

Broken Window

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THE WINDOW SHATTERED AS WE lay mixed in our burning selves. I felt Dante rise from underneath our warmth, throw off his side of the duvet to the sound of broken glass, switch on the bed side light, put on his clothes, go downstairs and outside. She was waiting for him. I heard the slap of flesh, sharp breathing, snapping undergrowth, inhuman moaning. It stopped and then started again, louder and more urgent even though more distant, then silence. I switched off the light and lay there, surrounded by shards, waiting in darkness for him to return. And it came upon me; I could feel the imprint, knew the damage it was causing, but there was no emotion, only bitter coldness in the splintering. I went under, and the grey pushed away from itself leaving an empty middle. Nothing, only winter coming through the opening, spreading over the duvet. My feet began to numb so I huddled into myself, breathing for warmth. Vague images rushed in at me, pulsing to the beat of my temple. It was her, dark woman, face caved in blonde hair, powerful, Dante in her arms, not resisting. I came up for air and listened for any indication. Only the single bird before dawn.

2 (I INFERNO)

HE RETURNED TORN AND SOILED and began running a bath. I cleaned the dull wine scratches that had rushed to his neck and chest. His hair came out in my hands as I washed it. He said that she would not go home and that he had dragged her to her cottage, only for her to chase after him again as he left, to continue the assault, that she was drunk and incoherent, spaced out on anti-depressants, that eventually he had got her inside and managed to pacify her before she passed out. I said that I wanted to leave, but he held my hand, kissed my wounds and said I must stay, so I did. We picked up the half brick, swept the emerald shards together, put on another duvet and watched the air slowly lighten. The wind picked up and, as I fell asleep in his arms, for a single moment I knew it was wrong, knew that outside of him things would be better, but I was anchored there, without desire or will, rolled into him as the gentle sun rose.

3 (XXXII PARADISO)

I CAME TO MYSELF WITH the sun an anaemic halo in the mist and him gone. I find it easy to speak of it now; somehow it is sweet. When you read it, all I ask is that you hear me. I entered this with my eyes open. I dressed warmly, walked down the stairs, made myself a cup of tea, went into the enclosed garden and sat underneath the empty limbs of the wisteria with Izzy purring on my lap. I had slept dead, no dreams from the deep, and now had a quiet morning open with nothing to do but think about what he was doing, if he loved me, if he had been unfaithful, about her and her stupid dogs, flouncing about the town as if she owned it, hiding her desire behind that awful laugh. I was better than her, he could not choose her over me. Her image slowly dwindled as the sun cut through the mist, leaving me in the quiet stillness of glorious morning.

4 (II INFERNO)

DANTE ARRIVED BACK FOR LUNCH with a French loaf, camembert and cherry tomatoes. He was more chatty than usual. Told me about the morning training, how his troops had messed up, and all I wanted was for him not to turn me into a shadow. Eventually he asked why I did not want to talk about last night and that made me angry. He always made it me. Why had he not raised it? It was his stupid past. He had brought me here to a strange town littered with his history and untouched by mine, brought me to a town that did not even speak my language, that left me silent and alone whilst he did his service for the country. He did not notice and carried on talking about work. When he left I cleaned up, put some washing on, went back up to the bedroom and lay in the blue coolness and thought about her. She was attractive even though I knew she was repulsive; she had been his before me. Izzy came up and snuggled in my crook. I did not want to stay, did not want to live in his rhythm, but there was nothing else. I would leave him, one day.

5 (XXXI PARADISO)

THE TAP TAP OF HIS cane through the broken window woke me. I knew who it was but did not get up. I could see his image anyway: three-toothed face that had lost its pride, broken shepherd's staff without the crook, yellow star of David sewn onto his filthy Zionist robe. He never knocked or called, just looked in the box for post to slip under my door, before drifting off. Nothing had arrived yet and it forced me to go downstairs, take the remnants of lunch and throw it out to him in a checkers bag. He picked it up and walked off without thanks.

Dante came back at four with pasta, olives, garlic and a slab of chocolate for after. He asked about my day with weak affection and then listened in his inattentive, vaguely bored way, giving me small bits of advice, though pretending not to, anecdotes about himself and others, little homilies that he told his troops to great laughter and effect, stories he had told me already. The only new thing he said was about the beggar problem, that they should strike because of their working conditions. Then he was off to manoeuvres.

I brought in the washing, hung up his uniform to dry, switched on the TV, watched Oprah dispense love to all around her. It made me feel a little better. He arrived back, odorous as usual, opened the fridge, got himself a beer and poured me a shandy. We went outside, but it was too cold and dark, so we came in and made supper. I was in charge of the sauce, although I made it exactly like Dante had shown me; the real Italian way one of his ex-girlfriend's grandmothers had revealed to him. He was in charge of the pasta and complained jokingly about how he had been relegated to menial labour tasks in

the kitchen. He dished up for me and we ate silently to the goings on of The Need. Then it was The News and half a slab of dark chocolate.

I felt tired, so I went upstairs to bath and shave. I ran it hot and full, put on a mask and lay there, warm and weightless, listening to the drip of the tap. Dante was waiting in the bedroom. He liked the way I had shaved and watched me put on his brown jersey. Tonight he wanted me. Quickly he went down and I stiffened, but he just laughed in reassurance. His tongue was silent and lithe, so I let myself go, circle to circle, upwards, and then he turned me over, and I was in his beat and animal smell until he came to outbursts of how much he loved me, with me still full-blown and empty, still in the desert and in limbo.

We lay together and talked about household things: glass, putty, the possible cottage, new colours for the house, and then he was asleep. I lay there and listened to the outside world through the broken window. I could see the township lights and feel its suffering, its thirst, its hunger. The world out there, without love, no ring to fit its finger, and me inside, safe and warm and so tired.

I felt the dark prophesy come with her nails on Dante's face, his face so impassive and bored with me, so alive and full in public, and me so ungrateful when he was looking after me. All I want is for him to look me in the eyes with some fire and warm me up inside, like he used to when on pass in my town, but I was falling back in the darkness with beating wings, falling back.

6 (III INFERNO)

THE MORNING WAS COMING, THE clean wet air quiet with song, and I was not ready for it. If only I could sleep a little more and forget all the dumb echoes. Dante stirred, so I snuggled into his back to wake him, but his breathing remained regular. He was trying hard not to push me or question me, knew that I was not ready, knew that the small details were big enough. I don't know how I got here and am resigned to it but, lying there as the curtains auburned, I felt stronger and ready.

I got up and made us some tea. Dante was still curled up when I returned but I knew he was awake. He made a show of it, groggily propping himself up before taking a hesitant sip. I asked him if it was nice. He said thanks. And that is how it is, he does not understand me, does not know how strong I actually am, how light I am, how happy I can be.

It is all her fault, with her black eyes and nasal voice, her insane thought that she can still rely on him after so long. I had been fine before this, so much in front of me, so keen to move forward. We had started too early after her, we should have waited, and now I was caught in the hatred. And even though she was a drunken slut, she could still call on him in the early hours and claim him with threats of suicide, and he would always respond, spend hours with her, enter into her hell, and it affected us, we were blistered by it, and he could not see that he still wanted her, that the reason why he could not break it off was not because he feared for her life, but because he is fascinated by it all, wants to watch her madness first hand, be a part of it, touch her evil. It makes him unfaithful. And she knows what it is doing to me, loves the cruelty of it, loves the reduction of him to

her level, wants him to die a little as well, and he runs to her and her lies, leaving me alone in the wildness with no way outwards.

Dante asked me if I wanted another cup. I said yes and watched him get up and stiffly walk in his funny way to the door, and I loved him then, felt it rise free and ardent from me, but with it came the weakness, the paralysis, the inability to turn back and the knowing that there was nowhere to go. There was no path for me, only the waiting for him to make me tea and leave.

7 (XXX PARADISO)

JUST ME AND THE HOUSE, again, too big to fill with the little us there was. I had tried flowers, but they wilted quickly and I could not help but leave them to fill the space until the water stank. I put on my dressing gown, took out the rubbish to the back of the garden and washed the dishes. Nice hot water, sunlight, careful rinse, white and clean. I Should have done it last night, hated the way the aromas hung and the food congealed, but there they all were, crowded on the rack, fats penetrated, glasses clean of fingerprints, tea cups soaked in bleach. I felt safe and happy and vaguely in the mood, so I got out the vacuum cleaner and went from room to room.

It had felt like a living house when we first moved in, with its wooden floors, sash windows, aubergine and mustard walls, but it was really a cold, drafty house with fireplaces that did not work and damp all along the one side, made even worse by the dead garden outside. The mood was gone. Nothing was quite my own in the house, and somehow that was me. I put the vacuum cleaner away and went for a bath.

Izzy was happy and excited as usual, jumping up and using my shoulder as support for a hot drink. I stroked her wet and watched her contentedly clean herself on the floor. Knocking on the door brought me out of the soaking. For a moment I thought it could be Dante, maybe he had left his keys behind, but it was a different knocking, so I tried to ignore it. It would not go away. Eventually I got out of the bath, put on my dressing gown, went to the bedroom window and looked down. It was a beggar, a young boy, maybe fifteen, eyes hidden, crown exposed, holding a bucket. He knocked again, more urgently.

I wished that Dante was here, he would handle it with authority. Sometimes he gave them bread and money, other times he just told them to fok off and never come back again, depending on what they looked like. I hated them, hated the threat, the guilt, the interruption, the reminder, the repetition, the necessary lie. Dante encouraged me not to answer, thought me vulnerable because I could not speak much Afrikaans or Xhosa, but I did not have anything to say or give except leftover food and empties.

He was not going away. Maybe he knew I was inside, or maybe he was making sure that the place was empty, so I stuck my head out of the broken window. He jumped away from the house, looking up at me with scared eyes. He called me madam and asked if I had Sunlight, using a mixture of pleading actions and bastardized words I only half understood. It turned out he was trying to make some money by washing the cars on our street. I could not say no. I went downstairs and got the Sunlight. It was almost full and I did not want Dante to be cross, so I poured out half of it into an empty Sprite bottle and went upstairs again. He was still waiting. I threw it down to him and he caught it easily without saying thanks. Then he asked me for a cloth. I looked at him and then away from him, but he just stood there, asking again. I found an old torn and stained T shirt, threw it down as well, and withdrew. I waited ten minutes and looked outside again. I saw him at the end of the road, washing a car. He saw me watching and waved, so I stepped behind the curtain, went downstairs and made myself a cup of tea.

8 (IV INFERNO)

MAYBE I WOULD GO INTO TOWN today, look at clothes, do what I used to. If only there were shops without cursed assistants hovering with serving eyes, half dull, half bored, unable to speak English. How do they do it, how do they sustain themselves? It was strange. I had always thought I would find myself somehow, that who I was would become suddenly apparent against the existing, but there was nothing there, only this living. Everyone else seemed to be so sure of who they were, and I had believed them, held a future where I would be the same, also clothed, made up, surfaced.

It is a very difficult thing to do, to go out and pretend that you are there, face up to so many people who have somehow embraced life, who have some sort of meaning, ambition, goal, who enjoy the inanities of conversation, who love the details of their lives and are happy to inflict them on you. And I used to let it happen without competition, and hours later would be exhausted by their monologues, unable to get their voices out of my head, carrying around their silly problems as if they were my own when they meant nothing. I was the dead surrounded by the living, the empty surrounded by the full, the naked surrounded by the dressed, and they loved it, loved to plug me in to their silly projects and disappointments, and for a while it used to wash around in me.

