

A MAN ON A GALLOPING HORSE

by
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DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies (Creative Writing), University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used.

It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judith King', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

JUDITH KING

4 March 2010

Supervisor: Kobus Moolman
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For Jeanne

Raking it up

A peeling, poorly cast bird-bath, dry as a salt-pan, disgraces a squat granite memorial block at its base. Weeds crawl over the scored lettering:

Rebecca Amos Lear
1925 – 1995
Love and Remembrance

Untended, the fixture marks something humiliating.
 Ashen with brick-dust, littered with oddments of labourers' clothing, the usually lush church tea-garden is bereft of butterflies.

Empty benches.

Silent trees.

An indifferent sky.

The screech of an angle-grinder, gnashing at hunks of new paving, ricochets against the grimy steeple, and back across the lawn. The workmen lean against the round concrete tables, waiting to finish for the day. Parched shrubs droop in their red-sanded beds; only the succulents prevail.

A life, a death, a stone somewhere.

Evanescence, etched as a lesson in detachment for the living.

What will it serve to place this elsewhere?

Who will set a pebble here, clear the leaves, turn the soil, sow some hopeful seedlings to promise a return?

Perched on a ledge bevelling the steeple, two charcoal-feathered pigeons nuzzle each other, and a zephyr of amnesty sighs into the garden.

On the morning she died, birds were the last thing she saw through the window before the vessels burst in her brain.

oOo

Second to none

I am reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* one Friday afternoon in the front lounge. Watering the roses, Bali the gardener gently scolds the two children for picking off the hydrangea buds.

“These are not Brussels sprouts, right? Soon they will be beautiful big flowers for the house, but not if you break them off now. Why don't you take a turn on the swing?”

Normally, I would intervene immediately. Benjamin is not the culprit. He was the sweetest of my three pregnancies, emerging like a serene shadow. Dark-haired, sallow-skinned, wise, he reminds me of my father – gracious with all living things, and not given to debate or confrontation.

But red-headed Ruby is artistic, inquisitive, precocious if not reined in – a constant source of anxiety, and she needs discipline. She should not be bothering the staff while they are working, and I will not have a child of mine dismembering living things. One has to nip things in the bud, so to speak. Maybe I should write that down. But today, I let things be.

On my bad days, I treat Bali Singh as harshly as I do everyone, yet I know he is a fine, intelligent man. He is devoted to his family and ours, joyfully observant of his Hindu customs, reliable and respectful of life, despite his own hardships. I too grew up poor, the fifth of ten children. Only seven of us reached adulthood in a small Eastern Cape town that was known as “Hitler's Halt” during the War. We read about the horrors in Europe and felt relatively safe where we were, but, looking so obviously Jewish from my father's lineage, sneers and slights repelled us into a low profile at shops, offices and school. While my three brothers finished school and studied further, we four sisters took our Junior Certificates and hand-me-down outfits, and did secretarial work to support the family.

Now, twenty-five years later, I live in a large house in a moneyed suburb of Durban overlooking the city, with two live-in maids who are marshalled with an intercom and a silver dinner-bell. Our three children can attend private schools. We take holidays on game-farms and to Europe on cruise-ships, spending weekends at mountain resorts and our beach-house on Natal's north coast.

This change in circumstances was made possible because I am a white South African woman and I married my boss, Arthur Lear – a young accountant with a gentle, solid character, and a fine pianist and artist. My folk welcomed him, respected his talents and seriousness, and the way his protective love foiled me – which is more than I can say for his family's regard for me.

Bali is also our driver. He bears a striking resemblance to Omar Sharif, with warm brown eyes, a fine moustache and almost Slavic features. People gaze at us being chauffeured through town and the suburbs in the black Mercedes Benz, and gape when Bali emerges from the car in his grey-wool uniform with peaked cap. While I loathe this kind of attention, I'll be damned if I will give in to their insecurities. I was spat at in the streets of my youth, insulted, leered at, threatened wherever I went – but I was the first woman in our community to get a driver's licence. I bought my own new Morris Minor when I was eighteen. I was stared at then, and I was elated.

But I am wary of all this pleasure and ease. It seems to be so much more than we need, and I worry that we could lose balance, G-d forbid. Poverty does not need to equate to dirt, ignorance and depravity; we were raised to “never look or act poor”. Remembering the indignity of bucket toilets, I know that wealth is contingent; so I don't believe in credit, not that our parents were offered it despite our need. I will not have us beholden to anyone or anything. But our children are healthy and clever, and in the end, one can't purchase that.

My book folds closed as I observe Bali from the bay-window. His skills are manifold, and he approaches everything with peaceful dedication. He doses and

cleans the swimming-pool, keeps us to schedule, smiles, predicts the weather, teaches my two younger children to make water-wheels out of bamboo and rear silkworms. Once I asked him how he cultivates such a placid disposition, and he replied, “When stones are flung on your path, throw petals.”

Opening my book again, and re-entering Simone de Beauvoir’s proposed moral revolution, I think she might have a different view. If I could take each day as Bali does, I would be happier – and probably easier to live with, but on the other hand, these ideas of women elevating themselves on their own terms appeal to me. No man has a right to tell me how to think or behave, and I abhor the club mentality of the Rotary Anns and directors’ wives who expect me to sport their uniform of mink, silk and linen, titter and nod at their inane opinions and bake on demand.

When I heard that the Durban Club portal had borne a brass plaque proclaiming: *NO DOGS, JEWS, WOMEN OR NON-WHITES*, I refused to go there with Arthur, no matter how important his business dinners there might have been to our future wellbeing. Now, with discomfort suppressed by resignation, I clink the crystal over my smoked salmon, secretly amused that these bigots are unwittingly hosting a woman of Jewish blood in their midst.

I become aware that something odd is taking place in the garden: the children are intent on Bali, who has turned towards the boundary wall over which the head and shoulders of that boorish Smit, our new neighbour, have appeared. This man has pestered me for days with uncouth propositions to buy our house. He plans to demolish his gracious Victorian gem within months of moving into it, and hopes to include our property in the development of a sixteen-unit townhouse complex. I thought I’d made it clear that we will not sell to him or anyone else, and I am not known for being vague in such matters. Now he is crossing the line, and it is time to defend it.

Ruby and Benjamin watch me with rounded eyes and mouths as I cross the damp lawn. Bali backs away silently as I approach the wall, but continues to spray the Golden Shower creeper at its roots. Smit is jabbering about offers to purchase and my not returning his calls. Something in the blue-and-gold afternoon and the smell of the moistened earth keeps my blood pressure below boiling. It is senseless and debasing to take up words with him.

Bali responds instinctively to my outstretched hand and passes the hose to me. I look up to the study window where my eldest son, Nathan, has broken away from his Latin homework to observe the unfolding scene below. He knows I cannot ignore Smit's coarse harangue for long. Winking quickly at Nathan's puzzled face, I turn back to the offending babble, and aim the spray at Smit's whiskey-blossomed nose. His face transforms into a winced, dripping mask of outrage.

I hold my stance with a benign smile as spluttered shrieks of "You're mad! Mad!" erupt from somewhere above his sodden shirt. The children clutch each other in a peal of giggles, and Bali's eyes twinkle in complicit mirth. Smit disappears into the grounds of his doomed mansion. I hand the hose back to Bali, saying: "Sometimes petals aren't enough."

I am bemused that these are the only words I've uttered since lunch-time.

oOo

Ebb, flow and undertow

Early the following day, the car eats up the miles along the coast, gliding past swathes of sugar-cane. With The Sandpipers' "Come Saturday Morning" playing through the eight-track tape-deck, the Lear family retells the story of Rebecca and the hose-pipe.

Ruby wriggles between her brothers into the red leather upholstery on the back seat, as Nathan skits the scene he witnessed from the upstairs window. Benjamin takes advantage of his sister's distraction to show her a "donkey-apple" pinch, part of their ongoing tally of teasing and conquest. Arthur drives with a steady hand, but his laughter reflex is so finely calibrated with his tear-ducts that Nathan's script of the spluttering neighbour is guaranteed to blur his vision. Wiping the moisture from under his spectacles, Arthur begs Nathan to stop. Rebecca's expression is not visible, but her chuckle allows the back-seat skylarking.

The beach cottage waits, nestled in the fragrant shrub-line with its own path to unspoilt stretches of sand. Already in their swimming gear, with Ruby's fair skin pre-coated in sun-cream, the children will race each other to the tidal pool, while Arthur opens up the rooms and unpacks the luggage. Rebecca will cook a memorable breakfast.

A late lunch is planned to roll into the balmy evening with the Ilanovich family, immigrant friends from the city who own a prominent interior design business, the house next door, and two majestic German Shepherds with Russian names. The adults will drink cocktails on the Spanish-tiled patio, some joining the children and dogs at intervals for dips in the moonlit sea and sets of ring-tennis on the front lawn, lit with garden candles.

On Sunday, Ruby will collect shells, Benjamin will find dried cuttle-fish for his budgie and scan the sea for dolphins; together they will tickle the tiny fish into

hiding among the rock-pools. After swimming lengths in the tidal pool to train his asthma into remission, Nathan will towel his butter-blond hair, gazing at the ships on the horizon and the yachts in a morning regatta.

If all goes well, Rebecca will be her Mediterranean-mellow self, tanned into honey, recharged by the salty air and conversation. She never learned to swim and is nervous of the waves, but at low tide, she might put on her French two-piece and let Arthur hold her while she does kicking exercises against the mussel-encrusted wall of the tidal pool. She might even allow the two younger children to ride back to Durban with Mariana Ilanovich in her emerald-green Alfa Spider with the top down.

But this tide will turn.

oOo

The world in the carpet

It is past noon on the following Saturday, and the house in town is like a veiled woman. The gold damask curtains in the inner lounge are drawn against the sun. Arthur's beloved boudoir-grand piano is mute, yet intrusive. Gilt-framed landscapes bear down from their mountings, the rich dabs of oil-colour lost in solemn shadow.

For hours, the family has been seated in this sealed chamber, chilled by the murmuring air-conditioner. The children's heads are bowed, eyes downcast and limbs locked into place. They can speak only on command.

Outside, elsewhere, other families are celebrating the weekend. In here, Rebecca reigns with an incomprehensible regimen. This time, as in all others, something has been violated – none can fathom how or by whom, but facts and logic are banished by the shrill crescendo of her rebuke. Nothing has been eaten or drunk since the previous night. While her demons have her, the evening and the next day bring no prospect of release.

Arthur's kind, wide face is forlorn and crumpled as his frame absorbs his wife's barrage.

"You are nothing but a worm, a fat, creeping parasite. You spineless bastard. You make me sick. All of you ... but you, you pathetic son of a bitch, you let them think you're so distinguished, but you're a liar ... A LIAR!"

You can't look straight at her when she's like this. Her eyes glint like knife-blades. You can only stare at the patterns in the Persian carpet. See how the different coloured shapes fit together, how the outlines keep the blue and the red in their tiny squares, and then the ends of the gold and turquoise curls meet at the top and the bottom. This piece of the design, near your foot, is like a link in a chain around the large one in the centre. It reminds you of all the beautiful little

plants and creatures in the rock-pools, how they all live and move together, so peacefully.

“Look at me! LOOK at me, swine! You think you’ll get away with this? You lie your way through it, but you’ll pay, you gross PIG. I’ll destroy you like you’ve destroyed me.”

You don’t need to look at her to know what’s going to happen next. Her mouth is making a sticky sound around the words and when she starts to snarl like this, you know it’s getting worse inside her. She’s thirsty too. She has a glass of water there with her pills, but she won’t let us have anything. Anyway, it’s too scary to have food now; no taste and hard to swallow. It was quieter when you were looking at the turquoise curls. Maybe it’s when you look at the red bits that she gets louder. Your hands are sweaty but your shoulders are cold.

“What are you shivering for, Ruby? LOOK AT ME! And sit up straight! Don’t think I don’t know what you’re thinking. You think I’m the disgusting one. Your father’s an angel, a saint, the great Arthur Lear. Yes, you slime – look at what you’ve done! You love this, don’t you? Turning my children against me, you fat, evil, lying SLUG!”

How can she call him those things? Each tiny block in the rug is starting to tremble, as if they’re trying to break apart. Stop it, stop it, please G-d, please, please help us... where is the calm colour? The blue, where’s the blue ... why won’t it all stay still?

“All you want is your food and your work ... people think you’re so perfect. You don’t give a shit what happens to your sick wife! Must I give up my whole life for you? What do you say for yourself? ANSWER ME!”

Benjamin looks as though he will disappear completely. Nathan is seething, thoughts ready to strike.

What can Daddy say to her? What can you say?

The shrouded house is a dangerous place. The glass hurtles into the wall above the fireplace and shatters on the hearth tiles. The children jerk upright in their chairs, young fingers gripping the upholstery. Arthur's voice is unrecognisable, a lowing wail: "Rebecca, no, please, for heaven's sake ..."

Rebecca is standing over him, pounding his bowed back with the sharp corners of the brass Chinese candlestick. Blood starts to seep through the pale blue cotton of his shirt. Her tiny frame is charged with the power of rage – she raises her weapon above his head. The children leap forward, dizzy with panic. Shaking, Ruby is the first to pull her away as Arthur lumbers from the chair, graceless on one knee. Nathan, swearing in hisses through clenched teeth, wrests the candlestick from Rebecca's hand; Benjamin stands rigid with anguish.

"YOU WAIT, YOU LOUSE! DEATH IS TOO GOOD FOR YOU!" The shrieks pierce the eighty-year-old walls, rearing up through the wooden staircase, and the window-panes tremble as Rebecca slams the bedroom door, wrenching the key in its lock from the inside.

She will stay there for a week or longer, in bed, in the dark, not eating or bathing, and no-one will dare to make a sound for fear of her re-emerging. Arthur is admitted into the room only to endure all-night tirades which, as the demons invest her with unearthly energy, will entail more beatings. If he can, he will gather his clothes for the next day, and retreat to the guest bedroom.

Exhausted, but alert with fear, her family goes on with the daily round of school and work, creeping past each other like timorous ghosts, straining for sounds of their mother's mind-tides. They know which floorboards will creak if stepped on, and have learnt how to close the old doors noiselessly.

When Bali fetches Ruby from school, he warns her in their private code: “Don’t play with the government today.” At times, the children’s whispered debates in remote rooms and passageways might collapse into guilty, nerve-wracked snickers, but they quickly chasten themselves in unspoken agreement, and shudder back into silence.

They are summoned to The Room periodically, where they will be made to sit or stand in helpless confusion, to account for their role in Rebecca’s misery. Sometimes in their father’s presence, otherwise alone, they are ordered to opine on his ostensibly errant ways.

Through wordless dinners with Arthur, the children converse in glances and grimaces. Much to the boys’ disapproval, Ruby will point a chubby finger at the cuts and grazes on his face. “My razor is blunt,” he says. Rebecca’s empty chair fills the dining-room with loathing and bewilderment. They watch their manners, despite her absence.

Gradually, her self-isolation breaks down into hours of rambling calls to Life-Line, various faith leaders and eventually, patient friends. As inexplicably as their arrival, the demons depart. To gather strength for showering and dressing, Rebecca presses the intercom button to the kitchen and with a cracking throat, asks Christina, the young, sweet-natured cook, for a meal to be brought on a tray. The sound of the key in the lock is moderate, contrite, and Rebecca’s descent downstairs is no longer a fearful event. As she unlatches the windows and switches on the radio, the house begins to breathe again.

The maids sing hymns in harmony while they work, and chocolate cake appears for tea. Benjamin spends less time alone in his room, and Nathan ventures to the yacht club after school. Bali brings in fresh roses and new potatoes from the garden.

In the evenings, Ruby reads parts of the Old Testament aloud to her father, before he tucks her into the sheets between Buster and Ginger, her two stuffed dogs.

