

Writing Autism Inside-Out

Autism and Representation:

A Novel and Critical Essay

Submitted by

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I certify that this dissertation is my own work and all acknowledgements and references have been properly made.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. J. Miller', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Kirsten Miller

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Writing Autism Inside-Out
Autism and Representation:
A Novel and Critical Essay

Kirsten Miller

Abstract

The dissertation adopts both a creative and critical approach to exploring the representation of autism in literature. Much of the autism literature produced so far has arisen in first-world, developed contexts, characterised by a high degree of support and an extensive knowledge base. In this original novel, *The Hum of the Sun*, autism is presented in a contemporary South African context. Against a background of the rather narrow or limited representations of autism found in Western medical and popular literature, the novel intends to extend the range and focus of existing literary representation by exploring a condition of severely impaired communication in a developing world. The creation of Zuko, a character with autism, explores the extreme scenario of the classic form of the condition, where language is limited or non-existent. A third person narrative describes the experience of Zuko's character through a visceral, sensory language that focuses on quality and immediate experience rather than cognitive processes.

The theoretical component of this study discusses autism through a historical narrative from its emergence as a diagnosis, and the condition's diversity but tendency to characterise as lack against a norm. The rise in popular representations of autism emerge from constructions in popular media, as well as the public's fascination with and anxiety about the condition. Autism's representation spans a variety of genres. Compared and contrasted here are the genres of psycho-medical, fiction and autobiography or life-writing. Such popular representations potentially both create awareness and simultaneously produce stereotypes about the condition. Here the question of the relationship between the different discourses examines the vexed notion of 'truth' in the epistemological value of literature. The value of literature as a source of knowledge, and a source of knowledge about autism, is discussed, which illuminates various ethical and aesthetic questions in writing. Representation might be viewed as construction, not reflection, and the role of discourse also determines how autism as a knowledge-object is constructed and shaped by a particular genre and its conventions. Literature is a construct and truth is complex, but literary texts can facilitate understanding and offer a form of truth and illumination about the condition. Within all three genres, attention is given to the use of language, the narrative arc and structure, common stereotypes, plot devices, the resolution and grounding assumptions in relation to the way autism is represented. Finally, the implications of this research for the writing of an autism narrative in the form of the novel, *The Hum of the Sun*, are examined, with reflection on the ways it is possible to extend the terms of the debate and avoid some of the pitfalls found in the examination of other texts.

The Hum of the Sun

A novel

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1.

Within dreams we awaken, and in our waking state, we dream. Zuko dreamed of singing, but when he opened his mouth there was no sound. He moved his lips, made shapes that might have formed words, but the sounds that emerged were soft, too guttural, and more like a warble from the throat of a thrush than any song an eight year old boy might sing.

Because his mouth wouldn't move in the way he wanted it to, he took the plate at his elbow and tipped it onto the cold stone floor. The crash sounded, a satisfying smash. One seemed to say, *I am here, I am in the world, I have something to express, something a song might be, if it would only come out.*

His capable sounds were reduced to this: the plate, the crash. They were enough to summon his mother, Yonela. The sounds brought her running in a way his voice never could.

She hesitated in the doorway as though she might change her mind about the broken crockery and the breakfast and the boy who sat at the table with the voice that wouldn't work. The sun through the window lay on Zuko's arm like a blanket. The warmth emitted a frequency like a sound. His lips pressed together. 'Mmmm.'

'Zuko.'

If it were possible to utter her name too, he would. Mmmama. Mama. How many times he had tried. How many times had she held his face inches away from her own, her lips softly expropriating that sound, urging him to repeat it. Mmma-Mma. Ma. Ma. Eight years already. He was never more certain than now of his own inadequacies. The biggest yet: his inability to call his own mother by the name of their bond.

'Zuko!' His brother Ash appeared at the door, summoned too by the splintering sound. 'Shit,' Ash said.

'Don't use that language in front of your brother. Help me to clean it up,' Yonela said.

'He should do it. He broke the plate.'

'He doesn't have any shoes on. Here, get the dust pan.'

Zuko wanted to say he was barefoot because his shoes hurt him. His feet had grown and the old brown canvas pushed too hard on his toes, but they didn't ask him. Even if they had, he wouldn't know the words, or how to say them. Instead, he put his fingers into the

thick air. They wavered like a conversation in the light of the dusty sun. He waited for the butterfly to land.

Later he lay on his mother's bed beside Ash, clutching the yellow plastic seahorse he'd picked up on the road outside the house, a cheap toy that might have fallen out of a child's bucket on the way back from the beach. A small and insignificant cartoon creature so incidental, a mere accompaniment to a full day of laughter and conversation, the exploration of rock pools and the gentle teasing laughter of a family enjoying a picnic together in the afternoon sun. He told the seahorse the things in his mind. He made convoluted sounds, and still the seahorse continued to stare at him, eyes wide, smiling without judgement or any attempt to unravel the sounds. The round yellow plastic lay cocooned in his fingers. It didn't move or try to get away. Its eyes, surprised to see him, remained constant and wide. This thing, he thought, was his. He'd studied the shape of it, the focussed black eyes and the constant expression. It would listen to him always, silent, accepting. None of these things would ever change.

2.

This is what Ash remembered: the whitewash of the cold wall. Summer nights too hot to sleep. Insects crawling the breadth of the pillow. The noises that came when the stranger stayed over. Her sighs. His groans.

From the shadowed space on the other side of the wall he thought they were only exercising, late at night. He'd seen older boys on the mapped-out field beyond the settlement of river houses. Young men working their bodies, shaping their torsos into the kinds of flesh youth bestowed, and youth wanted. The goal posts imagined, drawn on the ground in a chalky paint that washed away in the summer rains. The way they pushed themselves up from the ground with bulked muscle arms, legs prostrate at a 45 degree angle, skin glistening, eyes focussed and hard on the ground. At 10 years old, Ash longed to be like them. Sweating and pushing and striving towards a goal. Each exercise session a feat of physical perfection. At night he lay wide-eyed in the dark and listened to his mother and this stranger from the city where he'd never been. He mapped their movements with his mind as he imagined how they perfected their push-ups, turning over with the bed a metronome. He didn't know that each to the other, their bodies were already perfect. He didn't know the strides they made towards a greater fitness were incidental. In the summer weeks that year, when he swam for hours in the

brackish water, baked like a fish on the river bank, the stranger and his mother had made each other happy, and they had, inadvertently, also made his brother, Zuko.

After Zuko was born, the stranger was around them more often. They played together like a family would play, beside the river with a ball he'd brought for the boy. At first, when the child began to walk, the stranger tried to coax him to kick the ball and, at first, the child did try. But gradually Zuko seemed to lose interest, and the stranger stopped trying to teach him to play.

'What do I call him, Ma?' Ash asked.

'Who?'

'The man who comes here.'

'Call him whatever you like.'

'I can't call him Baba. It doesn't feel right.'

'Then don't.' She hung washing in the front of the house. Honey played inside with a rag doll, and Zuko skirted between the sheets at her feet.

'Pa?'

'If you like.'

'What do you call him?'

She took a peg from her mouth and used it to secure a small t-shirt in the wind. 'Dom. Or Dominic. I like the whole of his name.'

'What does he call you?'

She cast him a fleeting glance. 'My name,' she said. 'Sometimes other things.'

'If he was a real father he'd be here all the time. He'd live with us.'

'That's not true. Lots of real fathers don't live with their children.'

'Did you have a real father?'

'Yes. And he was always drunk.'

'What happened to him?'

'A car hit him one night, on the main road. After that I didn't have a real father anymore. And it was more peaceful.' She picked up the empty washing basket and took it inside. Zuko followed on small steps behind her.

The year Ash turned 13, the stranger came and went for the last time, like the season of summer. In the daytime their mother rose early, fed Zuko and Honey their breakfasts, and then stood at the edge of the road and waited for the Hi-Lux with the surfboard strapped to the roof to stop and pick her up and take her to the big house that fronted the river at the

bend. She'd stay away all day. When she returned in the evenings, her face glowed calm and well. She kissed Zuko and held him to her like he was still an infant and needed the warmth of her breast.

'He's not a baby, Ma,' Ash told her. 'He's already four.'

She sighed and wiped the heat from her brow. 'I know. But then ... She kissed Zuko's head. 'All of you will always be babies to me.'

'Why do you like him?'

'Because he's my child.'

'No, that man. The stranger.'

'A man needs a woman, Ash. One day you'll know what I'm talking about.'

'Do you need him?'

She smiled, looked kindly at her son. 'I don't need anything. Apart from food. And my children. This world is a free place. If people only realised that.'

Sometimes the stranger parked his vehicle outside the house in the evenings. They sat on the couch in front of the portable television, his hand high on her thigh, and sometimes he leaned in and kissed Yonela's neck. Ash cooked the meat they brought home on the gas stove and served it to them cut into thin strips, the way the stranger liked it.

'Thank you, son,' he said. His teeth gleamed white.

'Why does he call me son?' Ash asked. Yonela chopped wood on a dry stump outside. She glanced at him, shook her head, but she didn't answer. 'Why is my name Ash?' he used to ask her when he was younger. Then she'd give him that same look, and put a finger under his chin. 'You're what's left of a fire that burned out a long time ago,' she'd say.

Deep into the month of December, more cars arrived at the house on the river's bend. The stranger no longer came to fetch his mother in the mornings. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she put a scarf on her head and walked the distance to make beds and wash dishes and peel the vegetables the stranger and his family would have with their roasts and braaied meat at night. Sometimes he brought her home early in the Hi-Lux, the surfboard a sturdy identity strapped to the roof. They would go into the bedroom and lock the door and come out an hour later. The stranger would stand outside in a pair of shorts and soap himself from the bucket of cold water Ash fetched from the communal tap every morning.

'Where does he live?' Ash asked his mother.

'In the city. Under a beautiful mountain.'

'Is he rich?'

'I suppose.'

‘Will you marry him?’

She laughed, and flapped the shirt she held in her hand so hard it made a snapping sound, before she hung it on the line outside the front of the house to dry.

Ash knew the stranger came with the summer, and made his way home when the season was over. Ash knew too, without being told, that the stranger was how his brother was able to eat Cheerios for breakfast every morning, how his mother afforded a new dress every year, and how there were slabs of steak in the kitchen when he was in town. Zuko never ate the meat. If his mother offered it up to his mouth, the little boy pressed his lips together and looked up at her as if to ask, ‘Why do you want to make me eat such a disgusting thing?’ He whimpered, and looked away. He didn’t want it anywhere near his mouth.

The last evening the stranger visited the house his mother was upset before she arrived through the door. Without acknowledging her children she went through the kitchen to her bedroom. The stranger followed behind, his mouth set tight. He shut the bedroom door behind them. All evening, Ash entertained his brother and sister while the adults spoke in forced whispers at a heightened pitch through the door. When suppertime came and went the children whined. Ash made mealie meal for himself and his sister, and he put out the box of Cheerios for Zuko. They ate quietly at the table, while the adults argued behind a closed door.

When the darkness had wrapped the house in a quiet coat, the bedroom door burst open. The stranger emerged and filled the doorway, the kitchen, as he moved through the house into the open outside. Without acknowledging the children, he snapped open the door of the truck. The children ran outside after him. When Ash’s mother came to the doorway and called out ‘Dominic!’ the man paused and turned his head. She remained there, frozen. The stranger turned and seemed to be returning, but instead he veered off the path to the house, walked to the nearby tree where Zuko now lay on his side, pulling grass strands from the earth by their roots. He stood and looked down at the boy. Zuko barely raised his eyes. The boy’s hands pulled and released, pulled and released, a motion that might go on until Ash fetched him to complete his supper. The stranger squatted and said something softly, inaudibly, to the boy, while Ash, his sister and his mother watched. Then he kissed the child quickly on his head, stood and returned to the car. Without a glance backwards he pulled himself into the cab and slammed the door, revved the engine and reversed the vehicle before he turned it onto the gravel road.

Later Ash drifted into sleep with the sounds of his mother softly sobbing. It was the last time the stranger came to the house. Never again did he hear his mother cry.

In the house on the small piece of land that backed onto the gravel road there was no telephone. Pine trees grew in patches between buildings cobbled together in a country of no snow. There were no radios, no horses, no milk, not much of a farmhouse either, anymore, with the roof damaged as it was by falling branches. Not much of a farm but Ash called it one because everybody did. The land had been divided again and again. The acres that ran beside the river sold off in previous generations to wealthy folk who stayed for summer's peak and abandoned their buildings and the surrounding mowed lawns in the remaining months. In the end there was nobody who made the old land work. Women smoked on porches, guarding ground the size of a child's throw. No-one possessed the energy to till the soil, or plant new trees. Men stood aimless, chewing the lining of their empty cheeks. The women planted potatoes, a few mealies, butternut, and if the birds didn't get the produce, then the monkeys did. Or the potatoes came down with blight. Stories were told of the old mission, when the colonialists came and brought the word of God along with seeds and clothes and things to eat. People flocked to hear, because they were hungry. When the cities grew and the missionaries left, the old nuns stayed on until they died. The people remained because they had nowhere else to go. Some still spoke of God. There were women who prayed fervently, endlessly. His mother said it was this that made her sick, rather than the reality of no more seeds, no clothes, and little to eat. They walked like the living dead, skeletons waiting for the crows to peck the last of the meat off their bones. When the graveyard was full they put the bodies out in the fields, side by side. They didn't bother to dig a hole. It seemed everyone got sick eventually. Everyone apart from his mother, his brother and himself. Then just his brother and himself.

In another life, they might have moved. She told him often enough. She might have put them on a bus and gone to Cape Town. She said she had a cousin there. She might have found out where he lived, found a job, a place to stay, and a school. The possibility of another life lingered. If she'd ever had an inclination toward any of this, towards the possibility of something else, it by-passed her as a dream. She held onto her children as best she could, but more tightly she held on to her reality, unaware of the possibility of change, doubtful of any kind of cosmic safety net at the bottom of the abyss. She sang softly as she carried out her work, as if she had a secret or harboured an undiscovered joy. Empty stretches of arid ground lay bare. There were bodies to bury, skies that promised inedible clouds and a colour nobody could drink. Ash fetched water from a borehole, until it dried. Then they only waited for the rains, which almost never came.

4.

In December Ash walked the gravel road. He veered off a certain bend in the river and leopard-crawled through thick bush. He saw Dominic's car beside the large double-storied house that fronted the dark, brackish flowing water, and vehicles he didn't know. He returned later and lay beneath a bush while he listened to a group of people laugh and talk and drink on the wide veranda. The stranger's voice dominated. A female laughed, joined in by others. Ash stayed hidden until the peripheral voices were gone, and only the stranger's voice and the laughing woman remained. He watched them walk hand in hand down the steps of the house. He crouched, and wanted to run. Something stopped him. They crossed the wide grass. Once the stranger stopped to kiss the woman. It was only when they took their clothes off and entered the water that Ash crawled out from under the bush, and sprinted home. He never told his mother what he'd seen.

Sometimes they revered the clouds, and with clouds came the thunder, the lighting, and thickness of sky, and then the rain. Under the storm the drops hammered their heads, soaked the thread-worn cotton clothes, and they danced in it anyway, mouths open and thirsty while mud ran in rivulets down their skin. The women ran to get buckets and tins and basins. The men stood with their hands in the air as though they knew it would happen eventually. They couldn't walk inside without wading through a dark sludge that dried grey around their ankles. Soon the houses were full of it, the children's chests damp as the walls moulded. Everybody coughed long after it dried, days later. It was a long time before it came again.

5.

Ash was the eldest and his brother Zuko was the youngest, with a girl in between. A child named Honey, like the stuff the bees make, sweet and sticky. She was tiny, with hair to her shoulders; his mother had once ripped the bottom of a red dress and used the strip of fabric to tie the ends after she'd braided it. Ash remembered Honey playing in the dry dirt with a rag doll wrapped in her arms. He remembered her carrying plates for their mother, or stamping on the soapy washing when there was still water in the bore-hole. He remembered her playing with sticks and stones and laughing, and he remembered her growing still. Growing quiet. Growing thin. Growing hot. She lay around and stared with eyes as big as stones, as though she knew what was to come. She wanted to be brave.

'What's wrong with her?' he asked.

His mother washed a cloth in cold water, wrung it out with her hands. ‘Her lungs are weak,’ she said. ‘When Honey was born, she could barely take a breath to make her first cry.’

‘Take her back to the clinic.’

‘There’s no more they can do.’

‘They can give her pills.’

Yonela looked at him, her eyes dark moons both full and distant. When she spoke, her voice wavered. ‘The pills do nothing for her now.’

He remembered the girl in his mother’s arms when she carried her into the rain to cool her down. Honey cried little. She seemed to disappear bit by bit. Silently. She seemed not to know her own family anymore, until one morning they rose with the sun and only her body remained.

The sounds of his mother’s cries reached the roof of the dilapidated house and rose further to the skies beyond. If it was possible to call his sister back, then his mother’s voice alone would do it. He learned then about death: that nobody returns from it. Even his brother’s persistent humming was silenced by the sound.

Later his mother took a cloth and wiped his sister’s face. She cleaned her arms, her legs, her hands and her small feet. She took the red dress and ripped another ribbon from it. She gathered Honey’s hair up into one hand at the base of her small neck and tied it. Honey didn’t open her eyes. She didn’t smile or reach for his mother’s face. She was gone, for sure.

Zuko shrieked and cried and played with the light that appeared through the cracks under the door and where the roof failed to meet the walls of the house. Ash waited for his mother to silence him, to hold up her hand or to speak sharply, but Zuko was left to be. ‘Come here,’ his mother told them. They stood and watched as she wrapped their sister’s stiff body in the red dress, covered it so her head vanished along with her arms, her legs, her little toes. It might have been a pound of potatoes she handed to Ash, or a drowned kitten or a dog caught accidentally in a trap. ‘You carry her,’ she said.

‘Where to?’

She remained silent, her mouth a line as she took Zuko by his hand and pulled him upright. She opened the door and led the boy out into the dry day. Ash followed with the weight of Honey’s body in his arms.

Yonela stopped at the small shed and opened it with her free hand. With the light that fell across the floor the rats scattered. A spider’s web blinked. ‘There,’ she said, ‘that spade over there, get it and we’ll take it with us.’

‘But ...’ he held up the bundle that took up both of his arms. His mother looked at Zuko, and let his hand go for a moment. In one movement, quick and calculated, she entered the shed and grasped into the dark corner for the spade. Zuko didn’t try to run. She marched off, spade in one hand, with Zuko trailing at the end of the other. Ash followed with his burden to wherever she wanted them to go.

His mother dug the whole morning. Sweat dripped from her nose as the sun arced in the sky. She pushed her hair back from her face but it stuck with the sweat, pasted down onto her skin and though it itched and annoyed her she didn’t lose her focus.

‘Let me help you,’ he told her.

‘There’s only one spade. You might be growing, but I’m still stronger than you.’ She winked at him. ‘It won’t always be that way.’

‘You think I’m slow?’

‘Yes, you’re too slow.’

Zuko chased butterflies. He laughed at their wings in the light, and lay beside Ash on the ground to examine grains of sand between the grass. Yonela dug. Their sister lay in a heap a way off, wrapped in the velvet of the dress, her hair spun out and mingling with the grass like dark cobwebs. Once Zuko approached her and carefully pulled the fabric aside. Ash glimpsed Honey’s face, waxen and still and cold as a doll’s. His mother threw the spade aside, lurched herself out of the hole and grabbed Zuko by his wrist, stuck her finger close to his nose as though to shout at him, but then she stopped. She looked at him too long and pulled him to herself. She held him close and tight while Zuko’s forefinger wrapped itself in her hair, curling and turning it like a corkscrew, over and over until it was tight. He pulled his finger out and watched the dense hair unravel. He shrieked and banged his head against her forehead. Yonela’s eyes smarted, but she swallowed her emotion for his brother.

Zuko was different with Honey. He melted whenever she was near him. His shrieks would soften to a low-pitched moan, his eyes grew slow and sleepy. He liked to nuzzle his nose into her neck, or to lie with his head on her little belly. Now he looked at her body like a quizzical bird. Yonela sweated through her tears as she dug the grave a few metres away. ‘She’s dead,’ Ash told him.

Yonela stopped, wiped a sheen of sweat from her forehead. ‘Quiet, Ash,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t even know what dead means.’

‘Of course he does. He’s not an idiot.’

‘Don’t use that word lightly.’

‘Maybe he thinks she’s sleeping.’

Zuko knelt, and stuck his face right into his dead sister's neck.

'Zuko! Don't let him get too close, he'll get sick as well. Move him away from there,' Yonela said. Quick as a fox she was out of the hole and dived towards his brother. She scooped him up and carried him across the pine needles and sandy floor to place him at Ash's feet. Zuko laughed and flicked his fingers into the air, examining the spaces between. It was a game. He giggled and moved on all fours like a monkey back to his sister's body. 'For God's sake! Get away from there. Ash, keep your brother away. I have to dig this hole.' There was no-one else to help his mother. When his sister was sick Ash had cooked the rice and cut the vegetables from the patch outside while his mother had barely left Honey's bedside. He'd dressed Zuko and combed his hair and kept him entertained outside to allow them both some sleep. He'd missed school many times, and then he stopped going altogether. Zuko did nothing but mess his pants and throw his food over the floor for Ash to pick up. Zuko was strong, too.

Ash moved with him to the base of a tree. He sat with Zuko as though he were a sack of potatoes, his arms across the boy's chest, so he'd stay away from his dead sister. Their mother picked up the spade and went back to her hole. She dug. She looked at Ash and paused, mid-shovel. 'Don't hold him tightly, or you'll hurt him,' she said. Zuko struggled to get free.

Ash let him go, and Zuko ran back to his sister. Their mother shouted at Ash and went to fetch him and brought him back to the tree. The game went on, until the hole was dug. Back and forth, back and forth, Zuko and Ash, until his mother threw the spade across the ground and wiped her hands on the front of her pretty green dress that looked like it was badly in need of a wash anyway. Ash noticed how the fabric fell on her legs and outlined them; they seemed way too thin. 'Come on boys,' she said eventually. 'It's time to say goodbye to your sister.'