I don't know if you can call it concerned, although they seemed to think so, for I remembered their smallest details, but somehow I couldn't swim though the river of their speech, it always swept me away. So I listened while they went on, and it used to be that they would gather around me, each more keen than the next to tell their story, and my room was always full with laughter and tears, but it was

never me, I was not there, vanished in the grubby water of their lives while they turned their desires into their fears for me to drink in. I lay there, imprinted on the couch, immersed in deep tones of mauve and blue, remembering the empty contact that seemed so full, and felt relieved it was over. How do people live with nothing as if it is not there? Can they not tell the difference between the nothing that is not there and the nothing that comes at you full blown? Mild light began to creep over the wall towards me and I drifted into sleep.

9 (XXIX PARADISO)

NOON WOKE ME. DANTE WOULD be back in an hour. I put on some washing, should have done it hours ago. I put away the dishes and wiped down the counters, went upstairs and put on his favourite brown hemp dress. Maybe I lack the power to shine with Dante. He has done so much, swallowed so much, I feel drowned in him.

Initially I liked it, that swept-away feeling, being ravished in him, but somehow I weakened in the sweeping. What he was overcame me, encompassed me as I embraced and now I was fading, even though he had let go and was encouraging me. It was worthless because I could see nothing; all the stars were out. How can love do this? A broken heart is supposed to come after the failure of love, not its introduction.

I heard his key in the door and I felt like a shut flower opening. I missed him, I was lonely, I loved him, he knew me, I wanted to hear his voice. I walked towards him, happy. He had shopping in his hand and greeted me distractedly. I broke through it and gave him a hug. He smiled and hugged me back. It was going to be a nice lunch. He was pleased with the shopping, all fresh salady stuff, so we set about breaking the lettuce and chopping the tomatoes and crumbling the feta and de-pipping the olives.

I wanted to tell him all, show him what I was feeling, but somehow the routine of the preparations took it away and I felt deflated, the memory of his smile now slightly wounding and upsetting. I loved him so much and here we were, working away in the kitchen with Dante telling me about the specials at Fruit and Veg, and I could not say anything, because there was nothing wrong, only the failure of expression.

And it hit me, not with a flash but with a numbing blow – and it was strengthening because it was all so worthless, leaving things clear without the glow. It was dullness, a swamp of monotony that held me in, grey splashed on grey, again and again, caught in the vortex, blunt without perfume, entering and leaving.

We walked outside, sat on the patio, ate our salads and commented on how nice it was, but it wasn't, it was bland, with only vinegar and oils of broken leaves left on our plates. I could see that Dante sensed something was wrong. We went upstairs and lay down on the bed, but there was no desire. He kissed me. I smelt the balsamic and could not help turning away, bending away from us as he hardened. It was flat. As he got up and walked out back to work I felt the oppressiveness of it all. Why could he not remove the image and see me, see the failure of peace churning inwards, leaving no reflection to hold onto. And that was only what I could barely hold onto, not what was within, where the senses are lost, where what is most distant is at your core, and all is so thick. How do you run against this?

I lay in the yellow glow of the winter's afternoon, feeling layer on layer coming down in the silence. It was his lack of greed that was so crippling. I wanted him to be blind with love, like a little child grabbing at me. I wanted to chase him away because he was making too many demands on me, not live with someone who loved with a gentle, almost spiritual, touch, who tried to facilitate my re-emergence and give me away to the world. Why did he not want to devour me, hold me down, uncontrollably take his pleasure because his desire was all too much? I wanted him lower, not higher. How do you shout against kindness?

He was a connoisseur of love, knew its grades, could explain to me how his love for his mother, his friends, his ex-girlfriends, his principles, were different to his love for me. I had experienced a force

that had destroyed me, had thrown me down and out, a force I could barely look at, never mind express, a force that had made me abandon everything and come to him, and there he was, working its measure. Either he had somehow reached beyond love to a place where he could see it all clearly, or it had not struck him with the same force as it had me; either way it left me drowning in a sea he was sailing on.

IZZY JUMPING ON THE BED broke the reverie and I fell away from myself easily, stroking her delicious black fur as she kneaded a place for herself on me. The curtains picked up the colours of wind as it gusted through. My eyes felt like they had been crying and then the thoughts came back and reconnected with the feeling. There was a hill to climb, a good hill that holds the possibility of happiness, a simple hill, clear and open that only required a beginning for visions to suddenly unfurl. But it was a hill that I would have to climb without Dante, without his encouragement and gentle prodding, his lifting of the cotton wool to see if I was still growing. I would have to do it without him.

Izzy's purr comforted me in the aloneness. It was not limbo, I was as guilty as he. We had both gone under, both thrashed at each other in anger. And it was a relief to feel that loss, to know that it was going to sweep over you and lift you up on its cusp and hurl you at each other, two emotions becoming one. It was better than living in hope without desire. It was better than watching someone try to save you, try to lift you up and away from how you were. But it was a pointless wave, a wave that threw only violent shadow.

Izzy was asleep, but my bladder was full, so I carefully extricated myself from her. One of my magazines was on the floor. Dante must have taken it through for one of his sessions on the loo. Pleased with the find, I wondered downstairs and flipped through it, did the quiz on Are you in love or forcing it? I pretended the first time and got full marks, then went back and thought about some of the questions more carefully.

What compliment would we be likely to receive – that we look good together or are good together? We made a fine couple, I knew that, well-balanced and striking in our looks, and we had been good together, would be very good if it were not for her. The pain sounded out, dark red. If he had to dump me, what would my biggest regret be – the wasted time, or that I could not touch him and smell him? Without him, I felt stone circle my heart, trap the pain within, no gates out, and the noise started in my head, deafening, closing down space as I flipped through the match and moan game, five steps to real beauty, the bedside astrologer, the pap test reminder, the cosmo confessions, all with the same pathetic refrain. So many words, all falling short in the attempt to say love, love, love. I put it down, went inside and put on the TV, welcoming the sound and colour and the way it shone.

I LIKE TV CALMNESS, GAZING into a point where light overcomes you. It lifts me from the fall I feel within and for a while I feel better than them, stronger because of their weakness, and I laugh inside, tell them how silly they are being, advise them on the correct path, hold out for their recovery, watch like an angel from above, gathering joy in the display of light and its twisted stories within. It gives you space to breathe, allows your affections to float over without recognition as countless repetitions go out of its sameness.

Only when it shows cruelty to animals do I hate it: burnt cows on heaps, beaten dogs bred for fighting, calloused donkeys eternally pulling carts. Then I despise the way they invade and take over, and I just refuse to look. Dante always teases me, tells me it's over when it is not, asks if I would save a stranger rather than Izzy from a burning house. How could I not save Izzy?

The scraping of post being shoved under the door jolted me. I hated him for it, hated the unasked-for favour that had need and invasion written under it. But there they were, the specials of the day, and with vague excitement I picked them up.

DANTE ARRIVED BACK, Poured us both a drink. Good, that meant he was not going to manoeuvres tonight. We sat outside and watched the sky change without effort. Favourite times these: small smiles, picking over details, meandering along, no confessions or condemnations, only us in the opening. Then it was not a house of pain anymore, there was no destiny up or down, just tipsy laughter within our own private little garden, and being without will was not a crime for a while. We could talk then, honestly, about us, reason floating above our patterns, reflecting on where we were right and wrong, saying things we both knew, but saying them anyway, enjoying the us it showed in its quite centre and evening light.

I saw Dante hesitate and I asked him why. He said it was nothing but I knew, and this time the silence had an edge. He shook his head gently and told me he'd had a dream last night about how much he loved me and I felt a peaceful thrill run through. He was flying in a massive tornado and there were these spirits flying with him, a dark angel and a good angel, and they were encouraging him to fly higher and higher to that point where you can stop and just float into space and, as he was about to reach the highest point, he saw a small door, right at the bottom, and he knew that that was where he must go, so he flew down and opened the door, and there I was, on a bed, sleeping, and he knew then, in his dream, that he loved me and it was his choice and it was the right choice. In the dream I woke and held out my hand and he could see my breasts, and they had been branded, and in my hand was something small, like a hazelnut, and I offered it to him.

Anger mixed in with happiness as I listened. Why did he always work from such an uplifted state, sacrifice his passions so easily for me? I wanted to be the whirlwind, not a sleeping beauty. And in that happy evening misery stepped in. I was not the first root of his love, that was his boys and his fellow commanders and his manoeuvres. I was what all that was sacrificed for. Love constrained him, I was a distraction from his work, kissed absent-mindedly, used as light relief before the pursuit continued.

As he spoke, it rose in me, the knowledge that I was alive, and I got up and went inside, leaving him to the garden and the oncoming darkness.

13 (XXVII PARADISO)

THE HOUSE WAS NOT SMILING in its silence, not listening or caring. How could I live in this and still want it all so much? The streetlamp threw a little light into the lounge, growing more intense as I stood there, mixing with the streaks of traffic. Was it possible to feel more bleak, to feel colour drain when there was none left on my skin? And I understood her then, for I had taken her place, had thought it a temple, but now, with the last of the natural light gone, I felt the madness rise. I wanted to make it my own, wanted him to feed on my blood, wanted a union of anger, wanted to plummet with him into the vortex, tearing at each other, for it is in the wounding that one leaps highest in the fall.

As I turned, he walked inside, got himself another beer and asked if I would like another shandy. Somehow it released me and I was able to look upwards again and see the person I was becoming. It was not me. I wanted to believe that. He walked towards me, sipping my drink, checking it was to my taste, and I did not want him to do that, did not want his lips close to my glass. I avoided his eyes, took the drink, the drink he knew exactly how to make because it is all we do when we relax, sit on the patio and drink. He contained nothing of the world outside, never did anything, thought he was enough for me, even though he was always so neutral and quiet. It incensed me, plunged me into the fat nothingness of hopelessness.

He stood there, waiting for an indication of where we were going. I sat down on the couch, switched on the TV, trying to get away from the knot, divert the firing. I wanted to escape the measurement that made everything inadequate. And he sat there next to me, hand idly playing with my hair. I felt the cancer leave as my will dampened. If

only he would pick me and eat me, find inside my resentment the faith and innocence so obviously there. I wanted him buried, but only so I could hold him forever. His black skin lightened in the luminescence, and I could not help it, I wandered back into him, even though there was no flower to fruit.

14 (VII INFERNO)

IZZY JUMPED UP AND WE lay there on the couch, him stroking my back and me stroking her blue-black fur, lost in the circle. He tapped me on the shoulder, time for supper, and it was easy to get up with the ache soothed. We walked into the kitchen and it was ready for us, clean counters waiting for fresh aromas. Izzy followed us in, knowing that some scraps were coming her way, and settled on the fridge, one paw dangling. Dante gave her a scratch and she rolled on her side, gently took his hand with her paws and gave him a little love bite.

We made fresh plots of green, orange, white, yellow and purple. He had shown this dish to me as well, made it many times before me with other women whom he had loved, laughed with, enjoyed, and now it was all mere repetition, leaving the present only as the agreeable trapped without the new.

We talked about the Base and I could not hide the resentment. It loved him to overflowing as I stood by his side, always adding me in as an afterthought. Its admiration weighed in on me, inviting me to participate, but how could I when I went home with him? And he poured the familiarity back until we could not go out without it turning into a social event, each excursion prolonged with smiles and gossip and winks and salutes until eventually I just left him to it, waited for him, wondering if they were succeeding in their attempted seductions. It was silly allowing them to stir in our privacy, but they were always there, longing for him and him longing for them, with me ignored in the middle.

He knew what I was feeling, I could see it in the way his eyes closed down, and the guilt poured through. How did we land up in a world where I resented his pleasure and he my pain and it all happened in such dullness? I finished, he dished up and we walked through to the lounge and ate in front of the TV.