Downstairs, while Rebecca writes letters to friends overseas, Arthur plays Sinding's *Rustle of Spring* on the piano. The arpeggios tumble like blessings into their sleep – and decades later, this is remembered as his lullaby for them.

Life and love prevail, and the relief is so splendid that no post-mortem can be contemplated. But the carpet stores its secrets, and one more little death frays the weave.

oOo

Lifting the lid

Nathan, Benjamin and Ruby are building a model ship in the cupboard nook off the landing of the stairs on a wet afternoon. Outside, the birds huddle in the dripping leaves, chanting their rain-song. A leaded glass lantern glows overhead, and the smell of the pinewood floors comforts the space into refuge. Rebecca is catatonic in her room, sequestering her peace, with Arthur watching over her.

More glue and a cloth are needed from one of the cupboard shelves. On tip-toe, Nathan fetches the quaintly fashioned key from a drawer elsewhere. The open door releases a waft of cedar and linseed oil from Arthur's stores of art material. Benjamin finds some flannel squares among the ageing beach towels and swatches of fabric, and Ruby searches through old shoeboxes for the glue. They pore gently over sheet music, calligraphy, and sketchbooks with foxed pages full of chalk-and-ink studies of trees, churches and vintage cars.

In the last box, tucked at the back of the lowest shelf, they find an old pair of their father's spectacles, tortoiseshell with round frames, which they recognise from photos dating back to his early twenties.

"Nothing we can use here," sighs Benjamin, but Ruby keeps hold of the glasses in one hand, lifting a sheaf of smaller drawings from the box.

"Look, it's Mama when she was young," she whispers. "Daddy drew them."

The quick, rubbed strokes of the soft pencil form into fine, high cheekbones, tracing her dark hair into '40s-style waves, contouring her pert chin, caressing neat shoulders into the curve of her neck. In some, her eyes are lidded in repose with her hands folded against the side of her head; in others, she gazes intensely at a hidden point.

A scrap of newsprint flutters out. The crumbling, yellowed cutting is their parents' engagement notice. There had never been a wedding album, but this box and its contents become sentient with the tacit love of their younger lives. Tiny treasures, not destroyed or lost, but abiding beneath the turmoil.

Warm tears roll off the children's faces into the patterned cardboard shell. Not understanding their grief, they say nothing more while carefully repacking the cupboard.

oOo

Never the same

I don't know why I feel so drained and distracted. My neck is agony, as if I've been skewered for a thousand nights. Daily physiotherapy subdues it, but something feels calcified, and the inactivity of rest breeds a chewing fear in me that this is irreversible.

Forgive me, Rebecca, my Nefertiti, my Egyptian queen. I sit here, watching you, like a useless brute. Something is terribly wrong and you are writhing into impossible shapes. I didn't intend this for you.

This isn't me, it's not the body I had growing up. I was Becca, the family tom-boy, thin as a stick, scaling fences and trees to nip fruit from neighbours' gardens, kicking a ball with my brothers and their friends. That's how my right index finger got ripped – I tackled one of them and my hand was hooked into the scout-knife buckle on his belt; I refused to cry out as I was dragged along, so he didn't know, and he ran on to the goal-posts thinking I was being tenacious. My only best dress was covered in blood, and the town's horse-doctor was the quickest medical care available. He did an atrocious job of stitching the wound, so my finger never straightened. Now Nathan teases me when I wag it at him; “the Finger of Fate”, he calls it, but only when he knows I'll indulge the impertinence.

You are gazing at your hands, turning your palms upwards and downwards, splaying your fingers and curling your knuckles into private gestures, like a Tibetan mudra, seeking protection. I vowed to shield you from years of sacrifice and limitation, with a life of comfort and opportunity. When we first met, you would tap-dance into my office with laughing eyes to undo my stolid bean-counting. I told you to act your age – blowing me a kiss, you told me to act mine. I suppose I was never “your boss”.

I got the strap for that, deservedly. We'd been spruced for a visit from our rich relatives and I shouldn't have been playing outside at all. But I couldn't resist

when the boys called from the park for me to join the game. And it was hardly fair that my brothers were allowed to go. My mother believed in a hiding first, with explanations to follow. After ten births, who can blame her? Ruby often asks me why my parents had so many children, since money was so scarce; I tell her it's because they loved each other so much – she's too young for a full lesson in the birds and the bees.

Ruby was our mistake. We wanted children, but I weighed 86 lbs when we married, and Arthur felt I was too frail to cope. I was chronically anaemic from heavy bleeding every month and a life-long abhorrence for meat, but when the gynaecologist advised us that weekly iron injections and a pregnancy would balance my hormones and relieve the condition, Arthur yielded. When Nathan was born, golden-haired with perfect features and full of Lear genes, Arthur held his son to his cheek, and said: "If I died today, it would be as the happiest man on earth."

I went too far. You showed me heaven and I bumbled upward, pulling you along with me. I felt your fire would fuel us both, but all this has ruined you. The specialist says it's osteo-arthritis, and nothing can halt it. You're only thirty-three years old.

Benjamin came along four years later, his dear, dark little head shaped like an egg from the forceps. Arthur's mother slashed through my bliss, saying, "What an ugly baby, Rebecca – he looks just like you!" Neither Nathan nor I forgave her for it. Arthur was mortified, but too perplexed – caught between loyalties, I suppose – to retaliate on my behalf. I still can't forgive him for that.

I know how my mother's words hurt you; she went through hell bringing my brother and me into the world. I went against her by marrying out of our faith. I love you all, but I fail each of you differently.

Nathan's intelligence and good looks still charm everyone. When he was old enough for us to ask what he'd like to be when he grew up, he'd say he wanted to be a judge, but he also has an engineer's brain – and a sailor's bad language. "What's wrong with this bloody machine?" he cried at the age of five, when our fridge started to leak, making all the neighbours laugh.

The two boys are so different, yet a loving pair. With easy affection, Nathan became his younger brother's protector. Benjamin is excruciatingly shy. He would crawl after me wherever I went, calling out plaintively like a new puppy if I closed the bathroom door for a few moments. He is unfailingly thoughtful and observant; perhaps the only worry I have for him is that he is too cautious.

Bella, my vivacious younger sister, came from our home-town to live with us, and became the children's adored minder when Arthur and I went out to business socials. She was a breeze of companionship in our home, cooking and baking with me for fun on weekends, turning every meal into a fiesta with music and dancing. We'd share clothing, but no longer because we had to. With Bella's daring eye for colour and style, and mine for cut and quality, we helped each other dress for our parts, she for the office as a "single-and-looking" beauty, and me as the shareholder's chic wife.

"Does this look alright?" we'd ask each other, and then respond in unison with our mother's words: "A man on a galloping horse wouldn't notice."

Within a year, Bella met Lyndon Challinor, a dashing young development chemist who'd settled here from England. He fell for her like a river over a ravine, and soon we were awash in wedding plans.

I was caught in a thermal of wonder, as if the Almighty had taken hold of my hand in a glorious ascent of ambition. I was keeping my promise to provide for and preserve the family I never imagined I could really have. Now you had a sister's love under your own roof. Soon there would be cousins for our boys.

And then my Dutch Cap failed. Arthur was shocked, saying, “It can’t be mine ...”. The pain is so bad now that I have to prop up my skull with my hand to swallow the painkillers. I can’t turn my head to the left.

We were always so careful. I said, “But that can’t be ...” and in that instant, I saw what you heard, and that I would never be able to erase it. Our plan, my plan, what plan? I over-played, over-prayed, and now our blessing has cursed you.

Thanks to the iron injections, 10-lb Ruby wrenched her way out of my womb and nearly tore me in half. Emergency surgery to repair the damage ended up as a full hysterectomy, and I didn’t look at her properly or hold her until four days later, when the nurses brought her through, gleefully assuming that I could breastfeed.

Flattened with ‘flu and other infections once we were home, I missed Bella’s wedding, which was reduced to a simple court ceremony and a quiet family tea on a glorious September morning. With stars of jasmine still in their hair, she and Lyndon posed for the camera against our exuberant bougainvillea hedge, and sped off overseas for a long honeymoon in the Lake District.

Ruby was the image of Arthur, but I neither knew nor cared how my mother-in-law responded to this likeness. He was ecstatic to have a daughter, literally handing out cigars to strangers at the nursing home. In gilt-edged greeting cards sent to family and friends, I managed to write glowing notes next to photos of her at two days old. But beyond that, I felt like a hostage to motherhood and marriage, and scared to death of raising a girl.

During those days, Nathan said to me, “Dad, this house has never been the same since Ruby was born.” It was unlike his loyal nature, so I told him how blessed

we were to have her and that everything would settle down. But of course everything had changed. I just didn't perceive what had been catalysed.

She screamed, day and night, for months. There was nothing we could do to placate her. The doctor said she had good lungs. Perhaps she was hungry. She and I had not bonded soon enough. Could she sense that there had been a dubious welcome to news of her conception – was it a kind of divine discontent? What did she want with us as her parents?

And how in G-d's name did my mother cope with all ten of us, some growing up, some dying?

Have I deprived you of peace, all over again? What made me think I had the strength to carry you all into wellbeing? Love is my duty and duty is my love. I will honour that oath to you, Rebecca. I will do my utmost.

By the time Arthur and I were to marry, my mother's second stroke had paralysed her right side. She couldn't hit me any more, but still raged terribly. She lay there, twisted and wrung, furious and feeble. Over the previous years, while my brothers and sisters went to work and stayed out with their friends, I washed her, combed her hair, brought her meals, read to her. I picked up the bath-sponge flung across the room, deflected her ineffectual blows, scraped up the soft vegetables and shards of china off the floor, leaned against the passage wall outside her room and choked back the sorrow.

You lay frangipani around our table-settings on birthdays. The first thing you wanted in your garden was a bird-bath. When we are ill, you tend to us with quiet devotion and a healer's intuition. You see through false promises and no one should dare to threaten our privacy, safety or character. I had a thyroid disorder when my peers were signing up for the War; someone sent me a white feather, but you were delighted that I was prevented from combat.

Out of respect for my parent's constraints, Arthur and I exchanged vows in their sitting-room, we two in new suits, but there was no money for flowers or a cake. A few stamp-sized photos are the only mementoes of the day; I look like a simpering shrimp, and Arthur took off his spectacles in an odd gesture of vanity, so he is squinting into the sun.

You are fearless in motion, driving your car neatly and briskly, with antennae for hazards. You've always longed to fly a helicopter. So petite and powerful, my Mistress of Happiness. With Brahms on the record-player, I loved to sketch you on weekend afternoons when you weren't aware or too self-conscious.

We moved into a boarding house at first, buying a few pieces of furniture to make a new home of our room. When my mother died soon afterwards, I kept vigil, washed her for the last time before her burial, reciting the Psalms and praying I would never have a daughter.

oOo

Deadheading

This is the one of the best things about my job at the Lear house. The middle of the winter morning, after taking the boss to the office or the factory in Verulam and Ruby to school. I've freed the pool of leaves to make it silver in the sun and now, I can be in the sweet scent of the China roses along the length of this big lower garden.

The day is warm but the air is fresh, not sweaty like the devil's armpit. The madam is peaceful today, and is not going out. When she's like this, we can all be at our best. There are always her rules, and we have to watch for signs of trouble, but today there is no need for secret messages to the children or warnings from Christina and Regina at the back door.

Because they live in, they are the ones who know first if there has been strife the night before. When I pitch up, I can tell by their faces how the mood is. Christina hands me my first mug of tea and the key to the garden cabin where I keep my home clothes and books, eat lunch and roll my cigarettes. Regina, her auntie, is doing the washing in the laundry next to the kitchen and greets me through the open window.

They are always smart in their starched uniforms, smiling, even when poor Regina's bad teeth are paining her; the madam wants to take her to the dentist, but Regina is too afraid. The way they sing also tells me if they are cheerful or not – a soft hum like a prayer if the madam is sick or angry, or a rich Zulu folk-tune that they sing together if all is well. Then I go to wash and polish the car for the day, and change into my suit for driving.

I pick up more signs when Ruby and the boss come to the car and during the trip across the Berea and into town. They too always greet me kindly, but one day they are sad, silent and tense, then the next, joking and chatting. I listen to them closely when they talk, how they think; the boss teaches Ruby things all the time

and she tells him clever, funny stories. Today, she spoke about the boys taking the bus – they don't want to be chauffeur-driven. "They go to school with Corporation Claude," she told him. The boss asked her what she meant, and she said, "They take Debussy." I didn't understand it, but he was still laughing about it after we dropped her off.

On some mornings, she doesn't like to leave him and says she wants to go to work with him. I watch him smooth her hair down and see her off, telling her he'd like to go to school with her – but not that day.

Things like this put the Lears deep into my heart. The boss has to hold so much together, so many worries, but he never takes it out on us. I know when he's thinking about the madam or even nursing bruises, but he only asks me how I am and instructs me for the day. I can talk to him about anything. So many rich white people, I see how selfish they are, what they teach their children. But Boss Lear, for me, is like a good king, Nathan and Benjamin are princes and Ruby is the princess.

I check the stems of the rose-bushes for fungus, greenfly and moths, and rub them off with garlic water. Then with the secateurs I cut away brown, drooping flowers, to mix with the wet leaves from the pool filter for the compost heap. For the house I choose the best of the newer heads – not too full, but not young buds. I know how to strip the thorns and mix the sprays from the shorter Floribunda shrubs with the taller Tea roses for a nice show in the brass rose-bowl that Regina has polished. All the colours, the dark and pale pink, yellow, apricot, sharp red and the creamy, they look grand together. I crush the cut stems and arrange them with a one-cent coin and a Disprin in the ice-water.

Often, in the afternoons, the children come to me in the cabin, one by one, or Benjamin and Ruby together. Nathan comes to beg a forbidden smoke from me, which we share with one ear and one eye on guard. If he goes back into the house

smelling of smoke, he can say he was standing in mine. We talk about his father's car, which he loves, the yacht or motorbike he wants to build, and politics.

The two younger ones have a competition for the best vegetable patch (I am the judge), and together we plan a tree-house. Benjamin gives me cowboy novels to read on rainy days; Ruby spends time with Regina and Christina in their room, reading *Drum* magazine and talking, always talking. She comes to complain to me if the boys are teasing her unfairly, but she enjoys being a tom-boy and wants only her brothers' games.

The madam loves my roses. When I come carrying them into the house through the kitchen, along the passage and stop to knock on the open door to the lounge where she sits, she turns, sees them.

"Ah, Mr Singh," her face shines.

If she can, she gets up to smell them and place them on a special table; we talk about the garden, and I tell her how rose petals thrown into a flame can bring good luck. She asks me things about my wife and daughters, or about a prayer-day we might be having at home.

On these days, she is a queen, and the roses are my offering, something to keep her spirit happy. Then her anger comes, cruel and wild. It comes from very bad pain, not only in her body but in her mind, I think from a long time ago. I can say she is like a rose, easily broken, with her prickles to defend her. Not everyone understands why these hurt. They are only hooks on the skin of the stem and can be handled if you know how.

oOo

It is she that I have watered

What have I done? I can't face them.

Let them rot in the vase, there can never be beauty again.

Leave me fetid in the hard, dark well, so no-one should have to touch me or even see me.

Nathan was right. "You called him a coolie! It's you who shames us. How can you sleep at night?"

Bali Singh, take the cutters and slit my throat, split my sick skull open with a brick.

You were not here for three days after the weekend. You have no phone and we don't know how to find your house, somewhere in Chatsworth, we never bothered to know. When you arrived on the fourth morning, I took in your yellow eyes, sagging shoulders, puckered collar of an unwashed shirt, sure you'd been drinking, still drunk.

It was your mumbling, raw throat, the deadened gaze off-centre. I thought you'd done something too terrible to admit.

I boiled with disgust, spewed it on you, at you.

I heard "sick child, died" from somewhere in the muffle.