6.

The circle.

The circle was complete. It wasn't one thing. The circle was many things, in one. Corn, oats, rice, and wheat. If he had enough of them, placed them side by side on the table they would go on forever. CORN, OATS, RICE & WHEAT. Corn and oats the most tolerable, mostly round letters, but wheat! He couldn't bring himself to look at that word too long. The spikes of the edges, the incompleteness, and where they ended in space. The circles that fell

from the top of the box into the bowl, and the large splash of milk. The great big word across that meant 'happy.' That made him happy, the letters mostly in purple, but the O was red and the i dotted with the circle of the cereal. And above it, his dead sister's name: Honey.

'Those things can't be good for you,' Ash said. Zuko turned the box to the side and stared at the small diagram of Whole Grain, with its labels of Bran, Endosperm and Germ. Zuko worried that by eating the circles, the Germ would get into him and cause him some sickness too. But in the crunch of the circles that came from the packet there seemed to be no evidence of any kind of Germ, or Bran or Endosperm either. Ash grabbed the box and looked at the price tag on the side. 'Twenty-four bloody rands. That's a crazy expense. You need to learn to eat toast.'

The day Zuko realised he had no voice to speak with, no way to get what was locked in his head out, he realised any dream he might have had risked emerging still-born. He gave over to the dreams that emerged from deep within him. He let go of the plans and hopes and the ways of control. These, he thought, as young as he was, were not for him. At night, when the house was silent and he tried to sleep, the colours came down like arrows and stabbed his skin. The sky burst with the stars and he paced the night through, on watch for the colours, the arrows, and what the sky contained. What he was, was something else. He belonged, but only in the way of the wind, the sand and the stars, or the humming sun.

Once, after his sister's death, Zuko sat beneath the trees and ran his palms over the textures of the pine needles on the ground. The thick, barky knot that held each bunch together. The way the needles tapered to the end, like a brush. His brother emerged from the house, and bent to pick up a cone. In the same movement, he lobbed it across to Zuko. 'Here, catch,' Ash said. Zuko caught the sound but it remained unconnected to a word. Understanding that word and what his body should do with it, how he should respond to the sound, caught him in mystery. He drew a blank. The cone hit him on the left shoulder. His shame in the moment afterwards was such that he turned to the bark of the tree to hide his eyes. When he heard no further movement or sound of retreat, he turned his head back slowly. Ash waited there, staring at Zuko. The child whipped his head forward, and studied the complex, swarming patterns in the bark.

'You can't catch,' Ash said.

Zuko lifted his fingers and tried to distract himself by mimicking the tempo of the wind in the pine needles not yet fallen.

‘You’re eight years old and you can’t catch. Anything. You couldn’t catch a ball, if we had one.’ Ash disappeared into the house. He was gone some time. Zuko almost forgot the incident, and the shame it had fuelled. Then Ash reappeared, his hands out in front of him, empty. ‘I can’t find it,’ Ash said.

Zuko made no sound. If he had a question, he didn’t know how it was shaped.

‘I had a ball. A soccer ball,’ Ash said. ‘But I don’t know where it’s gone.’

Zuko remembered the stranger and the way he’d played with Ash on the river bank in days of summer, the grass thick and green and sprinkler-watered. At four years old and not yet out of diapers, Zuko circled his mother’s legs where she sat on a blanket near the water. Ash had kicked that ball too hard. It flew fast and landed in the middle of the river. The tide surged full and strong, it would have carried a man as quickly. The stranger laughed and shook his blond curls. He put a large hand on Ash’s head and told him he’d get him another ball. Ash didn’t remember that. Afterwards, the stranger had said goodbye to him and never appeared again. Now Zuko wondered if his sudden absence had something to do with that ball.

Ash stepped into the doorway of the house and called in to his mother. When she didn’t answer, he looked around the front and found her washing a bowl of samp for their supper in the water she’d collected that morning. She stood upright at the sound of his voice, and half-closed her eyes. She righted herself and came round to the back where Zuko was. ‘He can’t catch, Ma,’ Ash said. ‘Watch this.’ He took another larger pinecone from the ground and lobbed it at his brother. It hit Zuko in the middle of his chest, and fell onto the ground. ‘Watch,’ he said. He picked up a second pinecone and did the same. Zuko was unable to lift his arms, not through lack of will, but at the disconnection that occurred somewhere between that will and its intention. ‘See?’ Ash said, referencing his mother. ‘He can’t catch.’

Yonela wiped her hands on the flowered apron tied around her waist. There were holes in the fabric where moths or barbed wire or something else had caught it over time.

‘Don’t do that, Ash,’ she said. Her voice was low.

‘Do what, Ma?’

‘Show him things he can’t do. Make him out to be a fool.’

‘I’m not!’

‘Yes you are. He knows he can’t catch. Why do you have to spell it out to the rest of the world?’

‘The rest of the world! It’s only you, Ma.’

She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palms. Ash knew it as a sign of her weariness. ‘It’s me, or it’s a thousand others. You don’t have to say it in front of him.’

‘But he knows it anyway. You said yourself.’

‘Ash!’ Now her voice rang sharp. ‘We’re out of paraffin for the stove. You need to get us some wood, to boil the water for tonight’s meal.’

‘It’s something we could teach him.’

‘What?’

‘To catch! Because he can’t do it now, doesn’t mean he never will. If we teach him, maybe other kids will play with him.’

Her eyebrows arched in a question. ‘How do you suggest we teach him to catch?’

‘You stand behind him. Hold his hands up. Cup them for him. I’ll stand here, right close to him, and throw the cone. You help him catch it. Teach him what he needs to do with his hands. I know he wants to!’

Zuko giggled from the direct attention; his mother’s weight on his back and the serious concentration of Ash’s eyes. He squirmed and wriggled as Ash threw a pinecone from a distance of thirty centimetres. His mother approximated the catching movement, taking his hands along with her. It was when Ash began to count that Zuko found a rhythm in it, a reason to continue. It was when Ash called ‘Another ten!’ that Zuko found he understood how the series of throws were confined, contained. Within the bounds of a finite number, he concentrated enough to allow his mother to guide his movements.

The following day they tried again. This time, Yonela stepped back. She still cupped his hands in hers as she stood behind him, but she no longer leaned right into him. Now, as his own muscles learned the movements, she waited a second longer, then a second more, until finally she stepped back and he held his hands out on his own. At first he barely caught the cone three times out of ten. It was true that every time, he tried a little harder. It was rhythm, and he’d found it. He immersed himself in the motion, back and forth, back and forth. ONE-two-THREE-four-FIVE-six-SEVEN-eight-NINE-ten. One cycle complete, to start again.

It became what they did, in the evenings, before supper and after Ash returned from school, before the light had faded enough to take their vision. It made them laugh. Ash stepped back and increased the distance he stood away from Zuko; then he swapped with his mother and they took turns throwing the cone to the boy. As Zuko laughed at his own pleasure and success, as he began to catch more frequently, and to release it in time for the cone to fly out in the right direction, they formed a triangle between the three of them, and

played the new game three ways. Eventually, their mother sat out a lot. She said she was tired. She said she didn't have the energy anymore that Ash had, to keep up the consistency. She said, laughing, that Zuko had overtaken her in her own throwing and catching ability and endurance. She said next time she got some money, she would buy the boys a real ball.

7.

Zuko sat at the breakfast table, and his mother did not appear. Ash shuffled into the kitchen and placed a new box of cereal in front of him. Zuko opened the box and poured the circles out into a bowl. He added the milk and then ate them quickly so they kept their crunch.

'Slow down,' Ash said. 'You'll choke if you eat any faster.' Ash made toast in a pan on the stove and poured his tea from a kettle that shot steam into the air. Zuko delighted in the way the steam curled around the sunlight; he saw the individual particles. 'You keep your hat on today,' Ash told him. Zuko tapped the top of his head to show Ash there was no hat there. 'Mama's in bed. She won't get up today. You wait for me to come home for lunch, okay? You be quiet in here. She needs to sleep.' Ash wore his white shirt and grey trousers and the black shoes he shined with polish and a rag every Sunday evening, a ritual to mark the start of the coming week when the sun caressed the edge of the earth. Ash took a slice of bread and cut himself thick wedges that he slathered with peanut butter and placed in a plastic box.

When Ash left the house, the door creaked and thudded as it closed. Zuko leaped up to chase after him, dragging the chair on the floor. He ran past the henhouse to catch up, and softened his pace to a walk as he tailed his brother, quiet footsteps on the pine needle beds. When he came to the top of the hill, the river visible through the trees, grey in the early morning, Ash glanced behind him. 'Hey!' he called. 'Go home! Go back! You know what happens to you at school.'

Through the morning while his mother coughed and slept, Zuko sat alone in the kitchen and constructed formations on the table with the Cheerios. Flowing waves moved like painted steam particles across the table. Air molecules made visible, that sat on the wood. Through morning, the house sank further into quiet as it warmed with the heat of the day. Before the sun peaked directly overhead, he went out to the chicken coop. He took a handful of corn from the sack and flung it on the floor. The birds flurried and flustered, brandished

their open wings in their fight for the food. Zuko froze where he stood in the dust, and waited for the frenzy to abate.

He tried to know his own body by the smell of the dust. He wanted to take the two eggs in the straw to his mother. Although he knew he should be gentle, when he picked up the cold shell his fingers closed around it. The crack, the crunch, the breaking sent a sensation of pleasure through his body, connecting his fingers to his hands and arms, his limbs to his torso and right up into his head, to create a slow fizz of electricity.

He took the next egg, determined to carry it through into the house, to place it in the nest of his mother's slipper, a surprise for when she woke. Yet his fingers seemed to have their own mind, and their call to pressure against the shell was too strong. His fingers squeezed the shell. The egg cracked, crunched, crushed in the palm of his hand. Beyond the satisfaction of the sensation of crush, the slime repulsed him, and he panicked. It ran between the digits of his hand and gleamed in the sun. The yolk looped thick and yellow on his skin. A strange nausea crept into the back of his throat. He looked around. There was nowhere to wipe or to wash and his legs rooted him, unmoving, to the floor. The chickens flapped, disturbed. Zuko screamed. His voice assaulted the air as the chooks abandoned their home and moved out into the sun and away from the coop for relief. His sobs of frustration and disgust filled the small space. He longed for his mother to appear in the doorway and gather him into her arms, to sooth his experience with her soft words, to hold him and contain him in order for his body to remain intact. She didn't come. Long after his sobs had subsided, the chickens returned with relief at the renewed silence. With only the crickets and other soft insects sounding on the air, he waited for her. He moved from the coop into the sun and back to the giant shadow contained by the house. The gloom of her room was enhanced by the pulled curtains. Her eyes were closed and her head bent at an angle of pain to her neck. Fresh beads of cooling perspiration glistened on her forehead.

On the first and second evenings of her sickness, before the natural light was gone, Zuko stayed out at the back on the bed of pine needles below the monstrous trees. He picked up the biggest pine cone on the ground, and he waited. Once, Ash came outside and his heart lifted. He rounded his palms against the fronds of the cone in anticipation. But Ash went around the front and returned a minute later with the bucket of water, then back into the house without noticing Zuko. The second day Zuko picked up a smaller cone, and waited for his brother and his mother. Neither one appeared. When darkness dropped he went into the house and put the cone on the bed where Yonela slept, in a smooth place on the blanket, near

her feet. He stood over her head and watched her. He counted the spaces between her breaths. Once, she opened her eyes. Her mouth smiled. She said his name.

8.

The following afternoon, her boots remained empty beside the bed. Sun rushed through the broken window, unfiltered. Ash sat on the bed. The weight of Yonela's eyes pushed against themselves as she forced them open. 'Hello, boy.' She smiled.

'Hello, Ma.'

'Where's your brother?'

'Out the back.'

'He'll run if you leave him alone too long.'

'No he won't. I've shut the gate, he can't get out the yard.'

She reached out, brushed his knee with her hand. 'You know I love you the same as him.'

'I know, Ma.' Ash pushed her hand away as it rose and before it reached the side of his face.

'The same, but different too.' The circles beneath her eyes had deepened to hollow grooves. It was as though a sculptor had entered the room unnoticed, and chiselled her flesh away. 'You know that because he can't talk, doesn't mean he's got nothing to say either.'

'I know that, Ma.'

'You know he's stronger than you too, Ash. In many ways.' She put her head back, closed her eyes. 'You'll look after your brother, then?'

'I ...'

She put out her hands to prevent him from speaking. 'Shhh. Listen for now. Hear me out, okay? You need to get yourselves away from here. There's too much sickness. I want you boys to live.'

'You'll be okay, Ma. You're tired from looking after Honey. And Zuko was awake all last night. You'll see, you'll wake up better tomorrow.'

'There's money in the biscuit tin in the kitchen. Not a lot. Enough to keep Zuko in his Cheerios for a week or two.'

'No, Ma. You'll need money when you feel okay.'

'I don't think that's going to happen.'

'Are your lungs weak too?'

A thin smile flit across her face, though he'd made no joke.

'I can go to town, get you a doctor ...'

'And leave your brother?'

'I'll take him with me.'

'Don't leave me, Ash. Don't let me die alone.'

'You'll need the money for his education and you'll need it to look after Zuko for a long while ...'

She laughed, a rasping sound. 'He hasn't been to school for two years. He's eight years old. You still want to talk education?'

The ketones rang sweet on her breath as her body evaporated. A spider's web in the corner glistened and winked. 'Guess not,' Ash said.

'You'll look after each other?'

'Guess so.'

She stayed silent a long time. He thought she was done talking. He readied to creep out when she spoke. 'Dominic lives in Cape Town.'

'What?'

'He's one of those fancy lawyers. In Cape Town.'

The stranger's face appeared, clear as crystal stone, in Ash's mind. 'Why doesn't he come here anymore?' Ash asked.

'He's married now. He has a family of his own.'

'Shit, no man!'

'What, you think he was going to marry me? You think you're a miracle child and he'd give up his swanky life and his three houses and cross his lawyer parents for me and my brood?'

'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'It wasn't important before.'

'Why is it important now?'

She looked straight at him, through his eyes. 'Because I am going to die.'

The boots on the floor had worked a long time. Ash wondered now if they would ever be filled again. He thought of burning them, along with her clothes, after she'd gone.

'He ...'

'What?'

'I don't need anyone to take care of me. I'm old enough.'

'Zuko's not. Zuko may never be.' Her eyes were slowly closing.

‘I can take care of him. There’s no-one else, anyway.’

‘You’ll need some help. You’ll need to work ...’

‘Is he ...’

‘What?’

‘Was he Honey’s father too?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does he know?’ He looked at the floor and then at the trees outside. The wind had already started. It would blow through until tomorrow.

She didn’t answer.

‘Can I get you water, Ma?’

Her hands stretched too thin, the nails dug like claws into the flesh of his arm. ‘His name is Rahl,’ she said. ‘Dominic Rahl. And he’s given us everything we have.’

Ash went out the back of the house to find his brother. Zuko clung to a tire as it swung back and forth at the end of a thick dusty rope. Ash stood and watched him. He might have been a tree for all Zuko seemed to care. Sometimes the child raised two bent fingers into the air as though he was testing the wind, or waiting for it to change.

9.

They didn’t mean to go as far as they did, in the end, but Ash couldn’t stay in that place with the dry earth and the white-hot sky any longer. The giant trees sucked the life from the soil and blew endlessly in the in-between season. He couldn’t stand the way time stood still, or the way Zuko played with their mother’s body as they watched it decompose. The way he pulled at her hair until it came out in chunks in the eight year old fists, the way he put his nose to her skin and sniffed her, or the way the sunlight streamed through the broken window and landed on dust particles. The way they waited for something to happen, although nothing ever did. Still, he couldn’t bury her. ‘Zuko?’

‘ ... ’

‘What you want for supper, man?’

‘Maa ...’

‘Aw, Zuko. It’s a simple question.’

Click. Click click. Flick. Pause. Zuko looked out from the deep corners of his brown boat eyes. *Flick.*

Zuko howled into the night when the moon rose, many nights after Yonela was gone. He paced the small house on restless feet like some kind of supernatural being that had no need of sleep. Sometimes he laughed and sometimes he cried. Ash couldn't tell if it was for their mother, for himself, or for its own sake. He couldn't wait forever for something else to happen. He knew they had to go, or they would die also.

Click click. Flick. Click click. Flick.

'I've got no rice.'

Click click.

'There's tuna and potatoes but there's no rice and there's no egg, okay? I can't make the chickens lay right here and now. What we've got is what we've got.'

Flick. Flick.

'I know you don't eat fish. Today, you're going to eat fish. You're going to eat fish and you're going to eat potato and you're going to sleep and you're not going to keep me awake. I'm sick of it. You hear me?'

'...'

'Okay. Relax. I'm sorry, I'm tired, okay? I didn't mean it, it's not your fault.'

'FFffffff.'

'Yes, it's his fault, Zuko. His fault.'

The fingers answered, beside his eyes.

'Eat your tuna. Here, I'll mash the potato for you. Is that better? Mush, like you like it. I've taken the skin off. Please, eat the friggin' mash.'

Click.

'Please.'

Flick.

'Stop holding me to food ransom. If I had rice I'd give it to you. I've got none. Now eat.'

Click flick flick.

'Sit down, Zuko. Crikey, Zuko what is *wrong* with you!'

Zuko was already gone and out of the room. *It's me there's something wrong with,* Ash thought. *How many times does he have to tell me he doesn't eat tuna fish and mash potatoes?*

On the fourth day the last box of Cheerios sat empty. Zuko crouched at the table in a ribbon of morning light. His fingers flicked through the hovering dust. Clouds moved across the grass outside. Ash entered the kitchen, his chest bare, his taut stomach concave from the worry and the loss and the lack of food. He picked the empty Cheerios box off the table and shook it, then lobbed it into the overflowing bin. ‘There’s eggs,’ he said. ‘The chickens are laying at last.’

Zuko paid no attention. His fingers painted pathways in the dusty light.

Ash went outside to the coop and set the chickens out. He clapped his hands and shoo’ed the last dappled hen off her nest. Three creamy orbs nestled in the straw, still warm. He took them into the kitchen and fired up the gas, then broke the eggs into a pan of bubbling oil. When the yolks held together with a texture of soft cheese and the whites were laced with brown underneath he plated and salted the eggs and put one down in front of Zuko. Ash sat opposite his brother and swallowed the eggs on his plate in a few easy mouthfuls. Zuko leaned forward and sniffed at the centre of the yolk.

‘Egg,’ Ash said. ‘It’s egg. Eat it.’

Zuko whimpered. He stood and fetched the empty cereal box from the waste and put it back on the table, sat down. The single egg in front of him grew cold. Ash fetched a spoon from the drawer and broke the egg into sections. He leaned across the table and tried to force the pieces into his brother’s mouth. Zuko’s eyes squeezed tight at the gagging in his throat, the soundless tears that sat unexpectedly at the corners of his eyes. ‘Okay,’ Ash said. He put the spoon down. ‘Okay okay okay.’

Zuko’s eyes opened. They sat on his face like upside down boats, the whites clearer than those of any other eyes Ash had known. ‘Mama’s gone,’ Ash said. ‘There won’t be any more of this shitty cereal.’

When the sun was past its peak, a knock sounded at the door. Ash opened the door and a girl stood there in a white shirt and socks and the grey skirt and black shoes of the school uniform. Her hair was braided back from her face in thick ropes that snaked prettily in criss-cross paths across her head. ‘Hey,’ he said. He stood across the doorway, preventing her from coming in. ‘I thought you might be someone else.’

‘Who?’

‘The authorities.’

‘You haven’t been at school,’ the girl said.

He shrugged. ‘I’ve got ... you know ... my brother.’

She lifted the books under her arm as though she suddenly remembered them. ‘I brought you some work,’ she said. ‘I thought you could do it at home.’

‘What for?’

‘You have to learn.’ She peered around him, into the house. He stood firm, stretching his body across as far as he could. ‘What’s that smell?’ she said.

He looked beyond her, into the sky. ‘I cooked eggs this morning. I haven’t washed the pot yet.’

Her nose twitched and he winced at the disgust he imagined she felt. He held out his hands and took the books from her. ‘Thanks,’ he told her.

She stood as though she still expected something.

‘My mother died,’ he said.

‘They said that. At school. That maybe she was gone.’

‘I don’t know what to do with the body.’

She stepped backwards. ‘I can bring you more books next week,’ she said.

‘It’s okay.’ He couldn’t remember the last time he’d brushed his teeth. Or Zuko’s. ‘I’ve got to sort things out here,’ he said.

She paused, watching his face. Then she said: ‘Is your brother here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I see him?’

‘Why? You think he’s dead too?’

She shrugged and glanced away. ‘I’ve got to go, anyway.’

‘Hey,’ he said as she turned.

‘What?’ She looked back at him.

‘You got Cheerios at your house?’

‘What? No way. We eat porridge. Twice a day, sometimes. My ma can’t afford the box stuff.’

‘Oh.’ He looked out to the road behind her. ‘That’s okay.’

‘I’ll see you,’ she said as she turned away.

He said nothing. He watched her walk until she rounded the corner and was gone from sight.

He rose late in the morning with the heat already on his skin, transformed to a fine moisture that gathered on his top lip. He stood, delirious from hunger, and looked over at the other bed. Zuko was gone.

He found his brother outside, in a small dusty bowl near the chicken coop. Zuko's eyes arched in his head, still slitty from sleep and crusty at the corners. His face angled upwards, as though he were a battery that needed the sun's rays to recharge. 'You want chicken for supper tonight?' Ash asked.

Zuko squinted his eyes at the sky.

Ash leaned against the coop he'd built with his own hands with wood he'd collected from the surrounding forests. First there were two chickens and now they had six. With the fowls came at least two eggs each morning. 'We have to bury her,' Ash told him. 'We can't leave her there anymore. We have to dig a hole, and put her in the ground.'