15 (XXVI PARADISO)

I CAUGHT IT IN ITS essence as we sat there, the darkness made me see. I stepped into myself, walked around and saw how much I loved him, saw it without the fire, saw it without love, saw it without any dream attached, and I had to ask him to say it, and he did. He told me that I was his only, his beautiful, his sweetness, but it did not imprint, it floated away, meaningless. It was not good, our love, its weight pressed down, and I could watch its truth with my mind. It was a primal love that took all worth away, a love you cannot speak of for its naming wounds, burns the very strands it pulls you with.

I had packed and had left my old life for this one based on love, and now I could see its teeth and I was in its jaws but there was no frenzy, only a mindless, numb chewing with fetid breath. That was our love and we were both suffering so that it might live. It had taken us off the shore, removed all life from the world and swept it into us, and all we could do was drown. Then it drifted away from me, as thoughts do when you waft into sleep, coast away although still there. I asked him again and he told me again, slowly, with a humorous smile and added that my teeth were like a flock of freshly washed sheep and then I felt our love with love, and clarity fell away.

He took our plates to the kitchen, returned with some chocolate, split it down the middle and gave me my share. And I felt like a branch that had been bent by the wind suddenly lifting of its own strength again. He was enough for me, all else could fall away. He was fully formed, I was premature. I could rest in him even though I would have to grow outside of him, sometime. His tickle had shifted to a massage, and as he went under my clothes and up to my breasts I felt the reluctance ease. There was no true glass to view us through, no

mirror to capture us, only this time on the couch with me a garden and my Dante enjoying me, going down to the places where breath is lost as the tower builds, and it was going to last, and I was on the mount, trembling before being struck, rising rising to the sea.

16 (VIII INFERNO)

THE HURTING FEAR WAS GONE and in the touch there was only gentleness inside. I could feel his eyes pouring into mine in the darkness, taste the love, hear it on his breath and I knew no reason for descent or height, only the full sail of still evening. There was no guilt in the dance, only our bodies moving without greed or waste in the half circle, giving and keeping, keeping and giving silver in the fluorescence. As we lay there afterwards I wondered about the ease of it when all else was fraught. It was hard to deny the confirmation of our bodies in the welter of chance, how the sickness of permutation ended in the spent warmth of our filled opening.

Dante got up, found a towel and cleaned me with placid strokes. We went for a bath, the water lighter than light, blue-grey in the candle light. It was too small, we knew that, so I bathed first while he watched naked on the ledge, enjoying the clean stream. He washed my back for me, going over the places he had massaged before with a cleansing touch, and then folded me in a towel and vigorously dried me off until I squealed for him to stop. A comforting tiredness swept through and I opened the towel and welcomed him in, touching new on old, fresh skin on sex. He bathed quickly and we went to bed together, holding on until I felt him twitch into sleep and then I lay in the deep sweet air, light in my heart, full of meaning as the dreams came.

RINGING BROKE INTO THE SLEEP and I tried to hold onto his wrist. It was her disconnecting us, leaving only the taste of metal and the shadow of him on the floor next to the phone, speaking her language. He was linked to her, removed from me, whispering compassionately. I covered myself, tried to hide from the bitterness collapsing in, tried to tell myself what he told me, that she was without hope in the night and needed someone to know her pain and that there was no-one else but him. But he did not take on her despair, I did. I became her and she me, except there would be no comfort afterwards, only disappointment at my inability to empathise with another in agony. How can one empathize when the very condition is directly transferred without caution into your core?

I lay there, blanketed in a darkness swamped with grey, trying not to recognize the same tones he used to comfort me. There was no future for us, it did not matter what we were actually worth. Anger thundered through and I had to resurface, malignant. He was still gentling her and I felt the sudden flash beyond bearing. I can speak of it now, but then there was no articulation, only a flooding beyond control of pure despair and then the dance of malice and longing for blood, even if it were my own. I stared into the blackness and his shape appeared with hers, enflamed in the circle, hate and lust entwined in death, but there was only his breathing and the sound of our phone being placed back on its receiver.

Dante came back to me, his body cold and sweating, full of apologies that contained recriminations, and, although we lay together, we were far apart and, although it was dark, I could see the form of us to come, doubled in emptiness, suffering on extended wings as we drifted down.

I SWAM IN HATRED, TREADING the chasm with spears to rest on. By the quiet before dawn I could watch my thoughts run in green plasma, finally at peace in their wild chaos. Slowly, slowly they stilled, coming in waves with nothing in-between. I could see the beginning of their rise – their lifting to a crest and their falling away, then only calm – without waiting for the swell. Then it did come, my anger and resentment, just another wave to watch rise and fall without response. For a while it tried to pull me into its mire, but watching it do that was enough to stay unbound and clean as it broke and emptied. Dante had rolled away into his corner and I was happy with that. I could lie there, single, without condemnation, content in myself. In the deepening there appeared inside the calm darkness an opening, and I fell away from myself into its clearing, breathing blankness. There was singing and welcoming without sound or body and I knew I would be fine. That thought brought me back into myself and I lay there, on my back, overwhelmed in a still house, open to the first light pouring in.

THE BRAKING OF THE EARLY-MORNING bread truck woke Dante, and we lay there for a while, waiting for the other to make tea. He almost drifted off again, so I got up and offered. He mumbled thanks. We had come to like our tea the same way, with precise rituals done free of thought in peaceful stirring and pouring until equal colour and temperature were achieved. He was awake and grateful, and we lay on the bed together, comparing dreams and listening to the maids shouting greetings at each other under a rich orange sky. He said he would measure the window today and replace the pane. I felt a little sad. I quite liked its uncloseable opening to the world and the way the sky leaned in on me.

It was still early, so Dante offered to make another cup. Just the thought of more tea made me feel ready and while he went downstairs I went to the loo, anticipating the leisurely morning ahead. Dante did not seem eager to rush off and was all loving and warm. We did not want to raise last night, with all the broken hopes, collapsed belief, and pain of love it contained. He had betrayed her but did not deserve its effect. I did not want to be asked how I felt about the matter. I feared the repetition, feared her place, for I knew not where I would be without his love, damaging as it was.

I did not believe in him, did not hope any substance would come of us. There was no reason to continue, but we did; we continued while doubt coursed underneath, unable to test it on ourselves for fear of it breaking us. I was a weak object of desire, occasionally present in his mind. I barely moved him, he who moved so much, and caught in his movement, me, motionless. Dante got up and dressed. I asked him if he was going to bath and he laughed and came at me for a hug.

I pushed him away in disgust, but he encircled a second time, and this time I could not resist. As we held on, he stamped in him, the release came too quickly, and I asked for a third. He laughed, said I was spoilt, and went off to his platoon.

THE HOUSE EMPTIED OF COLOUR as the door closed, my Dante gone to the meek breath of a clear winter morning. There was never a struggle within him, never a call for help, never a longing for another's coming. It meant there was never a failure of hope. He asked for so little, accepted so much and was loved for it. I used to watch people come to life in his presence. They did not know it was a deep lack of care that made him so, that their spirits' jumping to life in his warm acceptance were merely within a free opening that dropped them for the next experience – totally accepted, totally forgotten.

Knocking on the door brought me back out of him. Another beggar, curse of this house, built on the street, close to the world. It continued, louder than before, and my eyes were drawn to the window. Initially, when we moved in, I had given three beggars some leftovers, only to find them returning, again and again, faces haunting me with their missing teeth and attempted smiles framed in matted hair, hands covering their hearts, hiding the nakedness of the appeal. I hated them. Dante had walked outside and physically chased them away, but they still occasionally returned.

Then I recognized the knocking: it was the car-wash boy. Against my will I went to the window and he was looking up at me, wearing the pink T-shirt I had thrown down to him as a rag. He seemed relaxed and happy, gave me thanks for the Sunlight and asked in broken English if I had any other old clothes he could use. It broke clean through me. I did. I went to my cupboard and took out the

suitcase that contained all my thin clothes: good pair of cords, nice shirt with Hi Boys emblazoned on the front, would never wear that again. I took some loose socks without partners and wrapped them in each other, put them in my untouched shoes and threw all of it down to him, one by one. The smiles he gave me.

I COULD NOT STEP AWAY from the ache breaking through the fissure of giving hope to another in need. It hurt me to so briefly taste the delight of helping someone also caught in dependency. It is easy to be strong when you are needed. I was not needed. I was loved with a gentle care that made no demands, that asked nothing but my own flowering, leaving me trapped in its sweet freedom, set in a place without conditions. To go out with a saint is a damaging thing, not that Dante is a saint, but the part of him I hate is.

I closed all the curtains in the room to escape the descending emptiness, to somehow cocoon myself against the cloud expanding without space inside of me. I lay on the bed with my eyes closed, wrapped in the smell of us, weak with tears, desperate to escape myself but finding the path within open and calling, unavoidable. A cup of tea would help, so I got up and gave Izzy some milk at the same time, even though it was bad for her. We went and sat out in the garden on the sallow grass, Izzy just out of reach, cleaning herself. There was a vague stirring in the air, the smallest nodes on the branches still without perfume but promising nevertheless. I lay down in a garden without flowers under a pallid sun, relieved to have escaped the vision. I looked directly into its white core and then closed my eyes, enjoying the red after-burn. Izzy curled up on my stomach and I longed for life in my womb and the fulfilment it would bring. That was not open for discussion with Dante. He felt me not ready, us not ready, him not ready, so I remained empty, slowly warmed by the sun and my sweet cat, arms stretched out in an unfilled embrace.

IZZY STIRRED AND READJUSTED HER curl to the warmth of my tummy, giving me a contented look before closing her eyes again and I felt assured that my body was not the pleasant coffin Dante wanted, it was ready for birth. This waiting rest could not continue for much longer: Dante would have to change or I would have to leave. I felt them in me, my children still to come. They were beautiful with our looks, Dante's structure and nose with my dark hair and sea eyes, fine boned, intelligent, happy, independent, and they were waiting for us, although Dante could not see it, could not imagine the happiness pouring out our eyes. I was in exile with him, taken away from a family already in me. His was an imperfect vision that celebrated every day as new, not seeing the sterility of the way we were ahead, and the day was coming when I would have to open the future away from him. 'Mommy'. this lovely, sweet, fair word came to me, caught me, and I sat up with its force. Izzy jumped off, irritated. I would not learn the journey of my life through Dante. His was an empty path, I could see that now. The sun was high and there were things to do. I got up, put the washing on, did the dishes, packed away his uniform and wondered, slightly hungrily, what he would bring home for lunch.

THE DOOR FINALLY OPENED AND I ran to him. He embraced me with both hands still holding shopping. He asked about my day in the house, commented on how clean it was looking and I felt pleased, even though I had not done much. The sword lifted and left was a winter's afternoon with the man I loved. We made lunch together, cutting the rolls into fresh spheres, still warm inside, and layered them with goodies. I could not repress the stirrings of my morning, could not stay the asking, and as we settled outside I told him about Izzy and me on the grass. He could not see the love the story was bound in, could not see the emotion behind the words, only that Izzy was happy to find some warmth on a cold morning and that warmth was me.

The garden closed down again and the cloister opened out in the wounding so I attacked him for the love he did not show, the dampness of his fire, his cutting me down to keep me. Deep down the suspicion came that he was like this because he did not love me, only cared for me, that there was actually nothing hidden underneath that I could hold on to. He looked at me with that surprised hurt look, mouth slightly open like a fish, told me that nothing would satisfy me because I did not know what would fulfil me in the first place, that every desire became inadequate and rotten as I tasted it and that thinking a baby would save me was the wrong way to go about it. He had sensed what I had felt with Izzy and had chosen to ignore it.