Saw my wrist lobbing the full heavy metal bowl at your sunken chest to silence the lying.

Slaughtered my own voice defying it.

Mocking your stricken face – wet, not just with the bowl's water.

Time after is blank.

I surface in the casket of a dim, cool bedroom, Arthur's shape in there with me, the alien smell of Dr Goldstein's laundered safari-suit, a bandage on my torn wrist, aniseed breath of the minister whose church I will never belong to.

Two weeks, they say, I mislaid, misled.

Bali Singh, where is he now?

Back at work, cremated his daughter.

It should have been me.

oOo

You may pass flowers

I stayed there for four years after our little Devi died of meningitis, until Mr Lear was retrenched and couldn't afford to keep me on. We never spoke much about the horrible morning when the madam didn't believe me, but she wrote me an apology which I still have, and Mr Lear paid for Devi's hospital and funeral costs. Christina was terrified of Mrs Lear, and found another job, but her aunt Regina stayed.

In all the months that followed, there was quiet giving from the family. Nathan bought me cartons of cigarettes out of his pocket-money. For my three remaining girls, Benjamin gave me bags of books and Ruby wrapped up all her beautiful dolls with their clothes. I knew she didn't really like them anyway, but she knew my girls would.

By the time I left them, Nathan was at University, studying law, doing so well, very thin but handsome with his long curly blond hair, zipping around in a cream Caravelle. He was full of jokes for me, but growing more serious about starting his own life. Sometimes he would go sailing, but mainly, after lectures, he worked in the garage and around me in the cabin, making some surfboards, or his favourite – stripping and rebuilding old British and Italian motorbikes and sports cars for re-sale.

The madam loved his projects and she always asked him to take her for a ride before he sold the cars. But then, something about his smoking, his tankard of beer or his oily overalls would snap her temper, and she would take the car-keys away and threaten to stop paying for his studies, screaming that he was not being raised to be a “low-class mackie” and a “grease-monkey”. Nathan would go white-hot-mad at this, shout back at her, and outside, swear at the sky. If one of the bikes was roadworthy, he would roar off to see his girlfriend Holly, a kind, quiet nursing student. He would come back calmer, but very down, his mouth like a straight line.

During the Easter holiday the year I left, he made another plan to make his own savings, thinking he might need to find his own way through law school. He joined the Railways as a shunter down at Bayhead, working nights and weekend-shifts for even higher pay. This was not something that young white men with his education ever did in those days, but Nathan was not snobbish or afraid of hard work. The madam was shaken to the core over it, but this time her explosion was not the devil-rage – it was a mother’s fear, plain and raw, of her son being chopped between the crashing train trucks.

One evening, she asked me to stay late and go down to the docks with the boss to find Nathan on shift.

“Please, Mr Singh, he adores you, he’ll listen to you. Tell him I’ll never take him out of University. He could be maimed or killed. Please, Mr Singh ...”

We went, the boss and me, and I felt special, that I was in this with him, trying to make it better, hoping it could help. When we found his train, Nathan was leaning out of the metal coach in his raggy T-shirt in the fumes and misty orange flood-lights. He was shocked to see us there – I think at first he thought something very bad had happened at home – but when Mr Lear explained, Nathan looked at him with a terrible scorn that cut through me like a panga. I tried to persuade him.

But he turned away, warning us to keep clear of the trains.

He kept up the short-term work on the Railways, because that money made him strong. In the July holiday he stoked the engines on the goods trains up north to Zululand and back, coming home now and again covered in soot, tanned and dressed only in black shorts, his Navy boots with thick socks and a tatty black Railway waistcoat.

The madam steamed, but not loudly.

Dawn patrol

Midnight folds back for the drowsy approach of dawn.

On the upstairs porch, kindly shadows bow over the three children's beds.

As a sky of wine and apricot begins to sheath the docile city, disorder rumbles behind the interleading door to their parents' bedroom. The fire razing through Rebecca engulfs Arthur once again, blistering through the coral-silk blind over the bubbled glass door-panes.

The noise strikes into the sediment of the children's sleep and arrests their travelling hearts.

Far too early for the ebullience of his alarm clock, Nathan stirs first. A reverb of joyful seagulls lifts him from a view of full sails in a crackling wind, to the overhead presence of the ceiling beams and the sudden screech of his mother's hysteria.

In the dawn-shiver of phantom grass, Benjamin feels a surprise of feathers growing from his ankles, then a Palomino's golden sigh around his head becomes the warmth of the pillow. The fall of hooves transmutes into a rising percussion of fists upon flesh, and his breath grabs at the dissolving dream.

Ruby's contented snuffles on the furry forehead of her toy dog become patchy. Catapulted awake, she suppresses a single terrified sniff of awareness with the sheet and blanket bunched against her open mouth.

Into this rank routine of ambush, they are trussed together across the few feet of parquet floor between the beds in a topology of silence, knowing that they hear, but never why. Rigid, they strain to listen, sieving the spill of invective and the freakish thuds against a roar of adrenaline in their ears.

Seven days earlier, at the chink of early morning tea-cups and a whiff of crumpets, they had bounded to the door and squirreled into the comforting rumple of chenille and cotton warmed by their parent's bodies. Revelling in the frowsy preface to a tranquil day, Nathan had bantered with Rebecca, as Ruby and Benjamin tweaked the hairs on their father's leg, squealing at the mischief of it.

But now, a familiar, liquid panic floods into their glands, icy poison indelibly deranging their blood-cells and biding its time for the snare of malignancy in adulthood.

oOo

On balance

Sitting cross-legged in the hallway, young Ruby lays out ornaments gathered during her parents' travels overseas and retrieved from the red-lacquered drawers of a Chinese cabinet.

Two pairs of castanets embellished with piped swirls, like cake icing, on twists of red and yellow cord.

A brightly painted babushka doll with its nest of replicas.

A hunk of pale green glass in the shape of an iceberg, sandblasted with a figure of a Lapp.

A magnifying glass and letter-opener from Portobello Road, matched with mother-of-pearl handles.

While a Florentine marquetry music-box tinkles out "O Solo Mio", she fiddles with a tiny barometer, housed in an intricately carved Swiss chalet. On a hidden swivel at its centre, a male and female figure alternate emerging from their respective doorways. The man wears a raincoat and carries an umbrella, while the woman is dressed for sunshine, with a bonnet and basket of flowers.

Try as Ruby might, she cannot get the two to appear together.

oOo

I am a truthful man

Ruby did it again. Flew down the stairs like the caped avenger, trying to end the hours of battering with her pleas for justice on Dad's behalf. Now it's much worse. Now he's accused of using his daughter as a shield and a weapon.

I warned Ruby this would happen, but she and Nathan don't know how to fold themselves up. I tell them there's nowhere to go, nothing to do but wait it out. Just get out of the way, like a grain of sand in the whorl of a nautilus shell.

So we sit on Nathan's bed, Ruby disgraced and expelled from the lounge, snotty and shaking. We talk in murmurs below Mom's rising yells and Dad's exhausted denials, waiting for the wrecking-ball to find its mark. Nathan says, Ruby, you can't fight irrationality with rationality, and she's barking mad. We giggle a bit, still frantic, and angry.

People say I was born old. Wise, I suppose they mean. But it's just my own alternative. I don't know anything special. Mom never targets me in any way, but there's no secret key for that cage. I try to make my own space in the shame, repeating to myself that what I can't change has nothing to do with me. She always talks about how shy I was as a toddler, hiding behind the sofa when strange visitors arrived, and following her everywhere. My brother and sister want to speak out, change things, get free, have normal lives. We all do, but I prefer not to speak until it's worth the gamble, until I know that I can have an effect. There aren't many chances for that – either the other two are stirring things up, or there's nothing persuasive to be said.

I have a riding crop that I will never use. With Rebel, the wildest horse at my riding school, I feel deep calm. He's known as my horse because he's so thunderous that none of the other pupils can or want to go near him. He is magnificent – velvet black with no markings and huge, expressive eyes, he stands at sixteen hands and is seldom approachable, snorting irritably with flat-back

ears on a good day. But knowing he'd been handled harshly when he was young, I only ever felt humble and tender towards him. He pitched me, of course, but only once, and soon I could take him into a rising trot and then a gliding canter. I can't explain why we trust each other, but over the stable door, my cheek resting against his nose is my grateful greeting and his graceful goodbye.

I find it hard to leave him.

I can tell Mom's tipping-point, most of the time. She was in the middle of a long, bitter lecture to me and Ruby one afternoon; we had to stand up straight, look at her as she spoke, pay attention to something, I forget what – if it was ever clear – and some phrase she used sounded oddly comical. Ruby pulled on my little finger, with her lips tightened under her teeth, and I knew she'd caught on to the joke. I lowered my head a bit, and pinched my mouth into a duck's bum.

But Mom sees everything.

“Benjamin? Stop laughing behind your eyes at once!”

It took a few seconds to judge it, but it wasn't shrill, there was no unraveling.

I led her into my smile, sensing it would be alright.

And then, her laugh. It filled the room with a peculiar power – no lilting tinkle, but a loud, naughty cackle. It threw her head back in that jerky way because of her neck, and the black in her eyes burst into light.

So we all fell about, and things were easier for a while.

I may be in the shadows, but I'm not indifferent. When she shrieks one of their names like a swear-word from some level of the house and fear wheels through the rooms, a glacier sweeps from the top of my head down my spine, and my arms feel like stumps. I shrivel just to think of it, that she who has known the shape and tone of us from within her, can choke us like this. Like an artery, opening and closing.

But I remember one humid night, when we woke to sounds of lapping water from the garden, and, looking out of the upstairs windows, we saw Mom and Dad naked in the pool. Holding her with his usual chivalry, he looked like an unnerved

guardian, as if the whole street could see them while she tickled him, telling him not to worry. It didn't feel right to keep watching them, but as I lay down again, I felt an umbilical safety.

Unbaffled, I long for her.

oOo

The dog in her cage

A beam of afternoon sun dapples Rebecca's tomato-red Olivetti typewriter. Looking up, she sees Ruby pass outside the study window, home from school.

"That haversack's too heavy for you, Ruby. Your back is hunching under the straps. What on earth have you got in there?"

"It's these *gesunde* art books, for my essay on Cubism."

The local Jewish day college is the only high school offering Ruby's chosen subject combination of Art, History and French. Its library is her wonderland.

"What are you writing, Mama?"

"A letter to Benjamin. Look, two arrived from him today! I can't make out where he is, though. The pages are full of black Koki-pen, and the postmarks say Pretoria, but that can't be right."

"He's on the border now, Mama, so the Army censors are busy. Let me get some milk and a salad, and we'll read them together."

Six months earlier, Benjamin had left home on a year's call-up to the South African Defence Force. It had been different for Nathan in 1970; because of his yachting experience, he had done his nine months of military service in the Navy. Freed to the sea, he'd had a whale of a time doing basic training in Simonstown, and later as a seaman gunner on a minesweeper, without any prospect of combat. When Nathan came home, resplendent in his white step-outs, Ruby and Benjamin had burrowed through his shoulder-high tog-bag, spellbound with adoration for their big brother.

But Benjamin was assigned to a year in infantry, to defend the ostensible peace and justice of the apartheid regime. Tensely acquiescent to his fate, he had asked

that Nathan alone drive him to Durban Station to catch the troop-train, and jokingly warned the family not to send him any messages to “Forces’ Favourites”, the English Radio Programme’s Saturday afternoon broadcast for servicemen. The house felt dismembered without his quiet presence, and Ruby and Rebecca had been struck dumb for a full week.

They sit now in twin armchairs, digesting the serrated contents of Benjamin’s letters. Rebecca rolls her head to ease the jagging sinews in her neck. Ruby senses her unspoken thoughts.

“I miss him, too, Mama, so much. Just read between his lines ... see, here as he says, bite tight ... he seems to be coping. And he looked so fit when he was home on pass. Never mind the gross haircut!”

“Still, he’s not made for this. That awful rifle he has to carry, and all that pack. I couldn’t bear to look at it. My son ... cannon-fodder ... How can they eat properly in the bush?”

“I’ve no idea. It must be tough for him, but in a few more months he’ll be home again.”

Ruby strains to winch Rebecca back from hopelessness.

“Remember, Mama, when Nathan wrote from his ship saying that the rations were mean, and you immediately placed a standing hamper order with Greenacres to send him. He loved the first one, but they kept coming, and even after sharing them out among the crew, he begged you to stop because the food was attracting rats!”

Rebecca fixes her with a dishevelling glance, which Ruby misreads for distress rather than irritation. Putting her empty plate down on the side-table between them, she leans towards her mother.

“I was thinking ... Mama, I don’t know how you’ll feel about this, because you aren’t really connected to Jewish faith anymore. But this morning, the Rabbi came to school to give the Friday lesson in Jewish Studies. He was telling us about the reasons for observing the Sabbath, that it’s like welcoming a bride. There’s a beautiful story in the Talmud about how an angel visits each home on the eve of Shabbat and blesses it if there are candles lit. I thought maybe we could do that tonight, and think of Benjamin?”

Rebecca’s face contorts into a sneering pall.

“A BRIDE? An ANGEL? Over my dead body will you bring that crap into my house!”

Horrified, Ruby draws back, her brain gnawing for logic.

“But Mama, why ... ? We never eat pork or shellfish, and you always say you want to be buried in a plain pine coffin. I don’t understand ... why can’t we light candles?”

Rebecca is out of her chair, pulling Ruby up by the roots of her hair, slamming her other hand across Ruby’s face.

“BE QUIET! How dare you twist my love for my sons into a parody? That all I can do is fret and overfeed! All this hocus-pocus of candles! I am NOT a Jewish mother! And you’re only at that school to get a good education, not to tell me what to believe in. IS THAT CLEAR?”

A backhander strikes Ruby’s other cheek, the claws of Rebecca’s ring scoring the skin.

“I don’t answer to you, or rabbis, or anyone! If you persist with this, you’ll find yourself in a Christian boarding school so fast you won’t remember your own

name. There's nothing beautiful about being Jewish. As far as I'm concerned, six million weren't enough! Now get out of my sight! GET OUT!"

Ruby scrambles from the study and up the stairs to her bedroom, to soil her pillow with tears of longing for Benjamin, and of guilt for the new salvo of recrimination that her father will face on his innocent return from work. But her mystified despair and revulsion for her mother's self-abasement cannot be drained.

During her first attendance at morning worship held in the school hall before assembly, Ruby had watched in engulfing wonder as one of her male classmates folded his fringed prayer-shawl over his head; bathed in sunlight, his low chanting of ritual praise in the humbling melancholy of the Hebrew had delivered her into an ancient, nameless presence. It was momentous. She had felt chosen, betrothed, her soul swaddled in an unknowable peace.

Since then, Ruby has revelled in Hebrew language lessons and rabbinic commentaries, and in poring through Jewish history, so rich, yet so wretched. Now, with her ears trained for Rebecca's piercing call, she quivers through her prayer-book, trying to escape from the rancid, cavernous place into which Rebecca's words have flung her.

Tradition teaches her that the sound of the spoken word is immensely powerful, for good or bad. Guttled by Rebecca's hateful negation of genocide, she cannot pray out loud to counter it, and so holds the open book against her throat.

She is well acquainted with the cruelty of her mother's anger – how Rebecca can, and will, resort to whatever would hurt most. But this goes deeper. In the ravaging Holocaust testimonies, she has read of the evil cascading into the psyche of some victims – of a boy, not much younger than she is, in a death-camp, snatching a stale crust of bread from his dying father's hand. What could have made her mother so rabidly opposed to her own heritage?

Through the portals of Rebecca's revisited hell, the days and nights rotate in a labouring spiral. Rebecca makes strident phone-calls to Ruby's headmaster, forbidding her to attend Hebrew and Jewish Studies classes, and to her school-friends' mothers, prohibiting all social contact.