Zuko made a grinding noise with his teeth. Ash hadn't seen the kid smile since their mother got sick, apart from a strange grimace when he pushed his nose up close to her body to measure the sweet cloying scent of her decay. 'She's gone, Zuko. We'll never see her again, after we bury her. It will be the biggest change you'll ever know. Nothing ... nothing will be the same.'

Zuko scraped a foot in the dust. Behind him the chickens scratched. A small cloud billowed behind them, then settled. Zuko moved his slow body in a rocking motion, back and forth.

Later when Ash fetched the spade from the shed, Zuko still sat there, eyeing the sky and the trees in the cold early sun. 'Get up here,' Ash told him. 'Help me dig this hole. We've got to get it done.'

When Zuko didn't move, Ash took him by the hand and drew him up from the dust. He put an arm around the smaller boy's shoulders and led him around the back of the house, up the bank to the pine trees that knotted the ground into some semblance of stability with their roots. Before the trees he flung the spade down and led Zuko to a tree. 'You can sit here,' he said. 'You can sit here and watch me bury our mother.'

Ash's body tensed, strong and wiry in the way of skin and muscle and bone, yet untouched by the ravages of time. Youth gave its blessings to the young. Those same blessings time would slowly take away. The earth Ash dug was fresh and soft from the humus made by many seasons of fallen pine needles. His body celebrated the labour, lost his potential tears through the strain and the sweat and the joy of physical work. Zuko sat by and

watched, curious. ‘Dust to dust,’ Ash told him as he dug. ‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We’ll all end up this way.’

The still morning marked the end of winter. A breeze moved through the trees. A crow called above them. Ash looked up and watched the bird in the nearby branches, hopping with its head at an angle, holding his gaze with an eye like a black bead. Branches caught the sun, and kept them from its glare. Ash dug and sweated for a full two hours, before he threw the spade down and stood at the bottom of the rectangular pit. Zuko stood up suddenly, and jumped in with him. ‘Get out! Don’t be crazy, this is your mother’s grave,’ Ash told him. A pile of dark earth faced them both at the edge, eye-level. Ash wrapped his arms around Zuko’s hips and hoisted him up, then pushed him by his feet, out of the hole.

Later in the day they walked for 20 minutes and came to a house with two Alsatians running outside. The dogs worked the chicken-wire fence, up and down, barking. Zuko shrunk back. ‘It’s okay,’ Ash told him. ‘I won’t let them get you.’

A door in the stone house opened and man appeared, dressed in a shirt the colour of a cornflower, grey trousers and shined shoes. He wore a wooden cross around his neck, hand-carved and hanging from a rusty chain. He reined the dogs in by their collars, attached a chain to each and led them inside. He came out, rubbing the top of his head with one hand. ‘Boys,’ he said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘My mother died,’ Ash told him.

‘I heard. I meant to stop by your house, but things got ahead of me. I’m sorry for your loss.’

‘We’re burying her today,’ Ash said. ‘I’ve dug the hole. But then I figured it’s not right to do it without a pastor. Or some kind of blessing.’

‘I’m not a pastor. I’m a priest. Your mother had no time for God.’

‘I want to do it the proper way.’

‘The proper way would be to report her death.’

Zuko stood by and watched the door of the house for the dogs. By the quick eye movements, Ash thought he was ready to run. Ash scratched his head, then realised his hands were stained with the earth he’d dislodged to make that hole to put his mother into. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a wash, or washed Zuko. He inspected his hands and put the cleaner one into his back pocket, and brought out his mother’s ID book. ‘Please, take it.’ He said. He held the small green book out to the man.

‘You should be doing this yourself,’ the priest said. ‘You’re old enough now.’

‘We need to get out of here for a while,’ Ash said.

‘I can understand that. But you’ve got a minor with you there.’

‘Zuko? We want to go and stay with our father for a while. In Cape Town.’

The man’s look was sceptical. He fingered the wooden cross around his neck. ‘When will you be back?’

‘I don’t know. I need to tell him she’s dead.’

The man motioned to the house. ‘I have a cell phone inside. You can come in and use it.’

Ash took a step away. Zuko put a hand on his arm absently, as though his thoughts were already off the dog and floating upwards, as though he worried they’d take him with them. ‘It’s okay,’ Ash said. ‘I don’t have his number.’

‘We can find it for you.’

‘No ... I want to see him ... him to see us. We’re his sons.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Dominic Rahl.’

The man looked at him, sceptical. ‘Do you know where he lives?’

‘I have his address.’

Silence filtered through the sounds of birds. The surrounding trees waited. Beyond the breeze that moved the tops of them, the river rushed. The man looked at his boots, then back at Ash. ‘Do what you must. I can’t stop you. You’re already sixteen.’ He took the small green book that contained the summary of Yonela’s life – her birth date, her number, her photograph. What was left of her now.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Still Ash didn’t move. Behind the man, in the house, a dog barked sharply. The priest took some steps back. ‘I need to let them out now,’ he said. ‘So, if that will be all ...’

‘We don’t have any money,’ Ash said.

The priest looked down as he put his free hand into his pocket. His mouth turned too, as though he’d swallowed something distasteful. He pulled out a fifty, leaned forward and handed it to Ash. ‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘I can’t give you any more than that.’ His eyes skipped to the side. ‘I don’t have it.’

Ash pocketed the money with the hand that wasn’t holding Zuko’s. His brother waited, strangely quiet, watching the ground. The priest retreated into the house. In the tree that overhung the roof with wayward branches, a lone monkey sat and picked at a flea on its belly with one black hand.

Zuko watched himself coming apart in front of the mirror. He couldn't help but be worried. It wasn't, anymore, that his mother no longer held his skin together in her tight embraces, or that she rotted now away from him, deep in the ground, in a hole his own brother had dug. It was Ash who worried Zuko now. A new line had crept between his eyebrows that threatened permanency, and Ash now carried with him a cloud of silence, of separateness, that wrapped him up and kept him apart. When he was there, he seemed not there. When Zuko made sounds or tried to speak, Ash seemed not to notice. Ash seemed something like his own shadow, or even himself – he existed, and did not exist, at the same moment.

It was Zuko's own body that wouldn't do what he wanted it to: carry eggs from the chicken run whole and complete, crack them into a bowl and heat them in a pan over the gas and then put them on a plate for Ash to eat. Instead his body rebelled against his mind, or his mind played tricks on what his body wanted. When his body wanted to help, his mind forgot. It became distracted, and allowed his eyes to play with light, to seek the gaps in the leaves and branches until hours had gone by. Until the trees had faded back, and the negative spaces became what was real. He'd get stuck on the circles at breakfast time. Now that there were no more, his anxiety deepened for the changes to come.

It was the circles and the guilt, the light and his immovable body, and the way his body played tricks on his mind, too. When his mind and his thoughts were focussed and exact with intention and understanding, his body disobeyed. When he wanted his legs to move his arms took over, waving in the air as though walking the other way around. When he wanted to take the broom and sweep with it, to tidy the mess and dirt Ash seemed to ignore, he found the broom and he held it in the kitchen, but his arms couldn't find any sweeping motion in their memory. He could stand for hours, until Ash came in and told him to put the broom down.

He imagined himself as a spirit. If he gave up his own body, as his mother had done, Ash might bury him in the ground too. He'd have nothing but air to float on. There'd be no demand for sound when words no longer mattered. His body would float, breathless. He'd find the quiet, and it would stay with him. He might look down instead of up, or across at others, and it might not matter anymore that he couldn't move to the places his mind wanted him to, or make the sounds that came easily to other people. He floated out to the back of the

house as if he had no legs. He swallowed air particles, as though they were Cheerios, the only nourishment he would one day need. His mother used to tell him to keep his mouth closed, that he looked like a fish, gasping for air, with his mouth open. When she was still on the ground, and not floating out there somewhere, a spirit on the wind as he himself longed to be.

A sound outside came softly, like brushes on a piece of tin. He ran from the house and lifted his eyes. The raindrops cooled his eyeballs, before he blinked. It was a game he played with himself, that he might catch the raindrops before they reached the ground. Slowly, he gathered them into the fibres of his shirt. The water and material merged into one. They stuck to his skin but he kept his eyes open, as though within them he held the sky's tears. He blinked rapidly, into the light.

12.

Ash's eyes opened an hour before the dawn. He stared into darkness before he sat up. Through the window the growing light turned the sky from pitch to gentle grey. The trees sat like black stamps against it.

Ash pushed back the covers and stepped over Zuko's mattress on the floor. Zuko snored, and turned over. Ash pulled on a pair of jeans and thick socks and the boots his mother had bought him for Christmas with the money their father had sent. Sturdy and brown, the leather laced up in criss-cross rows. He grew strong in them. As though his footsteps mattered.

In the kitchen he lit a candle and heated water for tea in a pot on the stove. While he waited for the boil, he sat in the doorway and watched the sky turn green.

When he'd had his tea he took the last flour from the cupboard and an egg he'd saved from the chickens. He made a rough dough with the sugar that was left in the tin, and shaped it into small rounds. He fried these in a pan in oil over an open flame.

When he'd got Zuko up and dressed he realised the child had no shoes to speak of. His mother had bought him Christmas shoes also, but with no regular school and no need to walk any distances, Zuko's feet had grown longer and wider and now he no longer fit into them. 'Shit,' Ash said.

'Shh,' his brother replied.

Ash looked at him sharply. From the gleam in Zuko's eyes, he knew it was an attempt at imitation, and no intention to stop his cursing. 'You're only eight,' Ash told him. 'Don't start on the bad language.'

‘Shhh,’ Zuko said again, relishing the feel of the sound as it escaped as air across his tongue.

Ash took a small green bag from his mother’s room and packed a piece of still-wrapped soap, a clean pair of underwear for each of them and a jersey for Zuko, though the child never felt the cold. In the kitchen he took a bowl from the cupboard, scooped in the small dough circles fried to a crunch, and added the last milk from the carton. ‘Here,’ he said, placing a spoon in Zuko’s hand. ‘They’re not Cheerios, but they’re circles and they crunch. Eat. You’ll need the strength.’ He brought the old biscuit tin off the shelf and opened it. Inside was a clear plastic packet filled with notes. Without counting the money, he pushed the packet into the pocket of his jeans, along with the box of matches that sat beside the tin.

While his brother ate Ash packed the rest of the fried dough circles in a small plastic margarine tub. He took the last stale half-loaf of bread, already tinged with white mold turning green at the edges, and pushed these into the bag. He fetched an old plastic bottle from the floor beneath the wash basin and filled it with water from the tap. Then he went out into the yard to the chicken coop, and caught each bird. Resisting the urge to hold them, to feel their soft feathers against his face, he wrung each of their necks and placed the bodies into a plastic bag. Back in the house he pushed two of the chickens into plastic, and put them on top of the small items of clothing and the bread and the water.

In his mother’s room the sweet, decaying scent of death remained. Her boots waited, open and expectant, on the stone floor. The table held a pile of papers, weighted down with a stone decorated with a thin white pattern. Ash had made it for her in years much younger, when she’d had enough money for a tin of paint for the outside of the house. He’d taken a stick and found this stone, dipped the stick into the paint and decorated it for her. She’d kept it always, this gift from her oldest son. She’d used it to weight down her important papers, and displayed it on the old table her grandfather had made. Now Ash rifled through what was there. He found copies of her ID book, her father’s will and the deeds for his hand-built house. He found an uncashed cheque for two hundred rands, and a pile of envelopes addressed to his mother sent from a business address, stamped on the back. Most of these were empty. In some was a slip of paper marked ‘with complements,’ and the same business name and address at the top. They were addressed to the same post box number in town. He’d fetched most of them, inserting the small grey key his mother had given to him into the box in the wall outside the post office when he’d done the trip to town to buy the potatoes or samp and Zuko’s Cheerios or other supplies. Sometimes he’d caught a lift home on the back

of a donkey cart. Now he stuffed one of the envelopes into an inside pocket of the jacket. He thought of building a bonfire and burning the sheets, the smell of her death, his mother's clothes, the boots. He knew it was only his anger that wanted to destroy any trace of what he would never have again. He took a soft lined rain jacket from a hook on the wall. 'Come,' he said to Zuko. His brother stood up at the kitchen table. 'I don't know when we'll be back,' Ash said, as though the younger boy's eyes had asked. 'Maybe never.'

Zuko followed him on bare feet. Ash locked the door with a single key that he placed in his jeans pocket. The surrounding trees bent gently in deference to his decision. They hadn't gone a few metres when Zuko swung his body low and let out a cry of resistance. Anybody who didn't know him would have taken it for a protest against being beaten and worse, by his brother. Ash tried to hold on, but it was useless. If Zuko didn't want to go, there was no making him. Gently, Ash lowered the boy to the ground. 'What?' he asked, exasperated. 'What?'

Zuko continued to cry, the sound interspersed with an utterance that might have meant 'no,' to anyone who knew him well. 'Nah nah nah!' The boy backtracked to the door of the house and beat the wood with his fist. 'Nahnahnahnah!' Ash lowered the green bag and reached into his pocket. The hope his chest contained sank low into his stomach. He walked to the door and put the key into the lock, and opened it. Zuko lurched into the house. His eyes cast frantically over the kitchen. He dropped to the floor and scanned the surface beneath the stove and the makeshift shelves.

They found it eventually under their mother's bed, its eyes still wide, expectant. The yellow body was fading now, after too many hours in the sun. The plastic seahorse nestled in Zuko's palm, and the boy's fingers closed around it. He grinned, the tears still fresh on his cheeks.

'Can we go *now*?' Ash asked.

Zuko offered no answer in words. He continued to gaze down at the treasured companion in his hand. Both boy and seahorse smiled. His feet obeyed, miraculously, and he followed Ash to the door.

Outside Ash locked the door a second time. Above them the trees moved against a white-grey sky. He slung the bag over one shoulder and took his brother's hand. It was not for the safety or comfort of the small boy, but to keep himself from crying.

||

1.

They walked a long time, close to the edge of the world. Years later he remembered Zuko's face the way it was, as though he still slept two inches away, the only time the boy was ever still. Then he'd watched him, and loved him, without also wanting to make him into something else. Years later Ash would search the landscape of his memory and Zuko was still there on the dust-ochre earth, clicking his tongue and flicking fingers into the air, whirling around as though the only thing he wanted was to become the wind.

2.

They followed the road that drew away from the town. Ash's boots drummed a determined crunch on the gravel, a repetitive, rhythmic step that Zuko counted as he walked. The sound kept their pace, measuring the morning. Zuko focussed on the footsteps. The distance between them remained exact, and they emitted a sound that was predictable and consistent with the one that came before, the one that would come again. Footsteps like stars and circles and a pattern of sticks and stones had the potential to be infinite if something didn't occur to stop them. There was the predictability of potential infinity, so reliable being nothing other than it was.

Ash carried the green bag on his back. Zuko had seen him pack the fried circles and the chickens and the slab of bread and warm clothes and the stack of bills that he'd taken from the tea tin beside the gas stove. The clouds in the sky held no such pattern nor predictability. Clouds tumbled like bedclothes with neither order nor purpose for themselves when the night was over. Ash's free hand kept a firm grip on Zuko's. Zuko knew it prevented his impulse to run back. It kept their motion forward, despite what his body might want. The craving to watch the sharp pine needles fall from his hands for hours behind the house, or some other activity that satisfied his need for the whole space of potential infinity. In his head and his heart he longed to know where they were going. Ash had forgotten to tell him, and his own words didn't work to ask. Somehow Ash's hand understood, and kept him from running

back. He had no knowledge of what was in front of them. A pigeon chortled a hollow, hooting sound from deep within the base of its throat. Gravel crunched. Trees held them, guarding the road on either side. His bare feet were practised at navigating the endless small stones with ease. He counted them, beneath the soles of his calloused feet. He matched his steps with Ash's stride, but the rhythm fell out too fast because his legs were shorter, his feet more feeling, and he found no balance between their movements. A quiet discomfort grew in his chest.

As the morning warmed the sound of birds penetrated the air, stabbing sounds so unpredictable and random that he wrenched his hand from his brother's and covered both of his ears to protect his brain from the sounds. He heard Ash's voice talking, but the words were indecipherable, and he had no idea what they meant.

A cold jab sliced through his foot. There was no pain. Instead a thick sensation of bile passed across his forehead. He took his palms from his ears and shook his head. When it failed to work the first time, he kept up the motion. It put the nausea in the background, and gave him something to focus on. Ash kept up the rhythmic crunch beside him, looking ahead. *Where are we going? Zuko wanted to ask, but he had no words to say it with. Why have we left my mother in the ground? And when will we go back?*

Slowly the clouds melted from the sky, and left an endless hole of blue. The cold on the underside of his foot grew. He couldn't look down, or the feeling of sick pulled him forward and he was afraid he would fall. Suddenly Ash grabbed hold of his hands.

'Shees, Zuko, your foot!' Ash pulled him onto the side of the road where soft tufts of grass grew together to create a resting place. He took Zuko's heel in his lap. The knapsack rustled. Ash extracted the water bottle from the bag and poured water over the wounded foot to clean it. He put the bottle to his lips and drank in guilty swallows. 'Here,' he said, and handed the bottle over. 'Have some. We'll fill it up at the bend, before the road leaves the river.'

Zuko drank, but the water seemed only to fuel the sick feeling inside him, to swell the sack of nausea that weighted the front of his head. He stopped drinking. Ash took the bottle from him and screwed the lid back. He leaned over Zuko's foot. 'There's glass in here,' he said. 'I'm going to pull it out with my nails. It'll be sore. Hold on.'

Zuko isolated the word 'sore' in his mind, and rolled it around in his brain. He tried to figure out what that was. He only knew his foot was cold and his head was thick and he couldn't look at the cut or the blood that continued to seep from it, though Ash had tried to wash it away with the water. Something plucked his skin, like a string or a harp or a bow or a

chicken's feather. The cold intensified, then faded. 'We'll find you a pair of boots,' Ash said. 'You can't go the whole way without any boots. And you could at least be decent enough to wear something on your feet when we see him.'

There was still a picture so clear it might have been a photograph in Zuko's head. It had been four years. Now he thought of the man smiling and the man not smiling. He thought of the man with his arm around his mother, and how he'd looked down below when he'd held Zuko up high above him and bounced him in the air with giant hands. A searing ripped through his head as sound. Ash's elbow angled into him as he tore a shred of cloth from the bottom of his shirt, and bound Zuko's foot with it. Zuko laughed into the air. If he squinted his eyes and held his head at a certain angle, his toes seemed to have separated from the rest of his body.

3.

They reached the main road two hours later. On the way, a vehicle stopped. A man put his head out the window of the cab of a truck that supported a canopy of chickens. Ash recognised him as the owner of the spaza shop where his mother had bought their milk and washing powder and green hand-hardening soap. 'You boys not at school?' the man asked. He wore a woollen knitted hat over the dome of his head.

'My mother died,' Ash replied.

'I heard,' the man said. 'Now you don't go to school?'

Ash squinted at the road ahead. 'Zuko doesn't go to school. He won't sit in a chair too long.'

'When was the funeral?'

'There wasn't one.'

'Not good. You should have shown your mother some respect. Buried her properly.'

'No money.'

'I heard there was a rich guy who sent her money every month, from the city.'

'I don't know about that.'

The man pointed at Zuko. 'Is he the one that won't speak?'

'Can't. He would if he could.'

'I heard about him. Is he okay in the head?'

'He's standing right here. Don't talk about him like that.'

'From what I've heard, he won't understand me anyways.'

‘That’s not true.’

The man put both his hands on top of the wheel, and looked suddenly bored. ‘If that’s what you say.’

‘You going to Cape Town?’ Ash asked. He assessed the chickens in the back. They’d both fit in there, if they had to.

‘Why? You going to Cape Town?’

‘Our father’s there.’

‘You’ve got a father?’

‘Everyone’s got a father.’

‘Not everyone knows who that is.’

‘I know. She told me.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘From what I heard, your mother quite liked the men.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Nothing. Get in with the chickens. I’ll give you a lift home.’

The sky rolled out to another place. The road would take them there. There was nothing to go back to. Ash shook his head. Zuko squinted into the sun and played with the light through his long eyelashes.

‘No,’ Ash said. ‘We’re on our way already.’

‘Someone will report you, taking a kid like that on the road.’ The man flicked his left indicator, already resigned that they had made their decision.

‘You think he looks like he doesn’t want to be here?’

The man shrugged, and pushed his beanie back from his dark forehead. ‘You got shoes for him?’

‘In the bag,’ Ash lied. ‘He doesn’t like wearing them.’

‘If anyone asks me, I’ll deny I ever saw the two of you.’

Ash shrugged. ‘Whatever. It’s a free country.’

‘Now it is.’

The vehicle accelerated onto the tar and the wheels spun slightly, like the sound of a small animal.

4.

The road stretched empty. Ash put his hand into the backpack and pulled out the clear plastic bag, filled with notes. He took the R50 the priest had given them and added it to the

pile. He sat down on a nearby rock and counted the money, while Zuko turned in circles, his face to the sky. Three cars passed, too fast for Ash to get a good look at the occupants. No one was looking to give two strange youths a lift. Ash scratched his ear, and waved away a fly that landed on the base of one nostril. 'Come here,' he told Zuko. Without taking his eyes from the absence of clouds, Zuko moved closer. He sat beside Ash's knees, and leaned into them. Ash put a hand on his brother's head. He bent forward and put his lips on the warm, dark head in a kiss. 'We couldn't stay there,' he told him. 'Not us alone. I need to go to school before I can ever do anything else. Keeping chickens is no guarantee we'll be able to eat. Even if you've got chickens and eggs, you need some way of selling them.'

Zuko tilted his head sideways as though curious at the sound of the words, or the tone of Ash's voice. He put his face in Ash's lap. 'We'll get a taxi,' Ash told him. 'I'm sure one will come along soon.' He wiped a hand across his cheek. 'There are plenty between here and Cape Town. We might have to wait. I think they travel mainly at night.'