We both knew the secret ladder downwards had opened and that we were going to descend, rung by rung, thrashing at each other. I wanted it so badly, wanted the antagonism to darken in the whirlwind and he wanted it too. Even though he was quiet and calm,

there was anger behind the reserve. I wanted it to scratch me, hurl itself at me, damage me, so I drove him down with me, watched his stillness deepen and dam, waited for the crack we could sluice ourselves within.

He would not release, just got up, took our plates and walked into the kitchen, indifferent. So I followed and waited, asked him if he really did love me and in the silent response I went for him and felt the strength of his hands sweep over me, but it was limited and controlled, meant to pacify. It was the coldness in his eyes that poured me out of myself, and this time there was no calculation, there was only the need for hurt and in his holding I tore at him with my mouth until there was blood and rage and the clear ringing of his slap in my head as we became one and the stars came in.

Then he was holding me in fright, the violence released, and there was nothing but my tears and the taste of sweet blood in my mouth. In the kissing I wanted him still stripped and fierce, but he was soothing the rawness, not wanting its consummation. The couch became a closing of the wound, not an opening for pleasure, a place of calming before his return to work, when all I wanted was for the good monster to lead the way as the blood gushed.

I LIKE THE SCENT OF cleaning fluids without jasmine or potpourri or any other fake flower perfume. Bleach, ammonia or, if nothing else, then lemon, so long as it is true to what it does. Most of the time the basics of cleaning do, but eventually the levels of dirt overcome the will to ignore it. Those unused neutral surfaces slowly acquiring grime, the surfaces supposedly clean through immersion like basins, sinks, baths and toilets with their sticky brown rings, the sheets with their subtle stains, the left-over crumbs underneath cushions and couches, the rotting container food in the fridge, the angry fat stains behind the stove, the books and papers left on chairs and cabinets pretending to still be important, the stains secretly eating into their surfaces, camouflaged by the mere fact of having been around for a long time, and then those treacherous remains that come from the process of cleaning itself, found in drain pipes and dustbins and on the very instruments being used to clean.

I hated those the most, the smell of the vacuum cleaner too full of itself, the broom fibres slick with food debris, the sponges oily from oven cleaning, the drying cloth limp and saturated. All the bonds that kept Dante and me together supplicated filth in his leaving. He enjoyed the connection without having to deal with its grease, enjoyed our love without having to deal with cleaning all those stains left after the flow. He was using me. Finally, as the evening neared, the cleaning abated and I could rest safe in the knowledge that the house was clean – sweat cooling, knees and back aching, released from the deposits of affection – ready for his entrance once again.

HE GREETED ME WITH AN occupied smile and all that I had held out for faded. He avoided my eyes but did not see how clean the house was, just got his training clothes, kissed me on the forehead, told me he would see me soon and ran out, leaving me inside, again, silent, punished. The ache came with the beauty of sunset: nowhere to go but inwards, up and down the same ladder, all the rungs familiar and examined but still holding their pain ready for the touch.

As I watched, what was darkest came towards me, intent on harm, razor in hand. I tried to fend it off with thoughts of love, but they were not strong enough to stay the sea of blood in my ears and the choking around my neck with dark hands as I hung onto the lowest rung with nothing below. I looked down into it, saw its greatness and wanted its damage. Its midpoint pitched at me and I smelt its breath focus in on me, penetrate me, swallow me and I fell away into black roaring. You are mine.

Despair lost its hold in that moment, for there was nothing to compare it too. I was like an infant exposed to thunder who can only embrace the blood raining down. How long I was there I cannot say, but when I emerged it was almost dark outside and I had nothing left to fear for I had seen the simplicity of my own elimination. The palms of my hands slowly appeared, pulsating in waves, giving off hot currents of gentle light. The sound of his staff became more apparent. I went to the window and watched him. I knew his history, knew that he had been the gardener of this house long before we came, that many women had looked after him, washed his clothes and borne his children, that age had been unkind to him. How could he continue to wander without a home, where was his despair? He was suffused

in the same subtle light of my hands but, as his eyes lifted to mine, I turned inwards, allowed the curtain to drop and went to the door, waiting for him to push the post through. First came the letters, then the specials. As I picked them up from under the door I felt his hand still holding on. In the jolt I let go and fled upstairs.

26 (XIII INFERNO)

HOW DO YOU MAKE YOURSELF beautiful for one you know too well? There is a kind of stripping down rather than a putting on: a mask for dead cells, shaving with a new razor for smoothness, plucking for clarity of line, paring for underneath the surfaces, shampooing for lightness, and a final cold rinsing for pure clarity. Then a wearing of freshly tumble dried, loose-fitting, warm cotton. No perfume, just the cerise of skin, free of hair, all of me ready for Dante.

He arrived soaked and filthy, dark smears across his face. He took one look at me and said he was a dirty bear who needed a scrubbing. It was the wink that made it all fine again. I ran the bath for him, full and scented, and laid out candles on the edges. He came up with drinks and we languished in the glowing steam, his body stretched out with the evening. We talked about the afternoon, with its collapse of love, how it had not been as bad as the others, and it was easy to believe in the mist. I offered to wash his hair and he accepted.

Controlled desire began to build in the baring of his throat and the closing of his eyes. The blood of the afternoon washed away without harm. When he finally emerged, he was half erect. Taking my hand he led me into the bedroom, looked me in the eyes and asked my pleasure. In the blush he knew and lay me out on the bed, half covered for warmth. His stroking ran over me, slowly deepening. I knew it was going to come, felt it take over, anticipated the anchor of his touch with longing. There was a point in what Dante did with me where I separated off into pleasure, where there was no necessity, only desire in the opening, with deep sounds coming from somewhere inside of me to his dark milk.

WE FELL ASLEEP WITHOUT SUPPER and I woke to stillness. I knew not who or where I was and felt a slow placing happen inside and out. It took a while to notice what the difference was. There was no anxiety and no loss felt with its disappearance. The river had lost its source, its blood did not want to spill. I awaited its return, its taste, but there was no murmur. Sweet to be without energy in the calm, without fire or flight in my head, with Dante next to me, stilled and content, happy; good effect from good action. Unusual. To be broken and then to sing with pleasure; to not believe and then to be confronted with the fit was to have it taken from your hands. We could not endure us, but when in what we were there was no leaving. It was not my will that had been overcome, it was my body, and not because it wanted to be overcome. He knew what he was doing to me, did it with concentration and intent, played my body until it was no longer gentle and then what was suffering was suffering no longer as he reached in, without hope, without love, but with certainty.

HE WOKE AND REACHED OVER for me and a kiss, honey and milk under his tongue. We lay there in the settled dark, looking through the window at the stark tree embroidered in crystal. I snuggled into the limbs of Dante and he gave me a contented grunt. I could still feel us inside of me. As I ran my hands over his back I felt a promising bump, so I rolled him over. Sure enough, a little pimple. I reached up, put on the light, told him to quit his moaning. It came out nicely, in a little rush, with a nodule at the end and a gush of blood. I pushed him down again, accused him of being a baby, and continued the search, shushing his pleading for pity. Eventually he relaxed in, occasionally asking if I had got anything out or was just squeezing for pleasure, but I knew he enjoyed it as well.

After his back, I rolled him over and ferreted out the blackheads hiding in his chest. It was only when I moved up to his nose that the real whining began, mixed with tears, but they had all come out in the night to play and were asking for release, easily spiralling outwards in white abandon. He said that if I ate it I would become enlightened, so I licked my finger to his laugh.

We lay there afterwards, him telling me about medieval nuns and how they drank the water leper bandages had been soaked in and me telling him not to lie on his back and stain the sheets. What is it that makes your heart lock and unlock so quietly? How is it that hurting and hurt need each other and can lie down together in comfort?

Izzy jumped up on the bed and headed straight for Dante, lay in between his legs, and promptly went to sleep. We lay there, listening to the silver tree through the broken window, our bodies suspended in the black of night with occasional red streaks lighting the frame.

SLEEP CAME WITH AWARENESS AND I was flying entwined with outstretched wings over souls lit like rubies with arms uplifted to the sun before them and from my beak came the chant *I is me, them is we* and from the collective glow one separated off. I saw the slim rope of her spine, saw her breasts in mirror of mine, and from her came a single sound of sadness, muting as it faded, and I swooped down in care and as I got closer I flew into a veil and, with wings fluttering, fell to earth and an outstretched hand suddenly appeared below and I managed to get my claws around it and, as I steadied myself, I felt the hood come with the darkness and stillness and I fell into silence and I was still awake and the dark without image was serene and alive and so I lay without flight, my little finger touching Dante, until the birds began to sing the morning alive.

IZZY JUMPED OFF THE BED as Dante stirred. I got up quietly, made us toast and tea and clambered back into bed to get some of his heat, enjoying the aromatic mix of warm flesh and melted butter. Suddenly it smelt rancid and I retched. The smell stayed with me, oily sweet, as I moved to the toilet and brought up quietly, without Dante hearing. I quickly rinsed my mouth, jumped back into bed and told him about the dream. He laughed, said I should have been born a thousand years ago, kissed me on the cheek, and went for a bath. I followed him through, smiled as he gave Izzy's face a good wetting. I felt contentment as she stood on his shoulder for her drink, arousal as he stood up in the water, and the inevitable disappointment as he dressed quickly, showered me with kisses and mantras, and left. Only then did I feel the coldness fall and burn. Nothing a hot bath would not sort out.

I cleaned the rim and allowed immersion to do its work, leaving my hands to float in the water. I drifted into what I was when I was with Dante and who I would be without him. To stand alone in the world without anyone knowing who you are, to not have him carrying me inside of him, to face existence without yourself in another, how is that possible? How can you shake your fist on the ladder and it mean anything without someone holding your other hand?

Existence poured into the bath and expanded out of me without anyone knowing or caring. I was alive and alone in the bathroom, facing an Alone far larger beyond me with only Dante in-between. The tears came without effort, bloodlike on my lips, ran down my neck and joined the blue below.

I WAS ALMOST EXPECTING THE knock when it came, but not the anticipation of what he would look like with my clothes on. It was not him. In his place stood a stubbier, dirtier, more desperate-looking young man. He told me in broken words that he was a friend of Bongani, that Bongani had been beaten up and was in a hospital in the city and that he needed tien rand to get there, tien rand I did not have.

This was what Dante had warned me about. Entanglement. He offered his ID as proof, told me the name of the hospital along with the plea that Bongani was his broer. I looked into his eyes and felt the need to help, but had no way of working out if I had understood what he said or if he was telling the truth. Harassment obscured all sign. Anxiety returned. There was no clear language for us to work in or for me to judge within.

I stood above him, caught in the broken window, unable to move as he blabbered details at me in a strange tongue. There was no way to tell, just the simple choice, help him or not. I went downstairs and found all the Sprite empties, collected them in two plastic bags and went up again. He seemed upset as I threw the bottles down one by one but it did not stop him. He asked for the plastic bags as well and then he said it, clearly with no expression while looking up into my eyes, suddenly calm.

Madam, Ek het jou lief.

Then he walked off towards the shops.

The outer voices of sky and cloud whispered at me. What had he said? I could not quite believe it. How could he have said that? Those were Dante's words. I knew those words, playful words. He would not

have said it if Dante had been there. Dante would have chased him away with threats, not even listened to the story in the first place, and now I knew he wanted to touch me, get inside the house, invade, rape me.

Hot fear made me leave the window and lie on the bed, but the words hung. I looked up the hospital number and ask if they had admitted a Bongani who had been assaulted. They could not understand me. Eventually someone asked for his surname but said there was no one who fitted his description. He had tricked me, abused me, and infuriatingly proved Dante right. He knew I was weak, knew where I was, knew I was alone. He would be back and I had nowhere to go.