In a few stolen moments, Arthur assures Ruby that she should hold to the faith she finds, in secret if necessary, and that love transcends all ancestry.

Once again, the household becomes a hushed bunker of impotence, waiting for a signal that all is clear.

Eventually, it comes.

Early one Friday evening, Ruby is in her bedroom, paging through a book of self-portraits, and as she halts at an image of Salvator Rosa in the Baroque period, Rebecca knocks.

They sit together on the stool in front of the dressing-table, and Rebecca taps lavender ointment around the angry scab on Ruby's cheek.

Softly counting to a hundred, she draws the hairbrush in long, slow sweeps down her daughter's Titian mantle.

"Rubelein. Do you remember when you were in primary school, your sweet little friend, Georgia Camden, stopped playing with you for no apparent reason? One morning, at the hairdresser, I found myself seated next to her mother. I greeted her very warmly; she turned and looked at me as if I were some cockroach wagging its feelers at her ankles, and with venom in her voice, she said: 'To whom am I speaking?', and turned away without waiting for a reply. Later, I heard from someone else that the Camdens did not permit their children to associate with Jews. Mark my words. If you proclaim Judaism, you'll be persecuted for the rest of your life."

Ruby turns around, about to speak.

Aut tace, aut loquere meliora silentio, Rosa had written in paint.

Either be silent, or say something better than silence.

Ruby looks into her mother's lost, lonely face, and instead, their foreheads join.

And they rest.

oOo

In the matter between

A barricade of papers, three decades old, lost into sheaths of frayed folders.
 Ruby pulls the cartons towards her, contracting her shoulder-blades to ease the
 binds of too many moves, so many keepsakes.

Drawings of friends, cards full of wishes for forgotten futures.
 Past poses held captive in photos, and X-rays preserving spectral physiology.
 A headmaster's compliments joust with school records that testify to years of
 under-achievement.

Letters she wrote to her parents, and theirs to her.

Reassembling each item into file-worthy stacks on the earthen floor-tiles, she
 trawls through the maze of whys and wherefores, the endless attempts at escape
 from the dark love of her mother, and the consistent returns.

1995. A postcard from Rebecca, received during Ruby's working holiday in
 London:

*Dear Ruby. I'm sending you these two little dogs – complete with sunglasses - to
 cheer you up and to watch over you. You've done very well overseas, Ruby, and
 shown tremendous guts. Don't let the rude people in the hostel get to you –
 what are they to you anyway? And remember what troubles they have seen in
 their lives, in Bosnia and Sierra Leone. Keep faith and love yourself. People will
 always be jealous of you. Do retreat to your room and let G-d speak to you.
 Rest a while when you can. Don't go to bed too late! I don't want to ask Nathan
 about your car right now, Ruby – he is full of 'flu and says he can't go to bed,
 got to keep the till ringing. You know how he doesn't spare himself. In any case,
 it is safe and happy and all is well. You must be eating too much cheese again at
 night (don't laugh). See a doctor about your coughs and sneezes. Keep your
 sense of humour and enjoy what you can. Ignore abrasive people.
 Love, Mama.*

Legal: proof of properties bought and sold, aging pay-slips, an early Will detailing laughable bequests. A Notice of Application for an Order: Applicant's Affidavit is appended in the name of a "minor spinster student", Ruby Verna Lear, making oath to this Honourable Court.

I didn't know I had this.

Her spine needs support, and the wall is a welcome brace.

"I am eighteen years old ... since about the age of twelve, I have been the victim of numerous assaults, false accusations, intimidation and humiliation at the hands of the Respondent ... I have reason to believe that the Respondent is emotionally unstable in the extreme ... I intend to ask the Respondent and my father whether they will co-operate with me in a contemplated action by myself to be declared a major in terms of the Age and Majority Act No. 57 of 1972 ... on the grounds that the Respondent is an unfit parent ..."

"I humbly pray ...

Signed ...

Sworn to ...

On this 7th day of May 1978."

I still humbly pray. For all of us.

oOo

Asylum

The subterfuge of Ruby's stolen evening in Durban is behind her – dinner and dancing with her first boyfriend at his brother's Graduation Ball, staying over with her best friend's parents.

The return trip goes smoothly this Sunday morning. Peeling off the main road into Pietermaritzburg, the tyres crunch to a halt in the gravelled parking ground of her residence. It had been fun, but it was fraught, as fellow residents covered for her with a scripted ruse about an overnight study group somewhere off-campus. No-one in her campus circle could really understand why her mother should not know about it, but they had obliged nonetheless.

A shy kiss, a hasty parting, and a sprint to the entrance.

Skipping up the porch steps with ready anecdotes for the common-room coffee-klatzsch, Ruby reads the waiting faces of her three friends grouped around the banister.

Cognition stops her dead, even before they speak.

“She phoned already. She knows.”

“They're on their way up here.”

“Rube, do you want me to drive you away somewhere?”

The familiar crumpling, from glib to grim.

“No. Thanks anyway. I'd better just face the music.”

Waiting, the girls huddle next to her on the bottom step, perplexed and tense, comrades-in-arms in a conflict alien to them. Most of the thirty residents know that Ruby's home-life is peculiar, that she lives on the edge of their communal growing pains, bound in dictates set by a domineering mother. Ruby's nightly curfew is nine o'clock, and the House President has been charged with reporting her associations, male or female. The girls on her floor now use the urgent jangle of the call-box beneath the stairwell every morning, noon and evening, for their

own time-keeping – but none wish to answer it and comply with Rebecca’s remote patrol of Ruby’s whereabouts.

Until she’d finished Matric, Ruby had never been allowed anywhere without one of her brothers accompanying her. For the first two years of high school, she’d kept a journal, discarding it in a delirium of shame when Nathan discovered that Rebecca was reading it every day. Ten years later, while looking through her mother’s recipe books during a visit home from Cape Town, Ruby would come upon a bewildering sheaf of photocopies – her own diary pages, festooned with Rebecca’s annotations.

She has survived her first year away from home by comic dramatising to her new friends of what she calls her parole conditions. In their cramped bedrooms after supper, amid a tangle of slippers and feet, shared make-up and over-flowing ashtrays, she serialises her cloistered status as a ward of the Residence into loopy tales that belie the yearning and indignity. Persuaded by Ruby’s cheery stoicism, the benevolent Lady Warden manages Rebecca’s abnormal algorithm with a light touch.

But in this second year, Ruby has gone too far. She can hear her brothers’ censure.

What made you think you could?

A few hours under a mirror-ball were worth this?

There will be a price, and worst of all, Arthur will pay with interest.

Swallowing hard, she remembers how this measure of independence came about.

Her post-Matric vacation was spent doing clerical work at her father’s office; one evening, she’d lingered too long at a farewell for emigrating schoolfriends and broken her curfew. Flying into a brutal rage, Rebecca had banished Ruby and Arthur from the house. Nathan was newly married and only Benjamin remained, vapourising into his room with his Economics lecture notes.

Maintaining a daily façade of happy-boss-and-daughter for Arthur's staff, the exiled pair took two rooms at a private lodge nearby, lurching through their nights between solemn rumination, fitful sleep and insomnia. When Arthur was allowed into the house during that fortnight, he returned bent and bruised. The family doctor advised him to have his injuries photographed in case of divorce proceedings.

Ruby had sat thinking of other moments in their home, her six-year-old view from below the piano, its keys like teeth, the underside of her father's hands, the majesty of the bass notes in Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. II, and that waltz by von Weber that she referred to, inexplicably, as "The Wolf to the Wolf".

"Would you divorce her, Daddy?"

"Ruby. The very nature of a vow is that it cannot be broken. What sort of a person would I be if I left her? She's terrified of life as it is. What would become of her? You three will make your own lives soon enough, and I'll do all I can to help you prepare for that, but your mother is my life. Everything I've built, everything I am, is in her hands. Besides, I love her."

Once Rebecca's demons had withdrawn and the home regained some composure, Arthur convinced her that for Ruby, the degree in Fine Art offered only at the Pietermaritzburg campus would be more advantageous than the local Technikon's diploma. Having chipped out this fissure of liberty for his daughter, he opened an art-store account in her name with ample credit for materials, and every month an exquisitely colour-plated Art History book would arrive in her residence mail-box.

"Is that them?"

Ruby nods, her gaze fixed through the trees on the chocolate-brown Volvo moving cautiously along the final stretch of road carved around the residence.

"We can vouch for your story. Surely she'll believe it if she hears it from us?"

"It must be close to lunch-time. Don't stay. I'll catch you later."

Leadened limbs carry her towards the car, failing as the passenger door opens. Rebecca's hair is in wild tufts. Glowering, tight-jawed, she pulls at the rear door. "Get in."

It lies like a deadly black snake on the back seat. Ruby's stomach seizes, not so much at the sight of the tapering leather cord, as the message it shrieks through its deliberate placement.

"No, not this. No. I didn't do anything to deserve this."

Her teeth will not synchronise with her tongue.

"Don't mistake me, you lying slut, if you think your tales are going to save you. I know exactly where you were last night, and you've asked for the hiding of your life. I have only one question, and you will tell me the truth, because the tricks are over."

Arthur's shoulders are shaking, his hands pressed over his face.

"Don't look to your father! This sack of shit won't be helping you any more. How long have you been sleeping with that cretin you think is your boyfriend?"

The girls from the residence pass the car on the way to the dining-room. As their heads turn backwards, Ruby sees their drained faces, eyes contused with vicarious fear. Defiance rises up within her, and the words take shape as if cued by an alternative self.

"I won't respond to that."

"Ruby, please! Just answer your mother, for heaven's sake."

"No. Not this time. You can't do this!"

"Whore! Get to your room and pack your things."

Suddenly the sjambok is in Rebecca's hand.

As Ruby reels away from the car, the first lash slices across her spine.

A second, harder, catches the back of her right arm.

The cracking pursues her as she bolts into the foyer.

In the corridor, more girls scatter in panic from the woman with the whip.

Into the bedroom, Rebecca's growling spittle flies at Arthur's face as she thrashes out of his grasp, eddying to a standstill above the buckled girl.

The flogging persists under a blur of shouts and thudding footfalls, until figures swirl into the room. Scrunched into a heap in the corner, Ruby's throat is raw with hacking sobs. Rebecca collapses over the tiny desk, lips edged with froth and her sleeves torn. Arms attached to adult strangers lift her onto the bed. A sedation scene unfolds, and the afternoon evaporates into a muddled parade of stethoscopes, bandaging and interrogation.

Arthur signs forms as Rebecca's small body is carried out, barely conscious, her head lolling against the wooden strut of the stretcher. Exhausted, he and Ruby sink into appalled silence.

The court order affords Ruby a brief escape from Rebecca's penal surveillance, but many pages of her potential will remain unwritten.

Exam-nightmares will puncture her sleep whenever a work deadline looms.

Locked in the stocks of her unconscious, hardened tubes of oil-colour and sealed textbooks are lobbed at her body; barren patches of canvas line her walls, and a banner reels across the dream-stage: *Not permitted to proceed to final year.*

She cannot forgive failing herself and her father, nor forget her lecturers' diagnosis: "You have more than enough talent – you just didn't put the time in."

Time and nature salve the weals on her back.

As the scars are traced under the inquisitive fingers of a future lover, she thinks of Rebecca's soft palms kneading oil into Nathan's congested chest.

Arthur's firm grip enfolding her own as the dentist drills into a root canal.

Her parents' hands, gently steering a sleepwalking Benjamin back to his bed.

Fierce repentance

The house is ten years older – like me, aging but still there, still theirs. The wooden double-doors of the lower garage need painting and the street-door is listing on its hinges. There is a second security gate now, at the top of the first set of steps. Mr Lear’s voice comes through the intercom, warm and familiar like old wood, lifting in surprise and welcome when I say “It’s Singh, Bali Singh”.

Through the soles of my shoes, my feet greet the old diamond-brick paving of the path, but I look away quickly from the grassed-over terrace above the pool.

There are no roses.

The side-door on the left of the house opens as I walk up towards it.

His hair is thick and white, quite long, and he has a soft wide hump around the back of his neck, but the same smile folds up around his wrinkled eyelids.

“There you are. Bali Singh.”

He grasps my hand and draws me into him with his other arm.

“Good morning, boss,” I say, and we stay like that for some while.

The old dining-room has a bed in it now, some chairs and a desk, a TV set and bookshelves. Mrs Lear seems smaller, very crooked, like a cripple-child, her dark hair completely silver.

I don’t want to see her so afraid of what to say, how to be. I kneel down to her blanketed legs, take her hands, they feel like soft little baby-doves, and kiss them. Her head, stiff on her twisted neck, drops low down as if to meet my forehead, and her face furrows into tears. Mr Lear moves towards her with a wad of tissues, dabs her cheeks and his own, pours us tea.

I tell them about the trucking business I started after I left them, the accident that left me with a disability grant, my daughters who are all teachers and married with young sons, the jewels of our life.

They show me photos of two grandchildren, an older Nathan and Holly,
Benjamin and Ruby, and the sight of them wakes a breath in my chest, sweet and
sore, as if they were mine.

But the photos seem to be all they have.

oOo

Coming to pass

Once again, on a branch swaying ominously close to the study's picture-window, a mother fork-tailed Drongo coddles her precious egg within its cup-shaped nest, while her mate keeps vigil from the lumbering old arms of an adjoining avocado tree.

Ruby believes in the presence of her ancestors. In all the mornings of her marriage, the conspicuous profile of the glossy all-black bird, peering through the sheet-glass into this room, brings Rebecca to mind.

Thirty years ago, this room was a nursery for Nathan's baby son, Saul. Elsewhere, and late in life, Benjamin is amazed at becoming a father. Now in her forties, Ruby has lost three longed-for pregnancies.

She no longer refers to herself as "a coffin for babies", but as a childless mother, she fixates on the wellbeing of this bird family. The previous spring, despite the bold defences of the breeding pair, their fledgling was attacked, and the mauled little corpse hung from the tatter of plant-down, cobwebs and lichen.

Distracted from writing a paper on the ethics of abortion, Ruby eyes the stormy afternoon garden for larger predatory birds, the stalking neighbourhood cat, and the lone male vervet monkey who regularly passes through from the nearby park. The ferocious wind could break the brittle perch of the Tibouschina tree and dash the nest to the ground. Rebecca had been petrified of Durban's afternoon storms, and would gather the three children with her into the cupboard under the stairs, assuring them that the smashing thunder was only the sound of heavenly housework.

Turning away from the gale-whisked trees, Ruby looks at the spines of books that animate two walls of shelves. Blowing the dust from her mother's bequeathed collection, she pages through signposts of Rebecca's protracted quest for enlightenment.

The Philosophy of Shakthi Worship: “the mother as Destroyer, Preserver and Creator ... despite her terrible exterior ... she confers knowledge ...It is not destruction, but transcendence.”

The Clouds and the Rain: “The art and supreme joy of love-play in China ... pleasure without remorse, the science, magic and mystery of the body in the Taoist ritual.”

Yoga and Sex: “Even those suffering from heart disease should indulge in the minimum sexual intercourse necessary to combat the ill effects of suppression.”

Mama had a naturist regard for nudity, and when we asked, she was candid about the mechanics of sex. But heaven forbid we should actually have any.

oOo

Undergoing

One of these days I will no longer be able to drive.

Not that I go very far, just around the Ridge to the shops or the park-and-ride for town, to treatments, to fetch old Mrs Clement for tea and the library. Arthur has done all he can to make this easier for me now that Bali has gone – an extended gear-stick for Bluebird, my Beetle, and another new car with automatic transmission. I can handle the pain for the morning, but by noon a manacle locks my neck and shoulder, and checking for traffic requires a full-body twist to the left. There are days when I'm driving alone and tired, and I feel like just taking a chance.

For myself, I don't fear, but Mrs Clement is my passenger. Her daughter Felicity – my dear physiotherapist – warned me today.

