to rain
(and she only has a t-shirt top on).

The parking guard settles only
when he hears a voice on her phone confirm
that *My husband is on his way to collect me*
because (as he knows) she can’t find her car
because (as he saw) she thought she parked *there* but didn’t
from under the rain jacket hood his eyes watch her until
she opened the door of her husband’s car.

*

“You okay?” the tall woman asks behind her tortoiseshell glasses.
She’s a primary school teacher from some school in Fish Hoek
she recognised desperate threading through rows of inactive cars
glaring at number plates and circling around stop signs
because her mother has dementia
(so she’s seen it before)
because her mother no longer drives
(because she has dementia)
and she’s wandering around like a Pick ‘n Pay trolley

and so she shifts bookbags, packets and chalk on her seats
so that she can sit on the front seat
(on the edge near the aircon)
she presses against the windscreen
(her white fists on her knees)
desperate for her car to respond with a *beep*
her thumb pressed into the remote button (white and pink)
they drive through the first clusters of cars
then the scanty outskirts
(the teacher didn’t mind driving far).

Beep beep

they stop at her car eight rows into the next parking level
and she reels with relief on the front seat, before her CY number plate
she cries on the teacher’s shoulders in relief
she hands the teacher the peace lilies she’d bought for a friend

the reason she came to the mall in the first place
the teacher says, "Thank you, dear,
but it's been over 30 minutes
and we both need to re-pay for our parking ticket
you almost forgot that part!" (she did).

But she's better now
she doesn't panic when she's lost
it's a familiar path
when that memory part drops away
she's learnt to wait and retrace her steps
she'll walk backwards if she must
a frame-by-frame replay from her edge to the start
because she's learnt to take photos of parking levels in car parks.

Her Throat

On a game drive at Thobolos Game Park in Botswana.

The kudu's neck arches heavily.
Her tawny chin stretches upwards. Then

her jaw lowers again, opening
for another mouthful of leaves.

In one swallow her cone ears lift
like butterflies.

For every bite savoured in the African sun
she sighs and her eyelashes touch.

How graceful the cow seems;
afloat on stilted hooves with slivers gleaming
on her back as she feeds.

While behind this cell-phone screen my jaw is a knot.
And I am tearing at my seams.

Rooms

“It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

...

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.”

– Sylvia Plath, ‘The Applicant’

The kitchen

The white plates fall

on the smashed floor: shards between shards under bare feet.

I’m left with a mouth

filled with words: ceramic and orange
and teeth: white and hard and
closed as doors.

Perhaps now I can allow, from above,

God’s lost pages to fall.

Boxes

There are boxes. Boxes in my mouth lodged like Tetris blocks.

I bite my teeth so they can’t spill out

Doggedly barking behind gates, scratching
the winding street of my tongue.

My once-spiked flair is now blunt.

But my boxes don’t topple over,

they don’t rotate and slot like Tetris.

They don’t communicate warning signs like ‘caution’ or ‘hazardous’.

Their insides percolate like age-old friends from primary school.

So I’ll side with the inside scars,

those doors that closed on their own.

The bathroom

That was the day our house grew too big for me.

I washed my wedding smile off my face

in a basin of sin and expired dreams.

I watched the shower scold a Rorschach onto my chest,

my stomach,
my thighs,

I wished to clean all the hands off my hands.

Handymen

Cable-tie cruel, we watch the jury hang themselves from the front seat.

Room 2

I wash clothes without soap.

My knuckles are white as linen.

I swat flies that aren't there.

Forgiveness

I arrive at Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not like salt thrown over the left shoulder at startled spirits,
those watching for the silver between praying hands.

Forgiveness is not like sugar, spilled over the lip of a saucer,
the grains no one got to swallow.

Forgiveness is rubbish-bin honesty.

Pool

We didn't see the bodies on the water, their pearly white skin.

Instead they were white starfish stuck under the surface.

We didn't realise that was the death of the counsellor,
like the sea of heat that simmers on a tar road.

I grabbed one of the hands that was outstretched in the water
only to realise
it wasn't yours.

Yellow Blanket

Night after night, my baby girl's marshmallow fist rises up from the yellow blanket. A little conquer-ress.

Still half her mind is in the womb-world of my dreams. Still blinking her way into the hospital room air.