I HATED MEN IN THAT moment, longed for the touch of a woman stroking my hair, to lie in her lap and feel long fingers run through me with care. I felt exhausted by the betrayal and the thought of explaining it to Dante. I needed another who was the same – clean, soft and smooth – who I could be with without the need to negotiate. My body bent in on itself, holding for comfort, slowly welcoming the oncoming heat. I needed to hide myself from the continual clarity of isolation, I needed suckling. My mouth hovered over her breast and in the warmth a forgetting began. I could open the door to her, invite her in. Slowly I drifted in the ring to hushed colours of sound.

Anxiety remained afterwards, all the more threatening, with the most obvious route away from it closed in satisfaction. To lie without purpose, caught in inadequacy, your body stilled and your mind awake, is to watch depression come to you without the ability to run. It is also to know the beauty of Izzy as she jumped up on the bed, came over to my face and touched her orange nose on my cheek before settling into my arms and chest with a soft purr.

We lay there, soft in light, listening to the street through the window. The sound of a dog choking got me up. It was her and her dogs, both young and tugging urgently, one more desperate than the other. She had bought them after Dante, a Doberman and Golden Retriever. The Doberman stopped at the tree and shat, docked tail straining in the air. She left it there, pulled by both as if they had chosen the route, not her, as if she did not somehow manage to be present every day. I watched until she turned the corner and lay down again to a hot weak smell drifting in.

DANTE WANTED ME WITH WINGS, tried to stitch them on with encouragements, but wings are of no use in a pit. He wanted to feel the beat of me off his ground, to look on the heat of my desire flowing outwards from inner certainty, but I had rooted in him and lost my future in his, become fateless. Our love had left me with no strength of my own, caught me in his watch without hope of exile, caught me in what I loved most dearly without any excuse to leave. I wished our bread bitter, wished him fierce and disrespectful so that I had something to fight against rather than grow on. If only he had the faith to cut me down so that new growth could begin, rather than wrap what was already wilting in tender care. He saw too straight, willed too much right, loved with too much decency. I needed another vision as partial as mine, another whose will collapsed into the abyss, another whose love had twisted with the power that overwhelms, another who lived without foresight, whose conscience was darkened by waste, who scratched at the scab rather than covered it in plaster. I needed him to cry out to me without prophecy in his voice, without the prophecy being fulfilled in me.

His words always held the future inside of them, each phrase carefully chosen for its effect on me and all I wanted to hear was his own voice in its own purity, not with its imagined effect on me already included. Her face rose to me, blonde hair a cave, darkening her features, her mouth barely open, whispering I understand, I know, I care, and my mouth opened to hers.

KNOCKING CAME AGAIN, AND THIS time I leaped from the bed with an inner curse and stuck my head out the window. Three women stood in a circle with fruit and vegetables placed in the centre. They were looking up at me. I recognized the one. Dante had pointed her out to me before. She had been abused as a young girl and had fled her home for the safety of the streets. Some outreach programme had taught her to draw as a part of art therapy during the Oudtshoorn festival, and now she carried dark pictures with her, strange, pregnant little things used to help her beg. I could see the bananas were tipped in black, but even if I had wanted to buy I had nothing to give.

She started telling me of her abuse, again, pulling the pictures from her breast. I began to withdraw but saw Dante ambling down the road towards us, shopping in hand. He saw me and his pace picked up with his smile. He walked past them and said 'jammer' without missing a step, holding up the bag of shopping in mock defence. As he neared, he asked what I was doing in the forest. He said he was looking for someone with a pink riding hood to eat so I ran down and let him in.

WHEN I AM IN LOVE with Dante it is his ex-girlfriends who cause the most pain. They circle him with shears, cutting away all that is us until nothing is left but what I hate. I long to be his only source, but see in us only mixtures of the past. I carry them all with me and know what each has irreplaceably brought to him for the first time. His first spiritual love and her early death to cancer, his first wild one who made her body his pleasure in every way desired until experimentation was no longer possible, his first beauty who made everyone turn in admiration and jealousy, his first true love who took his heart and ate it, his first dark love who tore at him in anger and continued to do so in orgasm, the first one whose body just fitted without need of anything else, the first friend who shared his interests and passions with her own, his first intellectual love who shared writing on her bed with him, his first muse who stirred him into creation after creation.

I carried them all with me and fought battles against them, seeking my own place in the city of Dante's past. It was a subtle war that involved combining clues from past photographs, letters, stories and anecdotes into a detailed tapestry. Minute interrogation of Dante over suppers and after sex had provided rich accounts of reasons for break ups, of what he hated about them, what was wrong with them, details they would never have known about themselves.

I often got him to rank them from one to five in terms of strength of love, intelligence, hang ups, beauty, cleanliness, sexual ability and experience, skin, vagina, breasts, legs, eyes, hair, cellulite, smell, taste and, although I was always on the top of his list, I knew my actual ranking in the pantheon. All became a weapon to be used in their

obliteration. I had succeeded with all except her and the attraction of death she held over him. It had no ranking, no competition, made all else stand still in its grasp and she had him clutched in it. It would be easy for me, a simple bloodletting, a calm emptying into oblivion, the effect on him a lifetime memory.

36 (XVIII INFERNO)

DANTE HAD AN AFTERNOON FREE from manoeuvres, the sun was giving off a placid heat, we were both hungry and at ease, with nothing to do but enjoy each other. Love came in purple bursts with us, bursts that Dante could not sustain for longer than a couple of days before retreating into neutrality and work once more. Yet, while in the free space with all the hidden channels clean, there was no sweeter taste. We became one then, desired the same flavours, looked at each other with equal thoughts, came together and woke together. Then I could not believe I ever hated him, for my hatred only arose as a result of his detachment. It seemed impossible to believe that we were bound together on a monster's back flying into hell.

The malevolent beast only arose in the rejection of the gift of myself. I had given my all to him, made over everything I was for his pleasure. And pleasure me he did, in an orgy of attention and love. But slowly it would dwindle and then suddenly dry up. It did have something to do purely with the exhaustion of love making, and we had tried to regulate ourselves into a healthy diet, but that was not our pattern. Our pattern was excess and drought, but in the drought I still longed for him while he drifted away into his other passions, fulfilments and loves, leaving me with no way to quench my thirst but through descending again into my own well, with its bitter waters and hurting air.

Dante saw my thoughts, gave me a hug from behind, told me that I was his apple tree in the woods, his lily of the valley, his tender grape that smelt so good, and then his hands were roaming and I saw the silhouette of his torn robe through the curtains and we were soaring up the stairs.

HOW IS IT THAT GUILT rides on before and after orgasm? The worry in the thrust that he is tiring or bored, that his neck is getting sore, that he thinks me too demanding or directing, that I should be giving myself over to his demand, that I am being selfish in my pursuit, that his lifting me there is forced. The relief in coming is intimately tied to the ending of these voices but, as he turns me over to take his pleasure, I wish I could do more for him, wish I was some porn star taking him beyond himself, that I was Hell herself pulling and loosening his strings.

Dante told me, in one of his more poetic moments, that I was alabaster fire opening out to him and I felt the fault in the priority of stone over heat. Why not oyster heat? But the most guilt lay in my need for him after the softening, my reawakening during his satisfaction and the hiding of it as we lay there. Sometimes I longed for him to just take me without reciprocation, to lay into me without care. But then he felt guilty afterwards, unable to accept the gift on its own terms, and promised massages and orgasms in great variety and profusion the next time round, and so the pressure remained. The virtue of alcohol lay in the smudging of the voices and the overwhelming tiredness afterwards, but those days had disappeared into the constancy of Dante. Sober sex, even when it engulfed, still did so in clear waters. I missed the vacancy of a drunken fuck, but I hated it, infinitely preferred clean breath and skin and the transparent look of two in one, if only it need not come with the discomfit of awareness.

PERHAPS IT IS ANTICIPATION OF the voices in my head that prevents me stepping over from love into abandonment. It is the finest of lines to cross. When I look at Dante, there is already the knowledge of how good we are. I know our love making will be warm and full, that the voices will come, but they will also go and, even with the voices, we will still reach into each other. The unsettling absence lies in the loss of the active will to have sex. When lying with him quietly I wish for no more than to snuggle into his arms and fall into sleep. When we are making love I feel the urgency swell inside, but it only comes in the act. I do not feel the drive until in him already.

There are no bridges to be crossed in foreplay, they all lead to what I already know. Seduction is wasted in the familiarity of penetration and I want to urge him to get on with it, even if my body is not ready, for it will become so in the scarlet hub. I do not want the stroking or the kissing or any of the other prescriptions to boredom. With all being ritual, I prefer to get to the final act as quickly as possible, not so that it will end but so that it may begin.

But this afternoon was different. The light was warm enough for us not to blanket ourselves, the initial falling on the bed was wrapped up in laughter at the unexpected freshness, his kiss rougher with morning growth, and the deceit in his eyes unpredictable. He wanted more of me than usual and he was not saying. I could feel it in the patterns of his mouth moving down and then not stopping and then my voices were shouting at their loudest but they held no power in the arch and then there was no sating as I became his whore shouting thanks in the pain.

39 (XIV PARADISO)

I DREAD THE COMPLETE SATIATION of Dante and know its moment in the way he comes and the slow burning of pure contentment in his eyes. I had been struck by him, inside and out, shuddering from centre to rim and rim to centre and now I waited for his leave taking. He was gentle about it, would lie with me for an hour afterwards, laughing and talking and making me tea, but he was waiting for the break.

His first approach was always tentative, and my holding on and begging him to stay would be met with a smile and a hug and a little more time, until eventually he had to prise away my grip and put on his clothes while fending off my attempts to take them off. And then I had nothing left to offer him; his desire had been doused in me. As good as we were, and as considerate as he was, it all came down to his desire at the beginning for the act to end, and when it did he had his boys to go and play with, leaving me pierced and unable to draw the veil. Promises of a return were of no use. I could feel the skin that was us tearing, leaving me exposed and thirsty as he went out full and wrapped up in things to do. And then the light that allowed us to be faded, and the vision of us wasted away, and the coal that was flaming intensely inside deadened to grey, leaving me alabaster, without identity or delight, the best of me consumed by the man walking out the door.

All I could do was wait for twilight, as the waves slowly stopped lapping against me, allowing the afternoon to stiffen and crack with resentment as I imagined Dante on the training ground. I

remembered watching him march when I first arrived. He was older than the rest, his body more solid, his movements more certain, his calls more definite, a man playing with boys, and I had longed for the same sureness as a girl. I should have gone for a boy. I'd not predicted the hardness of his imprint as I'd fallen vanquished at his feet.

I TRIED TO IGNORE THE knocking, but it would not go away. I could hear it was Bongani and did not want to confront him with how he and his partner in crime had sold their begging office for empty bottles. He would not give up, so I put my head out. He was in tears. I could see the snot running and the smell coming up from my dirty pink T shirt was disgusting. He told me in his broken way that he had been arrested on suspicion of stealing clothes and thrown in jail for the night.

The garble made me tired. It was being told to get something else out of me, and I had nothing left to give. I was a hole everyone kept trying to climb into. I could see their joints quivering as they tried to push themselves in head first. I wanted them all to go away, just leave me to lie in the bedroom with the fading light playing on the closed curtain. All these heads kept breaking into my room, wanting, wanting, wanting something of my nothing, massive heads sticking through the small window into my emptiness. I felt nothing for Bongani and his mess. His eyes held no more power, his voice planed out into babble, leaving only a vague aroma of disgust behind. He was too contaminated by existence, tied up in foul and parasitic relationships, I wanted nothing more to do with him.

I withdrew inside, his protesting madam reducing to a bleat as I closed the curtain to an increasingly granite sky. MADAAAAM MADAMMMMM MADAAAAAMMMMMMM.