“I know it's unjust and disappointing, Rebecca, just when you've got into your stride, but it's also dangerous.”

I can't face this closing down, the greedy pain sawing off another bond. Mrs Clement is everything my mother was too depleted to give me: encouraging, accepting, appreciative. Her wisdom is not pedantic, but nudging, and in the refuge of her friendship, I never need to explain, defend or analyse.

“Clouds passing over the sun, my dear,” she tells me on the phone, when the wry-neck is grinding or the shadows slither into my mind, and I cannot manage our outing. “We can wait while they move on.”

She doesn't know what happens next, though, and I never want her to see it. The cracking sensation in my chest, the terror of toppling into a sorrow so hellish that everything in ordinary life evaporates. I can't even hold the mental image of her, the blue gaiety in her eyes and rosy ruche of her cheeks, pewter hair furred into an elegant chignon, the warm cushion of her arm linked into mine as we walk slowly to the lake in the Botanic Gardens. The beast takes it all, flooding his wild

blood through my veins for another bout of dispossession. I go blind, deaf, lame, and each time he leaves I take longer to see, hear and walk again.

It's not as if I "give in" to it, although people think I make a choice on this after some sort of deliberation. It's an attack, a lead apron that descends on me, toxin that seeps in me from all sides and up through my feet like fast-rising damp. Once on my knees, I have no power to repel it.

At best, my brothers and sisters, my children, see me as a virago with a hair-trigger instinct for offence. I don't mean to dispute this. But there are times when I feel justified in taking firm action.

Just last week that Hogan oaf next door got his come-uppance. He may be a successful haematologist, but his wife has noodles for brains and is a drug-addict, I'm certain of it. Their three sons are totally undisciplined, and G-d knows when they study; they only sleep when recovering from their booming, drunken house-parties. They all go off for long weekends, hauling their speedboat and motorbikes and leaving their two distraught St Bernards, unwashed and unwalked, to howl for days and nights. When Felicity comes up the path to treat me at home, the dogs launch themselves at the boundary fence, their huge barking heads so near her face that they frighten her witless.

I hoped Nathan could help with some sort of interdict, but he railed at me, saying that he's a maritime lawyer and that the Hogans are friends of his colleagues. I ask you. Why have a lawyer for a son when he won't help you to litigate in your time of need? So despite his threats to ban our contact with the grandchildren if I made any trouble, I instructed another firm to send this rabble a legal warning about their trapped and neglected dogs. The other morning, I had just got into my car, and Hogan loomed at the half-rolled window, shaking the letter and yelling imprecations at me. I started the engine and warned him to stand clear, but he ranted on, saying I should move to an old-age home. Being well over six-foot tall, his hairy navel – exposed by a burst shirt-button – invaded my vision,

and with all my might I whacked the open car door into his groin. I roared away, leaving him doubled over on the garage apron. Serves him right.

Apparently, some of my outbursts can be so grossly volcanic that friends, contractors, school principals, even live-in nurses, flee for their lives.

Sometimes I really can't remember what I said or did.

On occasion, I do, after a while. Then, I feel like a murderer being forced to view the corpses of my victims, and everything in me pulls into a state of aversion.

Marooned in the horror of it, I can't speak, much less admit anything.

So the people I cherish the most conclude that I can't make reasonable decisions, be honest or humble, or be capable of loving them.

Let's not kid around.

Psychotic, is how I've been labelled.

I think that's the worst of it – knowing that I'm generally regarded with dread and loathing, especially by my own flesh and blood.

How to explain that truth and loyalty is the moat I need to protect us all? I have to know what they're thinking so that I can correct all the false perceptions. My crusade is not peaceful, no, and often, at full volume and pace, barely manageable, but it begins and ends in the depths of my love for them.

Tomorrow, on my last solo drive to town, I'll buy Mrs Clements that lavender cashmere scarf at Stuttafords.

All that's left

The study is a haven for my sane-day self. Over the desk hangs “The Four Graces”, as Arthur calls it, a hand-coloured formal photo-portrait of me with my three sisters, all in our twenties.

Hazel, the eldest, is in the centre, regal in her black and gold floral silk – a piano teacher, who never married after the love of her life suffered a family scandal and broke off their engagement. She is the archetypal oldest sister, principled, parochial and generous to a fault. She still lives in the Cape, so we only see her once a year on holiday. She dotes on our children, buying them outfits with money she can hardly spare, and composing little songs for them when they were smaller. My heart breaks for her, not having the children she longed for, although we never discuss it.

Alongside her, with a marquise brooch in the shape of a sprite on her collar, is Fay, the youngest. She was nervous and frail as a small child, still so young as my mother's life ebbed away, and my father was especially protective of her. The dreamer of our brood, an aspiring playwright, she is as mercurial as her name and passion suggests, and now lives abroad where she can steep her imagination in ancient cultures. I worry about her being single so far away and rather too fascinated with all things Continental, but she has no airs about working in live-in jobs to fund her quest, and weighs up her options carefully before swapping Greece for Scandinavia.

Above us is pretty, impish Bella in a chic crew-neck jumper, our brothers' favourite, She could have been a fine dancer, if not for her caprice which obviated the self-discipline of rehearsals. Thankfully, she's settled now as a sporty, entertaining wife and mother, and although I envy her popularity with my children, I gladly entrust them to her care when needed. We share the fair-weather times, and she's a tonic for me when I lack confidence in crowds, but

when the fun stops, she has no patience for my moods, abhors the very subject of illness, and despises any hint of hysteria.

I look ... inquisitive. Thinking back to those years, when I was lithe and full of plans rather than notions, I saw life as a labyrinth of challenges that I alone would face down, armed with values, skills, persuasive power and sheer will. I had long since realised that beauty and charm were not my gifts.

There should be five of us.

A sister in between Hazel and me, whose glorious auburn hair and flawless skin would off-set our olive and jet quartet.

I resist thinking of her death as a wound, which it was and still is, because she was too good for the world.

But Hannah was mine, and recollecting that is macerating for me.

In our large, working-class family, solidarity was a motto and we funded a common store of emotional support for one another, but our parents had little time to spare for our individual needs. A natural order, a sort of pairing for caring, evolved among us, with the older siblings paying special attention to younger ones. Among the girls, Hazel held Bella, and Hannah held me.

Everyone who met her was inescapably enchanted with Hannah; her poise was unassuming but luminous with intelligence and compassion. She bathed people in laughter and her mere presence would infuse the room with harmony. She sang and played the violin, reducing us all to tears. Young men streamed to Hannah's seat at local dances, and my parents benignly fielded their arrival at our home to call on her, trusting her mature discernment. She didn't need shielding – she shielded us.

So her particular regard for me ensured my deliverance into an Eden of favour: she understood my temper, explaining it as deep sensitivity distorted into self-defence. She championed my willingness to take on household chores, and was

my only source of applause for consistent success in English composition. She said I was courageous and destined for great things.

Those evenings when she'd be dressing to go out were the highlights of my girlhood. I had the privilege of helping her to get ready, my gangly limbs reaching to take the amethyst satin ball-gown donated by our wealthy aunt off its hanger, nail-bitten fingers unfastening the covered buttons down the back. Avoiding the sight of my untamed mop in the mirror, I would sit transfixed while she crimped her hair into chic waves of russet and endured my endless parables and fumings.

I would ply her with queries about the eligibility of her suitors, who by and large were known to our brothers, Marlon, Jasper and Vincent.

"Could Ivor be your true love, d'you think? His ears make him look like a jug with handles."

"Not really, poppet," she'd smile, "but he's a sweet friend, and I'm sure we'll have a lovely evening, regardless of his silhouette."

"Eerie, dearie! OK, ears are one thing, but that Maurice Bernard has such huge hairy hands. He gives me the creeps. How would you know when Mr Right arrives?"

"I'm not sure, and to be honest, I'm not considering a serious romance with anyone. But if it happens, it's less likely to be because he's good-looking. Some people are beautiful because they have special talents and kind hearts."

"What if he's not Jewish?"

"I think love is greater than dogma."

"What's dogma?"

"It's a set of teachings that give us rules to believe in. All religions have these rules, but you don't have to belong to one particular faith to be a fine person. Sometimes we also have to believe in what we don't know, or aren't told. We just have to care for other people, no matter who they are."

"What if they're smelly or cruel to you?"

"Oh, Becca ... well, illness can make our bodies smell bad, and pain or fear can make you nasty. It's not always easy, I know, but we should stop to think about

those things before we judge or hit back, and imagine what it feels like to be them.”

She dignified my eight-year-old curiosity simply by celebrating it, and if I had any need of dogma, my faith lay in her. I believed she would always be my live-in fairy godmother, more than I trusted the rote of our prayers to the invisible, almighty, ageless male creator to whom all praise was due ... and in the blur of the following year, when I heard my father tell my mother that he was worried about Hannah’s persistent cough and her slight stagger as she walked up the path from work, it didn’t register as a threat to my assurance.

Maurice Bernard ran the bakery not far from our school, and was smitten with Hannah, but had never tried to take her out. Each day, when I stopped there to buy bread on my way home, I hated the sight of those hands touching our loaves. He’d go through a ritual of pleasantries, asking after the family and slipping a small iced doughnut into the packet for me (which I couldn’t bear to eat and would give to little Fay, with some misgivings). But soon enough, he’d be talking about Hannah. As he spoke, his eyes would widen in strange spasms, and only my parents’ insistence on politeness and the knowledge that we were allowed credit at his shop kept me from bolting away from his gaze.

One day, anxious to get home early because Hannah was in bed with a bad chest, I was glad to see that there were no other customers in the bakery. Maurice seemed distracted, and pointed a hirsute finger towards the empty shelves. “One of my ovens has packed up, Rebecca. Perhaps you can wait a bit for the next batch? It shouldn’t be more than 10 minutes.”

Ten years, more like, I thought, but I couldn’t leave without the bread.

As I took a book out of my satchel, Maurice lifted up the flap of the counter and said I’d be more comfortable reading at his desk. I flinched away from his hand on my back as he ushered me through to the office, every surface coated in a layer

of greying flour. With muffled thanks, I sat with the book open on my lap and tried to focus on the printed text while he returned to the front of the store.

Suddenly, his bulky frame fills the office doorway and his apron drops from those hands onto the desk.

Too close to me now.

Below bulging eyes, his mouth expels odd panting grunts.

I scrape the chair back, but in seconds I am spun up on the pivot of my school-dress, the collar wrung tight in the hairy pudge of his hand.

Things clatter off the desk.

My head is twisted leftwards and rammed down into the mouldy film of flour. With my jaws pinned tight under the mass of his arm, my brain shuts down its connection to my spindly legs.

The dusty trouser-leg lifts and bends, his foot coming to rest on the opened middle drawer.

A cudgel inside me.

Hip-bones gnashing against the hard wood of the desk.

Coughing, choking on the flour, dribbling a little pool onto the wood.

Calendar on wall. 1935.

Picture of woman with wedding cake.

“Flop-proof baking powder”.

When I got home, no-one noticed my torn lapel, or the flour on my hair and sleeves, or the trembling wetness of my legs.

A long black car was parked at the gate.

I saw my father on the wrap-around verandah, his hands cradling his head as he stumbled round the side of the house.

Hazel and my brothers hovered near the front door and told me to stay outside.

Slumped against the trunk of the guava tree, hugging the packet of squashed loaves and my satchel against my pelvis, I watched two men emerge from the house with a stretcher covered in black.

Hannah was 19 when she left me.

I do not eat bread, and Arthur knows never to ask why he is responsible for buying it.

I hate the blessing over Sabbath loaves.

oOo

On hold

On the ridge above the city, Ruby's Beetle chortles out of the service lane behind the old family home – where the long-retired Arthur and bed-bound Rebecca still live – and into the grounds of her apartment block two roads away.

Now in her mid-thirties, Ruby has been back in Durban for five years, single and celibate, licking a lifetime of wounded choices. After her perceived folly at art school, she had run away, hitchhiked to a friend in Pretoria, to be retrieved by Rebecca's tracing agent. Atoning for these sins, Ruby had knuckled down to secretarial work, eventually winning her mother's concession for a second chance at graduation in Cape Town.

Ruby was poised to take up an overseas scholarship for further study when Max, a lovable nomad from a rich, broken Jewish family, tumbled into the equation. He yearned for the sea, but was moored to suburban stagnation by his newly diagnosed diabetes. Genetics had blessed him with a glorious physique which he sculpted for a living as a sports instructor. Taking an administrative job to create a home with him, Ruby made Max the magnum opus of her mothering project. She could look into his eyes and in a moment know if he needed glucose. She studied his vegetarian diet, researched his training regime, turned his laundry into fieldwork, wrote his job applications and managed his near-coma episodes. She stoked all her home fires to give him stability, and doused his willful incendiaries to protect her dreams for their future.

Until, exhausted, Ruby had realised that in the house called Hobbitat, with her organic kitchen garden, the Lapsang Souchong tea and home-baked bread, they had spent a Hansel-and-Gretel decade under the mountain, nestling for dear life as an antidote to abiding dysfunction. And that her mirage of their already named unborn children around an antique kitchen table, laden with their scribbles and her doctoral thesis draft, could only evaporate.

Now, Ruby is reconciled to her maverick status in the grey-blue livery of a multinational corporate media post, balanced with voluntary teaching every Saturday for township pupils, and the bittersweet role of a devoted, slightly eccentric aunt. Eleven-hour days and gradual achievement in part-time academic projects offer paltry fulfillment. Her bosses exploit her mawkishness and appropriate her products. Knotted with envy, self-pity and outrage, she watches the ascent of younger staff in the embrace of acclaimed mentors.

In the weekday evenings, the car that was once her mother's takes a Pavlovian detour off the route from town to the old house. There, Ruby spends an hour or so with her parents, splayed across the foot of Rebecca's bed, with Arthur in his armchair beside it.

Just past her 67th birthday, Rebecca's face is ravaged, the skin under her eyes smudged brown with years of distress. Her neck vertebrae are ruthlessly ossified into her left shoulder, and the spastic muscles jerk with abandon, making a trial of every quotidian task. Administering her raft of medications and monitoring her pulse, blood pressure and glucose levels in monthly graphs has become Arthur's vocation, leaving his easel permanently folded, and his piano's action seized.

The room is fusty, cut with Wintergreen, a static cell of memory and malady, padded with the futile detritus of Rebecca's search for relief. Here an electric heating pad, a clump of worn-out neck cushions in brocade, gingham and floral satin tucked into spaces between the bed and pedestals, there a covered foam collar repugnant with sweat-stains, and an infra-red lamp.

A pile of homilies in pamphlets, notebooks and letter-folders is braced at its base with a family album from the Sixties. Within its vinyl scabbard, a svelte Rebecca in Chanel, and Arthur in Henry Kissinger glasses with a harsh short-back-and-sides, pose with their friends aboard the Windsor Castle mailship.

“In France, they thought I was French, and in Italy, they thought I was Italian,” she rasps.

Arthur looks up from his crossword, smiling wanly but without rancour, and Ruby rubs her thumb lightly over the plump veins in Rebecca’s inert hand.

Ruby’s visits buffer her father against depletion, and gladden Rebecca, when her demeanour allows it. As children returning from school, Ruby and her brothers could sense their mother’s disposition on their approach to the house. It would either crackle through the wood and metal of the door when they turned their key in the lock and reluctantly took hold of the handle, or piccolo through the lace curtains into the garden air, enveloping them in affection.

Now, Rebecca’s brittle body can no longer vaunt the power of her mood-monsters, but they still have purchase on her temperament.

Ruby is accustomed to the risk.

“Ruby?”

Rebecca’s voice through the receiver is strong, but light. It is not unusual for her mother to call directly after Ruby has spent time with them; the telephone has always been both a weapon and a tool for Rebecca’s obsession with connection. She routinely phones just after dawn to say: “Good. You’re up early.” Ruby jokes that if she ever journeyed to the moon, her mother would station herself at NASA.