Zuko didn't move. At first Ash thought he was asleep, one dark and tender cheek pressed against his knee, but when he shifted and noticed Zuko's half-smile, he knew his brother was only listening to him talk. 'Do you remember the stranger?' Ash asked. 'He's our father. I always called him the stranger to Mama, but that wasn't right. I think he still sent us money, after he stopped coming to see us. At least you still got to eat Cheerios, after he left.'

Zuko sat up and tried to peel the makeshift bandage off his foot. The underside was caked with dried blood, and dust made an ochre mud. 'Keep it on,' Ash told him. 'The cut will get infected if it gets dirty.' Seven distant birds flapped in lazy formation across the sky. Zuko's eyes followed, caught by the moment. He continued to pull at the fabric until it came loose. He left it in the dust beside them. Ash shrugged. 'Whatever you want,' he said, and Zuko grinned.

When the sun sat at an angle, the first white mini-bus approached. Ash stood and put his hand out. The vehicle slowed to a standstill beside them. A young man with a smooth head and easy pale green t-shirt leaned over the steering wheel to get a good look at them. 'You going somewhere?' he asked. The back of the minibus held a sleeping woman in a Zionist's uniform, and two men in blue overalls.

'Cape Town,' Ash said.

'You got money?'

Ash fingered the plastic sleeve in his pocket. 'How much will it cost?'

'Three hundred. Each. Six for the two of you.'

Ash shrugged. 'S'okay,' he said. 'We'll get a lift.'

The minibus jerked into motion. The wheels slurred on the gravel roadside. Ash looked ahead at the road that narrowed to the horizon. Forward was the only way to go.

5.

The first night they crossed a field and settled behind a koppie large enough to conceal them from the road. They drank the last of the water from the plastic bottle. Ash made a circle of small stones and piled dry sticks and grass into the centre, then he lit it to make a fire. While he tended the growing heat Zuko climbed the hill, favouring his wounded foot. He reached the top and turned around. A kind of laughter rose from him, a rich and gurgling joy. Ash smiled to himself. The warmth of the young fire glowed on his face. Zuko stayed at the top of the hill a long time. Ash kept his eyes on the fire. He trusted the first notion of freedom Zuko had known. Somehow he sensed that finally, in this open space, Zuko had found permission to be alive. As dusk faded, Ash took the plastic packet that contained the dead chickens from the green bag. Now the birds' bodies complete with feathers swam deep in the draining blood. The water was gone. Now there was nothing with which to clean the bloody mess.

He called to Zuko on the hill but the boy only laughed so hard his body doubled, then righted itself. 'What you fuckin' happy about?' Ash muttered. But to himself he admitted that for the first time since his mother died, the weight that leaned in against his heart had lightened. He almost laughed at the absurdity of their journey, their sudden homelessness. It didn't feel bad, now they were actually in the world, and nothing looked to harm them. He lowered a whole chicken onto the fire. The flames seared the feathers and charred the skin. He took a forked stick from the ground and removed it from the flames, and placed the blackened bird on a smooth warm rock. As it cooled, he took off his boots and flung his socks across one of the stones that confined the fire and warmed his feet.

Zuko returned when the chicken was cold. Ash pulled off the blackened mess of skin and feathers to reveal a tender, creamy, light flesh below. 'Here,' he said to Zuko. He held out a leg, but the boy pursed his lips and turned away. He leaned against Ash's back to look into the surrounding dark. 'You've got to eat,' Ash told him. He put the meat into his own mouth and chewed. Food had never tasted so good. He ate half the chicken and waited for Zuko to get hungry, but when the boy still refused to eat he dug his fingers into the meat and pulled it from the carcass. Ash ate from the body of the bird until his stomach churned and resisted more.

He buried the bones and blackened feathers in a shallow grave ten feet from the dwindling fire, then looked around for a bed. He'd brought nothing for them to sleep on, and the only pillows were the stones that surrounded the fireplace. 'Come on,' he said to Zuko. 'Let's go and pee.' His brother looked at him. Ash bent down and with a hand, pulled Zuko to his feet. 'You're not going to see a toilet for some time. We're going to have to get used to doing everything out here, in the open.'

Ash paused, facing a nearby tree. He opened his fly and pulled the zip down. He watched Zuko's face as the child watched him let loose a thin stream of the water they'd drunk from the bottle that day. 'I know I'm bigger than you,' he said, laughing. 'But you'll get there, one day.'

Zuko tried to imitate him, struggling with his own button. Ash pulled up his fly and went behind him, put his arms around the boy's waist and helped to him undo the button. At the release, Zuko's small round belly forced the zip down. His penis emerged and along with it, the force of his pent-up stream.

Later Ash helped Zuko put on the jersey before they lay down. In the dark beside the dying fire, underneath their mother's jacket that covered their shoulders, Zuko's whole body shivered. Ash pushed himself closer, to try and let what little warmth that remained in his own body seep through into his brother's. Ash lay awake through the night, while Zuko shivered in a cold and restless sleep.

6.

The first thing Zuko knew was blue. His heart shouted at the colour that was deep, pure. He made a sound, a gurgle, a rush of emotion like a burst spring. He knew the words and what he wanted to say. The sound, though, was wrong. The words floundered. They emerged guttural and still-born. He waited. He imagined his own soul swimming in that blue. He travelled up into it, his skin startled and fresh from the space; there was nothing to potentially bump into. He blinked. Where was the pattern in a day-lit sky? The sun! Up, arc across and down, up, arc across and down ... no static pattern, but bigger than anything made-up or self-created. It was a pattern to mark the whole of his life, more dependable, more countable than the random scattering of stars offered by the night. A repetition of the same, the routine that ultimately made his days and his nights. Suddenly, in the vast empty space of limitless sky, it made sense. The pattern of the sun contained him, if nothing else stayed. The endless movement bound him here, to the earth, and prevented what chance there

was that he might float away. He rolled over, onto his belly. The earth cracked, red and dry. Tufts of grass sprouted everywhere. It gave him a feeling of salt in his chest, or the crunch of a boot on grass as it satisfied his need for dry, brittle resistance. Even if he had words, he could never explain this. Easier then, to keep himself contained. Nobody would ever know how much he spilled out of himself, in reality, into everything. Even his own skin was barely enough. He stared up. Slowly, he became aware of another sound. Perhaps a voice that called, but still his thoughts would not disengage enough to focus on it, or understand what it was. ‘Zuko ...’ His mind remained fixed, like resin, on what his eyes wanted. It struggled and pulled to unlatch itself, to land on something else. ‘Zuko ...’ It was his name. He knew something was required of him, some kind of response from somewhere inside or outside of him, but the sky was too big, the blue too rich and endless, and it consumed now the whole of his attention. Still, the sound pulled at him. Something familiar, a word, a voice. It wouldn’t stop until he connected his eyes, but looking was the difficult part.

Only when Ash stood over him, bent down and pulled him up by his armpits, did the motion, the touch and the tension release his mind and finally allow his eyes to come back. His eyes fell upwards onto Ash’s face. He started, dazed. The force of Ash’s help provided the momentum for him to stand. ‘Enough sleeping,’ Ash said. Zuko yawned in his response.

Ash sat on a stone beside the small resurrected fire and pulled the margarine tub from the bag, opened it, and handed it to Zuko. As Zuko put the fried dough circles one by one into his mouth, the salty feeling in his chest diminished with each crunch that came as his teeth drew together. The world was bright. He blinked at sunlight, yawned again. ‘I’m glad you’re eating,’ Ash said. ‘We’ll have to find some water soon. And something, at least, to sleep under. The wind last night was killer-cold.’

Cold covered Zuko’s flesh, but what his body knew, today his mind wouldn’t register. He knew he shivered, and there was a plank inside him. The hard wood of cold kept him stiff, with the rest of the flesh around it threatening to melt, as though made of jelly. He’d been cold before, but only outside of himself, on his skin that raised in tiny pimples like a chicken’s skin right after his mother had plucked it. If this was cold, it was of a different kind. It came from deep inside him. This cold had a texture that went from wood to unbending steel. With his skin pulled tight around it, it rendered him almost unwilling to move.

They walked for four hours before they found any sign of other humans. Fences cut fields in half, separating one crop or one group of animals from another. They navigated by Ash's instinct, and their proximity to the sea. So long as he still smelled it, or sometimes caught a glimpse of blue beyond the earthy mounds, he knew they were travelling in the right direction.

Before midday they came to a group of huts built of mud and straw, with corrugated iron and thatch for roofs. An old toothless woman sat outside, scraping down a goatskin to be dried in the sun. 'Ya, Ma,' Ash said. Zuko trailed behind him.

'Yebo,' the woman answered. She stopped the movement of her knife. 'What are you two doing out here?' she asked.

Two small children, naked from the waist down, crept shyly from a nearby hut and stared with watery eyes.

'We're going to the city,' Ash said.

'The city? You'll die of cold before you get there.'

'Please, Ma. We have no water.'

'What business is that of mine?'

'Please may we have some water.'

The woman shouted to the children. The taller child disappeared into the hut. She emerged seconds later with a bucket, filled to the brim. Ash longed to put his head in and drink as long as he could. Zuko sidled up beside him. Ash observed his brother's eyes ingest the water also. He put out a hand, and held Zuko back. The child put the bucket onto the ground, and some of the water sloshed over the top. 'Bring a cup,' the old woman told the child.

'I have a bottle,' Ash said.

The woman only called again: 'Bring a cup!'

The cup handed to them was enamel painted cream and chipped, with a thin green rim. Ash dipped the cup, scooping water, and handed it to Zuko.

'You let him drink first?' The woman barked from the ground. 'You're the older.'

Ash nodded. He watched his brother swallow. The bright of the seahorse's tail emerged from the boy's fingers where he held the cup's handle. When the cup was empty, Ash dipped it back into the bucket. He filled it and held it out to Zuko. 'You want more?' he asked. Zuko turned away.

'That's a rude child, right there,' the woman said.

Ash nodded. He put his lips to the edge of the cup and drank until it was empty. He'd never craved water, or been so grateful in his life. The water burned icy, fetched fresh from a stream that morning, and his stomach expanded.

'May I fill my bottle?' Ash asked.

The woman nodded and wiped the blade of her knife off on the grass in front of her. Her feet were bare and her toes sprouted gnarled, yellow nails. Ash pushed his hand into the green bag and took out the plastic bottle, and filled it to the top. He sealed it with the round yellow screw cap.

Already Zuko had wandered off. The girls, not quite his age, followed him. They tried to engage the boy in conversation, but he only held the seahorse out to them and made a chattering sound. 'What's going on with that boy?' the old woman asked.

'He doesn't speak.'

'Sit,' she told Ash. He obliged.

She stood and bent low to enter the doorway of the hut. While she was gone, Ash watched his brother skimming the top of the high grass with his palms. The girls copied his movements, laughing at the tickle on their own hands. Beside the hut a pile of dry logs lay covered with a blue plastic tarpaulin. The woman returned with a bowl of samp and beans, and placed it into Ash's hands.

'Thank you,' he said.

As he ate he watched the children. The old woman watched him. Ash wished Zuko would see the food and come to him, hungry and ready to eat, but the child stayed with the grass and sky.

'Where is your family?' the woman asked.

Ash swallowed. The food caught in his throat. 'My mother died,' he said.

She looked out to the children. 'Their mother died also,' she said. 'My daughter. It's not what you expect.'

'I didn't expect anything,' Ash said.

'Everyone expects something.'

'I don't. Not now.' He wiped his hand across his mouth. 'Not then either.'

'The longer you live, the less you expect things to happen the way you wanted. The less it matters. You'll get used to it.' Her eyes were on him. 'Where are you from?'

He named the river on the banks of which he was born, and left out the nearby town known for its accommodation of wealthy holiday makers. 'You know it?' he asked.

She nodded. 'The foresters. It's an old community. My grandfather told stories of the forest people. Your people. Only there are no forests now, are there? There's no way for you to make a living.'

'The old people are dying,' Ash said. 'Young people leave. They say there's nothing to stay for, anymore.'

'And what do you say?'

Ash shrugged. 'It's all I know. I'm leaving because with my mother gone there's nothing left for us there, either.'

'What is there for you in the city?'

'Don't know. I've never been there.' He left half the food in the bowl, and put it aside. He hoped Zuko would come and eat, or, if he didn't, he might be able to stash it away in the margarine tub and save it for later.

'Look up there,' the woman said. She nodded at the sky.

'What?'

'Wait ... no, they're gone.'

'What was it?'

'Swallows flying north for the winter. They're like you two. Hoping there's something better. Hoping they get to come back.'

'I didn't see them.'

'Your eyes will sharpen as you travel. You'll see things you won't understand. Things you'll want to get away from. You'll see shades and shadows you'll wish you hadn't.' She nodded in Zuko's direction. 'Looks like he's already seen things. He looks haunted. Like he's living with a ghost.'

'You think you know what he sees?'

'I can tell he's different. I know it's something to do with your family.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Righting wrongs. Smoothing things over. Maybe your ancestors are displeased.'

'Displeased?'

She gave him a sharp eye. 'You don't wonder where your bad luck comes from?'

'What bad luck?' he asked.

She took the bowl back and ate the samp with her bare hands. There were no more birds in the sky.

After a while he told her he wasn't interested in bad luck. 'My mom, she always did the best she could. That's what she taught us. Taught me. Sometimes things don't go your

way. You have to try harder. Like one year there was no food. The rains were bad and the forests were almost gone and we hadn't thought of keeping the chickens yet. We waited till dark and my mom made this trap with rope and a fancy knot, and we crept onto this riverside property. It was shut up, the holidays were over but those rich people, they sometimes employed guards. You never knew who was there. We sat behind the reeds in the moonlight and waited. Suddenly, there was this massive noise, crazy after the silence, the peace. There's a whole flock of ducks there, just landed. Then my mom pulls the rope and she gets a duck and they panic and flutter and there's all that squawking, going on and on, and then eventually they rise and they cover the moon for a moment, as they fly away.'

He looked into his hands. 'The moon went black. That's how many there were. But we got one. We cooked it whole on the fire. We burnt the feathers and skin and everything. The meat underneath was good. That was when it was only my mother and me. That was before my sister and brother were born.'

The woman looked him up and down, and bobbed her head towards his feet. 'How come you've got those fancy boots?'

'What?'

'Those boots. And that ladies jacket. You can't have been so poor.'

Ash watched the whole meal disappearing into her mouth. 'My mother,' he said. 'She loved this man. He sent her money.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Always a rich man somewhere. He was from the city?'

'Yes. He used to come on holiday to the river. I think they knew each other a long time.'

'And then he left her. Made her sick, probably. And left her. Left you.'

'We didn't belong to him. My mother said we didn't belong to anyone. No-one can leave you when you don't belong to them.'

'That's some logic. And let me guess, his hair was straight and his skin pink as a pig's.' She leaned backwards, and threw a finger towards Zuko. 'Looks like it, to me.'

'I liked him,' Ash said.

'You're lying.'

'He made my mother happy.'

She nodded slowly, wiped the remnants of samp from her lips. 'I'm sure.'

'We've got to go,' Ash said. He waited for the woman to stand. She nodded. 'Don't think you're going to find what you're looking for,' she said.

He shifted. His face burned. 'I'm not looking for anything.'

‘Oh yes you are. You’re young. The young are always looking for something.’

‘He’s not.’ Ash gestured at Zuko’s distant form with one hand.

‘You might think not. Inside his head, though, he’s looking for someone who understands him.’

‘I understand him.’ Ash stood. ‘Thank you for the food. We have to go.’

She squinted into the sun behind him. ‘You’re not offering anything in return?’

‘What?’

‘I gave you water, and a meal. You’ve got nothing for us?’

Zuko drifted further away. Ash wanted to follow him, now his belly was full, into the wild. ‘I don’t have anything,’ he said. ‘It’s only me and my brother.’

‘What’s in the bag?’ she asked.

‘Nothing. His jersey. We’ve got nothing.’

‘Open it.’

He hesitated, assessing her seriousness. If he ran he’d have to double back, after he’d got to Zuko. It wasn’t worth it.

‘You don’t come and take from people, without giving something in return. You don’t show up at someone’s house, eat their food, drink water carried on some poor girl’s head for an hour, without giving something to show appreciation. I know you’ve got something in there.’

Two youths emerged from a nearby shack. One carried a stick in his hand. His eyes were yellow and swollen and the hair on the other’s head sparse and moth-eaten. They stared at Ash as he passed. He greeted them, but they remained silent. They passed by, but the woman called them back. ‘This boy,’ she said. A gnarled finger pointed in Ash’s direction. ‘He’s hiding something. His ancestors are displeased.’

‘What you want us to do?’ the boy with the flea-bitten head asked.

‘Make him open the bag.’

They stepped towards him. Ash held up his hand and bent down to open up the green bag. He pulled out the plastic packet that contained the remaining bloodied chicken and threw it on the ground. ‘There,’ he said. ‘That’s what I have. It’s all I have.’

Her crone fingers unwrapped the top of the plastic packet and she peered inside. ‘This should be eaten tonight,’ she said. ‘It’s almost off.’

‘How will I feed my brother?’ he asked.

‘Looks like he doesn’t eat anyway. The spirits that have possessed him, they’ll decide his fate.’

The youths muttered to themselves and retreated. They ambled over the next hill, and disappeared. Over in the distance, Zuko and the two girls were specks to the eye.

‘Consider this your first sacrifice,’ the old woman said. Ash closed the green bag, now lighter, and hoisted it onto his shoulder.

‘What else you got in there?’ the woman asked. Ash backed away. He watched her eyes narrowing, the glint of cold steel they contained. He turned around, and ran.

He found Zuko in a patch of scrub, making patterns with the stones. The girls floated some distance off, chattering together; they paid him no attention now. ‘Come on,’ Ash said to Zuko. ‘We’ve got to get out of here. You should have eaten that damn chicken last night. There’ll be no supper now.’

As though Zuko had been waiting, he stood. His toes were dusty, dried blood from his still-fresh wound caked one foot. The back of his shorts were red with the earth where he’d sat. He put his hand into Ash’s, the skin between them dry, dusty, like the sand he’d been playing in. Ash squeezed the small fingers, intertwined in his own. In that moment, his own heart grew.

8.

They climbed in height and altitude and found a place to sit and wait and look down upon the settlement where the old woman would later cook their chicken and feed it to the girls she looked after. The sun grew weak. It dropped in the sky. The air turned green and purple and then night fell onto the ground. Ash watched a fire below begin to burn. People gathered around it. The glow deepened and settled. He watched it fade, and the people who had occupied the space around it scattered as they went indoors for sleep.

He waited another hour. He watched Zuko’s eyes grow heavy and his hands fall at his sides. Ash made a pillow of the green bag, and he guided Zuko’s head to lie there. He covered the boy with his jacket. ‘You wait here,’ he told him. ‘You don’t move.’ His hands squeezed gentle pressure into Zuko’s shoulders where he lay, trying to make the boy feel he needed to stay, even if the words did not quite reach him evenly. Zuko blinked upwards. His boat eyes gleamed in moonlight.

Ash was halfway down the hill before he turned. Zuko followed behind him. ‘Shees! I told you to stay!’ He took the boy’s arm to lead him back. Zuko’s eyes danced, alive,

meaningful, delighted by adventure. ‘Okay,’ Ash whispered. ‘But you behave. Don’t make a sound. They’re sleeping. Like you should be.’

They reached the hut and Zuko lingered behind as Ash stood beside the wood pile and tried to move the tarpaulin off the top of it. The heavy plastic was fixed, wedged in between the logs and wall of the dwelling. ‘Shit,’ Ash said softly.

‘Shht,’ Zuko echoed.

Ash pulled and tugged but the plastic wouldn’t come loose. He lifted the top of it and peered underneath. He’d have to remove the first three layers of wood before he could tug the plastic free. He looked at the moon, already high. Enough time had passed that the inhabitants of the huts would be fast asleep. Quickly, he shifted logs off the top of the pile. A throaty sound like a cough broke the air behind him. He thought it was Zuko, and did not turn around. His head snapped back only when there was a tap, light and firm-fingered, on his shoulder. It was the second youth of the afternoon, thick-eyed, but his was a head full of good hair. He held a stick in one hand and the edge of his nostrils glistened. ‘What are you doing?’ His voice emerged thick like his eyes; slow and deep.

‘What are *you* doing?’ Ash retaliated. Zuko stood a distance away, playing with moonlight through his eyelashes. Ash had nothing with which to defend them.

‘If Gogo wakes up, she’ll make me beat you half to death,’ the youth said.

‘You ate my chicken tonight.’

‘It was good. Tasty. Not much to go around, though.’ He leaned on the stick with one hand.

‘You heard me from inside?’ Ash asked.

‘No. I’ve been guarding. I was on the other side of the hut. I watched you come down the hill. I watched your brother follow you. I heard you start on the wood. What are you looking for?’

‘I want that plastic.’

‘What for?’

Ash shifted. His need made him vulnerable. His vulnerability made him truthful. ‘My brother’s thin. He’s cold at night.’

‘You want plastic to sleep on?’

‘Under. To sleep under.’

‘I can get you a blanket from inside.’

‘A blanket will be too big to carry. We need to be light.’

‘Okay.’ The youth looked around. No one else was awake. A dog lay at the fire, mangy and curled around itself. ‘Go back up the hill, to where you were. Get out of here. If she wakes up, she’ll have me kill you. I know her. You can’t take anything from her without being given it first. And then she’ll want whatever you have. She’ll make you pay forever.’ His voice rumbled low, his whisper thick, dark as mud. ‘Go, and I’ll see what I can do.’

‘If I can get it now ...’

The youth’s eyes narrowed. ‘You don’t understand me. Get away from here. Take your brother, and get back up that hill. You have no idea who she is. What she can do. I’ll watch your back.’

They trudged back up the hill. Zuko remained silent, mystified by the distance of the moon, while Ash kept his arm around his brother’s shoulders to keep him close.

They lay together in the night, awake, and watched the clear stars. There were no sounds apart from a distant dog, the wind as it gathered muster, and a grainy, textured silence that only Zuko knew. It was only when the forced biological need of their bodies overtook the cold, the stars and the waiting, that they fell asleep together in the deepest silence, not long before the dawn.