THE WORD DID NOT MAKE sense. It broke up into assorted variations of sounds, disjointed arrays, splattering across the room, weaving the air. The signal of my thoughts began to taste strange and thicken, slowing down in my chest. The tune was still there, but the words were gone. I knew what was meant underneath the echo, but a natural smoothness had been lost, as if their ability to carry was damaged, leaving strange eddies and stagnations. I lay as still as I could, waiting for naturalness to return. It was only habit that kept me in the disconnection. I knew that words bore thoughts, that meaning would return and allow me to climb in again, but as I waited on the curb panic grew. I desperately searched for a word that sounded right and held meaning easily inside of it and just as I was about to fall I found one. Dante.

I KNEW HIM AND LOVED him, and he did love me, or at least cared for me, or at the barest found pleasure in me. He might leave me, ignore me, use me, but he carried me inside of him. In the one I loved was an image of me. It was like my head suddenly twisting on my shoulders in the right direction again, away from the interior sounds and into their use. I could look forward to the return of Dante and away from the cut of prophesy. I ran a bath and waited impatiently for its hot cleansing. Izzy arrived from the garden with a prrrrrritt.

I scratched the little white star on her forehead and answered her. Meeow.

Mouw, mouw, mouw.

Kittykittykittycat, my little kittiecat.

She rubbed herself around my ankles before checking out the level of the water, leaving dirty little brown prints on the edge, and waited for me to immerse myself before jumping up and treating herself to a drink. I love Izzy. She understands me. I felt sadness that we had taken away her chance to have kittens, that she had lost the chance to be a wild virgin as she lay in the mist, looking at me. I heard the sliding rasp of the post coming in and went under, safe in the slow wet heat.

THE BATH LASTED UNTIL DANTE returned and I felt guilty for using all the hot water. He said he did not mind using my water, as I was the cleanest girl in Christendom. We had shared baths in the first spurts of love, but he quickly found out that my levels of cleanliness demanded separate washings. He was content with occasional rinsings, soakings, shampooings, and shavings in descending order. For me to bath in the detritus of another was simply disgusting. But Dante merrily climbed into mine and splashed away vigorously for a couple of seconds before getting out and using my towel to dry himself. I could feel the afternoon pull me towards him, but he had forgotten and was focussed on the oncoming storm and food, rather than holding me in the fading steam. I went into him anyway, and so we stood there, love caught in care, two rainbows in the thin mist, me inside of him and him holding me while looking at the door, waiting for the release as the wind rose.

IT WAS STEW NIGHT. WE both loved the meal but hated the waiting. Stewing delayed the pleasure of immediate consumption and then tortured us with slowly readying aromas. Alcohol did not help hungry matters and inevitably we would take it out semi-ready and disappointedly eat half-hard potatoes, too hot for our mouths. The left-overs always reminded us of how good the stew actually was, and so we would look forward to its arrival once again and repeat the same mistakes.

Dante was trying hard to be loving, but the energy was gone. I could feel it in so many subtle variations: the way he held me without desire, in the slight stiffness to his shoulders, the over-grabbing of my bottom to ensure a reprimand rather than a response, a vagueness in listening, a return to pat phrases, and I could hear the black demon begin his beating up the cliff towards us, feel his outstretched wings spread over us, feel him pick up and shoulder us backwards to the red cauldron waiting for our murky dance. Sometimes we confronted it with our knowledge of his pattern, but this only delayed and intensified proceedings on the wild road downward. Better to allow the relationship its price and march with it under treaty of surrender than antagonize it even more. We were not alone in the relationship anymore. It escorted us into the black pitch we had ourselves created and dumped us in for the slow burning.

IN THE EMPTINESS OF THE waiting, with only TV and flashes of lightning to fill the silence, I longed for something beyond Dante – law, medicine, religion, business, her, anything – but all had paled in my love for him. All that I was I had given to him, all my entrances had been filled with his presence, my very future presented for his taking. He had become my father mother brother sister child friend lover.

To find love, wisdom, lust and care in one person is to burn away within its strength until left is nothing but your poverty. To fall in love with one close to the gods is to be wounded in passion with one who already knows its range and limit. There is a crippling, hurting inadequacy that comes from being beyond your limit with one who already knows and calculates the orbit. It is to be dispossessed of the freedom of straying into poorer pastures and holding onto another who is also lost.

Dante was my light, what I needed was another to hold onto in the darkness. He always gave answers to my questions – good, accurate, wise answers – but my questions did not want an answer, they wanted someone to be with me in the question.

I felt tired, told him I was going to bed without eating and he said he would be up soon. I could sense his relief at the empty space created in his thankful goodnight kiss and the way he stretched out on the couch as I ascended the stairs.

On the landing I saw the first indication: two soft, light, grey feathers from the breast of a dove. Each stair upwards bore increasing evidence of the massacre. I could hear Izzy growling from the bedroom. The poor dove must have flown through the opening,

seeking safety from the oncoming storm and finding the claws of Izzy instead. I shouted at Izzy to let the dove go, and she ran from the room and down the stairs with a proud trot and bristling fur, the dove's soft breast high in her mouth. I half chased and then let her go. Angry as I was, the dove was already dead, or at least fatally wounded.

FIGHTING AT NIGHT IS A dangerous affair. The energies have nowhere to go. There is no distance to be found, only acidic wakefulness and a longing for the lost forgetfulness of sleep. I preferred to do my fighting in the afternoon, but this time no sleep would come and so I waited with increasing agitation for Dante to tire. It would not be long, he was already channel hopping.

As his footsteps sounded up the stairs, I covered myself completely, leaving only space for breathing in the curl. He was uncharacteristically quiet as he stripped and climbed gingerly into bed, lying still on its edge so as not to disturb me. I felt myself soften and turned round to him, warming his cool back with my body. In the simple touch I wanted him and my hand ran down his stomach and felt for hardness. Not there. I wanted to pull away in alarm at being too forward, but he held my hand there, slowly moving it up and down and thrusting until it thickened, but I knew he was doing it for me, and now I would have to do it for him, and all naturalness squeezed out the embrace. But my body was not listening to my reservations, nor was Dante, and between the two they conspired to get me on top and then I was riding with an urgency for home, feeling for the rise.

And then it happened. He weakened as I was closing and as I desperately increased speed he softened to nothing. He wanted to go down on me in apology, but that only increased the boiling guilt. There were times when I did not come with Dante, when the rhythm of his movement in the closeness was enough, but this time I needed to come, needed its release pouring through my body and drowning the voices in my head. Instead I had to lie there as he apologized

and try to be nice with accents so loud I could not distinguish their various misgivings. I had wanted to rise in flight away from the cauldron with Dante at my side. Instead we tumbled into the heat, wings beating against each other in the fall.

47 (X PARADISO)

SLEEP CAME UNEASILY IN THE primal disquiet as the wind loosened the curtain and revealed a wild tree gesticulating through the window to the scent of plums and rain. Breathing slowly did not quiet it down; it preferred to circle the spaces, waiting for my eyes to unfasten the wheel so it could ride. Initially I could sense the drift of thought and then I was not aware of the descent, even though everything had slowed and I was in colour, deep without light, and there was no devotion to Dante even though love was still there.

Shades circled me without intent and I lay down in the middle and waited. The first to come was a dumb anchor of a man, the second looked on me with desire shown only to widows, the third placed a glowing piece of wood in my vagina, the fourth was so practised that one stroke was all he needed. After each had had their way, they did not leave but stayed close, their bodies released to curl and dance, supple and turbulent as their faces revolved round and round me. The fifth was covered in hair that tasted saline, the sixth whispered that he did not mind, the seventh consoled me with the smell of sleep, the eighth woke each part of my body as if a separate treasure, the ninth put me together again and the tenth, the tenth she cut my wrists and strangled me, her face spinning and spinning into a noose of darkness as they chanted love you, love you, love you, het jou lief, to my blood pouring out and her wet, warm mouth kissing me.

I WOKE UP SICK WITH the dawn, quietly rose, went downstairs, vomited bile and waited for the kettle to boil to the hard traces of the storm on the lemon-yellow grass. The dream lingered on, like a memory still to happen. He came down attentive and loving and I did not mind. Placing a plaster on a wound is a pleasurable thing. But then he had to be explicit and try to explain the collapse of our arch by clambering all over it and me. My limbs turned to lead and my breath struggled to come as I anticipated his covering hug and pushed away.

We were both suddenly angry, like two snakes coiled in each other without hope of concealment. He struck first, grabbing my hands and holding them down and, in that absurd moment of struggle, bit me on the neck, almost hard, just right, like fire, and the ashes began to burn. We both laughed, our eyes connecting in the surprise with the look of us.

It was only in the making of the tea that I noticed the absence. There was no Izzy asking for her tithe of milk. Dante said that she was probably in the garden, burying the dove, but I knew something was wrong. He always made light of things, disapproved if I got worked up and anxious. It had been a vicious downpour and the thought of Izzy caught alone in its wrath winded me. I could not pretend everything was fine. Her white paws, warm black fur, her soft bites, where was she. The prophesy rose in me, she was hurt, she was abandoned, scared, cold, disoriented, swept away in a drain, drowned, dead.

I ran into the enclosed garden and began calling for her. Here Kitteekittiecat, here izzy, IZZEEEE, IZZYCAT, KITTEEKITTEEKITTIECAT, IZZYO, IZZY, IZZY CAT, where are

you kittie, kittie, KITTEEKITTIEKEEEEEETIEKEEEEEETIECAT, KIIITEEEEEEEEEEE, KITTIEEEEEEEEE, come on my little kittiecat, where are you, prrrrit, prrrriiit, kittee cat, KITTEEEKITTIEKAT, KITEEEEEEEEEEE KITTIECAT, PRRRRRRRIT, PRRRRRRRIT, IZZYCAT, PUUSSYPUSSYPUSSYCAT, pussycat, where are you, puuussy cat.

Nothing, only a violet sky with broken twigs on the lawn in memory of what had happened.

DANTE STOOD ON THE PORCH looking at me with a half grin, hiding what I knew was irritation under it. The sun came out sharp against my tears. I went to the wall and climbed up the compost heap with its dead flower heads and rotted grass until I could see over the top into the street. Sometimes Izzy wandered outside onto the road and would then wait at the front door, rubbing herself against the security gate as she asked to come back in. Dante called for me to come inside, told me I was being silly and excessive, that Izzy was around, that she was only a cat, that my feet would get cold.

Normally the dismissal would have made me angry, but there was only fear and love mixed to a stain inside, and I called for her again over the wall, searching for her form at the drained edges of the street, each looking like it had just suppressed some secret. Dante wheeled around and went inside, leaving me to exhaust myself in calling and crying.

I tried to keep my voice clear and normal, so that Izzy would respond, made as if food and milk were on offer to entice her away if she was hiding or sleeping ensconced somewhere close. I kept seeing her in the shadows and felt my heart brighten in hope, but she did not come and I hated Dante as I stood there on the rotting leaves. My heart curled away from him. How could someone who claimed to love me and know me so well not see what Izzy meant to me? How could he hold to some generic classification of cats, without seeing what she was to me, my Izzy, my companion, my part of warm existence rubbing up against me, cuddling me, dependent on me?

How could he not see the gift of her purr? My hands clapped on the cold, hard, outer wall, drumming for her attention, longing for her to come running. And I screamed inside, beyond the final edge, into my own silence with unmoving lips, but there was only the long unlovely street, the empty tree and a town silently humming in its uncaring.