But she is intrigued by an oddly rapturous note in Rebecca’s tone.

“Rube, do me a great favour. The next time you write me a letter as beautiful as the one I’ve just found, don’t tuck it away inside a book that I might not get to read for weeks.”

Triumph! She likes it!

When wrapping a book as a birthday gift some weeks earlier, Ruby had inserted a note wishing her mother wholeness of heart and relief from pain. The message had burgeoned into an explanation that with her own maturing, she had grown in

empathy for the young girl she visualised within her mother. Secretly, she had hoped for this ingress, to stand inside Rebecca's being, where the key to her wild grieving might be found.

"I didn't want to thrust anything on you, Mama. I reckoned that if and when you felt like reading a book on self-healing, you'd also find my thoughts, and that would be the right time for you to receive them."

"Rubelein." Ruby loves it when Rebecca plays with the Yiddish form of her name.

"It means the world to me. Do you know how much I love you?"

"I love you, Mama."

This moment. This feeling. It supplants everything.

"Here's one Mrs Sugarman, my new physio told me: the practice of psychology is for Jewish doctors who hate the sight of blood."

They rupture into belly-laugh.

"Rube, that little piece of amethyst you gave me. You said I should hold it when the pain is bad, that it has special properties. I don't know about these things anymore."

Years before, when Rebecca was exploring Hinduism, she'd had Arthur fly a Swami out from India for teachings, and they'd all had to throw rose-petals on the ground as he emerged onto the runway.

"But I hold it because you gave it to me. That eases the pain."

Ruby sinks into her sofa, her arm bent across her forehead, her throat too full to reply.

If only we could always be like this.

Keep it blithe.

“Well, I wish my brothers were as gracious about it! Benjamin calls me a ‘space-cadet’. And when I offered Nathan some Arnica for his back, he said he won’t use my druid-snolly.”

“Oh, you know the boys take any opportunity to tease you – but it can hurt, though. I remember breaking a plate over your Uncle Jasper’s head when we were kids and he went too far. You hold your stones if you want to. But frankly, I’d much rather you were holding a penis.”

Ruby’s knees shoot up to her chest and she shrieks, in half-scandalised amazement.

“Mama! I almost dropped this phone! What did you say?”

“Okay, I’m saying. Yes, you need a man. I don’t often have this clarity, so let me use it well. It’s time you found someone and had kids of your own. Not for me, though – for you. And for your Dad. He deserves some joy, G-d knows.”

For me, for us, for joy.

To life, lechaim.

Raise my glass to the light, my chin to the wind, my broken chains to the sky.

Only now do you say it, Mama, as if your decree will breathe it into being.

That I should have what came to you when you were twelve years younger than

I am: the eminence of faithful love, and my own family!

But the hooves of the unbridled horse, its eyes hot and awful with fear, have pounded through their doors, reared up and trampled them for so long, leaving only the draught of years desiccated by chaos.

Is the rider blind to the rubbled wake?

All those doors in the old house, so many thresholds.

We all needed a lot of keys.

“Ruby, my beautiful. Just be sure to know that he loves you above anything. And whatever his beliefs, you need a man who has a spiritual side. Best he doesn’t drink, either.”

Ruby holds the disconnected phone, like a talisman, to her temple.

Please, don’t let it all be too late.

Another year passes before Ruby finds her mate.

On another Sunday, a few days before he is due to meet the family, Rebecca wakes to the early-morning coral of the sky, looks towards the birds calling through the open shutter, and dies with her eyes open.

Without a word.

oOo

Nothing fails its perfect return

“She’s gone.”

Arthur’s voice on the line freezes Ruby’s hand.

Her paintbrush aches for the canvas before her – a self-portrait as Ophelia, submerged in a womb of rock-pools, recalling her childhood paradise.

Absurdly, her first thought is that the drawing will have to change.

All has changed.

Gone? Not slipping away, calling for us. Gone.

NO! Wait for me!

When Ruby gets there, the house seems dazed, as if, like Rebecca, it has been rezoned.

Arthur’s big, soft frame stands oddly shrunken in the lounge.

“Don’t look at her, my dear,” he says with fracturing breath. “It was early this morning, so it’s been a few hours ... I haven’t touched her. I thought she needed to sleep a while longer, she watched *Driving Miss Daisy* late last night ...”

“I must see her, Daddy. Sit for a while. I’ll be alright.”

Your jaw is slack, useless now. You look as stunned as we are.

This sharp light in your sightless eyes, like a dead sparrow’s.

But it’s not you – you really have left us.

Released or defeated?

Retreat or surrender?

What did you see? Who did you hear?

You were so terrified of a drawn-out passing. But you got there all on your own, no longer in darkness.

Cause of death: Everything, enough, never enough.

In your raucous disfigurement, you felt unseen, unheard, unwanted.

You leave nothing but love.

So this is grace.

Ruby hears a vehicle in the back lane, her father opening the gates for Doves funeral services.

Strangers are here to remove the body of Rebecca, his wife of 49 years.

Arthur's anguish floods through the walls, and Ruby abandons her mother to go to him.

Benjamin has not yet received the message.

Nathan has come; he makes no move towards the bedroom.

He and Ruby flank Arthur, gripping each of his shoulders, holding on through the haze and muffle of the undertakers behind the door, left slightly ajar.

We've never done this before. What are they doing with her?

One of the men from Doves places the three tiny rings and the dainty watch into Arthur's palm.

His knees vent. The ground has given way under all of them.

Into the still, overcast morning, they follow the horrid vertical trolley with its scorpion-skin body-bag across the wooden deck from the top storey, through the carport to the open driveway gates.

They stand in the lane, arms crossing their chests, watching the yawning rear door of the hearse receive its cargo. Suddenly, one of the heavy gates slams into Ruby's back, cutting at her heels. Her stifled yelp goes unheard by Arthur and Nathan, and she swivels towards the offending fixture, rubbing her chafed skin.

There's no wind! How did that happen?

The hearse has moved off under a shower of lilac, its wheels slowly crunching their circles beneath the arches of jacaranda.

No dominion

No-one stayed beside or cleansed my husk of a body.

I had renounced this rite.

Now I am a shade, unshackled and pardoned from gravity.

The roots of trees reclaim the marrow in my buried bones.

In the temple of the living, I sweep my faith among the pillars.

My darling Arthur, alone in the healing house, plays his piano until after midnight. Unseen in the elegant cove of his arms, I am washed clean in the waves of our favourite nocturne.

Inside the profane shell of his bitterness, Nathan, my warrior judge, hides the firstborn's memory of opening and liberating my womb. I can fly into time, sighing its mercy over the sour fruit of his heart.

Benjamin, who no longer goes riding, has cast off his armour to cuddle his sleeping son. In the cleft between cheek and fontanel, together we dream of free roaming horses.

Enfolded in her gold-mesh veil, I hear Ruby share vows with her groom, and as he stamps the glass, their joy bonds all my life's splinters. A place is set for me at the main table, encircled with roses and jasmine.

I watch their bodies age, their canted souls slowly making their way Home, where there is no pain or poison, only the love of all loving.

From that distant shale, as the bird who rose from her drowned human self, I am Halcyon, fluttering at the corner of the eye.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Certain segment headings in the novel were derived from the following sources:

It is she that I have watered

- from Antoine Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. 1995, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire, UK. p. 57.

You may pass flowers

- from the film *Nuovomondo* ("Golden Door") by writer-director Emanuele Crialese; 2006, Rai Cinemafiction (Italy). Sicilian women immigrating to the US in the beginning of the 20th Century were convened in an office at Ellis Island, New York, to be married to local Italian citizens, who presented their "fiancées" with bouquets.

I am a truthful man

- English translation of "*Yo soy un hombre sincero*", from *Guantanamera*, the national song of Cuba.

The dog in her cage

- from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, (2000), Vintage Books/Random House, UK. ("the dog alone in her cage" is viewed by the protagonist, Lurie, with grief; Barney, R.A. 2004. "Between Swift and Kafka – Animals and the Politics of Coetzee's Elusive Fiction". *World Literature Today*, Jan-April, p.18)

Fierce repentance

- from *The Seasons – Spring*, l. 995 of verse by James Thomson ("Amid the roses, fierce Repentance rears Her snaky crest; a quick-returning pang Shoots through the conscious heart. ..."). *The Works of Cowper and Thomson*, 1832, J. Grigg. Philadelphia, US.

Nothing fails its perfect return

- from the poem "All is Truth" by Walt Whitman; Volume: *Leaves of Grass* – 9, 1900. In Oxford World Classics paperback: Jerome Loving (Ed.). 1998. *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, Oxford University Press, UK. p. 362.

No dominion

- from the poem *And death shall have no dominion* by Dylan Thomas. *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, 2003, New Directions Publishing, New York.

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**Honouring the gravely insulted:
Reflections on writing *A Man on a Galloping Horse***

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**Honouring the gravely insulted:
Reflections on writing *A Man on a Galloping Horse***

Aurora Palmi - DIRECTOR'S JOURNAL: 21st September 2011

Securing the film rights to Judith King's novel *A Man on a Galloping Horse*, a fictional memoir of a mother afflicted with untreated manic depression, was the result of my premeditated search for new work in the genre of trauma fiction. The coincidence of finding this while reading *The Good Listener*, Neil Belton's moving biography¹ of veteran anti-cruelty campaigner Helen Bamber, was a marvel of serendipity – King herself has treasured this biography.

Belton's observation that the wounding of a "gravely insulted human body ... demands from others an extraordinary effort of sensitivity", provides an evocative context within which to understand King's intentions for her novel. Contemplating these two explorations of suffering – one fictional and the other non-fiction – elevated my conception of trauma, and how human pain is woven into an individual's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual being, and across place, space and time.

The novel's protagonist, Rebecca Amos, does not represent a quintessential manic depressive as a character of defective constitution, or as a vessel of chemical imbalance to be medicated. King's perspective is that Rebecca's mental illness is primarily based in trauma, hence her story is a particular account of an individual who wrestles with her extreme physical and emotional pain to fathom her own instincts, while attempting to control life as she believes it should be led. Eccentric and achingly resilient, Rebecca is vilified by others as having been bad-tempered and self-willed since childhood, but the story delves into the origins of

¹Belton, N. 1998. *The Good Listener: Helen Bamber - A life against cruelty*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London. p.54

her wounded experience as a daughter, sister, friend, wife and mother, seeking to excavate the complexities of her deep sensitivity, anguish, and capacity to give and receive love.

Bipolar pathology as a literary subject is not uncommon, but King's book is a creative experiment in form, designed to address it through authorial interventions that survey the nature and history of Rebecca's illness and the effects of its alternating violence and withdrawal on those around her. The author sets her tale in the life of a middle-class white South African family, using memory as a vehicle to traverse three generations with the dipping touch of a dragon-fly. Its intense moments of perpetration and victimhood become like particles in a pool of trauma, colliding, fusing and transforming the characters' unfolding perceptions, interpretations and convictions. One comes away with the idea of pain as energy that never disappears, but changes form in an unending impulsion to endurance and refinement.

By describing the characters' inner and outer life, the novel burrows to the source of what causes Rebecca to alienate those with whom she seeks profoundly to commune. It reflects the struggle of family members yearning for her to try harder for balance, as they make their own way through conflicting loyalties, ethical dilemmas and private aspirations. To a lesser degree, it raises issues of moral discrimination relating to gender, vis-à-vis female transgression, and provokes thought about moral development within paradigms of earthly and spiritual justice, through Rebecca's quest for selfhood in different faith doctrines.

Developing a strong script for the film version will present numerous challenges – not the least of which is its sparse dialogue – but the narrative offers a portrait of a fascinating lead character, and enough thematic footholds to facilitate the viewer's journey through the piece. The novel achieves a certain structural logic using controlling metaphors; these will support the atmospheric chiaroscuro I envisage in the dramatic and visual power of film as a medium for describing the life of Rebecca and her family.

Jeremy Podeswa's film *Fugitive Pieces*² – the story of Jakob Beer, a survivor of Nazi occupation, based on the novel by Anne Michaels – is one source of inspiration for my project. The film is introduced thus: “When the dead cannot be laid to rest in ground that remembers them, sometimes literature is the only grave we have”. The script raises questions that could well be asked of Rebecca's husband and daughter, such as: “How can you come through everything that you have and still be so generous?” In the film, Jakob's guardian, Athos, tells him: “You can choose to see what destroys something or what saves it”. But there are technical lessons to be gleaned from this production for the making of *A Man on a Galloping Horse* into a film. Because of its many shifts in realm and time, the script will need sustained rhythm and pace.

Being curious about how the author dealt with various levels of inquiry in the writing of *A Man on a Galloping Horse*, I recorded a day-long conversation with King to cover this ground.

King began by explaining that in 2008, she wrote about 8000 words as the kernel manuscript. Essentially, this extant piece, around which she wrote the larger work for submission as a Master's thesis, was composed as a project of redemption. She did not envisage the story being one of “recovery” in the clinical sense, but as one of reclaimed memory with its various forms of truth – a literary rather than a psychotherapeutic project.

King: My primary aim was to facilitate, through language, “the outsider's” immersion in the fictional family's reality, and to set up issues of trespass and forgiveness with conviction, but without being prescriptive. The challenge was to make painful memory accessible and to enable Rebecca to “be heard” – something that she cannot

² Podeswa, J. (Director). 2008. *Fugitive Pieces*. IDP Distribution; Salmuel Goldwyn Films. Author: Anne Michaels (Canadian poet); 1997

achieve in life, despite the volume and frequency of her laments and commands. As I wrote Rebecca, I felt that surely the hardest hearts of those who condemn her would soften if they could see her as I do – sad, frail, flailing, despite her formidable persona. But I was mindful of what Sophie Tamas, an eminent trauma fiction theorist, warned in her seminal literature review³ regarding the limits to this kind of “recovery”; that, in some cases, destruction and loss can’t be redressed – “whoever was tortured, stays tortured”, and I presume that this applies to readers who have been traumatised themselves in one form or another. Still, I hoped to show something about the relevance of fictional memoir as a particular and a universal encounter with layers of truth, and about trauma literature as an aesthetic form.

- Palmi: To what extent do you think it was possible to render Rebecca and other core characters in a sympathetic light, while respecting the reader’s agency to judge them?
- King: In drawing out Rebecca’s consciousness, I tried to present her as someone who matters as a human being, knowing that conclusions about her virtue as a character lie in the reader’s psyche, forming a mirror of subjective moral truth. If readers resonate with the composition, the thresholds in the novel’s structure become communal, rather than solely authorial spaces, as readers construct images to signify personal meanings through their own consciousness. Because some core portions of the narrative describe behaviour that is morally distasteful, the writer’s authority allows for countering this with presentations of Rebecca’s and other characters’ benevolence.

³ Tamas, S. 2007. “Research, Trauma and Recovery”. *Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*. Urbana, Illinois: 2-5 May. www.c4qi.org/qi2007/workingpaper/3216.pdf p.11

There are explanations from the neuroscience of consciousness – to do with resonance and recurrent processing – that I found helpful in approaching this issue of transmission and reception, and these align with ideas from Jewish metaphysics⁴, which is of special interest to me. Neural systems in the brain (“where the knot is tied”) make connections and pathways between the lower sensory and higher cognitive levels of function. So: I might see or hear something which has a particularly powerful resonance for me, triggering memory and attendant emotion, and my brain commands me to gasp, or cry, or laugh, or swear – and that response is also archived in my emotional and spiritual silo (“where the lamp is lit”) to be restored at some other point. Having written these scenarios, anyone who reads them will undergo the same process, but within a different consciousness. It’s about re-entry and correspondences. I don’t believe my own re-entrant pathways can be infinitely controlled, and I certainly have no purchase on those of my readers.