9.

When Ash woke the sun was strong and the blue tarpaulin lay folded beside him, small enough to fit into the bag at their feet. He picked it up and spread it wide to judge the size of it. Then he folded the sheet as small as it would go, into a perfect square. He pushed it into the green bag, and woke his brother.

They tore off mouldy pieces of bread from the loaf with their fingers and forced it into their mouths. They finished the bread, each gasping from the emptiness in his belly and the hollow need to fill it. They each took a sip of the water from the bottle, but when Zuko cried for more Ash put the bottle away. He picked his brother up by the elbow. ‘We walk again,’ he said. His hips ached from the night on the cold ground. Still they loped onwards. Ash’s pace remained steady and measured. Sometimes Zuko bounded ahead with an unknowable energy. The land was dry and barren, winter-brittle. Bones of dead animals sprawled in hollows. When a farmhouse came into view they ducked behind a hill and stayed low and out of sight. At the edge of the fields hung a smoky blue haze. They breathed in the heat of mid-

day, not yet knowing the night's cold to come. Across the hills that bore animals and scrub and soft fields, they sometimes glimpsed the sea.

They hiked across yellow grass waist-high, traversed burnt ground the sound of which caused Zuko to cry out at the joyous sound of the snapping made beneath Ash's boot. A bird echoed his sound and he froze. Ash kept his eyes ahead, and watched the sky. All day they moved forward, and stopped only in the afternoon to sit under a tree. They drank from the water bottle, now half-empty. 'I don't know how you do it,' Ash said. 'I don't know how you keep going, when you eat almost nothing.'

They slept in a hollow they found in a fallow field. That night there was no fire. Their bodies crushed together in the hardening cold, beneath the blue tarp. Tired from the day's walking, they both slept sound and still.

The following day they sat beneath a tree. The sky hung overcast, grey. A rumble in the distant sky threatened rain that never quite reached them. Ash did not talk. Zuko made no sound. Neither moved much. In the dust, Ash drew patterns with a pointed stick. He wrote his own name, and Zuko's name, and his mother's name, and the stranger's name. Then he dragged the stick through the patterns, eliminating the letters, and started again.

Zuko rose and stood above him. The child watched him form the letters that made whole words. Ash's was the shortest. 'Ash,' he said aloud. 'That's me.' Then he wrote the child's name, and spelled it out as the stick traced the letters. 'Z-U-K-O. Zuko. That's you. That's your name. Who you are.' He wrote his mother's name, and said it aloud. 'That's where we come from,' he told his brother. Then he wrote his father's name. 'And that's where we're going to.'

Zuko knelt and took the stick from his hand. He made a mark, up and down, in the dry earth. It looked like nothing. His hand flopped and the stick fell, as though he'd given up. 'Try,' Ash told him. He picked up the stick and replaced it in Zuko's hand. 'Once is never enough for anything,' he told his brother. 'Learning is repeating. Trying.' He guided Zuko's hand and showed him the easy zigzag of the first letter of the child's own name. 'Zed.' The child held the stick out for more, and Ash facilitated the tracing of those that followed. '... You ... Kay ... Oh.' Ash took his own hand back. 'Now you try.' He told the boy. Zuko put the end of the stick down and managed an approximation of the zig-zag of the first letter of his name. Then he scratched randomly, angrily at the dust, and threw the stick down. 'She should have taught you to write,' Ash said. 'You could do that, you know. I think you could do it easily.'

After noon they finished the mouldy bread. Ash allowed Zuko one final sip of the water, but denied his own thirst. His tongue latched to the roof of his mouth. His lips hung heavy on the outside of his face, as though stuck on somehow, but they didn't belong to him. As the afternoon wore on, his mouth swelled with thirst. The sun dropped, creating long shadows, and Ash stretched the tarp, and lay down on it. He closed his eyes. Sleep took him quickly. He almost willed it, as an antidote to the thirst. He dreamed of the ocean, that he stood waist-deep in the water. He leaned into small waves, cupped his hands and raised the water to his mouth, but spat it out when the salt threatened to choke him.

He woke at dusk and gathered twigs and branches of wood to make a fire. Zuko sat some metres away. The boy had cleared away the grass in a perfect circle around himself. In the circle, he'd created an immaculate concentric pattern with the stones. After he'd laid them flat and measured the distances between them with his eyes, made his adjustments until he was satisfied with the result, he'd collected more stones and tried, in a three-dimensional fashion, to build his pattern formation upwards. Ash stood above him. 'They'll think aliens came down and landed here,' he said. Zuko continued to build. His patterns, built too high, tumbled down. 'Circles. Always circles,' Ash said. 'Why?' He thought of water and he thought of bread and he thought of eating. He looked at Zuko and knew his brother's life was in his hands. Zuko might die out here, in this wilderness. On this path he, Ash, alone had decided. He didn't know if what he'd done was right.

When the child was done with his pattern making Ash led him to the fire in his jersey and rubbed the boy's cold feet. Zuko cried out when Ash accidentally pushed at the wound. Ash found a large rock and placed it beside the fire, close to the flames, then lifted Zuko's feet and rested them there. 'We should have brought you socks,' he said. He knew here, in the warmth, the child would grow sleepy. He propped him up against the bag, to prevent him from falling into the fire. He pointed a finger at the space between Zuko's eyes. 'You stay here. Hear me? Don't move. Don't you dare move.'

He topped the ridge above the fallow field and beyond it a light glowed from a simple house with a doorway and two windows and an old Volkswagen beetle parked outside. He thought of going to the house to ask for food, but he was afraid and reluctant to leave Zuko alone too long. He crept back down the hill to the fire and sat and watched his brother sleeping. The child's lashes lay heavy on his cheeks. The outward breath gave life to the surrounding air. Ash turned his eyes to the fire.

An hour later, footsteps thudded on nearby ground. The man was already on them, before Ash had time to prepare for anything. The stranger wore ragged trousers and boots with holes. His hands hung by his side, gnarled and roughened from years of work. 'I see you,' the man said.

'I see you also.'

'Nice night.'

'It is.'

The man fell silent. He stood with his arms crossed over each other. Ash kept his eyes on the fire. He guessed the man had been sent from the house to invite them inside.

'Thanks for stopping,' Ash said.

'You be careful travelling as you are, with a child like that.'

'With a child like what?'

'The authorities in these parts. If you look suspicious, especially where a child's concerned, they'll lock you up.'

'We look suspicious?'

'He looks young.'

'He's my brother.'

'That's what anyone would say.'

'It's true. I don't say what isn't true.'

'You stopping here long?'

'We'll be gone tomorrow, first light. We meant to travel today but he was too tired.'

The old man's eyes reflected judgment and kindness.

'And I was too,' Ash said. 'We haven't eaten much.'

'Okay,' the man said.

'Okay.'

'Well goodnight then.'

'Goodnight.'

The man disappeared into the dark as suddenly as he'd appeared. The night closed behind him. The fire died to coals.

Ash took his jacket off and laid it under the child's sleeping head for a softer pillow. He lay beside the boy and slept with the green bag as his own pillow. Once in the night he woke. Something moved beside him. It was only Zuko, turning over in his sleep. Dogs barked across the field. He waited for Zuko to move, disturbed, but he remained asleep. As Ash turned over the boy's eyes opened. 'Zuko,' he said softly, to soothe him. To let him

know it was alright. The child stretched out a hand and found Ash's cheek. The dark eyes stayed on Ash's a long time, as though Zuko witnessed something there he'd missed before, in his fleeting glances. His eyes closed again, and the boy drifted.

Ash slept and the coals of the fire wasted to warm embers. He awoke to find the eyes of the boy on him once more. The sun was not yet up, but the moon was gone and the hard ground pushed the bitter cold further into him. The dogs in the distance were quiet now. Ash rose and blew on the fire. He fed it sticks and twigs to try to revive it. He lay down beside the boy, and he must have slept because when he woke the light was up and the boy was up and there was a package beside the fire wrapped in silver, with a glass bottle of milk beside it.

Zuko perched on the rock where his feet had warmed the previous evening. His eyes were lost, vacant, as though he looked beyond this world and knew something else entirely. One finger moved, slowly, at the side of his face, close to the corner of his eye. 'Why didn't you wake me?' Ash asked.

Zuko turned his head, slowly, and looked at him.

Ash rose and put his jacket on against the cold. He unwrapped the silver paper and inside were four slices of bread held together with peanut butter and margarine, two pieces of chicken and some small cherry tomatoes. His mouth longed for the milk. He thought of the icy cold of the liquid, the creamy smooth and the way it would feel in his throat. Instead he went to the boy and unscrewed the cap of the bottle and held the milk to his lips. Ash allowed Zuko to drink until he was satisfied. When Zuko finally closed his mouth and pushed the bottle away, two inches of milk remained in the bottle. Ash put the lip of the bottle to his own mouth and drank the rest down. He unwrapped a chicken bone and held it out to Zuko. The child smelled it first, before he pulled his head to the side in his own way of refusal. Ash put the meat to his own mouth and it was gone in a few easy bites, without much chewing. He couldn't help himself. He finished the other piece too, while Zuko watched. Ash took the bread and offered it to the child, but this too, Zuko turned away from. Then Ash held up a tomato and the boy took it and crunched the small red orb between his teeth until it popped. He reached for another, grinning. Ash ate one of the sandwiches. He wrapped up the other, and put it into the bag. Zuko ate all the tomatoes, one by one. Ash stamped out the fire and took Zuko over the ridge and down the other side to where the small house stood. There was no-one about. Ash placed the glass bottle beside the closed door.

They walked on and once before they turned around the side of a small hill, Ash looked back at the receding house. The figure of the old man stood outside. Ash lifted his hand and at great distance, his gesture was returned. There was no sign of another person.

Ash considered the care with which the package was wrapped, in silver paper. At the man's feet were a cluster of chickens, pecking at the ground.

10.

They pushed on through the day. The sky hung heavy and grey, bearing down like the weight of their feet on the earth. Three hours in and their drinking water was done. Ash's throat scratched as he swallowed. Midway through the morning Zuko sat down on a dry bank. It seemed unlikely he would move again. Ash thought of bullying him, cajoling him, but without excess energy he sat down beside him to wait instead. 'You saw those bones,' he told Zuko. 'That's what we'll be if we stay here. Look around. There's nothing. We must move until we find something. Something to keep us alive.' Zuko stood suddenly, and with an almost imperceptible limp, he made off in the direction of the horizon.

At noon Ash sat and finished the second sandwich. He thought of trying to give it to Zuko but now the boy stayed well away from him, as though the smell of the peanut butter or the bread turned his stomach, or he wanted Ash to eat instead. Ash's gait gained optimism for an hour after the small meal, but soon his energy flagged. His feet grew light, his head too heavy. He looked behind him. Zuko followed, on bare feet.

The landscape changed. The surface rumbled into hills that rose higher. *There has to be water in there*, Ash thought. He found the carcass of some animal, small and unrecognisable. It might have been a cat, or a dassie, or a ratel, even. The bones had already whitened, and the small pile stank, putrid and ripe. Ash steeled himself. He dug with his finger at the drying, half-eaten flesh, and put a small piece to his lips. Something in the animal moved, suddenly seemed alive. Ash's vision focussed. A whole section writhed with maggots, dampening the flesh, soaking it down. He gagged, and turned away. At the base of a small tree he doubled over and vomited. His stomach heaved and purged until there was nothing left in him; no bread or milk or fluid or strength. When he righted himself the world seemed lighter. The edges of his vision shimmered. He put his fingers to his nose, steeled his mind to keep from retching at the smell that remained there. He took the small bar of wrapped soap from the bag and opened it. He spat on the soap in the absence of water and rubbed his fingers, then dried them on a patch of grass at his feet. Carefully, he rewrapped the soap, folded the edges, and replaced it in the bag.

They veered off their path and by instinct navigated an incline that dropped deeply down. At the bottom ran a stream clear and cold, transparent over time-smoothed rocks and tapering to a deep pool. They followed it beyond the pool until the stream became a river with a grassy bank and trees and a place of green to rest. Only then did they stop and fill the water bottle and their stomachs with the clean, clear liquid. Ash lay on his back. A tear escaped. He squeezed his eyes shut, and the drop ran down the side of his face. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered at the cushioned sky. ‘Thank you.’

The night was warmer than the last. They had no food. Ash wanted to save the matches that remained in the box, so they slept beside the water without fire, close together, covered by the jacket, and the tarp on top of that. ‘You sleep tight,’ he whispered to Zuko.

‘Tight,’ he was sure his brother uttered in return.

11.

In the morning he stood and rubbed the grit of sleep from his eyes. He watched the grey and yellow dawn. Behind him Zuko moved in his sleep, but made no sound. ‘This is not what I wanted for you,’ he whispered. ‘I’m gonna find him, Zuko. I’m gonna get us what we need.’ He blinked twice as though a shadow fell across his eyes. ‘What we need,’ he said again.

He discarded his boots and then his jeans. Out in the river the water circled his midriff before he cupped his hands to make a basin and splashed his face. He dipped his head, breathless at the chill. He ran his wet hands across the skin of both his arms and shivered as he stood and watched the early mist rise from the water. A single swallow swooped low, tipped its beak on the surface and rose again. Chattering wings brushed the air. He wet his face before he waded out onto the bank. He took his shirt from where he’d spread it over a thorn bush the previous night, and put it on.

He pulled on his jeans and then his socks over wet feet and pulled his boots over these. The light rose steady and clear as he sat beside his brother. He watched Zuko’s lashes flicker like the wings of some small insect. Birds filled the sky. Insects sang. The grass grew warm. Still his brother slept.

He walked a short way back along the road they’d travelled the previous night. Before the road turned away from the river he pushed through thick leafy bushes and found a tree with plum-shaped fruit ripening orange in places. He picked three of the fruit and pushed his

teeth into the ripest. His lips pursed and he spat on the ground as the bitterness burned his tongue and the thick white glue oozed from the skin and stuck his lips together. He threw the fruit on the ground and found the water's edge, where he kneeled and cupped his hands and repeatedly brought the cool water to his lips to clean them. When he stood, he thought how empty his stomach felt.

As he turned a man appeared in a leather hat with his hands on his hips. The man's skin was pale beneath the hat, his cheeks flushed and perspiration already dampened the front of his shirt despite the time of day. 'What are you doing here?' the man asked.

Ash said nothing. He took a step back.

'Wait,' the man said. 'Come here.' Ash stepped forward. The man eyed him carefully. 'This is my land you're on,' he said.

'I didn't know it belonged to anyone,' Ash said.

'Everything belongs to someone.'

'What difference does it make?'

'The difference depends on who you are.'

'There are no signs up.'

'The road at the top is a public one. You can make your way back up there.'

'That's where I'm headed.'

'It's rude, you know. Coming to invade a place like this.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Go ahead.'

'How big is your land?'

'More hectares than you can count.'

'How many people live on it?'

'My wife and two daughters. Myself. I have 50 labourers. They have children, wives and husbands too.'

'I can't see them.'

'You cheeking me?'

'No. I can't understand why it's wrong to be on a place where as far as I look, I can't see anybody else.'

'You can see me.'

'Only because you saw me first.'

'What's wrong with this story,' the man said, 'is the world forgets too quickly this land was paid for with sweat, and the blood and tears of my grandfathers. The world may be a

different one now. Maybe there's entitlement. Maybe there's blame. But back then land was won, fair and square.'

'And what's wrong with that story,' the boy said, 'is before it belonged to your grandfather, it was held in the custody of my great-grandfather, and my great great grandfather, and their ancestors before that.'

'And before that it belonged to another tribe,' the man said. 'I know the story.' He took a thick cigar from his top shirt pocket, bit the end off and put it in his mouth. 'But in the current story, you're trespassing.'

'How long do you think you can hold onto this land?' the boy asked.

'How many nights do you intend to stay?'

'One. I'm finished here. I'll be on the road by noon.'

'It's a dangerous place for a boy your age. Alone out here.'

'I'm not alone.'

'Who's with you, your ancestors?' the man laughed.

'My brother.'

'I see. Your invisible brother. Well. Good luck. You might want to ask people before you squat on their land.'

'I would've asked. If there'd been a sign.'

'People are always looking for signs. A poor excuse for not getting down and doing the right thing. You think a sign will point the way, show the direction. But if you're brought up with decency, you don't need signs. You need good manners. And to do the right thing.'

'The right thing?'

'Yes.'

'Everyone does his best. Who's to say if it's right or not. Sometimes people are alone and there's no one to judge whether what he does is right or wrong.'

'There are always other people. There is always judgement.'

'I'm sorry I didn't know to look for you, how to ask permission to spend the night on your land.'

'Next time you'll know. You'll be more careful.' He pushed the hat back from his head. 'And you be careful too of the kinds of people who own the land around here.'

'Thanks for the warning.'

The man took a lighter from his pocket and lit the end of his cigar. He sucked at it with pursed lips until the red cherry glow grew strong. The smoke drifted from his mouth in short puffs, before it dissipated into the air, sweet and choking at the same time.

‘You didn’t answer my question,’ the boy said.

‘What question?’

‘About your land. How long you’ll hold onto it.’

‘Let me ask you a question instead.’

‘Okay.’

‘How come one so young, like yourself, is so certain of things?’

The boy shrugged. ‘I guess I don’t know any better yet.’

‘Next time you come here, you call me first. I might give you a real bed. You never know.’ What the man gave then was not a smile exactly, but something close to it, before he turned and loped away. The smoke from the cigar billowed sporadically behind him. Ash watched him until he was gone from sight over a nearby hill. A diesel engine started, and edged away.

He walked back along the river to the tree where they’d slept. The tarpaulin was thrown to one side, abandoned. ‘Zuko!’ he called. Then he said, ‘Fuck.’ He listened. There were birds and a cricket calling and from the water came the sound of a frog. He waited for footsteps but there were none. ‘Zuko!’ He called again. He looked for footprints on the ground but there were too many leaves for feet to penetrate the soil. He’d chosen that spot purposely, for the leaves and the comfort for their backs in the night. He walked behind the tree and up towards the small hill that looked over the water. At the apex he turned, his eyes on the sweeping river. Further on his brother stood on a rock and faced the water, his eyes on the swirls and the glistening light.

Ash’s feet slid as he struggled to maintain a foothold in the descent. When he reached Zuko, the water cast a light on the boy’s face. Zuko smiled.

‘It’s time to get going,’ Ash told him. ‘We’ve got to walk.’

Zuko kept his grin up and kneeled down on the rock. He pushed his face close to the water.

‘I don’t know how long it’s been,’ Ash confessed. ‘I’ve stopped counting.’

Zuko’s hand skimmed the water’s surface. He spread his fingers to make his hand a small net, to catch the fluid light.

‘Ah. Okay,’ Ash said.

Zuko remembered dancing. He remembered music creating lifts of sound that supported his arms as they rose into the air and made him laugh. The rhythm gave him a beat to move to. No longer were his feet immobile, rooted and unsure of what to do. Music required no memory. When his mother laughed, when she said ‘dance, Zuko, dance,’ he didn’t have to draw on what the mind re-told. His body remembered. Rhythm, like patterns, gave him purpose. Music was another voice that helped him know what to do. In silence, or in people’s voices, the space was too vast, the expectation and the gap between instruction and moving eliminated any impulse that might have been. Even if he understood the requirement, there was a block in implementation. As though his arms or his legs couldn’t, or wouldn’t, obey the sergeant in his head that sometimes shouted, desperate to please, to do something, to participate, at least. In the beginning they’d called him quiet, introspective. Later, it was odd, quirky. Then, in the town, he was regarded as downright strange. Still his mother didn’t hide him. She took him out wherever she went, proud of her son, of his big boat eyes. She’d told him it didn’t matter what people said, or that they stared. It made him feel better, and less alone. He hung onto her hand, wordless. He had her to look to, her voice to guide him, her attitude and approach to tell him it was okay. She loved him, he knew that. He looked to her always, to decode the way things were. She spoke to him like no-one else did, whispered secrets into his ear as though they were the partnership, they were the team. She explained things to him so he understood. She didn’t presume that because he couldn’t speak, he couldn’t understand either. ‘You have to eat,’ she told him. ‘The food goes into your stomach, and it feeds your arms, your legs, your skin, and it makes you grow.’ When she put it like that, he swallowed the nausea, the wobbliness that came from his ears, his jaw, and he forced himself to swallow. But the next day, not his own fault, he would forget. ‘Why won’t you eat?’ she’d ask him. He knew that one day he’d remember every time, if he only heard it enough. Most days, though, he forgot what the question was.

His mother remembered for him. She became his memory, his voice with which to ask questions, a place for his answers also. When he didn’t know what to do, he looked to her. She showed him when to dance, and when to be still. She knew when he should be outside, playing beneath the pine trees, and when it was time to come inside. She told him when to eat, and why, when his brother had to leave the house, when he would return, and why. She told him when to wear a jersey, what cold was and what it did. She taught him the stars and the rain and the wind, and what nature meant. She still took him to the chicken coop every day to feed the chickens and check their nests, even though his hands repeatedly wanted to crush the eggs.

When she was gone, he didn't miss her, exactly. His broken memory interfered with that. He still smelt her scent, her skin, her hair and the house. But now the feeling loosened, as though he drifted, inside as well as out. If he'd stayed in the house he might have gone crazy, stalking the floors and moving with his shadow for company through the house. But now Ash had brought him out into the world, he didn't feel so bad. Here his voice emerged independent of himself. A holy shriek into the night, the bubbling laughter of delirium, the hopeless walking of his endless steps that the wide and distant earth absorbed. Out here there was darkness deep enough to contain such sounds, and the intensity of his own restless experience. Here the air bubbled big enough to carry his laughter with it. Here his insides expanded endlessly, like the pacing, the walking, the surface of the earth that continued large and wide. Out here, he became part of forever.

13.