IT WAS THEN I ACHED for anyone I could surrender to in exchange for knowing that Izzy was safe, even the beggars on the street. They could take me and I would embrace them for her. Izzy, Izzy, my sweetest sweetest. In the loss I could not help the smile rising at the memory of her. Izzy cat, who had slept purring on my lap as I cried the fights away, who circled her way around our legs and into our lives, who lay on our bed while we made love and then snuggled in with us to sleep, who shared our suppers and drank from our baths, who had hidden in our cupboard when first arriving and then loudly purred the night away wrapped around our heads. Izzy cat, who had been too young to learn from other cats, who had slept, like us, with her head peeping out the blankets, who'd learnt to fight through our hands, flattening herself for the soft clawed pounce and the mock bite and the furious kicking hug. My little kitty cat with her yellow green eyes and orange nose.

KITTEEKITTEEKITTYCAT IZZIEEE, IZZY, IZZEE CAT, Everything is fine kittie cat, everything is fine, its fine, just come home please my little one, my little kittie cat, just come home. PUSSIECAT, IZZYCAT, everything is fine, kittie cat, everything is fine.

LOVE IS POISON, NESTLING IN to the most vulnerable channel before seeping outwards in pain. Dante was inside, flicking through the channels, an open book on either side, and he was ugly in his indifference. If only he was gone and not Izzy, I would swop them any day. He came and went. Izzy was always there, responsive and warm. He was dullness in dampness, dripping from a chill cold everyone thought was clarity. He mouthed sympathy from the couch, not even moved by understanding and I felt the hatred rise. He was untouched by her and would be the same with me. How could I love one so remote, so arctic? Mistake the chill wind for a stimulant?

I walked into the kitchen and switched the kettle on. He asked for another cup as well, so I threw out the cold tea, looked at the two dirty rims and just let them be. Fuck him. There was no sweetness to him. How could he be sweet if he did not know the bitterness of loss? He came through and gave me a hug from behind, pressing my thighs with his hands as if a massage would help. Don't worry he said, she will be fine, treating me like a child who would believe, and I almost did. I felt the relief and hope rise, only to feel it collapse again.

I pushed him away, went upstairs to the broken window and sat on the sill, looking out. Izzy, my most precious little one, I whispered to the street below, calling for her softly, gently as the tears ran.

MADAM?

I had not seen him coming down the street and now he was looking directly up at me. I hid my pain but knew he had seen it naked. I looked for the mockery, but saw only a small flame of concern. How could I tell him about Izzy? That would be just silly. Then the thought descended. Black men eat cats. I knew it was racist, knew that my mom was responsible for it when Ticky had gone missing, had reprimanded her then, even though I was twelve. But now it was real. They were hungry and poor, desperate and starving and cats tasted like chicken and last night had been cold and awful, and in the rage of the storm Izzy would have been vulnerable and lost, or maybe already dead, and they would have taken her.

Madam, ek is jammer vir alles, madam,

The sun came through the gathering clouds at that moment and shone on him so he had to squint away and before the clouds covered he walked away without asking for anything, without me being able to ask about Izzy, leaving me to look up at the cobalt sky with alarm.

LIGHTENING LUSTERED THE SKY AND I waited for the thunder as the grey deepened. It growled through, soft and distant. It was going to come again. I could smell its hurl. And, if Izzy was alive, she was going to be caught yet again in its rush, with no-one to protect her. Little Izzy, as human as a cat could be, trapped alone, not cat enough and not human enough to survive. My little kitty, brought up and protected behind the safe walls of our house with its enclosed garden and rambling rooms, soft beds and couches, somehow cast out into the wildness.

Dante came up with a cup of tea and remarked on how black it was outside. It's going to be worse than last night, he commented, and then, realizing his mistake, assured me that Izzy would be fine. Cats have survived storms for eons, he said, otherwise they would not be around, and I could not let it go, the way his intellect was not touched with love, the way his love of abstract truth lost the power of vulnerable being. I used to envy his quiet balance, assuming he was treading a middle path between two heavy extremes, not walking lightly in a vacuum, everything convenient to promote his joy. I twisted away from him, holding the cup of tea with both hands for warmth as the wind rose and the darkness reached for the window. And then he said it as he turned away.

Jesus Christ it's only a cat

The words corrupted everything, took all that was us and shredded it. There could be no loving a man untouched by the most elementary struggle for life.

IF ONLY IZZY WOULD SHOW herself somewhere down the street, I would run to her, go through the door, outside, into the road. I wanted to call for her from the window, but the words could not get through. The wind stilled as the clouds disappeared into a green blackness so high it made me withdraw inwards as the first blast came, punching the curtains back. It was all Dante's fault, he was responsible, he did not care, he had not gone out to search for her like any human being would. Even a drive around the neighbourhood... but nothing, just unstated recriminations and lazy indifference. It would be nothing for him to go outside and do a search, go to the neighbours and ask if they had seen or heard anything. Instead he looked at me with that you are pathetic shake of the head. I longed for him to be hanging on the thread of my wish so I could turn away from him and watch him fall with despair coiled in his face. Such a man did not deserve love, certainly not my love.

WHAT DANTE WANTED BEFORE LIVING was peace. He wanted nothing to disturb his equilibrium so that he could be open to life – when it was precisely life that disturbed him. His little empire ran on the principle of keeping disturbances down, of throttling the breath out of life for an eternal kiss.

The storm suddenly took the house with a dark violent intake as the rain hit. I felt it in the chill that came with the rain. It was too cold and too dark for it to remain just rain. It was going to turn vicious. Already in the heavens it was hardening in an upward rush, waiting to be hurled down, hurled down on my little Izzy, somewhere in the open, unprotected. The drumming began on the roof and, as the curtain whipped, I saw its power. I stuck my hand out and fierce, frozen pain struck back. Somewhere in the howl was Izzy, somewhere she was clinging on, but the moment of hope was crushed as the hail intensified into a deafening upsurge.

In fright I withdrew, suddenly scared, stepping back as the storm shifted angles, pounding itself through the broken window and pelting off the wooden floor. Dante came running in, ripped the duvet off the bed and threw it on the floor. The hail stones struck in more muted tones, arresting into marbled pearls as they gathered on the duvet. He picked up one of the bigger stones and tasted it, like a child. We stood there, on opposite sides of the duvet, watching the storm until he came round, held me tight, stroked my hair, and told me everything was going to be alright.

IN THE ARMS OF DANTE I tried his words. She is only a cat, cats run away and come back, cats survive storms. They helped. As the curtain calmed down we picked up the sodden duvet and I carried it down to the washing machine. It was only when I looked outside into the ruined garden that I felt the foreboding gather once more. It had been my worst storm, making the storm of last night a mere whine, and Izzy had been caught in both.

The air was still cold with hail, the tree stripped, the garden mangled, wounded, pierced with severed stubs jutting out in disordered angles through the grey ice. Only the scent was sweet, the fragrance of beaten leaves rising from the ground, releasing a perfume at once heady and crisp. The garden would recover, it was almost spring, it would send out its most tender shoots in response to the beating. But Izzy? There was going to be no recovery for Izzy. She could not have survived such a thrashing. She would not curl on my stomach as the grass grew lush underneath us.

It was too much. I felt myself tear through my throat downwards. I wanted to call her but no words could catch. As I doubled over I knew it was an over-reaction. One part of me saw this very clearly, but it was also the part feeling the hurt. Dante had to go out, he had to search for her, I would have to ask him. And he would look at me with my unspoken inability to leave the house – and then dismissively step outside into the street, maybe even walk around the block, but it would not be in search of Izzy, it would be to demonstrate the possibility of leaving the house. He would turn it into a lesson, as if

it were possible to cut my head off and hold it up in front of me as a lantern to lead my body outside. And I wished for it, longed for its clarifying split, one that did not rip me downwards into two halves, but neatly severed my head from my body with one horizontal slice so that I could take my head by its hair and escort my black body out of the house.

DANTE CALLED ME BACK INSIDE for lunch, as if nothing was happening, as if the repetition of ritual would carry over the loss. I could not stomach looking at him. In the ache there was a dull, empty, flat spot and that was the spot of Dante. The sun damage of his neck glared out at me. He was going to age early, he was going to turn ugly, his beauty was waning, soon all he would be was a handsome lizard, and our vows would alter, he would understand what it meant to love one more beautiful, the weakness it brought, the jealousy, the hope of scarring. Then he would fear the breaking of vows, then he would fear my own freedom and not wish to give it to me so freely, then he would want to abuse my will, take it from me and hold me captive. I was his to take and all he ever did was deliver me back to myself in benign dismissiveness. He was going to taste weakness soon, what it meant to collapse under the hands of another only to feel the same hands clap with recovery instructions.

He put down my sandwich on the table, carefully cut into four quarters, crusts removed, leaving only soft white bread with cheese and cucumber precisely layered in between. I politely thanked him, to remove any sense of obligation, and left it untouched. The house felt dead, even though sunlight was breaking in. Dante followed me into the lounge and we sat there, like fish in a bowl as his jaws masticated to the silence. The loss of Izzy had decreased my love for Dante, withdrawn the impulse. He was devoid of interest, the thought of him trying to talk filled me with weariness. The sudden excess of sunlight only made his sallow skin clearer. I wanted him out and me

alone. He began to talk about the broken window and how he would have to fix it this afternoon before the next storm, of how silly he was not to have done it already with the window pane and putty waiting for him in the garage, and I wanted him to just get up, do it, and leave me alone.

IF IZZY WAS REALLY FRIGHTENED, then maybe she was hiding somewhere in the house, in one of the cupboards perhaps. Hope flickered. When she had first come home as a little kitten, she had crawled straight into our bedroom cupboard and stayed there for an hour before tentatively coming out, one whisker and paw at a time. Maybe she was there, holed up from the storm in her first place of safety. I ran up the stairs to the cupboard, but there was no trace of Izzy, not even an imprint of her curled-up body on the towels.

I went through the house systematically, looking under all the beds and in all the cupboards, gently calling her name under my breath. All the while I could feel anger building up towards Dante, noisily washing the dishes, letting me know how sacrificial he was being. I wanted vengeance, someone to take my pain on their body, someone who deserved it: Dante. But I could not go down the stairs again and face his little sanctimonious sigh of satisfaction at the dishes being done.

I lay on the stripped bed, looking at the curtain with its saturated ends drifting in and out against the window. I cast round my body for something to attack and found an old shaving scab on my ankle. The scab came off too easily, leaving the itch, so I marked it with a fingernail cross, but there was something inside of it. It had got a little infected. I could feel the itch build. I dug inside, watching the clear skin juice begin to break into crimson on my finger nails, running up the cuticles, framing pink with red. Skin has layers where only the third and fourth bleed. I pinched the wound and tasted the blood and it hinted of the salt within and I wanted it, wanted to lacerate myself out of its dead covering.

I stretched out on the mattress, looking at the ceiling shifting from yellow to blue as the sun came and went to the ache, and it was moving with my breathing, blue in breath, yellow out breath, and I was moving to the ceiling and the ceiling was moving to me with only one word coming and going, izzy, izzy izzy; and when the sound of the post came sliding up to me there was no invasion only another word mixing in: thank you thank you.

THE ACHE DID NOT GO away in the quiet, but its middle opened to a clearing where I watched my thoughts run through. It was more than my thoughts, it was myself. I rose up in the clearing. I could see and feel who I was, look at myself from the outside, but with an inside view, suspended in clarity between, and, to the rhythm of my breath, the insight came. I lived in love even though the love came with damage, violation and defencelessness. I suffered under love. Its force was too strong for me. I wavered under its fire. My weakness came from its strength inside of me, from the attempt to escape its flooding. I had broken under its impact. At that moment love turned on me in the opening and I felt its warmth lap over me, fill me from the inside and it whispered in her voice, everything is going to be fine, my sweet little one, everything is going to be fine, ek het jou lief.