She stares at familiar strangers, cooing. And at the little bird in the window.

POSTSCRIPT

Skins

I am that bastard's daughter
the rabid bitch that barks into the darkness

I am the thin-lipped prude, tall
and meek as the grootslang simpering in my mouth

I am your scorned sister in tartan, fearmongering
among virgins and orphans

I am the swine that feeds on scabs and grocery bags
swallowing on Sundays, plagues are my messengers

I am the headmistress that plagiarised
the words scratched under your wooden desk

I am a textbook bonfire of marginalia
barcoded teeth peeled off your student card

I am the *nil per mouth* surgeon's note, gloating
near the electrodes on your heart

Ho ho ho, I am the slut that can never be owned
the sphinx that shows her ankles to hounds

I am the lipstick of your wild night's shoulder bites
a xenoestrogen starved by sunlight

If experience is a frog that bubbles in the pot
then I am Sybil, rasping for the mic.

ESSAY

Moving Beyond the Confessional

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation - initiation - return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. (Campbell 23)

Introduction

This bildungspoese, “Subjects and Skins: her Curriculum”, is a collection of original poems that chart the development of the female self across different critical life stages, during which both internal and external forces are shown to shape the unfolding identity of the protagonist’s character.

Thematically, health and education-related undertakings are inextricably involved within her journey and many poems are located within the institutions in which they took place, alongside the corresponding rites of passage. Premises from mythologist Joseph Campbell and analytical psychologist Carl Jung will be applied in this essay, and I will discuss how they informed the bildungspoese in general. Panoramically, the development is indisputably that of a heroine with specifically female personal and social rites that develop the individuating self from her own birth to the birth of her first-born child.

Monomyth

The primary underpinning of this collection is the transformational potential of critical life phases within the formal trajectory of a lifespan, in this case of girl- to womanhood. Within the span of a typical individual’s development, male or female, a range of interactions at certain phases are inevitable. Joseph Campbell’s premise for *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, an anthropological and mythological meta-study of the protagonist’s ‘monomyth’ as it is plotted across civilisations and tribes, is that the function of rites of passage are to consciously and unconsciously transform (and deepen) the subject’s psyche through “difficult thresholds”(6). Campbell identified typical phases within the main character’s lifespan that encompass these “difficult thresholds”; in particular, “ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, [that] serve to translate the individual’s life-crises and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms” (331). In contemporary Western society such “impersonal forms” would include phases of maturation as they encompass the spectrum from life to death –

infancy, childhood, puberty, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age. Informally, humankind's social encounters within these phases are the impetuses themselves, for example, the onset of menstruation, engagement with a first girlfriend/boyfriend, the loss of virginity, pregnancy, a wedding proposal, a funeral, and so on. Nonetheless, each "impersonal form" serves to separate and break the individual away from an old phase, such as her situation within her family of origin, and impel her towards creating her own new identity within another social setup, such as her own new nuclear family. These phases of "separation-initiation-return" shape and mature her individuality and her identity.

Typical examples of these phases include the initial courting of her parents ('A Medical Love Story') portrayed in the Prelude section, a first boyfriend ('Matric Boy'), peer group bonding ('Wild Girls'), employment ('Fraud'), marital tensions ('Rooms') amongst others. Organic and unanticipated experiences interpenetrate these milestones and add dramatic texture to the existing narrative arc. These include the divorce of her parents ('Welcome to the Year 2000!'), moving to another country and alloparenting by her maternal grandparents ('Dear Diary (About Granny Heart and Grandpa)'), bullying as a result of appearing foreign ('Swallowing'), a near death car accident ('Handing Me' and 'My First Tattoo') as well as post car accident memory challenges ('Car Parks and Parts'). In '#Coolgirl', the subject plays with her own identity and appearance socio-culturally, while her internal values are tested behaviourally.

The protagonist's individuation is showcased throughout the collection. Carl Gustav Jung, in his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, describes the individuation process as *circumambulation*, where "there is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self"(240). He contends that the "self" continues to deepen and develop in an ever-continuing spiral to becoming more concentrated, more individualised, more mature. As the self grows, so too do her personal preferences, values, relationships and goals, as each encounter reveals a new layer of selfhood. As she matures the subject's identity unfolds. Her maturation is non-linear as a result of spontaneous and unpredictable external forces she comes into contact with.