But in the end, I am reassured by Coetzee’s teaching on writing, centred on the author’s contract with the reader, and discerning what is real and what is literary. In all his work and commentary, just when one thinks the author has pinned himself down for the reader, he disappears. Coetzee says in an essay collection entitled *Inner Workings*:⁵ “The stories we set about writing sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight”. Once I started to write, I found this to be partly true, and that to

⁴ Lancaster, B.L. 2006. *The Essence of Kabbalah*. Eagle Editions Limited, Hertfordshire, UK. pp. 213-222

⁵ Lowry, E. 2007. “J.M. Coetzee’s Ruffled Mirrors”. Review of J.M. Coetzee’s *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*, Times Online - The Times Literary Supplement, 22 August.
<http://www.tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25339-2648841,00.html>

stay sane once a manuscript is released, one should detach from one's own plans for it.

For instance, the struggle to forgive involves intense combat between remembering and forgetting; some characters, such as Rebecca's sons Nathan and Benjamin, resort to erasure rather than release, whereas Rebecca has no such luxury. Her daughter, Ruby, on the other hand, and Bali, the chauffeur-gardener, represent alternative responses which are more compassionate.

My hope is that the fiction is persuasive enough to draw readers into and through Rebecca's reality, so that the origins and ambiguities of her responses are plausible. The narrative architecture works through refraction, and readers will find reflections of their own encounters with suffering, such that the final edifice becomes more than the proffered manuscript; it's a co-constructed truth, a mirrored mosaic, if you will, that resonates through subjective association. The Talmud says that we don't see things as they are, but as we are. This idea of fragmentation is also relevant to the context of manic depression, and of trauma and memory in general.

Palmi: Before we discuss the characters and their plausibility in detail, how would you define the novel's structure? It's difficult to identify a conventional classification for it.

King: I saw its formation as a narrative "arcade of thresholds" into the life of a family journeying through the turmoil of the mother's mental illness. The initial structure echoed the cyclical pattern of manic depression (or bipolar disorder, as it's now known) and the relational nature of trauma: it was laid out in segments, each commencing with a metaphoric vignette describing an experience of

catalytic recollection, and leading into a family-centred episode. But in developing the larger narrative, I was advised by my supervisors to confront the risk of repetitiveness inherent in this patterning: the original set of paired segments needed an element of discontinuity in order to dramatise consciousness and break the predictability of the founding form. I found that, as a means of supporting both the reader's journey, and my own amidst the perils of distance and recollection in the writing, I had to relax my attachment to the patterning.

The solution turned out to be quite simple: each pair of the original set of episodic segments was split into free-standing texts, and new episodes were planted intuitively at relevant points among them. Once I relinquished attention to fixed lengths for these segments, I found that I could surrender to a variety of duration, fulfilling only the requirements of the characters' experiences in different times and places for the direction of the narrative.

So, the analogy of the arcade can be understood through the notion of its pillars juxtaposing scenes of dark and light, violence and catatonia, cacophony and silence, damage and healing, alienation and connection, with symbolic imagery foregrounding and cross-referencing these boundaries through the story, which is about an illness of opposites. The spaces between the pillars allow the reader to progress through the story in a contained but non-linear manner, through inter-leading points of entry and exit – each segment pausing within or around the consciousness of different members of the household. The architrave spanning these inner spaces is the omniscient authorial presence, with its sense of spiritual governance over destiny, or what might transcend a troubled past.

Finally, it is a designed procession – one does end up where one began. The novel was already complete when I read Jennifer Law’s stupendous essay, *Sympathetic Magic*, in which she articulates the mystery of renewal through life, death, memory and legacy as a project of perpetuity rather than closure⁶. She says: “The self ... may only be perceived as a rationalised unity in retrospect, and indeed at the moment of death, history itself appears to die with the individual, only to be reborn outside of time as memory. We begin at the end because it is at this boundary that the life of the individual is both complete and on the verge of disintegration.”⁷ Nothing could have explained more persuasively than this passage my impulse to lock together the opening and closing segment of my novel – like, in effect, an *ourobouros*.

Palmi: These pauses in consciousness to recollect events and emotions result in numerous leaps across time. What degree of success do you think you’ve achieved in controlling this non-linear movement?

King: I realise that the book is not an “airport-read”. The subject matter, as well as the way it is framed, requires sensitive attention and close reading. For some readers, this might make the story one that has to be “undergone” (to borrow a term from Rita Charon in her review⁸ for *The Lancet* called “Meditations on Pain”).

The back-and-forth movement over individuals’ lives was the only way that came to me to approach the illustration of painful memories, and I was inspired in this regard by Michael Cope’s

⁶ Law, J. 2002. *Penny Siopis: Sympathetic Magic*. (Commemorative publication, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand). p.10.

⁷ Law, J. 2000. *op. cit.* p.17.

⁸ Charon, R. “Meditations on Pain”. *The Lancet*, Volume 373, Issue 9670, pp. 1163 - 1164, 4 April 2009. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60668-1. (A review of *Pain and its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture* by Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Harvard University Press, 2008. pp 439 ISBN-0-674-02456-7)

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/issue/vol373no9670/PIIS0140-6736\(09\)X6068-X](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/issue/vol373no9670/PIIS0140-6736(09)X6068-X)

remark in a 2006 interview⁹ about his book *Intracacy*:
 “Reminiscences and reflections are random triggerings of memories and mini-stories. These don’t manifest in a linear fashion like train-coaches, they are jumbled and contingent ... My mother was a hugely complex person, and so it’s also not simple to convey or describe her life and personality very easily.”

This could just as easily have been my own explanation for the fragmented quality of my storyline. It relates both to Rebecca’s personality, which is shattered by trauma-induced mood disorder, and to the nature of memory itself. The narrative is woven into cohesion – as much by the reader as by the author – in viewing the vulnerabilities that cause such breakage, juxtaposing that which was whole but flawed, with what was dispersed but treasured. This viewing is so contingent that it is, in a way, kaleidoscopic, an immersion in complex patterns formed through lenses when one focuses on a particular point and turns the tube.

Palmi: Flashbacks and flash-forwards can be a daunting narrative technique in both film and novels, but Atom Egoyan’s film *Adoration*¹⁰ presents an interesting new model for dramatising family memoir in this discontinuous manner. One critic observed¹¹ that because memory is “an eternal present”, Egoyan’s treatment of flashbacks succeeds in creating a tapestry of revelations and remembered moments within the round of daily life.

King: There will be readers and viewers who won’t find this approach satisfying, and constructing the work was demanding, requiring careful planning under close supervision. For example, the second

⁹ Cope, M. 8 December 2009. Personal correspondence on his book *Intracacy: A Meditation on Memory* (2005) Double Storey Press, South Africa. ISBN: 9781770130210

¹⁰ Egoyan, A. 2008. *Adoration*. Sony Pictures

¹¹ De Waal, S. 2009. “Where the truth lies”. *Mail & Guardian Friday*, 18-23 September.

paragraph in “Coming to pass” tells us that Ruby is married, and that her mother has passed away – but it is not clarified that Rebecca died before Ruby got married. I tried to rework this, but something resisted its revision, which leaves this piece of chronological intelligence to become a “surprise” in the final segment, “No dominion”. Perhaps this is a flaw.

Palmi: What decisions governed the ultimate length of the novel?

King: Only a few were made in advance, because I wasn’t very sure whether the intrinsic logic of the kernel manuscript could withstand enlargement – so some decisions could only evolve by continuing to write. I was committed to developing existing characters, especially Rebecca’s two sons and Bali the chauffeur-gardener, along with new characters including her six siblings (in particular Hannah, her favourite sister who dies of pneumonia at the age of 19), her parents and significant friends. While the “Asylum” segment was the dark core of the original version, “All that’s left” supplanted this, because I wanted to introduce Rebecca’s originary trauma, and this had to be more gruelling. The death of a loved one on the same day as being raped is an intense conjunction, but it accounts for the magnitude of loss and abuse from which she never recovers.

I did think about how far back to trawl through Rebecca’s ancestry to illustrate the notion of epigenetic or hereditary suffering – which is something I’m very interested in – specifically investigating the persecution of Jews and women, tracing the age of pogroms in Eastern Europe and discrimination against English Jewry. But I left these threads to trail, because it became more important not to dilute or stunt the development of central characters in Rebecca’s

own lifetime, which is established by the dates carved into her memorial stone in the opening scene.

Coming back to the issue of collapsing time boundaries and the novel's serpentine chain of causal meaning, I expressed this in a reflective piece composed after completing the earlier manuscript. I noted then that the mother-character seemed to beckon me into different mornings, afternoons, and evenings to glimpse into her living self, so that the home, her past, and several aspects of her personality flowed out from this. In this sense, I felt much like a seed parachuting into fertile soil, as if, having surrendered to the advice of "trusting the fiction", I found myself in the middle of the work – it was already there, waiting for my landing. Prior concerns about character, setting, dialogue, symbols, plot and point-of-view were dispelled through a natural entry into a new dimension of consciousness. In reading about writers and writing, I had learned that material starts to flow from an as yet unknown source, with accompanying options; suddenly I was in this reception room, and enjoying the freedom to make these decisions.

Once I was further into the writing, research I'd done in the 1980s of the fatal dualities in the life and art of Ernest Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf's handling of distance and immersion in narrated consciousness, showed me how individual and collective histories of pain can be compiled from glances into single days or weeks. During the later writing phases, I was delighted by Maria Del Mar Ansensio Arostegui's comment in her doctoral thesis¹² on selected works by Jeanette Winterson that our journey through time and experience "denies the calendar [and] the wrinkles and lines of the

¹² Del Mar Ansensio Arostegui, M. 2003. "Recurrent Structural and Thematic Traits in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*: Time, Space and Construction of Identity". University of Zaragoza PhD Thesis. p.373

body”. She says that “it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self ... might be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.” This expresses precisely my vision of shifting into and out of the characters’ memories within the span of many decades.

But here is where I learned that the demands of characters, and particularly their relationships, can come to dictate the length of a work. In the kernel manuscript, the opening scene, “Raking it up”, with its memorial bird-bath, foreshadowed Rebecca’s death in the original ending “On hold”. Again, I had become deeply attached to this neat circuit, and I was determined to retain it for the larger version; but my supervisor, among others, found that the Ruby character had become as central to the story as Rebecca, and that their relationship needed more articulation. An idea about Ruby’s guilt after her mother’s death had been niggling me for some while, and I realised that constructing the background for this haunting was crucial, both for describing their tormented bond, and for recording an additional dimension to the “re-recovery” of and from the family’s trauma. This resulted in the new segments “The dog in her cage”, “Nothing fails its perfect return”, and “No dominion”, which link Rebecca’s rejection of her Jewish roots and her prohibition of Ruby’s pursuit of Judaism, with – in and after her death – resolving Rebecca’s renunciation of Jewish burial rites.

Not only did this serve the “inflation” of the manuscript in a natural and necessary way – still allowing for the circuit leading back to the opening scene – but the process also confirmed what I had read in trauma fiction theory about the need to evoke the depth of haunting

in retrieval of past wounds. Tamas¹³ discusses authorial strategies for representing truth around trauma through story-telling, and a range of interesting positions on the writer as both “expert” and “client”. She concludes that artistic works (in this case, the literary project) undertake a recovery process by giving voice to what is suppressed, oppressed and repressed, adjusting identity and belief, and restoring communal ties. My supervisor remarked that the story was unfolding to become Ruby’s memorial as much as Rebecca’s, and I found also that this sub-plot threaded back to Rebecca’s memories of the deaths of her own mother and sister, Hannah. Through this (unplanned) re-entry into painful history, the story contemplates both damage and restoration for the characters, as well as for the reader.

Palmi: What are your reflections on the use of voice?

King: Primarily, how extraordinarily difficult it was to achieve anything worthwhile! There were numerous elements to contend with in the matrix of the characters’ retrospection and anticipation in different states of mind and mood, such as: handling the various youthful and adult voices to retell poignant experiences; according such testimony an intrinsic value – not as tidy packages of knowledge or fact, but as verisimilitude that strikes an emotional chord in the reader; and being aware of the character’s class and culture as formative boundaries for language and tone.

Another challenge of voice lay in capturing comic moments. In many other forms of my writing, I have been confident in producing witty material, but I think because of my concern to show how

¹³Tamas, S. 2007. “Research, Trauma and Recovery”. *Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*. Urbana, Illinois: 2-5 May. www.c4qi.org/qi2007/workingpaper/3216.pdf p.5.

Rebecca is herself insulted and in turn, insults others, I struggled to convey humour, whether emanating from Rebecca or from the family members as they experience joy and harmony (typically briefly, and in cycles). I'm not satisfied about the end-result in this regard, because I may have failed to elicit sufficient compassion for and goodwill towards her.

Palmi: There is very little spoken dialogue in the novel. Was this intentional?

King: Not consciously so, but it may relate to the issue of "testifying", in a way, and to an abiding awareness of atrocity being relived when, as the writer, one resides with the characters in this narrative. It's understandable that family trauma can make witnessing, in a directly expressed form, psychologically impossible, because there's a sense of responsibility or loyalty to one's core relationships that, we are taught, should be sacrosanct. It might be different if suffering is imposed on an individual by an outsider, or a whole group is violated by another. Helen Bamber and many therapists observe that some victims need to relate their pain repeatedly, while others will never speak of it. Language cannot always register or validate these experiences authentically. Some Holocaust memorials are iconic attempts to express this muteness or voiding: a row of discarded shoes in stone on the bank of the River Danube, or a small sculpted monument depicting empty clothes left to hang outside the Auschwitz gas-chambers; one Holocaust survivor, now a renowned stained-glass artist, never depicts figures for fear of dishonouring the remembered presence, living or dead.

Most of the characters in the novel are traumatised people. To depict their emotional apprehension and disorder, I experimented with both internal monologue and external self-expression, based

on Woolf's treatment of the character as a construct and the reader as the originator of the total response. In many instances, the self looks within as an intensely personal quest, yet in "testifying", adopts a parallel position as an outsider. This aspect is important for the issue of judgement, with the literary character as "the accused": Rebecca is, arguably, an incapacitated individual, but is she entitled to special regard by others merely because she is in pain, or must she earn their empathy? In her case, I wanted to frame this interrogation within the paradigm of manic depression crippling the self and invading the daily lives of those in its sphere, so that one is left with only one question: who is entitled to judge what one might not fully understand?

Palmi: But surely it would not be through voice alone that this could be accomplished? It's not as if the story fails to convey her grief and fear.

King: True. The surrounding text reverberates in another form of voice, so that we encounter all the characters' symptoms and burdens of trauma in illustrations of place, thought and action. The Lear house, for example, is so much a part of life with Rebecca that it takes on many aspects of her persona. It becomes a sheltering being in itself, responding to and reflecting the natures of other family members, and terrible or joyful moments of their lives.

Palmi: Did you consult any medical resources to inform your construction of Rebecca's form of manic depression?

King: A few. I looked up a syndrome called malignant narcissism, which is characterised by paranoia, egocentric aggression and lack of remorse. Some of these definitions were useful in relation to the

kind of psychosis displayed by Rebecca, but sadistic delight in cruelty is not appropriate to her.

Peter Whybrow's *A Mood Apart*¹⁴, a study of emotional disorders and how they destroy the self, was informative and moving. He talks about cyclothymic changes in mood which seem to be driven by an acute sensitivity to emotional attachment, especially its loss, confirming that while this can be inherited and acknowledged as such, it is not recognised as seeding vulnerability. He is also careful to distinguish between “mood” and “emotion”, defining mood as the consistent extension of emotion in time. Of great relevance to Rebecca is his assertion that moods “recruit memory and any ongoing experience, and colour these with the prevailing mood state”.

I had already completed the earlier manuscript when I found *An Unquiet Mind* by Dr Kay Redfield Jamison¹⁵, a professor of psychiatry, an authority on manic depressive illness and a patient herself. Her personal story of living with the disease and the tragic effects it had on her relationships has chilling parallels with my conception of Rebecca.