I WOKE TO THE SOUND of Dante coming up the stairs. The room was still, waiting for his entrance, and he came with tea and a box of Romany creams. He must have gone out for me. We sat on the bed, him dipping his biscuits, happy that I did not want any. It was close to evening. The light had lost its intensity and settled into a glow. I knew when the thought came that I should turn away from it, but it shifted into an image and I saw Izzy with swollen limbs and numbed face, her lips curled up as if a drop of water would suddenly bring her to life.

I pushed through the image and tried to listen to Dante talk about supper and a possible walk where we could look for Izzy together. He meant it well but how could he attach my concern for Izzy to that, as if my two greatest fears could somehow come together and resolve themselves in the clash, with me thrown clear in the explosion. I could see how he thought it would work. Me putting on shoes, us walking hand in hand, calling for Izzy as we circled the block, arriving back home and going safely inside, mission accomplished. But it was not like that at all, and in his raising the possibility I felt my throat close up. I did not answer him and tried to calmly get up and out.

A bath would do it. I walked through, put in the plug and turned the tap, watching the shadowy blue water come out with increasing steam. He followed me through, as if nothing had happened, perched himself up on the ledge and waited for me to take my clothes off, and I could do it for him, do anything for him so long as he allowed me to stay and not go out there to her dead body lying without life somewhere.

I STIRRED THE HOT WATER with my hand and watched the heat-steam radiate off it as I closed the tap. Dante's outline became faint in the dusky haze, his eyes mere hollows, his body a swirling shadow. My feet burned as I stepped in, but I sat down anyway to the full sting. It was too hot to move and I waited for my skin to take its line with the water before lying down very carefully to the spreading needles of pain. Dante drifted out to fix the window and all I could hear was the drip of the tap as the prickling took over.

The clarity of the afternoon remained and I could still feel what had become of me with Dante. It was not just the overwhelming force of love that had done it, it was the quality of his love. He wished for me a higher place where I could see further and in the first fire of love I had mistaken it for passion and thirst and handed myself over to his will, not wanting to be blessed but to be love-soaked. He saw the whole world as paradise, with me an additional harmony, love mixed in with love. How many times did I have to see it for the hurting to go away? His love was too magnanimous for my intensity; as he spread out I became captivated. I lifted my hand out the water and wished to be a heavy weight in the deep, but I was light and floating with her burning limbs on mine.

WHEN I FINALLY ROSE IT was less dark than night and less light than day. In the mist I sensed Izzy's call, faint, at the edge, too soft to be sure. There was no direction to turn to and no certainty that I had heard. Her resonance was somewhere in my body, like the first dream of a night of dreaming. I froze and waited in hope, straining with focus for the smallest indication, searching the trace to check its quality. Nothing. I left the bathroom and walked through to the bedroom and the broken window with Dante crouched next to it, putty in his hand, and listened from the frame. Only the night sounded back, quickly settling in to the increasing sharpness of the streetlight, but hope had flared, she was alive, somewhere far away, scared and calling for me. And I cared not for Dante or the neighbours or anyone walking down the street, it rose from me clear and strong.

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AWAY I AM COMING
I ran down the stairs, out the door, barefoot into the sulphuric
orange of the night.

THE WIND GUSTED IN MY face and I loved its cold new breath, for it had carried the sound of Izzy to me. At the bottom of the block I stopped and called again, listening for her answer, but could not hear anything. The street lights shone like diamonds struck by light in the night, offering me paths across and down, and further down I went, away from the house, to the stream at the bottom of the road, calling for her.

The aromas of home cooking and family conversation came at me from both sides as I walked down, reminding me of times before Dante, and I could listen to their sounds without feeling the abuse it had wreaked in me. Each streetlight covered me with a dome of darkness illuminated within, each one accepting me as water accepts light until I reached the bottom of the road, away from the fiery poles and into the deepening, enchanting night. The rush of the stream was strong underneath, but I called above it for Izzy, listening in hope for her response.

I could see no way through. The bridge was barbed on both sides to prevent access. The pine trees rose up on either side, like black hands caught in alarm. And then Izzy's call came and it was to my left, clearer and more plaintive, somewhere further down the stream. I traced the rounds of security wire, feeling for a weakness. A small hole appeared in the underbrush, a dark hole, big enough for a dog and I went down and tried to crawl through. It let me in and down to scents of jasmine in the dark.

Suddenly I was on the embankment next to the rushing stream, the bridge above me like a giant's mouth with a single tooth, trees surrounding me, trapezoids of blue in an upward sweep. This was

where my Izzy had been for the last night and day, it was here that she had got lost and sought protection from the storm. I could sense why. It was soothing with enough light coming through from the street to see that it was more open and clear than it looked from the bridge. I crabbed across, looking for level ground, meowing to her. The ground was thick with rotted leaves and then I was slipping down, even though I clawed both my hands and discalced feet into the bank, and pressed myself flat, so close I could smell the organic stew of hummus underneath.

Faster I fell and then was abruptly standing on sandy ground, hands still glutted into mud stench, gown uncovered, breasts muddied, the stream loud in my ears. I turned into the newness of night and looked at a beautiful world, stripped of all colour, running in front of me.

IT HAD BEEN HERE ALL the time, increasingly hemmed in on all sides but still flowing underneath. I felt at home in this first world and as I called for Izzy I heard relief in my tone. She would have been safe here, underneath the canopy, even happy, casually deciding to come home after a little vacation from her over-possessive mother. I looked for a route next to the stream, between the dark silvery rocks almost purple in their black sheen.

Then I heard it over the current, clear and close, something rustling, something alive, not Izzy. He would live here, this was his place. The rocks became heads looking at me, muttering underneath their breath lief, lief, lief. The trees above loomed down with their darker selves. This was not my world. It was an underworld, a place they hid and attacked from, a place where rape and murder happened without a way out, a place where Bongani would take out all the unspeakable damage heaped on him without mercy and I knew it was going to happen, could feel his body twisted into mine, tears frosted to malice in his eyes, my hair caught in his with the smell of dog all round, his trespassing tongue forcing its way into my mouth. Sorry Madam, thank you madam, fuck you madam.

I stepped back involuntarily, into a rock, and fell backwards, careening off its side, half into the freezing stream. Caught on the icy slope, my feet already senseless to the ground, I sensed death. It could happen here, had already happened. It was a place beyond the borders, where struggle happened without witnesses, where the last breath came without care as his broken staff crashed down on me, and my gown let them in. And then I heard her cry, clearer, stronger, closer and from the back of my neck the fear lifted and I called to her, telling her that everything was going to be fine.

MOVEMENT WAS ALL THICK, DARK, hard, slippery, slow, each step carefully felt out with blind toes covered and numb, each breath wet and jagged, my hands half in front to feel, half to the side to balance. My eyes tried to make sense of the shades of black and grey, but the fall had taken away any security of judgment. There was no depth, only patterns on patterns, mutating in front of me without order or place. The only direction I had was the call of Izzy, somewhere ahead and high in the night, added to night. Any animal would have moved easily across, with deft limbs, each move quick and sure, and here I was, alien, graceless, awkward, inching painfully forward. There was no harmony down here for me, each step was its own. There were no staircases with carefully calibrated shifts upwards or suspended yellow wood floors, only mud, rock and water endangering each move.

IT WAS ONLY AFTER A couple of steps that I found a path directly to my left, weaving into the darkness, guided by the night. Three steps confirmed it and I slowly made headway, calling for her as I went. I could not see my feet walking me underneath, and the edges of my arms were obscure voids. The feeling spread and my body dissolved into the dark, leaving only my consciousness moving in suspension with the sound of me calling coming from an emptiness below. When she answered, it was from above me, with short pleading meows. I looked up into the night, and slowly, through the canopy, saw the clouds rushing by.

To my left was a massive trunk, lifting upwards from the embankment and spreading out into vast wings on either side. I grabbed the roots and clambered upwards until I stood facing the trunk on level ground. It was dark red in the night, and as I called for her I slapped it hard, trying to let Izzy know it was alright, I was there, she was safe.

And then I could hear her coming slowly closer, each of my calls answered with increasing intensity. I looked up for her, but could see nothing clear above the initial thigh joins. Then I heard her claws on the bark as she became frantic in the descent. Don't rush, my little kitty cat, I am here, I am here, I am not going anywhere, don't rush, just come down. And she did.

I could hear her slowly making her way, and then saw her little form coming down headfirst. It was only at the first joint that she stopped, unable to come down any further with no branches to help her, too high to jump, too close to bear. And I was crying at the sight of her and terrified that she would become scared and flee upwards

once more. Turn around my little one, I pleaded with her, come down back first, you can do it, just turn around, and in the moment that is what she did.

In the most uncatlike, ungainly way she began coming down the trunk without any sound until I could reach up and touch her. Still she would not release until she was level with my head, and then I pulled her off, turned her around, and buried my face in her lovely fur. It was scented with pine and I held her close, purring with her. The night was clearer from the ledge and next to the tree I saw a path winding its way upwards at a slow incline. We walked up, Izzy quiet and warm in my arms, until, through a round opening I saw the beautiful things that the sky holds and we issued out from there to see, again, the blue clouds flowering over the stars.

IT WAS A GENTLER WORLD that I stepped back into as I stood on the bridge. All was clear. Under the streetlights each garden fence, driveway, gate, tree, stood in its own right, as if an artist had spent a lifetime dedicated to intricate detail. I walked back up the hill, with Izzy nestled in my arms, alive with awareness.

The door was closed and I stood on the opposite side of the road, under the encrusted tree, looking up at the empty opening where the broken window had been. Dante was framed in the backlight.

He would not understand what had happened in the profound night, by the dark stream and the red tree as she came down to me; it was not his to understand. He was in a house that was not mine, a sealed sarcophagus waiting to bandage me up again, bandages that were unravelling as my heart danced to the streetlight.

The branches of the tree crystalized, dipped into the stream of moving clouds, and I saw white buds peppered across the edges. I crossed the street, walked inside the house and gave Izzy some milk. Dante came down and held me with an edge of anger. I was content, even with him, as we both stood there in the kitchen, watching Izzy cleaning her face with her white paws. Eventually he walked back up the stairs into the bedroom to carry on fixing the window. I followed with Izzy in my arms and sat on the bed as he rolled the putty into thin strips and carefully placed it on the edges of the glass, before lifting it and setting it neatly into the waiting opening.

AFTER FINISHING MY DOCTORATE, THIS novella jumped out of me as a strange rearrangement of all the ancient and medieval mystical texts I had been reading. Dante's travels through hell, purgatory and paradise had seared my imagination, but a part of me wondered how his wife, Gemma Donati, must have felt when Dante used an early love (Beatrice) as his muse and guide through paradise. Gemma had stayed in Florence whilst Dante travelled all over Europe, writing the *Divine Comedy* in exile. We have no words from her; of her heaven, her hell, her purgatory. I wondered about her everyday life, and the idea came to me – mix heaven and hell into the domestic. Dante's *Comedy* consists of 100 cantos, and I started from the last canto in paradise and first canto in hell and worked inwards towards the middle, stopping when purgatory was reached. Over a three month period I wrote around a chapter a day, using the cantos as a base. If the canto was from paradise I twisted it into hell; if it was from hell I made it heavenly. If Dante had travelled the world, then the heroine would be isolated in one house; if Dante was powerful and dynamic, then the heroine would be watery; if Dante was a sympathetic and admired character, then she would be dislikable. Out of this odd creative machine the novella sprung. Even in this peculiar world – transcendence would find a way in; even with a non-heroine – grace would enter.

The book cover is inspired by a medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, who had a near-death dream of a hazelnut in her hand. She was amazed by how such a small thing could last, “for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness”.