The Feminine

Correspondingly, the second underpinning for this collection is specifically feminine, specifically Jung's view of woman's psyche and her symbolism. In *Aspects of the Feminine*, Jung asserts that for the female psyche "goodness, passion, and darkness" are "the three essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic

emotionality, and her Stygian depths” (126). As nature herself can be, in many poems the underlying female impulse is dark, damaging and disruptive (‘Her Throat’, ‘The Tunnel’, ‘Weaver Nests’), while other poems portray a typically female ambivalence and despondency (‘Sunflowers in June’, ‘My First Valentine’). In this light, the poem ‘Fraud’ can be seen as ego-centric and neurotic, ‘Car Parks and Parts’ almost risks bordering on hysteria and ‘Skins’ portrays an almost anti-heroine persona. Therefore, “goodness, passion, and darkness” together comprise the range of inclinations inherent in the female subject.

The great range of attitudes and capacities within woman are central to this collection, both intra and interpersonally. The daughter-father relationship is depicted in ‘Dream Catcher’ and ‘Sunflowers in June’, and in ‘Red Blanket’. The protagonist’s father, indeed, is seen as a vital source of security and protection. Her first socialisation and further encounters with the opposite sex is described in ‘Swallowing’, her first Valentine’s day letter was sent by her own mother (‘My First Valentine’) and the relationships with her friendship group, the camaraderie and challenges they uncouneted together, is described in ‘Wild Girls’, which also ends with her final phase of high school. ‘Wild Girls’ also relays typically female experiences, such as sharing sanitary pads in the bathroom and lending clothes. In ‘Matric Boy’, the subject’s rage is portrayed in her self-protective impulse when it is rumoured during the dance that the other matric girls aim to jeopardise her evening by throwing food on her, and she imaginatively engages in the destructive feminine, Carrie’s dangerous telepathy against both the matric boy and his female peers:

For you, I would’ve been a modern-day Carrie:
burned holes though all their throats, dragged their loose skeletons across the
floor,
lifted them onto the ceiling and washed them all in swine blood.
It was then I should’ve finished you off.

Reference to the macabre and horrifying signifies the passion and darkness in the speaker. As such, central to this collection are girl/woman experiences within the monomyth template.

Literary Landscape

In terms of situating this collection within the broader literary landscape, the key theme-bases of two bildungsromans influenced this work: *Educated* by Tara Westover and *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen. The protagonists undertake journeys of education (Westover) and health (Kaysen). Although from a different literary genre, these two influential memoirs introject the feminine confessionalism that is required for the maturation of the subject, since health and education are critical bases that the subject returns to throughout my collection. Learning and healing are often inextricable processes within my poems. Furthermore, as a bildungspoesie, a poetry of formation and education spanning across developmental years, the bildungsromans emphasise the central characteristic: formative education.

Specifically on the genre of poetry, the works of South African poets Joan Metelerkamp, Ruth Miller, Petra Müller and Genna Gardini were influential to this collection, together with the works of American poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Present in Genna Gardini's *Matric Rage*, a collection of poems organised along the subchapters of Junior, Senior, High and Matric, are the experiences that shaped the subject's identity during this impressionable period. Likewise, my collection is similarly structured along the lines of formal educational, and then life phases that surpass them (Chapter one: Child, Chapter two: Girl, Chapter three: Nineteen, Chapter four: Twenty-five, Chapter Five: Wife). Overwhelming and heightened intra- and inter-personal responses are evident in Gardini's poems such as 'Angry Girl', where anger is described as "attack[ing] only from the inside" (39), and 'How I Hate You' ("How I hate you, other girl,/ is not how I hate myself") (37). These poems can be likened to the rage in my poems 'Headmaster' ("she clenched her fists tighter and tighter"), 'Matric Boy' ("For you, I would've been a modern-day Carrie:/burned holes through all their throats, scraped their loose skeletons across the floor") and 'Swallowing' ("I imagined the doll I was working on was Brent, Phillips or Samuel, or the other boys in the pack, and I could sew their mouths shut. I could be the needle that threaded their lips together, their eyes shut, their hands dismembered"). Given the impressionability of developing high school students' psyche, responses are heightened and can be viewed as primal, visceral, and violent. They are also honest in their transparency and therefore confessional. These necessarily extreme responses are indicative of the 'shadow', the third underpinning discussed below.