After the dry of the sand and the cool oasis, they wandered south, past the incomplete shells of stalled housing projects, now abandoned. Twisting lines of stones, the remnants of a children's game, lay aimless in the sand. The small town was nothing but a dusty main street. Most of the buildings were shut up now; board covered the windows and doors, apart from one with a sign outside: Dr Man from the Island. Below the name, the sign listed Dr Man's areas of expertise:

- Lost lover: bring him/her back
- Deafness
- Misfortune
- Court cases
- Promotion
- Insanity
- Education
- Blindness
- Gonorrhoea
- Bewitched
- Diarrhoea
- Bad luck

The street ended in an abandoned playground. The equipment lay faded and worn as the dry ground. Beyond the town a farmhouse remained, deserted, surrounded by tall poplar trees, its roof once painted red. Beyond the house the ground continued. The sky bulged a molten grey.

14.

Hours later they found the sea. At the ocean's edge the sun faded. Ash picked matungulu fruits that ripened between white thorns, three eggs in a sandpiper's nest, raw red bait on the rocks. Zuko swallowed without protest, without chewing. Apart from unbearable, undeniable hunger, Ash didn't know why his brother had decided to eat.

Zuko stayed high up at the line of the succulent vegetation, nervous of the sand and the water. Beyond the wide beach a deep and navy blue evening emerged. 'It's the ocean,' Ash said. He pulled the boy down beside him. They sat with their legs stretched out, facing the sea.

Zuko said nothing. Watched, only.

'We lived eight kilometres from it, at home.' It was possible Ash's words sounded as a jumble, a collection of utterances that held no meaning. Zuko sat, mesmerised by the water's movement. Still, he listened intently. 'Ma never thought you'd walk there. Didn't want you to get lost.' Ash cast his eyes out to sea. A tern swooped, touched its beak to the surface. '*He* loved it,' he said. 'The stranger. That's one thing I remember. He would take me down there. He used to surf a lot.'

Later they squatted in the bushes behind the dunes. Ash waited until Zuko had finished before he stepped forward and cleaned the boy's bottom with the fleshy leaves of the succulents that grew across the surface of this high sand, breaking the leaves for the moisture they contained. Afterwards he collected wave-roughened sticks that had dried to white in the sun. He made a fire to warm them.

They did not sit long around the salty logs. Soon Zuko's eyes drooped heavy-lidded, dropping him into sleep. Ash dug a hollow in the sand amongst the plants. He picked his brother up and put him in it. 'If I leave you there you'll fall asleep into the fire and burn to death,' he told him. Zuko's eyes were already closed.

In the morning Ash rose and took his brother's hand. They walked together to the water. In the distance the sky mirrored the sea. The world shone blue. 'Zuko,' he said. 'Put

your toes in.’ Zuko leaned forward, into the wind, but his feet stayed rooted in the sand. The boy’s eyes closed in ecstasy.

‘It’s the ocean,’ Ash told him. ‘Ocean. If you could say it. Ocean.’

But Zuko’s mouth was all teeth. His eyes stayed closed as he breathed in the salt on the wind. What others saw, he felt. What others heard, he saw. Ash put his arms around Zuko’s waist, picked him clean off the sand and carried him forward to the water. The boy screamed and his body contorted. He threw his head back and it thudded on Ash’s collar bone. A deep tremor of pain shuddered through him. ‘Okay, okay,’ Ash said. He released the child and as the water enveloped his feet Zuko stamped and screamed and turned and clawed at the skin on Ash’s chest. Quickly, Ash lifted the boy. His ears rang against the high-pitched sound, and he carried him up the beach and onto the sand.

Zuko lay like a shrimp on dry land. His cries lessened, then stopped. A slow smile found his face. He pushed his whole body against the rough security the grains made against his skin. Here he felt himself, where his own body ended. From here he could examine the ocean’s abyss, and not fear it would swallow him whole.

Ash’s skin ached for the cool immersion, the freedom his body would find in the water. The beach lay wide and empty, the thick bush on one side and the water on the other. If he swam, he could still keep an eye on Zuko. Even if the child ran, he’d spot him for at least a kilometre either way, even from the water. He’d catch the child if he needed to. Ash pulled his shirt over his head. He discarded his jeans and waded out, the sky ahead itself an ocean. It swallowed his spirit whole. The water cut his skin with the cold. He ducked under a wave and opened his eyes, absorbing the marble-green blur beneath. He surfaced, choking. He had yet to learn to hold his breath, to breathe with the water’s own rhythm. It was the kind of cleansing only nature provided. Even if his life came to nothing, in the end, the ocean would wash it away.

He turned to face the beach where Zuko stood at the edge of the water. ‘Come!’ he called. Zuko’s desire for closeness, for oneness and security was greater than any fear he retained. He pushed through the shallows so swiftly Ash didn’t have a chance to call out, to wade back and remove his brother’s clothes. They caught each other in the mid-break; by then Zuko was laughing hard at his own courage, at the water, and the way the wind whipped up the surface, as though all of nature laughed also.

Zuko knew the roar of the ocean, but never like this. He knew it as a sound in his ears or something that took his whole body away, but never outside himself, so big or so fluid. So many grains of sand, each whole and separate. He'd never counted them all and it terrified him, the unknowing and the unknown number. Not infinite, was all he knew. The grains had to end somewhere, but there was no way to tell where, or how many were there at the end of it. Slowly the rhythm of the waves fell in line with his rocking body. His pulse eased, his racing mind subdued when he found the beat. He looked out, adjusted his eyes and a pattern slowly formed in the way the sea moved. Whitewater-blue; whitewater-blue; whitewater-blue, in never-ending lines. He might stand forever in this sense of the world. The water of the river at home had caused him fear because of its flatness. No way to tell what lay beneath. It offered no solace in that there was no sequence.

In the morning he woke late when the light had already taken the air and filled it. His eyes found the pale sky and he screamed. The shaking sensation moved from the thud in his heart through sinew and bone, out through his limbs to the tips that made his fingers and toes tremble. The fear that accompanied the morning loomed large. It filled his ears in a roar so loud only his own voice drowned it out. The voice and the scream and wide sky and the roar and the terror that emerged in the tremble of his fingers and toes surged forceful and fierce. He hardly noticed Ash gathering his body and holding it to himself in the way his mother once had. As though he were a baby still, when his body arched rigid and his eyes seared upwards, searching the sky. The day was light and the sun was up. Behind his brother's head stood a tree and behind the tree in clear blue the moon hung still, a renegade out of place, not banished by the morning time. The moon's presence made Zuko know the world was mistakenly, mysteriously upside-down. His terror screamed that at any moment they would fall from the earth, through the blue and into a sky of stars, but with no pattern to define it.

Ash looked at the boy in his arms, his wide eyes, and followed them up to the sky. 'Oh J.C, it's the fucking moon,' he said. He held his brother closer and spoke long and slow. He covered the moon with his head; now they were eye to eye. He told Zuko about the way the world moved, that it was fixed on a pin but it turned round and round. Around the sun that made people know it was day, and how it was night when light fell on the other side. He said the moon moved too, rotated once per orbit around the earth. Sometimes it was slow or sometimes too fast, and that's how it could be there with the sun in the daytime sky, and at

the same time. It was not that the world had turned upside down. They were unlikely to fall off the face of it any time soon.

16.

They walked on the line between sea and sand for three days. The sun burned Zuko's retinas. His feet played in the lacy shallows where the waves petered out on the shore. When the wind blew and pushed dirty foam inshore, Ash said it was the dried blood of mermaids grown light, blown in on the wind.

Zuko ran on the empty wasteland, delighted by the space. At night they turned their bodies like puppies in the beach scrub that grew to stabilise the dunes. Sometimes the shrubs were high enough for Ash to use the tarp to create a small, roomy tent, though Zuko liked his body covered with something immediate, to hold his skin in. He pulled on the plastic until the branches cracked and fell. The tarp made a sheet above them.

On the second evening, Ash took his hand and told him he was not a slave to his master. Zuko would darn well help him with the firewood or he might as well be a spoiled prince in another land, if he was expected to do nothing for the rest of time. There'd been no rain for a month. On the other side of the dunes were the milkwoods, the wild olives and the silkybarks, the sea guari and the wild camphor trees. Beneath them, Ash stood behind his brother's body. He showed Zuko how to bend, how to wrap his fingers around a stick of dry bark and snap it, how to take it to the pile and leave it there, and return to find another.

He held his brother in the fading light as they watched the stars emerge. When the sun's last warmth was gone, Zuko stopped his humming and stared above, trying to see what existed between the stars. Sleep came easily to him in the scrub above the beach. The soft lull of waves collapsing on the shore created a rhythm in his mind, one that took him easily to the other side.

In the morning Ash woke first and built a fire from the kindling they'd collected. The wind was not yet up. For now, in the emerging morning, the stillness supported the flames. Heat from the fire paid homage to the new day.

17.

On the dawning of the third day, skirting the ocean's edge, Zuko stood first. Ash rolled over and looked down towards the sea. He grabbed at his brother's hand and pulled him down. 'Shhhht!'

‘Shhhht!’

Ash looked at him, surprised. ‘Quiet,’ he tested.

‘Quiet,’ Zuko said, in an equal whisper. He laughed.

‘What, you choose now to start talking?’ Ash whispered.

The words were there, in Zuko’s head. They came fast and fully-formed, long stringy sentences of varying shapes and sizes, but they jammed up somewhere between his brain and his mouth.

Below them two fishermen baited their hooks and wiped off their glinting knives and bloodied fingers in the sand. The flick of the rods towards the face of the ocean held the power of grown and hungry men and the bait flew far and strong into the rise of the water.

Ash put his face close to Zuko’s. He breathed in the morning scent of the boy, mingled with the air’s salt. ‘You be quiet now. You make a sound, you get up, and we won’t eat, you get it?’

Zuko stared back with deep eyes, brown as the earth’s crust. Ash held his gaze. He allowed Zuko to examine the random flecks in his own iris, to keep him from calling out. Zuko rolled onto his back. ‘Shhh,’ he said. Then Ash knew he understood.

They watched the fishermen where they sat down below on the closed lids of their cooler-boxes, facing the sea. The men rolled thick wads of tobacco in squares of newsprint and smoked, then swigged from a bottle containing a liquid so cold or so strong it caused their bodies to shudder.

Ash watched as the sun rose and the bodies of the fishermen loosened up, leaned into one another in earnest conversation. Zuko stared at the sea. They waited until the sun reached its pinnacle and the men forgot their rods and spread their jackets over the sand. They lay down and covered their eyes, before they drifted into sleep.

Ash looked at his brother and calculated the risks. If he was caught, Zuko would be alone. He wouldn’t know where to go. If he sent Zuko down, there was as much chance the boy would be distracted by the bubbles that popped on the damp sand as there was of getting the task done. Ash only hoped whatever was in the men’s flasks was strong enough to keep them sleeping deeply. He leaned in towards Zuko. Their shoulders pressed against each other. Zuko fell sideways at the sudden pressure, collapsed onto the planted sand and giggled. Ash leaned over him. He steadied his voice into a deeper seriousness, and penetrated Zuko’s gaze with his eyes. He drew up a hand, and put a finger close to Zuko’s nose. ‘Listen,’ he whispered. ‘You lie down. You lie still. I mean it. Don’t you move. You hear me?’

Zuko's breath escaped in an utter that sounded like an echo. 'Hear.' His eyes bored into Ash's. There was no telling what was in there. There was nothing left to do but trust.

Ash stood and allowed the motion created by the loose sand of the dune to take him. Each step created a drift that sent him further downwards. At the bottom of the dune he paused and looked up. There was no sign of Zuko. Between Ash and the sea, the fishermen slept. He was grateful for the dry, undulating sand that would banish his footsteps with the wind once they were made, but still they were not unclear. It might be minutes or hours before the men woke. There was no way to tell how much time they had.

He moved closer, straightened his body. In the wide expanse of sand and wind and space there was nowhere to hide, nothing to obscure his presence. Only invisibility could save him now, but he had no magic ring or token of any kind.

Both men slept on their stomachs. As he approached, Ash caught the whiff of smoke and body odour and the sourness of unwashed skin. Their clothes were dark and holed and stained as if they hadn't seen water and soap in months. One of the men had a healed scar clean across his cheek, from his ear to the corner of his mouth, like a train track. The other man appeared older. Grey speckled his coarse, curled hair. His nose protruded downwards, almost touching the sand. A thin string of saliva hung from his mouth and glistened in the sun before it hit the ground. The younger man's body heaved and fell as he breathed in a long, vibrating snore.

Two sardines, already soft in the sun, lay apart from the box on the lid of the cooler. Beside them a knife rested, longer than Ash's hand. From the thin edge of the blade and the clean slice taken from the side of one of the sardines, Ash knew it was sharp. He took a step closer. His boot squeaked in the sand. He approached the cooler and imagined himself invisible, a trick of the mind to still his own heart. He leaned forward. He took the knife and swiped the fishy blade through the sand, to clean it. He stuck the blade in his boot between the leather and the sock. His stomach churned. The hollow there was deeper than hunger, an instinct beyond sight or smell or appetite. The fish on the lid might have been rotten, but the desire to have them in his stomach overtook his senses and sensibilities. The box that contained the rest of the fish wasn't enough. He wanted all of them – the fish in the box, and those soft and expired from the sun.

He peered into the cooler. Beside the yellow cardboard of the sardine container sat a hunk of bread and a pile of pink cured meat slices, wrapped in thin opaque plastic. With his mustered stealth and his heart beating beside his voicebox, he took the soft fish from the box lid and the sardine box from the cooler and stuffed the loose fish back inside. The sardine

box, once frozen, had thawed, beaded with tiny drops of condensation. It almost slipped from his hand. He reached in for the bread and processed meat. The older man grunted in his sleep, snorted the contents of his sinus passages and shifted. Ash knew he should run, but his feet wouldn't move. He stood transfixed by his own potential fate. The man's eyes remained closed, the bottle of golden liquid half-empty beside him. When Ash knew he might be safe for a few more minutes, he reached back into the cooler and took the bread and wrapped meat. He tucked these into the crook of his elbow and stepped to the side. His leg was now so close that if the scar-faced man woke he could grab it in a single movement and topple him to the ground. The moment emerged as the pinnacle of the boy's insecurity. Ash's heart dropped to his stomach as he rode the crest of it. He used the momentum to stretch his hand and grab at the neck of the bottle. The men barely moved, they continued to sleep while they breathed the thick sea air through phlegm and overblown arteries. Stepping backwards to keep his eyes on them, Ash moved carefully away. His exit was slow. They would catch him anyway, if they woke. He'd have to drop the fish and bread and the meat and the bottle. He'd have to find some last resource of energy that would come from terror rather than any nutrition that remained in his torso. Running would be useless. He'd only lead the men to Zuko, and who knew what Zuko would do, or what they would do to him. He'd have to run away, down the beach, and distract them from the place where his brother waited.

He made it to the edge of the dune and began to ascend. Still the men slept. Now Ash was safe, and the adrenaline faded. Without cortisol's fuel in his veins, his limbs ached with fatigue. His torso weighed him down with its own incredible hunger. He turned and faced the scrub at the top. He climbed while his legs burned.

At the ridge of the dune he dipped down. The ash of the fire, the tarp and the evidence of where they'd spent the night remained, but Zuko was gone. Ash placed the bread with the meat and bottle on a rock. He folded the plastic sheet and stamped on the fire where some of the embers still glowed warm. He went to the edge of the dune and looked down. The men still slept. There was no sign of his brother on the beach below. His eyes scanned the sea. There was no head bobbing, no body splashing, or wading out in the foam.

He returned to the remains of the fire and fetched the bottle from the rock. He held it by the neck and took it back to the dune top, where he lay down and kept his eyes on the men below. He wiped the top of the bottle with his jacket sleeve, and put his nose to it. The fumes sent his head reeling back. He looked down. Though the sand was soft and dry, the tracks from where he'd walked were clear. Unless the wind picked up, the path to their camp was easily discernible. He put the bottle to his lips and his head back. The cloying sweetness of

the rum warmed his stomach and at once set his mouth on fire. He gasped and swallowed. His stomach applauded and begged for more. Now it would accept anything. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, and replaced the cap on the bottle. He returned to their makeshift camp, rested the bottle on the rock beside the food, and folded the tarp as small as it would go. He stuffed it into the bottom of his rucksack and put the food on top, then closed the bag. He kicked sand over the small remains of the fireplace, and slowly retreated further into the scrub that became a thicket and then a small coastal forest of trees. He bit his lips to keep himself from calling out. On the wasteland of beach, the wind would carry the sound to the men.

When the trees were thick enough, Ash dropped the bag. He fell beside it. He unscrewed the lid of the bottle, and as he swallowed, he allowed the fire of the golden liquid to burn as it wanted.

18.

Zuko's arms lifted, light as waves. The sea wind wrapped his body repeatedly, invisible arms folded and unfolded him, rendered him warm and cold and warm again. 'Here,' he whispered to himself as he watched his brother go. 'Hair. Here. Hhhh ...' The sound distracted him from Ash's mission. He rolled over, onto his back. The sun caught his face and held it there. He squinted his eyes against it. He hummed. But he wasn't to move! He rolled back. His stomach was so empty it hurt to have the pressure of the ground pushing up against it. The burn in there was of acid and fire, and he imagined his stomach had begun to eat itself. Beneath the leaves of the succulent plants, the sand squeaked each time he moved on it. The tone of the sunshine was something else. The sound of richness, warmth, or dancing light. The worlds available in a single glance were endless, overwhelming. Each grain of sand, separate and minute, glinted a different tone, texture, size and dimension. As though they were planets in a giant universe. 'Here ... Hair ... Here ... Her ...' His mouth wouldn't stop. It had found a sound and now in the action he was scared that if he put his mind somewhere else for a second, his mouth would forget how to make it. He was pleased, with the co-ordination of his lips and breath in a single movement, to produce an utterance. He knew what it meant. 'Stay here,' Ash had said. 'Here,' Zuko whispered. Here. Where he was. This moment. Now.

It was everything.

He looked down. He watched Ash, the trail of footsteps that had led him to the men. Ash seemed still and far away. The men too, unmoving. Still in their postures, as though asleep. The sound of the sun's vibration. The sound of Here. The worlds of the sand. His mind leapt from one to the next, trying to find the paths between.

Something moved across his feet. He froze. He turned and looked and there it was, an animal he barely knew the name of, round black eyes and fur of grey. He shrieked in surprise and then stifled any future sounds. He thought of Ash, how angry he might be. The creature paused, looking back at him. Black eyes, too dark for judgement. Only one sparkle: curiosity. Or it might have been the sun. The animal scratched intently in the sand, and looked up. 'Here,' said Zuko, sharing his sound. 'Hhere,' he said, and laughed. That was it. That was everything; they were here. There was nothing more.

The animal scratched and dug and looked. Somewhere else a bird called, a warning to them both. Zuko moved his arm and the creature started. He bent his leg at the knee and the animal raced backwards, froze suddenly, mid-flight. Zuko laughed and moved his other leg. The creature dashed and froze, as though it was a game. Zuko stood and laughed and took one step, and the creature fled further back towards the forest. As it halted, Zuko giggled at the pattern they had created, at the connectivity, at the meaning and response. He moved, and the rat moved. He moved, and made it run. And stop. And run.

Before the shrubby undergrowth, when he'd already taken six steps, the rat disappeared completely. It scuffled and lifted its head between leaves, then dived back under the blanket of plants. Zuko laughed and followed, followed and laughed, until he found himself among the trees. The shade and the cool there made him forget the pitch and tone of the sun's sound, and the here, and the now, and the men and his brother. Between the trees were a million leaves, a canopy of stillness. Somewhere in there was the rat that seemed to play. And stop. And run.

19.

Ash lifted his head. The deep throb near the top of his neck brought a slow nausea to the base of his throat where the liquor had burned it. The sun had long passed its halfway point in the sky. He put the flat of his hand on the back of his head and rubbed, as though movement healed pain. A glance at the empty bottle beside him told him where it came from.

He left the pack on the ground and retraced his steps to the camp. At the edge of the dune he peered over. The men had gone. Now there were six sets of footprints, up and down

the rise of sand, only two of them his own. The men had been there, to look for him. His eyes followed the tracks back down and along the beach. Ash brushed the knife in his boot with his fingers. Still his eyes scanned the emptiness for his brother. All around were sticks and twigs that snapped when he stood on them, from years of drought. He collected an armful and built a small fire, then he fetched the bag from the enclave of trees and sat beside it as he waited.

The night was deep and the stars too many to count. He stamped out the fire and pushed his hand past the box of small fish, now bad, past the bread and the stack of pink and processed meat. He pulled out the plastic sheet and put it over himself. The night was cold and he missed the warmth of Zuko's body beside him. He couldn't sleep. He listened to the trees, but they fell silent and seemed to have dropped off along with the whole of the world, apart from the ocean and her restless waves.

Sometime past midnight a sound woke him. The dreams of his mother were fresh, mixed in with anxiety, and loss, and freedom. He sat up and bent one knee to check the knife between the sock and the boot that he'd kept on. The cool handle fitted his hand exactly.

'Here,' a voice whispered. A giggle followed. 'Hair ... here ...' Ash turned and released the knife. A tension in his chest lapsed and something fizzed like gas bubbling in a bottle. The relief was so great he wanted to lie down and laugh. Instead he moved aside and held the edge of the tarp up. Zuko wedged in beside him. 'I thought you'd given up on me,' Ash said into his brother's neck. 'I thought you'd taken your chance to leave me. To escape. To find a family to look after you better.' A wetness chilled his own cheek, and he brushed it away. 'I promise, Zuko, I'm gonna get us there. You don't have to leave me. You're all I've got. I don't think I want to live in this world without you.'

He waited in the dark for some sign his brother had heard, a movement or comforting sound. Soon, if he waited long enough, he would hear the soft sound of Zuko's sleep. He did not wait. Long before the first bird chirped to herald the impending dawn, Ash's arms held his brother as he drifted between dreams.

20.

A single finger raised in salutation placed itself on Ash's left eyelid. Softly, so as not to hurt. 'Hello Zuko.' Ash smiled. Zuko's eyes were deep. Ash looked for some kind of acknowledgement in them, some kind of recognition of himself, his brother, his keeper, but

there was none. He didn't know, anymore, what it was Zuko saw. Did he see the whole of Ash, the human side of him, or the patterns of his iris?