At one point, I was disconcerted to read parts of Jamison's account; she recalls being wildly out of control, screaming insanely, assaulting others and frightening herself. She compares her attacks of mania with seizures, during which she has destroyed cherished things, alienated people she loved, having to be physically restrained with brutal force and heavily medicated, and emerging from them buckled with shame. I had already composed my own text to embrace these very descriptions, so I worried that I might be

¹⁴ Whybrow, P.C. 1999. *A Mood Apart: A Thinker's Guide to Emotion and its Disorder*. Picador, London. p.18-19

¹⁵ Jamison, K.R. 1997. *An Unquiet Mind*. Picador, New York. p.120

accused of plagiarism. However, I came to peace with the value of having found this account, because it made me realise how widespread, yet hidden, this abnormal condition is in society, and it endorsed my impulse to write Rebecca's story, in the form best suited to my purpose. It indicated that I knew enough about the condition to write the fiction.

- Palmi: The narrative is set in South Africa's apartheid society during the 1940s and beyond, but these references to the pre- and post-apartheid eras seem to form a secondary backdrop.
- King: I was aware that this might be questioned, but I've not felt obligated to ensure that the story foregrounds in any focused way how life was growing up here through the turbulence leading up to the democratic dispensation, because it emerges incidentally. Some readers who are looking for this perspective might find these unpursued references too oblique; I could have taken my characters into varying depths of this aspect, but the evolution of the narrative claimed as much as was needed in this regard, and no more.
- Palmi: How, if at all, would you cast the novel in the field of feminist writing?
- King: Simply in the argument put forth by feminist therapists that qualitative accounts of trauma victims, survivors and perpetrators can be understood through a relational approach, which is an essentially feminine response available to both men and women, and demonstrated by the characters of Arthur, Bali Singh, Hannah and Ruby. The family story is one of shattered belonging, caused by Rebecca's sense of disembodiment, dislocation and disassociation resulting from her own violation and loss. Her resultant despair catalyses her brain deregulation and uncontrollable anger, and

there are many fluctuations of relationship that operate for good or ill in her experience.

Even if readers find themselves unable to excuse Rebecca's abuse of others, they are called upon to explore and invest – perhaps in deference to the examples set by other characters – their own capacity for caring. Some readers, both male and female, have indicated that they want more retribution; they find Ruby, especially, to be inexplicably forgiving, if not weak, in cherishing Rebecca despite her sins. But I wonder whether this says more about their own wounds than Ruby's.

Palmi: There is an instance of Ruby fighting back. In “In the matter between”, she obtains a protection order ...

King: Yes, but the ensuing story endorses the fact that such wounds “act like thorns in the spirit” as Belton has quoted William James, which can't be salved with an interdict. And it's important to note that when Rebecca was raped as a child, she had no recourse to the law or help-lines or therapy; this is why legal action becomes one of her weapons later in life. Readers might also criticise Arthur's characterisation, but he is not merely an enslaved dolt – it is simply not in his nature to hurt anyone. Although this does beg the question of whether or not his devotion to Rebecca white-ants his obligations as a father to protect his children, this is precisely the tragic dilemma that the family carries for the rest of their lives. How would divorcing or institutionalising Rebecca ultimately ease the family's trauma?

At one point in the writing, readers wanted to know what Ruby did with her pain, so it became necessary for me to portray more aspects of Ruby's adult life to show that she is significantly

damaged – how her insecurities and a role as “the fixer” extend into her later choices – but it should be apparent that she has inherited Arthur’s stoic genes, and that her close bond with him informs her desire to prize love above bitterness.

For me, presenting this beauty alongside the ugliness is another imperative in writing about bipolar disorder. Benjamin expresses this too, from his walled-off world of yearning; Nathan rages his way out of Rebecca’s life, not because he doesn’t love her, but rather because she has betrayed his world with her. Perhaps it makes one feel potent to be angry, but this merely exacerbates one’s own pain, and precipitates another cycle, perhaps into a new generation, of vicious alienation and abuse, not necessarily with shouting or whipping. Peter Whybrow explains that illnesses of mood disorder don’t destroy what is human; rather, they magnify and distort it.¹⁶ So the larger story reframes upheaval and constructs release for Rebecca, by showing the small, remembered circumstances that imprison and preserve the characters’ reality. Of course, the story ends without exploring how the three adult children replicate their wounds, or what they understand about loyalty.

Palmi: Let’s return to the storyline. There are several motifs that provide linking mechanisms between segments and which work for the creation of sub-plots.

King: I see this as a family of themes. The story opens with birds and stones in ‘Raking it up’, which come to represent freedom and remembrance as well as abandonment and mourning. Birds recur in “Coming to pass” and in the last three segments, with stones

¹⁶ Whybrow, P.C. 1999. *A Mood Apart: A Thinker’s Guide to Emotion and its Disorder*. Picador, London. p.19

denoting relief in “On hold”. Roses are especially symbolic for Rebecca’s relationship with Bali Singh and her interest in Hinduism, and there are touches of lavender, amethyst and lilac across the narrative, which signify healing. The horse, which has lyrical power in an axiom echoing from Rebecca’s childhood, is a strong image identifying Benjamin’s world, his relationship with his mother, and Rebecca’s black mania.

There is a deliberate chain of references to water as a sensuous and cleansing element. These occur through the memories of the family in tidal and rock pools, Nathan’s abiding connection to the sea, Arthur and Rebecca in the pool at home, and even Rebecca’s spraying of the irksome neighbour to ward off his intrusion. In the last segment, the metaphoric washing of Rebecca’s spirit by Arthur’s piano-playing is offered in lieu of the ritual *tahara* (the Jewish tradition for purifying the deceased body in preparation for burial and spiritual rebirth) which Ruby fails to do for her. This is the enveloping theme – it connects with the way Arthur has held Rebecca in water during her life, because she cannot swim. I think what’s common to these water motifs is the preservation of dignity in an otherwise debasing experience of life.

There are a number of scenes that develop the theme of keeping vigil. The episodes of Rebecca’s depressive withdrawal, wherein the family members are submerged in waiting for her to re-emerge, are broader brushstrokes of this facet. In “Never the same”, Rebecca’s husband Arthur watches over her, with characteristic concern for her pain and mental odysseys, and recalls their early life together, while Rebecca embarks on an internal journey back into her childhood, youth, marriage and motherhood. It’s in this silent, almost telepathic, conversation that we discover how Rebecca had borne the brunt of her own mother’s violence, and had taken

responsibility for her care, until and at her death. This foreshadows Ruby's later attendance on her aged parents, in "On hold" and at Rebecca's deathbed in "Nothing fails its perfect return". Kay Redfield Jamison¹⁷ offers an exquisite perception of this loving vigilance:

"Sometimes, in the midst of one of my dreadful, destructive upheavals of mood, I feel [my husband's] quietness nearby and am reminded of Byron's wonderful description of the rainbow that sits 'Like Hope upon a death-bed' on the verge of a wild, crushing cataract; yet 'while all around is torn / By the distracted waters', the rainbow stays serene:

*Resembling, 'mid the torture of the scene
Love watching Madness with unalterable mien".*

All the characters around Rebecca, albeit to varying degrees, display this unalterable regard.

Finally, another link is that forged by the likeness between Hannah and Ruby. Both are red-haired, musical, artistic and spiritually inclined (these latter traits also bonding Ruby and her father). In Rebecca's anguish, she associates Ruby's potential de-flowering with her own undisclosed rape and Hannah's death on that same day. Ruby's whipping takes place when she is about the same age as Hannah had been when she died. This correspondence is critical to the notion of how unspoken trauma, experienced inwardly, not only generates pathological outward expression, but can affect a family for generations.

Palmi: The connection is also powerful in terms of sex and death. It's disturbing that Ruby is flogged for her presumed sexual debut, and later suffers three miscarriages, never becoming a mother herself.

¹⁷ Jamison, K.R. 1997. *An Unquiet Mind*. Picador, New York. p.175

King: Yes, and this is a correlation that early readers seemed to overlook. I found Sonya Michel's description¹⁸ of the tension between American Jewish mothers and daughters and their desire for reconciliation as "the rotted cord" very apt in this regard. Rebecca's engagement with her world as an adult is affected by changing socio-economic circumstances in South Africa, as well as her personal cultural and religious responses, especially regarding sex and sexual violation. But her core issue is the trauma of loss and buried rape, leading her to perpetuate self-rejection.

Rebecca's earthy passion is presented alongside her secret shame and overt rage, ultimately trapping Ruby in stringent self-denial. Ruby seeks to redeem her own conception (labelled by Rebecca as "a mistake") by proving her worth to her family and everyone else she encounters. She cannot cut this cord, and it infects her life, but to define and claim some right of identity for herself, she emulates her father's moral code of love-equals-duty, so becoming the unplanned child who is her parents' only remaining line of solace. Even at Rebecca's death, Ruby is torn between staying with her mother's corpse (which is compulsory in orthodox Jewish tradition, especially in the presence of the male undertakers), and tending to her father's distress. Prior to Rebecca's death, she is polluted by her mother's pathology – her haunted mind – and she struggles to reshape this role while still striving for reconciliation. She tries to replace the "rotted cord" with what Michel calls "a bond which can nurture in both directions" by consistently re-offering her love to her mother, but it is only when Rebecca is released into spirit that she herself can fashion this bond – her awful oscillation between

¹⁸ Michel, S. "Mothers and Daughters in American Jewish Literature: The Rotted Cord" in Koltun, E. (Ed.). *The Jewish Woman*, Schocken Books, New York. pp. 272-282

happiness and sorrow ends when she is emptied of life, and all is still.

Palmi: And yet there is a sense that her daughter's pain will not cease, or never entirely.

King: There is a hint of this in "Coming to pass", when Ruby ruminates on the books she keeps from her late mother's library, some of which explore different forms of sexual pleasure and healing, and as she writes an academic paper on the ethics of abortion. Ruby tries to do that conversion from loss to creativity and from pain to release, although it doesn't come easily to her as a young adult, as she tries to repair things outside herself and not within.

I had already written this segment when I came upon Rita Charon's "Meditations on Pain". It speaks about beholding pain, with all its greed and injustice, even if it cannot be relieved or understood, noting that, "Touchingly, [pain] also brings us into congress with each other"¹⁹. I recognised that this is exactly what I was trying to express in the novel. The cord between Ruby and Rebecca will never be severed, but there can be ways of honouring it. Herman Wouk, in *This is my God*, puts this beautifully into a Jewish perspective: "The garment that the pious mourner rends can be sewn and worn again. The mark is there, but life resumes its course."²⁰

I think this speaks to the inconsolable realisation that in Rebecca's death, her absence becomes a gift, for her and for her family. There is release for them all, but never from having known and loved her.

¹⁹ Charon, R. "Meditations on Pain". *The Lancet*, Volume 373, Issue 9670, pp. 1163 - 1164, 4 April 2009.

²⁰ Wouk, H. 1960. *This is My God*. Jonathan Cape, London. p.175

In the segment “Fierce Repentance”, Bali Singh demonstrates a compassionate reluctance to reproach Rebecca, despite the dreadful attack he had suffered at her hands years before. As a child learning French, I adored Saint-Exupery’s book *The Little Prince*. The Little Prince takes care of a single growing rose, and the fox tells him that it is the time spent with his rose that makes it so important.²¹ This is why I used the phrase “It is she that I have watered”²² as the heading for one of Bali’s Singh’s earlier memoir-segments.

And thinking about it now, these are the ineffable truths that guided me, in writing both Rebecca’s and Ruby’s speech, to spell the name of the deity in the Jewish way, without the vowel. This is fitting in a broader sense, because with commemoration as my purpose, the novel poured itself through me; I attribute this to what the Jewish mystics call the “everflow”. The Little Prince also learns from the fox that one can’t see well except with the heart, because the essential is invisible to the eyes.

Palmi: Are there any literary forms within which one might categorise the novel?

King: I measured the kernel manuscript against the definitions of magic realism. Without pushing the work into this mould, it contains inklings of some relevant aspects of this form: the use of extensive imagery and symbolism; emotions, death and sexuality as central to the story; distortions of time, such as collapsing the present into the past and the future, or cyclical shaping to suggest cause-and-effect; presenting events from multiple perspectives; describing family history and relationships; a labyrinthine, circular or spiraled,

²¹ Saint-Exupery, A. 1995. *The Little Prince*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire, UK. p.84

²² Saint-Exupery, A. *op. cit.* p.57

intertwined and parallel plot; and specific historical, geographical or cultural contexts. Some examples of these elements would be the segment “Dawn Patrol” describing the dreaming children, and the closing text “No dominion”.

The latter is written from the afterlife, so to speak, and at first, I was nervous about portraying immortality, but these fears were allayed by both the fiction itself and a teaching from Jewish metaphysics: that we must look beneath the outer shell, to deeper forces and structures. When Rebecca descends to an almost subterranean state – her “underworld”, as it were, to find tranquility or to articulate a radical source of trauma, she has to sever herself from her immediate physical reality, or her recollection of it. Death allows her to shed altogether the mummified pain of remembered violation and her own destructiveness, and we briefly float with her as a freed being in a “metaworld” beyond dimensional definition. Modern physics holds that particles can move backwards in time, be in two places at once, and can move from one point to another without crossing the space between them. So, ironically, we needn’t think of this as “magic”, but rather as levels of reality.

Palmi: I’m interested in knowing why, in “The dog in her cage”, Ruby is looking specifically at a self-portrait by Salvator Rosa, which leads into the rapprochement between Ruby and Rebecca.

King: I happened to see an image of this painting (“Self-portrait as a Philosopher of Silence”) the day before I completed that segment. I was aware that, after the movement of Mannerism, artists in the Baroque era sought to return to tradition and spirituality, which seemed pertinent to the scene in Ruby’s bedroom. I was also very drawn to the Latin words painted into a scroll in the composition, and while I had considered working in the Talmudic saying that

“Silence is the best answer to a fool” as Ruby’s retort to her mother, this was not the response I wanted, so I used Rosa’s more judicious wording instead. I suppose that readers wishing to see a little more “fight” in Ruby would have preferred the former option, but that would obviate the peace and gentility for which all the family members thirst following one of Rebecca’s violent episodes.

Palmi: So you never considered casting Ruby in the same role as your namesake, Judith, in the Old Testament?

King: It’s odd that you should mention that. One of Margaret Atwood’s on-line texts about “Female Bad Behavior in the Creation of Literature”²³ refers to the biblical Judith “who all but seduced the enemy general Holofernes and then cut off his head and brought it home in a sack, was treated as a heroine, although she has troubled men’s imaginations through the centuries – witness the number of male painters who have depicted her – because she combines sex with violence in a way they aren’t accustomed to and don’t much like.” I imagine that Rebecca, had she received the help she deserved when she needed it, could have turned her violation and her passion into a force for good. She could have been another Helen Bamber. But that would have made for a different book.

My urge to write this story is encapsulated in Kay Redfield Jamison’s reference²⁴: *The Chinese believe that before you can conquer a beast, you must first make it beautiful*. I want all my readers to see something of Rebecca’s beauty, and in all the other characters, something of themselves.

²³ Atwood, M. 1994. “Spotty-handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behavior in the Creation of Literature”. <http://www.owtoad.com/home.html>. Site accessed 3 February 2009.

²⁴ Jamison, K.R. 1997. *An Unquiet Mind*. Picador, New York. p. 5

Reviewing this interview transcript, I understand King's choice of cover art for her book. It is a close view of a Symbolist depiction of "The Muses" by Maurice Denis (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) – a grove of ancient chestnut trees in rich greens, umber, sienna and black, rising from a carpet of leaves and silhouetted against a cool, creamy sky. The forest is a place of ritual for these women gifted with spiritual vision. And ritual, in Judaism, is a quasi-magical system created to elevate the state of the world.

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