Unprecedentedly in poetry, Plath and Sexton pioneered their explorations of woman's physiological and psychological experiences in their poetry with nuance, texture and courage. For Plath, typically woman poems include 'Lorelei', 'Stillborn', 'Barren Woman', 'Heavy Woman', 'Widow', 'Lesbos', 'Childless Woman', to name but a few; while titular examples

from Sexton's oeuvre include 'The Abortion', 'Woman with Girdle', 'Menstruation at Forty', 'In celebration of My Uterus', 'Mother and Daughter' and more. Evidently, Plath and Sexton's works demonstrates that they sought to investigate and artfully depict woman's range of experience without restraint or consideration of what topics were socially acceptable and appropriate in the 1950s in America.

Literary critic Judith Kroll notes in *Chapters of a Mythology*, her seminal study on Plath's work, that the "one overriding concern: [in Plath's work is] the problem of rebirth or transcendence" (3), which my collection similarly aims to bring to the fore within each phase. The female self continually renews herself through internal and external conflicts, both conventional and individualised. Furthermore, literary critic Maxine Kumin argues in her biography on Sexton (1991) that she wrote from her unconscious. This is a method Jung titled 'active imagination', a technique I employed with some of my material where I incorporated dreams. Both Plath and Sexton sought to access material from their unconscious (Pridgeon), evident in the surrealistic imagery present in their poetry.

In *Under dark under branches*, Joan Metelerkamp explores vignette-like memories of her family and national history in one long, unnumbered poem with page breaks between stanzas. Harkening back to specific moments, such as the introductory sentence in the poem on page 8 "I am four - / looking up at the black of the leaves" and on page 9 where she and her siblings are exploring their environment (as "free feral kids"), she recalls the experiences that shape this particular bildungspoese. Similarly, in my collection I explored inter-relational memories with my siblings and relayed my position within the nuclear family. In 'Middle child' I begin with "Not from the middle/ middled but not centered/ (but made from two)" and explore the speaker's identity as it was shaped through interactions with her siblings, Daniel and Emma, and continue to explore how the birth order contributes to the role each child plays within the family dynamic. In 'My Inside Family', I explore the idea of a typical family's daily life in comparison to a non-nuclear family whose daily living takes place without the presence of a father. As a result, atypically close friendships were developed with siblings (Daniel) and peers to make up for the deficit of love and belonging within the household, as seen in my poem 'Wild Girls'.

Character-driven

Although the plot provides a backdrop against which the subject can mature, and although the institutions represented (education, hospital) are the crucibles in which the self is transformed,

this collection is essentially character-driven. Internal struggles and crises are central to the subject's development in terms of her personal identity and selfhood. Significantly, Campbell asserts that it is the "prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward" (7). Symbols signpost the pathways taken and the corresponding experiences encountered, and examples of these in my collection would be the school, the hospital and the university. Throughout the collection, avian imagery is also referred to directly ('Little Bird') and indirectly ('Yellow Blanket': "strangers cooing. And the little bird in the window"). External encounters facilitate individual transformation, while events in and of themselves are secondary to the unfolding character, the 'she'.

The chief conflict thus is self versus self, as opposed to self versus society, environment or technology. The developing identity is shaped through painful separations and relieving unions. These include from family members in her parent's divorce, firstly her father indirectly and her mother directly ('Her Mother, of Course') and then her brother ('Welcome to the Year 2000' and described retrospectively in 'Ode to Chester'). Unions can be seen as her first mature romantic relationship ('The Philosopher'), and wedding ceremony ('September Proteas') and miscarriage (Little Bird'). Inwardly, the self is split and transformed after a car accident ('Facts (from the Volksblad)') and the recovery to selfhood that follows it ('The Hypnotherapist'). These interactions occur within the psyche and the themes of medicine and healing are instrumental to the crises that she encounters. Medicine and medical interventions are of course critical to the speaker's survival, although they are not without consequence. For example, in 'The Hypnotherapist' during the speaker's quest to regain her memory, she states:

That she'd remember what she was

...