Ash sat up and shook the dew from his hair. The ground shimmered wet and the early mist lay so thick around them the sea would not be visible, even from the apex of the dune. Ash unwrapped the tarp from their bodies. He pulled on his boots and sat opposite Zuko, and helped him with his jeans. The craving for coffee pulled strong. The familiar nausea washed through him. He rolled the tarp up against his knees in a tight neat sausage, and stuffed it inside the green bag.

Zuko stood, not looking anywhere, as Ash moved about. He was lost, Ash thought. But more comfortable in this nowhere place than inside himself. 'You ready, Zuko?' he asked.

The kid's eyes flicked past his own, scanning for something. Ash put the pack onto Zuko's back, then threaded his arms through the loops. Zuko dropped it – thud – to the ground. Ash picked it up, guided the boy's arms through the straps and this time pulled them tight to prevent it falling. Thud – the bag fell from Zuko's back. Ash picked it up, pulled the boy's arms backwards and through the straps. He held Zuko's hands in front of him, so the bag stayed on. 'Look in my eyes,' Ash told him. He knew it was hard for him but Ash stared menacingly into the deep brown and slowly they drew themselves towards his, reluctantly focussed and then he slowly counted to five. Ash held his gaze. 'Listen to me, Zuko. We've got to walk a long way. Today, tomorrow ... maybe weeks. I don't know exactly where we are. You understand me?' He wanted a response, a nod, a blink, a simple yes, but he knew he wasn't going to get anything. *He's staring at me, Ash thought, concentrating on holding his eyes on mine. I keep going anyway. If it enters his head now, a few hours from now, or tomorrow, I've got not control over that. All I can do is feed him the information, try and make him understand. The rest is up to him, how he deals with it. Or when.*

Zuko clicked. Once. His finger rose, rested in the air in line with his peripheral vision.

'We're walking, Zuko. I don't know how long it's going to be, or when we're going to get there. When you're tired, you have to sit down, show me you're tired. If you keep walking and walking, I can't know, okay? I can't know how strong you are.'

'Hear.' He was listening, at least.

Ash checked the beach from the dune but the mist hung thick and he couldn't see the shoreline. There would be no fishermen today. He sat beside Zuko and pulled the bag from the boy's back and the fish from the bag. He re-lit the fire, and laid the stinking fish directly onto the old coals. When they were crisp to almost black he pulled each fish from the flames

with a stick, and laid them out side by side on a rock to cool. He took the water bottle from the bag and they each took their turn to sip from it. Ash held the bottle to Zuko's lips to prevent the boy from swallowing the liquid. When it was a quarter empty he tilted it to the sunlight to measure the level, then replaced the lid. His hangover from the rum had created a thirst that seared him, but he put the remaining water away. 'We don't know when we'll find any fresh again,' he told Zuko. He put a hand out to stop the boy from pulling the bottle out from the bag.

21.

Zuko had tried counting the stars. He knew the people on earth were more numerous than the lights in the sky. He figured that, given the enormity of time and the numbers that would inhabit the world within it, there was nothing he did or didn't do that would ever matter.

They wanted him to talk and they wanted him to do things too difficult for his body. They wanted his mind to go in directions not natural for him, and he tried for their sake and he tried for his own sake and in the end it was enormous effort and the results were of one or two options: their joy, or their disappointment. He failed to understand how one small person – him, Zuko – so insignificant in the history and trajectory of people both backwards and forwards, could have such power to make the people close to him happy, or disappointed. He thought it wasn't right they should be affected by what he was able or unable to do. He thought he loved the wind and the sun and the patterns in his head, but making sounds was hard. In the beginning, he'd tried only to see the light altering one way or another in his mother's eyes. As he grew older, he became more wistful, less sure of the wisdom of others. As time moved on, she'd demanded less of him also; asked less that he be like her, or like his brother. She spent more time with him, as she accepted who he was. Gradually, she found her own joy in him, when she began to glimpse his. On the surface it seemed he was trapped in the idleness of his own life. Underneath, though, he quietly created his own order. The Cheerios, the circles, the patterns reflected a bigger existence he couldn't quite yet fathom. When someone stopped or interrupted him, he grew angry. He threw things down, broke things sometimes, because of the nature of the order he'd imagined but still had to learn to understand.

At home he'd stood at the river with a ball in his hand. His fingers across the furry skin. His fingers traced the skin of it, which is how he learned there was no beginning and no end. The trees whispered a similar story around him. He'd learned what mattered with his heart. 'See those children?' his mother had said. 'You need to learn to play with them. Take that ball, and go and kick it with them.' That was when she'd been full of directions. She hadn't seen him yet, exactly who he was. What his body knew, and understood, took his mother a long time to catch up with. 'Go and swim with your brother and sister! It's such a beautiful day.' These were the kinds of things she'd said to him. But the pain of imagining how his body must move in order to take his shirt off was too much.

At first he knew she was waiting for his words to come. It was for him, of course, but also for her. She wanted him to have the life she'd imagined. Something easier than this, where conversations flowed like ideas and movements. Then she'd wanted him to talk, because it was the way of the world, and the way of people, and the way of parents and children. She didn't yet see it was a way not meant for him. And because he had no words, he was not engaged in the backwards and forwards of polite conversations of adults and the not so polite verbal skirmishes of children, or the endless conversations about who was right and who was wrong, and the rules, and who was first and who was last, the dominance and submission. He engaged himself with other things. He spent hours examining the way the tops of the pine trees moved in the wind. He watched the colours of sunset; how slowly they changed in the evening sky. He studied the texture of soft ground, the crunch of gravel on long walks. He watched the patterns of the river as they changed with morning, noon and evening, with the moon's pull, and back. He learnt the sounds of different birds, and imagined them associated with different states of human emotion. Some were light and optimistic. Some called mournfully, as though they would never be happy again.

While his mother stayed busy with her house tasks inside, while she swept the floor with the broom made of a branch, washed the walls or made the house neat, he'd beg her to go outside. 'No, Zuko!' she'd say. 'I'm busy. There's no time now.' And he'd begin to moan and wail and wonder at the emotion inside of himself, how he'd felt enthusiastic, then desperate. Extremes of emotion in a short time, and over the same thing.

He learned, eventually, to take his cues from her eyes. She was happy with him. He learnt to see the peace there, the approval, when what he did was right. He learnt the other side also: that he could displease her. He alone at times caused an ancient deadness in her

eyes. Then he understood that even he, her youngest child, would never be enough to make her completely happy.

22.

Flat stretches of grass and shrub and mist covered the sea until the start of the afternoon. They walked far and fast to keep off the cold. Sometimes Zuko's skin pimpled like a chicken's and his lower lip trembled, though he'd found the rhythm of walking and he hardly let up pace. Then Ash took their mother's jacket and wrapped his brother in it. Zuko's leathered feet were strong and hardy, but in the night by the light of the fire, Ash took those feet into his lap and ran the blade of the knife horizontally across the soles of them. He found the thorns and grass embedded there, and he removed them. Sometimes drops of blood seeped through to the surface of the calloused skin. Sometimes Zuko yelped like a broken animal. Sometimes he crawled away from Ash and lay beside the fire and stared into it. Long afterwards Ash fell asleep, not ever knowing what his brother was thinking.

They came to a town on either side of a river's mouth. The sloping roofs rose to thatch apices, the walls of every house washed in a similar holiday white. They walked the streets and through curtainless windows children sat staring at television screens, eating TV dinners on their laps, their parents shielded by acres of newspaper, or their faces set alight by the glow of screens. Ash took his brother's hand and Zuko did not resist. In the main road a pair of boots gleamed in the window of a general dealer. The man behind the counter wore sideburns that ended in a rough moustache. He peered at the boys entering the shop over black-rimmed reading glasses. There was distrust, or distaste, in his eyes.

'The boots. In the window,' Ash said. Words lolled strangely in his mouth, spoken aloud. He'd lived so much with silence. 'How much?'

'Five-sixty,' the man said. He held the boys in his gaze.

Ash fingered the notes in his pocket. He knew without counting how much was there.

'You want them?' the man asked when the boys didn't move.

Zuko's eyes drifted to the rows of sweets that sat at an angle in a singular long wire basket lining the walls.

'You got boots cheaper than that?' Ash asked.

'Not likely.'

'Well? Have you?'

‘What bush did you two crawl out from under?’

The words caused Ash’s eyes to smart. Before he turned away, Zuko dropped to the floor in a rare moment of defiance and wanting. The movement wrenched his hand from Ash’s and suddenly Zuko was away, motoring on his backside towards the shiny appeal of the sweets. Ash tried to lift him from the ground, to intercept his path and at once sweep him off the ground by his arm pits in a move Ash had seen his mother use repeatedly when the child was younger, but the intensity and focus of Zuko’s intention was stronger than any intervention. In a second, sudden movement of panic and control, the moustached man rounded the counter’s edge and grabbed Ash by the collar. His elbow lifted high into the air. A tight fist found the side of his face. A sudden wetness from the blow seeped into the corner of Ash’s eye. Ash’s only thought was that both tears and blood are warm. He shook his head. A white haze crept into his vision. He centred himself. The world curled at the edges, threatened to close in. He couldn’t let Zuko alone.

The white at the edges of his sight became the florescence of the strip globe on the ceiling. The man’s mouth moved in a swirl of sound. Ash couldn’t make out the words. He had Zuko by the collar. He pulled him backwards from the shop and into the empty, dusk-softened street. He ran, dragging his brother beside him, around the corner and from the sight of the man and his shop. He stopped and released Zuko, then realised he’d choked the child. Ash looked down at Zuko’s hand, still furled around the shiny chocolate bar.

They walked from the town's centre into the rows of peripheral houses made to look rustic in a way constructed and contrived. Zuko pulled on the chocolate wrapper at the corner until it opened, and when Ash took it from him to divide it fairly, Zuko's mouth squared and he cried in protest. Ash gave up, pushed it back at him. 'Okay, eat it. Have the whole thing.' He softened, imagining the sweetness. 'You were the one brave enough to take it. You should have it.' *And I took it on the face for you*, he thought, touching the side of his brow. But he didn't say it.

The sound of wheel-bearings on tar tugged at the air around them. A youth came to a slow glide on a skateboard beside them. Younger than Ash by some years, he was well dressed in a hoodie and label jeans. 'Hey,' the boy said. His blonde hair flopped sideways across his brow.

'Llo,' Ash said.

The boy wore blue canvass high-tops, the toes capped with white rubber. They looked new. They were a kind of boot, and his feet were the same size as Zuko's.

'You new 'round here?' the boy asked.

Ash swallowed. 'Do we look new?'

The boy pushed at the ground with one foot gently, enough to keep up a side-by-side rolling speed beside them on the skateboard. 'Haven't seen you before. You look kind of homeless.'

'We're not.'

'Where d'you live then?'

Ash considered the question. He went with the safest option. 'Cape Town,' he said. He thought of the address on the back of the envelope from his mother's drawer. 'Our father is there.'

Still the boy's foot pumped at the ground. 'You don't look like Cape Town people. You look like homeless people.' He laughed at his own observation. 'My dad says we need to watch out for homeless people around here. Homeless people don't belong. He says he'll fuck them up if they come and fuck up this town.'

Ash listened to his brother chew hard on the chocolate beside him. Zuko licked the silver paper, then dropped it on the ground.

'Hey,' the boy said. 'Pick that up.'

Ash paused and leaned backwards, and plucked the wrapper from the ground with two fingers.

‘Not you,’ the boy said, ‘him.’

‘It’s done. What do you care who did it?’

The boy pushed the skateboard out in front of him in a small double-run movement that flipped the board up, and he caught it neatly in one hand. ‘Where’re you staying?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean around here. Where are you staying? Where’s your holiday house?’

Ash shook his head. Zuko kept pace beside them, his mind and mood appeased by the sweet’s nourishment.

‘We don’t have a holiday house.’

‘You talk like you’re from the bush,’ the boy said. ‘You look like it too.’

We’re from the river, Ash thought. He said nothing. He stared straight ahead. If he kept walking, he hoped the boy would get bored, turn off into one of the neat, grass-edged side-roads towards his home. Zuko’s right hand raised itself. His fingers moved slowly beside his eye. ‘Hey,’ the boy said. ‘What the fuck’s up with your brother?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why’s he doing that?’

‘He likes to do it. It calms him down.’

‘Calms him down? What’s he got to be het-up about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Zuko.’

‘Zuko.’ The boy was quiet for a bit, as he walked beside them. A car passed with its lights on, now the daylight was completely gone. ‘What the hell kind of name is that?’

Ash shrugged.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Ash.’

‘*Ash*? You mean, like fire?’

‘What’s left of it. Yes.’

‘You got hellofa names, sounds to me.’

Ash nodded.

‘Where’re you going?’

‘Home.’

‘Stop fucking me around. Where’s your house?’

‘We’re going to Cape Town.’

The boy stopped his walking. He leaned forward, incredulous. 'You're going to Cape Town? Now? How're you going to get there?'

They came to an intersection. Ash examined the boards that pointed out various directions: the way to the library and the way to the sea and the way to the nearest inland town and the way to the city of Cape Town. Ash nodded his head in the last direction. 'We're going there,' he said.

'No shit!'

Ash considered the boy's face, drawn to a point at the chin, like a rat's. His eyes flicked around, small and darting. He looked like he'd never trusted anyone, though he wanted to. 'Listen,' Ash said. 'I'll give you fifty bucks for your shoes.'

The boy leaned on his skateboard and lifted up one foot. He looked down on the shoe as though there were some kind of secret message written on the sole. 'These things? You know what these cost? They're brand new. Converse. My dad bought them.'

'A hundred bucks?'

The boy looked back towards the town. 'My dad would kill me,' he said.

'Okay. Forget it.' Ash took Zuko's hand and backed away.

'No, wait,' the boy said. He seemed uneasy at the inevitable parting. 'Why d'you want them?'

'For my brother.'

The boy looked down at Zuko's feet. 'Does he speak?'

'No.'

'What the hell's wrong with him?'

'Do you dance?'

'Fuck, no!'

'What the hell's wrong with you?'

The boy grinned, suddenly open and impish. He lifted one hand and brought it down hard on Ash's palm. 'Okay, I get you. But I've got socks on. I can't walk home in my socks.'

'Skate, then.'

'You can have the socks too.'

Ash put his hand into his pocket and brought out a bill. It was a little less than half the money he had. 'Here,' he said, handing it to the boy. The boy's eyes gleamed as he took it. 'Aw, thanks. I don't need it, though. My dad's got so much money. He can buy me more.' But he took the bill anyway and pushed it down hard into the front pocket of his jeans. 'Good

luck,' he said. He held the skateboard across the front of himself with both arms, and backed away.

'The shoes,' Ash said.

'Oh ja.' The boy sat on the sidewalk and unlaced the high-tops. He pushed them off his feet and onto the road. His socks were bare and stringy, with a hole at the toe. He pulled these off too, tucked them into the tops of the shoes and flung both shoes gently in Zuko's direction. 'Here,' he said. 'Hope you can dance in them.'

23.

Ash waited for the boy's shape to diminish against the town's lights. 'We're going to have to teach you to wear those things,' he told his brother.

A heavy truck thundered towards them. The metal body shuddered as the driver dropped a gear, slowed to a halt and leaned across the seats. He shouted through the open passenger window. 'You kids going somewhere? You want a lift?'

'Nah, it's okay,' Ash said.

The driver flicked the lock on the door. 'Get in. I can give you a ride to the next town.'

Zuko was already at the truck's door, grasping at the handle, trying to pull it open. Ash relented. He climbed into the cab first, and pulled Zuko up behind him. He leaned over his brother and closed the door. The cab reeked of stale cigarettes and a woman's perfume. Also oil and diesel and exhaust fumes and fried food from greasy late-night joints. The driver wore a low cap over his eyes and, despite the cold, his muscles bulged from the armholes of a white string vest. An unlit cigarette bounced where it balanced between his lips. 'Welcome to the party,' he grinned.

Evening sieved the daylight into dark. They saw only the few metres in front that the truck lights illuminated. The wings of lost moths fluttered, startled, before they slammed into the grid of the radiator at the front. Ash sat squashed between his brother and the driver, his shoulders touching each on both sides.

The driver looked at him, a moment too long. As Ash's lips parted to tell him to keep his eyes on the road, the man's gaze returned to the strain of the dark ahead of them.

'Where're you going?' he asked.

'Cape Town,' Ash replied.

'On foot?'

‘Not now.’ Ash stared straight ahead.

The man grinned, the end of the cigarette rising from the motion. ‘Smart mouth.’ He looked at the shoes in Zuko’s lap. ‘He going to put those on? It’s cold outside. For bare feet.’

‘He hasn’t worn shoes most of his life,’ Ash said. ‘He doesn’t feel the cold like we do.’

‘What, how does he feel it then, like someone else?’ The man blew a short burst of air from his mouth. The truck approached a pass, a hill to descend. His left hand changed down a gear, and brushed Ash’s leg. The truck changed its pitch. Ash absorbed the vibration of Zuko’s soft hum beside him, through his shirt. The man wouldn’t hear it over the roar of the engine. Ash leaned back and rested his head on the seat. ‘I don’t know how he feels it,’ he said.

He must have drifted off. When he awoke he sat beneath the yellow neon light of a truck stop, alone in the cab. He looked around. He didn’t, at first, know where he was. Men sat on low stools in huddled circles as they played hands of cards close to their chests. Suddenly he remembered the man with the low cap, the bouncing cigarette, unlit. His brother beside him. A thud landed his heart, and then another. A slow chill crept up his neck, into his jawbone. He shivered. He looked down and at his feet was the bag that held the plastic tarp and the stale bread, or what was left of it. He twisted his ankle around, the hard of the knife still there like a splint. He looked to the side. The cab was unlocked, and on the driver’s side also. He took the bag and leaned across, opened the door and jumped to the concrete ground. One man looked up at the sound of the door slamming. His attention lasted only seconds before it returned to his game. Someone emerged from a door marked ‘toilet,’ his hand at his crotch as he pulled up his fly. ‘Sheesh,’ Ash muttered. A desperation clawed at the back of his head. There was a tuck shop attached to the trucker’s lounge, a dirty place with an unwashed floor chequered black and white, large fridges that held soft drinks and beer and another dark liquid in unmarked plastic bottles. Suddenly the door of the shop opened. Two figures emerged and one, a boy as small as Zuko – it *was* Zuko! – had a bag of crisps in his hand. The other walked with his cap pulled low. The smoke in his fingers, now lit, had half burned out already. He bit into a hamburger, chewed, and eyed a piece of wayward tomato as it escaped the bun and fell to the ground. ‘Awake at last,’ the man said. ‘This is the end, really. This stop is on the edge of the town. My wife will be here in a few minutes to pick me up. Here’s where I leave the truck for tomorrow’s driver.’ Zuko stood beside the man, crunching down on the potato crisps, as though he’d known him always. Ash hitched the bag

onto his back, and reached out and took his brother's hand. Something was different. He looked down. Zuko wore the high-tops. The truck driver followed Ash's gaze. 'He's got broad feet,' he said. 'He should be wearing shoes every day. What are you going to do when he's eighteen, let him slouch around with no shoes on? Who's going to take him seriously then?'

Ash grinned. 'Thanks,' he said. He shook his head, disbelieving. 'I don't know how you did that.'

'I didn't do anything,' the man said. 'He did.'

Ash looked at him, curious.

'I showed him the packet of chips. I told him to sit right there, on the floor, in the shop, and let me help him put these damn things on, or the chips would never find his hand.'

'He let you?'

'He didn't want to. But yes, he let me. I wasn't going to stand at the till and buy food for a child that looks like a beggar.'

Ash nodded. Zuko's chewing continued, his hand deep into the packet as he tried to take out the last of the crumbs with his finger. Ash thrust his hand forward. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Thanks for the lift.'

The man pushed his cap back and looked at Ash's hand in surprise. He wiped his own hand on the back of his jeans and took it. 'No problem,' he said. 'Good luck to the both of you.'

Ash put an arm across his brother's shoulders. As they walked away, the man's eyes bored into the back of him. He didn't know yet if he walked in the right direction. Over the dark hill, an orange glow emerged that looked like the lights of a town.

24.

An hour later they lingered on the other side of the road. Ash put his hand out, extended his thumb. No vehicles stopped now. No stars braced the sky. Zuko shivered beside him. The night ahead seemed empty.

A glare of headlights caught them. The approaching car veered from the tar. Tyres crunched the gravel. A known face looked at them, still wearing that low cap. 'We can't leave you here,' the man said. 'Get in.' Ash looked at Zuko. Chip crumbs still skirted the corner of the boy's mouth. Ash considered the night. The vast farm land on either side of the road lay scrubby, dry and exposed. The tarpaulin would cover them, but they'd breathe dust

while they slept. He thought of a home, of curtains that would filter the light in the morning. He thought of a hot meal, warm water, on his skin. The scent of soap. Bricks and mortar, a roof above him, even if it was small and built by the man who owned it. The woman at the wheel peered at them over the lap of the capped man. 'This is Fikile,' he said. 'She's my wife.' The woman didn't smile. Her face appeared put-out, as though they'd had a short argument, and she'd lost. Her expression hung sulky, annoyed. 'Yebo,' Ash said softly. She failed to greet him back.

'Okay,' Ash conceded. The man flicked the lock on the door behind him, and Ash leaned down and pulled the lever up to open it. A red rust crept up the side of the car, and spattered the roof like stars. Inside the leather seats were torn and broken. Compared with the inside of his boots, Ash considered it luxury. 'Come,' he said to Zuko. 'Get in.'

The boy backed away. Ash lunged at him, tried to grab him, but Zuko ducked under his arm and ran to the game fence behind him. Ash grimaced at the possibility that it was electrified. He put his hands to his head in a resigned panic as Zuko's shoulder missed the fence by inches. The boy looked at him, stubborn and challenging. The man climbed from the car. 'Want me to help you?'