That she'd return to the hours before the midnight

she transformed into a patchwork princess, a Frankenstein-girl

Thus medical intervention, albeit lifesaving, intervenes at a cost and creates a paradox: the girl/woman is saved, although her memory (and identity, sense of selfhood) is compromised. Health and the necessity of medical intervention stand in opposition between the subject and her optimal, healthy self. The life-altering car accident at age nineteen, described in 'Handing Me', interferes with the subject's psyche, memory and identity. The subject experiences a loss of control and agency in her life, ("I am a string of paper girls linen white and paper crisp, my

edges neat and pared out by the great cookie cutter), where her worldview is shattered to the point that her own hands, her individuality, are no longer her own (“Her mind now a child’s, her spirit a teenager’s, her hands – someone else’s”). Yet it is as a result of medical intervention that the subject survived in the first place. Thus an ambivalent attitude towards medicine/healing, and the attempt to re-own and empower the self is seen in ‘My First Tattoo’, where the speaker seeks “to mark my own body myself/ with something new” and to overwrite the scars resulting from the many surgical operations she underwent.

The Shadow

The last theoretical underpinning of importance to this collection of poems is Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of the ‘shadow’; a major archetype within the personal unconscious of individuals. Traditionally in literature, the shadow is portrayed as the “disowned self, the lower self, the dark twin or brother in the Bible and in mythology, the double, repressed self, alter ego, id” (Zweig and Abrams 3). Examples of these from the literary canon would include Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and the Biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. However, the function of the shadow is misunderstood in terms of its potential and its vitality.

The shadow in itself is a component of the psyche and can be seen in opposition to the ego (see Jung’s *Aion*), although the ego and the shadow develop concomitantly (Zweig and Abrams). In *Aion*, Jung indicates that the shadow is the most accessible personal archetype (other than the anima and animus), and it presents a “moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality” (8). Further on this point, Jungian analyst Liliane Frey-Rohn states that the shadow is a “dark treasury [that] includes our infantile parts, emotional attachments, neurotic symptoms, as well as our undeveloped talents and gifts” (Zweig and Abrams xvii). Indeed, Edward C. Whitmont asserts:

the fundamental fact [is] that the shadow is the door to our individuality. In so far as the shadow renders us our first view of the unconscious part of our personality, it represents the first stage toward meeting the Self. There is, in fact, no access to the unconscious and to our own reality *but* through the shadow... Hence no progress or growth is possible until the shadow is adequately confronted. (in Zweig and Abrams 16)

Throughout my collection of poems the shadow resurfaces to integrate within the character-driven personality, a process that ultimately necessitates psychic wholeness. To develop the Self, contact and engagement with personal internal darkness – melancholy, destructive forces, rage, greed, guilt and shame – are required not only to rebalance the psyche, but to mature the character herself. Confessionalism in this sense is mandatory in bringing about catharsis and the consequent reconciliation. The feminine identity is further forged through these interactions to modify the Self and further the maturation of selfhood.

On the overarching theme of rebirth, Jung states in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature* that “The creative process has a feminine quality, and the creative work arises from unconscious depths” (121). Since individuation is facilitated by the integration of the shadow – a facet of the personality that includes hidden potentialities, drives, urges and complexes that require actualisation – engagement with the dark feminine is unavoidable. Rebirth requires a shedding of skins; see the poem (‘Skins’) on which this collection ends. Skins, selves, shadow, other, are interchangeable and represented structurally in the epigraph by Kahlil Gibran (“It is not a garment I cast off this day, but a skin that I tear with my own hands”), in the extract from the film *Split* (“Rejoice! The broken are the more evolved. Rejoice”) and in Sylvia Plath’s line (“It works, there is nothing wrong with it. .../ Will you marry it, marry it, marry it”) from her poem, ‘The Applicant’.

Conclusion

To conclude with a Campbellian axiom, “Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new” (11). This highlights the supra-personal requirement of rebirth through transcendence, either confessionally or imaginatively. Thus the collection begins and ends with parturition, the symbolic start of a new beginning and the closing of past events as a requirement. Selfhood and identity are continuously developed throughout the lifespan of the subject and become more concentrated with each internal (and external) crisis.

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