'Simo, be careful,' his wife called.

Simo bolted forward, tried to grab Zuko's arm but Zuko wiggled away and ran further up the road's edge. He stopped and looked back.

'Come here!' Ash called. 'Don't run!'

Zuko's mouth widened, and he cried. A loud wail, an unusual plea for this boy usually amiable, full of humour, so free. Simo ran after him, but Ash called him back. 'Please,' he said, 'Stop. You're frightening him.'

'You can't be out here in the dark,' Simo said. Zuko edged further up the road. 'We'll take you back to our house. What if this kid runs off and you can't find him?'

Ash didn't answer. He kept his eyes focussed on his brother, and narrowed his attention to a beam. His movements slowed. He softened the intensity of his gaze. He kept his voice low, reassuring. 'It's okay,' he said. 'You're going to be okay. I'm coming closer. I only want to hold your hand.' Zuko cried louder, and backed further away. There were real tears on his cheeks, glinting in the car's only working headlight. Ash thought of a rabbit, soft as velveteen on the outside, wiley and sharp-witted in instinct and able to flee at a moment's threat. He inched closer. The boy watched him, mistrustful as he assessed Ash's intention. 'It's okay,' Ash said. 'We don't have to go with them if you don't want to. I can see you're frightened.' Zuko's shoulders shifted and relaxed in a slight, almost imperceptible movement.

He knew he'd said something right. 'It's okay,' he said to the man over his shoulder. 'You can go. We're not coming with you.'

'I'm not leaving you here. What are you, fifteen? You don't look old enough to take care of that kid legally.'

'I'm eighteen,' Ash lied. 'I'm his guardian.'

Simo snorted. His wife sat in the car and watched. 'Could have fooled me,' he said. 'But you didn't.' He approached Ash from behind. The hand on Ash's shoulder landed too firm. 'Come with us,' he said. 'You'll be comfortable. My wife and I, we'll take good care of you tonight.'

Ash flinched. The offer of help squeezed like a vice that threatened not to release him. Zuko was not yet at ease. He seemed ready to run if his stress elevated a fraction more.

'Please, take your hand off my shoulder,' Ash said.

The hand remained. 'We want to help you. That boy, he could get you into some trouble. You'll become wild things out here. Anything could happen.'

'You're right,' Ash said. 'Anything could happen.' He tried to pull away. The man pulled him closer and Ash ducked his breath. Stale smoke and dental decay.

'Team effort,' Simo whispered. 'You in from the side and I'll take him head-on. On the count of three, move fast!'

'Fuck that,' Ash said.

'What?'

'Fuck that, fuck you. This is my brother. He's not some kind of animal waiting for a cage. Leave us alone.' Still, the softness of a rabbit's image stayed with him. The dignity, the fear. The vulnerability and the depth in those dark eyes. Zuko, he knew, depended on him. But only to a certain point. Beyond that, he was his own person. Zuko would make his own choices if he had to.

Ash's arm twisted in sudden unbearable pain as the man pushed it behind his back and tried to force him down. Though small and wiry, Ash's strength was developed and finely tuned from years of chopping wood and carrying heavy sacks of potatoes over the eight kilometres of gravel road from the town. Sometimes he'd hitched a ride on the donkey cart that sold fragrant wood up and down their stretch of river twice a day, if he timed it right. Mostly, since the age of twelve, he'd been their own small family's pack-horse, with no horseshoes to protect his feet. He bucked under the man, and his knee gave way. A searing pain cut through his leg and he straightened slightly, lurched himself into the man's stomach and knew from the gasp he'd briefly, momentarily, taken Simo's wind away. Bent double,

Ash took advantage of his position and reached down to his ankle. In a single movement he lifted the cuff of his jeans and found the fishing knife against his sock. He pulled it out and took a step backwards, pointed the tip at Simo's heart. The man's cap had fallen from his head and lay in the dust a few feet away. Beneath it he had no hair. His eyes rested on the knife, then assessed the distance to the car. He held his hands up, resigned, and inched closer to the vehicle. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'I was only trying to help.'

'Get in your car and drive,' Ash said. A distance away, Zuko had turned his back on them. He faced the rising moon and rocked back and forth, as though to an invisible beat that lay beneath the surface of the universe.

The car started. The engine revved. The man opened the door and eased his way in. Before he closed the door Ash said, 'I don't know what your case is, mister, or what you wanted with us. But if you come near me or my brother, I'll slice you open and take your heart out.'

The car door slammed. The engine revved. The back wheels spun and the car launched onto the road. Neither of the tail lights worked. The car grew smaller and disappeared completely. The sound of the engine through a rusted exhaust remained long afterwards. Ash bent and put the knife back in under the cuff of his jeans, between the boot and sock on his right foot. He walked over to his brother and put a hand on his shoulder. The rocking slowed, then stilled. 'You were right,' Ash told him. 'I should trust you more.'

Zuko turned around, and buried his face into his brother's chest.

25.

They made no fire that night. Ash feared the man and his wife would return in their rusty car to find them. They walked the road's edge, close to the trees, until the fence ended. Then they turned into the body of the land.

They walked another kilometre. Now the road lay a safe distance away and they no longer heard the traffic. They breathed in night-flowers, a thick and choking scent. Ash pulled the tarp from the bag and spread it on the ground beneath a poplar tree beside a field of lucerne. The perennial plant provided softness; later, Ash thought, when the dew came, they might lie beneath the tarp and let the lucerne serve as a mattress. He pulled out the bread and what was left of the meat, and tore off a hunk of bread. In the darkness he couldn't see the mould that grew, the soft white and green spores they would swallow. He placed a piece of

processed meat across the bread and handed it to Zuko. The boy took the food and pushed it into his mouth, and almost swallowed it whole. ‘Glad to see you’re hungry,’ Ash said.

When they’d eaten he took his jacket and tucked it around his brother, then pulled the plastic sheeting over both of them. He lay awake for a long time beside Zuko and expected the cold to come. The night remained mild until early in the morning when the temperature suddenly plummeted. By that time he lay deep in the kind of sleep from which no cold nor any kind of dream could wake him.

26.

The road stretched long and gave no hint of passing time. Through the clouds the light emerged at an angle as though far away it was raining, though the drops hadn’t quite reached the earth. ‘You love being out here, don’t you?’ Ash said.

Zuko found a gathering of cosmos at the side of the fence. He pulled the pink flowers together to make a bunch. He stuck his nose into the blooms, then extracted his face, grinning. They passed a small farm with sheep grazing near the fence beside the road. As though they were a single curious organism, the sheep turned to face them and moved as one towards the fence as they passed. Zuko put his hand through the wire and tried to touch one. Simultaneously, the animals moved away.

They passed a single dwelling, washed white, with dark windows and small tin roof, that contained no living people. They climbed grey rocks, hewn by time. They played in the morning sun, jumped across petrified paleo-surfaces, where ripples of hardened mud had formed a million years before. They weaved through poplar trees, beneath green and yellow leaves where donkeys grazed, winter coats thick and warm, ears poised in anticipation of the passers-by. Once they came across a woman washing jerseys in a stream. Her sons played touch-rugby nearby – three boys, barefoot like Zuko, but their clothes were cleaner. They stopped their game. One grabbed the ball and held it. They watched the two as they passed. Ash greeted the woman, bent double with her hands in the sudded stream. She waved at them. She kept her legs straight.

By nightfall, Ash grew weak. Shadows moved in and out of his vision. He wanted to lie down, or he feared he would sink into oblivion without choice. He looked in the bag for bread, for anything to eat, but there was nothing left.

‘You hungry?’ he asked Zuko.

The boy stood without answering. Suddenly Ash knew enormous pride in this child who accompanied him, unquestioning. ‘You’re amazing,’ he said. ‘You’re doing better than I am, you know.’

Beyond the fence an old railway track emerged half-buried from the grass, and metres down was a carriage, abandoned and rusted. They scaled the fence and approached the carriage where inside an old mattress, stained and yellow with collapsed springs in the middle, filled most of the cavity. ‘Move away from the door,’ a voice said behind them.

A man stood draped in a colourful, patch-worked coat, his hat a rich purple. He held a dead bird in one hand, a long carved stick in the other.

‘We didn’t know anyone was here. We’ll go,’ Ash said. He took Zuko’s arm and backed away.

‘No. Stay. You were brought here for a reason.’ His voice resonated low; a controlled baritone.

Ash eyed the dead bird, no bigger than a mouthful. ‘What reason?’

‘That’s not for us to say.’

‘For who, then?’

‘The winds, the clouds. The laws of nature. Nature makes the only decisions that are worth anything.’

‘We came on foot. We decided on our own journey.’

‘You speak for the boy also?’

‘He doesn’t speak for himself.’

‘Oh yes he does.’ The man picked up a stick from the ground and ran towards them. Without releasing the bird, he chanted and danced around Zuko. The boy’s mouth arched down, and Ash thought he might cry. The chants from the man grew louder, more intense; Ash had no idea what he was saying. Finally, his voice trailed away as though it echoed a leaving wind. He turned back to Ash. ‘I don’t know who you are,’ he said. ‘But I’m taking the boy inside.’

On the other side of the carriage lay tortoise shells of varying sizes, upside down. Ash imagined the trapped animals left to starve to death, struggling in the baking sun. ‘You eat bird?’ the man asked.

‘We eat to stay alive,’ Ash said.

The man sat down at the carriage entrance. His legs overhung the edge as he plucked the brown feathers. Zuko lay on the mattress and looked up at Ash with big eyes. When the man was done plucking the bird, he built a small fire on the ground outside and skewered the

bird and roasted it whole. Afterwards, while it was steaming, he ate the flesh around the head and neck and innards, and offered none to the boys.

‘You don’t feed your guests,’ Ash said.

‘That was the first. The hunter needs strength, to hunt again.’ He threw the skewer into the dying fire and wiped the cooled juices from his mouth. ‘Stay here,’ he said as he stood. He disappeared into the trees.

Despite himself and his own vigilance, Ash crept onto the mattress beside Zuko. Zuko reached out an arm and flung it across his brother. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ Ash said. ‘I think this guy’s okay.’ As he drifted to blackness, it crossed his mind he might have been trying to convince himself.

He awoke with fingernails sunk into the skin on his shoulder. His heart pounded. His senses had left him, he’d been so tired. ‘Where’s Zuko?’ he asked. The boy was no longer beside him.

The man held a stick that penetrated another charred bird’s body, end to end. The juices dripped onto Ash’s t-shirt and burnt him through the fabric. The aroma wafted, tantalising. ‘Eat,’ the man said. ‘Magic only happens when your stomach is full.’ His breath over Ash’s face reeked foul. Ash sat up and took the stick. He ate from the bird’s body, and the crazy man seemed not to care that the juices ran onto the sleeping mattress, and soaked into it.

‘Where’s my brother?’ Ash asked.

The man took the stick and, at the entrance to the carriage, he threw it out. ‘He’s important to you?’

‘Of course he is.’

‘Would your journey not be easier if he wasn’t there to hinder you?’

‘I’m on this journey because of him. He’s the reason.’

‘Ah. Take him away, and your life becomes yours again.’

‘My life is mine.’

‘You want to sleep for a while? Let’s think about it some more.’

Ash used his strength to push himself to his feet. He looked out from the carriage entrance. Distant mountains hung from the sky. In front of the carriage were trees, and grass, and the bones of animals and birds, feathers tied in bunches with strips of leather to trees. Ash held the frame of the doorway to keep himself upright. Gravity threatened to take him. There was no sign of Zuko.

‘You won’t know your own freedom until you take it,’ the man said to him from behind. He leaned in closer. ‘Take it back for yourself,’ he hissed.

‘My brother doesn’t hold me back.’

‘He’s a special person, your brother.’

‘I know that.’

‘He’s special in ways of which you have no idea.’

‘I don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘He has the gift of the spirits in him. His body is aligned with healing.’

‘His body is his body. It’s special for nothing but what he uses it for.’ Ash breathed. He tried to muster strength, and imagined the spirit of the bird he’d eaten entering him. By the light outside, he’d already slept a few hours. He jumped down onto the grass below. As he landed his legs threatened to buckle, but he managed to keep himself upright. With the angle of the knife in his boot, if he’d landed wrong, he’d cut himself without feeling it. ‘Zuko!’ he called into still air. ‘Zuko!’

From between the trees his brother emerged. The boy held a wild flower. Ash forced air from his lips in a sigh of relief. He ran to the boy and hugged him. The man in the technicolour coat grinned from the carriage entrance. ‘You expected me to be a monster?’ he said.

‘Pass me my bag,’ Ash said.

‘I want your boy.’

‘Give me the green bag or I’ll come in and get it.’

‘He has special powers, you know. He is called.’

‘I can’t ask again. Throw the bag out.’

‘He could be a great bush doctor one day.’

‘The bag!’

‘You’re on your way?’

Ash made a move to leap upwards into the carriage, and the man laughed. He disappeared and re-emerged with the green bag in his hands. He threw it at the boys, with too much force in the movement. ‘If you leave him here, I’ll look after him well.’

Relief crept slowly into Ash’s chest. ‘What do you want with my brother?’

‘We’d make a good team, he and I. The spirits speak through him. I think I understand him. I’ll pay you for him.’

All the while, Zuko remained fearless. He stood and watched. *Maybe he is special*, Ash thought. *But he belongs with me*. He picked up the bag at his feet and hoisted it over his shoulder. He reached out and took Zuko's arm. 'Did he eat?' he asked the madman.

'Like a horse. He'd get fat here, with all I have for him.'

'Run,' Ash whispered to Zuko. The boy lumbered beside him. Ash dragged him, stumbling, and they made it back to the road before Ash turned around. Three cars passed. The carriage stood in the distance, yellow, derelict, seemingly empty. The boys slowed to a walking pace.

When evening came they watched a sunset of fire and ice that burned the remains of the day away. They drank from an animal water trough, enough to fill their bellies, and to cause them to rise frequently through the night. Zuko clung to Ash as he slept. 'You *are* special,' he whispered into Zuko's skin. 'You *are* filled with spirit. But you're my brother. You're my blood. I'll never let you out of my sight.'

27.

In the morning the world emerged different, bathed in an early shimmer. Silver frost streaked the ground like forgotten moonlight. Tiny spiders eked out a living from miniscule nests spun between blades of grass. Mist rose from the earth's crust, in conflict with the chill of air that wrapped Zuko like a different kind of blanket. He weaved the spangled light between his eyelashes. His mouth stretched in a yawn. Small pools of saliva gathered beneath his tongue. He swallowed. He imagined the spit as a waterfall, plunging vertically into his stomach. Over he rolled. On his stomach the lucerne stretched as a forest in front of his eyes. It sang rich. A brown beetle crawled with giant difficulty over mountains of earth and swords of green and miniature landscapes. Zuko blinked and watched, watched and blinked. Above him stretched branches of sky, between the trees. Like a thousand hands clapping, the leaves applauded.

Here was a world small enough. Plants with tiny leaves, flowers that would fit a thimble-vase. He stood and walked between trees flanking the field, steering away from the piercing needles of the thorny branches. The whooping of a bird's call bounced into his ears, and away. Something in his throat tried to echo the sound.

His feet itched in the shoes that added weight; he had to learn to walk again. He lifted his legs and placed them back on the ground, too careful. Not stamping now, not making noise to rouse the resting Ash.

Almost as soon as he was up, the wind was also. Here, in this open plain, it whistled as though behind it was a man with a puckered mouth. They fascinated Zuko, the sounds the wind's energy created. He stood in the open space and the air assaulted him, tried to push him over. He listened to its call. He tried to work out how to whistle in a way that sounded exactly like that. In between, he waited for the sun's hum, the sound of warmth as it entered his skin. The wind dominated, and blew what vibration there was away.

Ash woke eventually, and wiped his eyes. Zuko did not see the movement, so focussed he was on what surrounded them. Zuko's legs would no longer move. He'd walked far, found the pattern that would perhaps have carried him forever, but for the weakness, the vulnerability of human flesh. His legs ached. His body didn't want to walk anymore. His brother put his own boots on, folded the tarp and pushed it back into the green bag. Ash's hands cradled his head as he checked it for random sticks or insects that had tried to burrow there during the night. Nearby, a lone angora goat watched them. The ends of its hair seemed to float. Ash's hands brushed the sand from his brother's head. 'Come on,' Ash said. 'It's time to go. We need to get back to walking.' Zuko hardly made out the words above the sound of the wind, though he understood the intention. He dropped to his feet and howled. He cried until it was no longer his own sorrow that emerged from his mouth, but a sound that blended into the landscape, to become a part of the world. 'Okay,' Ash said. 'You don't want to go now.' He found a nearby rock and sat down. He watched Zuko as the boy paced, and cried, and competed with the wildness inside and out.

'I'll wait here,' Ash said. 'Until you're finished.'

Slowly Zuko's voice quietened, though he was not yet ready to leave.

The lone angora drew near. Ash moved his arm slowly down to his boot, and pulled the knife from inside the sock. It was not hunger that made him do it, but a sense of survival and protection.

Zuko watched Ash move like a tortoise, jerky in his attempts at stealth as he approached the angora, as though trying not to startle the creature.

The animal resigned to its fate, whatever that would be, and stood deathly still. Ash caressed the silken fur. He brought the knife up to the beast's throat. In the wind its fringe moved sideways above soulful, deep eyes. The nose was smooth, soft as a rabbit's. A strange bleat shuddered from its mouth.

'I'm sorry,' Ash said.

Zuko moved forward with his face of kindness. His child's hand drummed the beast's back, his smile and his insistence radiated outwards. He buried his face in the animal's neck and imbibed the warmth, the miracle of running blood that makes a conscious life.

Ash put the knife down on the hard earth, and wept.

The angora moved away eventually, lost in its realisation that the boys were not kin. The wind picked up. 'Come,' Ash said to his brother. 'Let's walk.'

Zuko refused. He stayed on the ground and allowed the air and the rising heat to swallow him. He stayed in thought and prayerfulness for the nature that accepted him. There was nothing for Ash to do but wait. And in the waiting he pulled threads from the bottom of Zuko's jersey. He plaited these, tied them together with knots and made a noose. He sat for hours in the wind, waiting for lizards and other small reptiles to trap. When he had six such creatures of varying sizes, he made a small fire behind a collection of rocks as protection from the wind. He charred the creatures to crisp, and allowed them to cool. With the distant sheep watching, he gave three to Zuko and kept three for himself. They ate without tasting, without passion or enjoyment. Later Ash made pillows of their extra clothing, bunched up side by side for their heads. Some nights, Zuko's body burned warmer than the fire. Nothing was solved in this world. Ash knew it now. Neither love nor death nor brotherhood.

28.

Zuko sat for three days and watched the wind roar. A buzzing fly looped his head. The cry of a rooster at dawn. The sound of birds and a humming insect in the heat. The smell of fynbos and the warm evening. Breeze on his face, now the fury had abated. A motorbike cut the silence, followed by the soft rush of a car. Line-white machines like insects through his head. Small branches nodded. Ahead loomed a dusky mountain. In its folds sat a lonely white house. The sun landed on Ash's face. The clouds rolled over, and the stars set the sky alight. Zuko glimpsed the soul at the edges of Ash's eyes. The sky remained broken, split apart into patterns of blue. Finger-leaves moved still. The far-away wind knew who he was. The moving air taught him where to go.

Long ago in the dark river of his head, he'd learnt how to pray. It was not to the god of the ordinary. From the first realisation of his difficulties, he'd understood the world was under the control of something he couldn't comprehend. A force beyond himself had made him what he was. It had reduced his choices and decided for him, before his birth, what it was

he would be. He'd learnt to distinguish early between day and night, but not in the ways other people would. 'Look!' they would say. 'Look, there's the sun, it is day time now.' But he would prefer to say, if he had words: 'Feel! Feel the sun, it must be daytime now.' Though he saw light and dark, it was not the primary way the world entered his being, or the only way he understood it. There were other ways to know it was day. He knew it by moving. At home, he would rise and move to the breakfast table, then outside to wash with his mother in the basin. He moved through the house, following her as she washed the floors, wiped down the walls and made their home neat. He accompanied her to the henhouse to fetch (or crack!) the eggs, he moved to the road with her, to wait at the corner for Ash to come home, and they would move together outside, to practise his throwing and catching the pinecones. Others knew it was day by light alone, by the sight of the sun. He knew it first by the vibration on his skin, the moving it entailed, and the patterns and habits that followed. He learnt to move not because it always pleased him, but because it pleased others. He looked to his mother to guide him on what to do. Her eyes told him, even if her body didn't. Moving was the daytime thing, and she alone had helped him to know how, and why. Out here, on the road, the day was marked by moving also. Only the sky was varied, and gave him great visions. The landscape changed, and the distant ground became close, and distant again, behind him.

Nights were known to him only through a sense of waiting. He'd learnt to sleep through most nights now; the dream he'd had of the butterfly had helped with that. Then he'd begun to look forward to closing his eyes, to seeing the creature again. The way its wings expanded, bursting with colour; the expression on its insect face. Soon he learnt to bring it into his daytime dreams also, but that was for him alone to know. The butterfly had helped him to feel less lonely. He conjured it up in moments when others spoke between them. When he stood aside, and simply watched.

What concerned him was where the days eventually went. People spoke of 'a day' or 'the day' like it was a thing, an object, or something to have like a dog or a stick or a spoon. The difference was, you always knew exactly where a dog was. A dog was on the road. Or it was in the house, or in a basket. A spoon was found in the cupboard, or in a bowl. But where was a day, unless you were in it? If it had not yet come, where did it wait? Did a place exist where all the days, an infinite number if you considered time, waited patiently for their turn? When the days were behind you, where did they go? Discarded, unwanted, because a new day had arrived for people to be inside? It was time and its tricks he didn't yet understand. Nobody had tried to explain it to him, because the words of the questions dammed up in his brain. They wouldn't come out, to ask.

The other question of great concern was whether the air was something in and of itself, or if it was really a great big hole. If the air was something, it should be possible to kick holes into it. But if the air was nothing, then it was, in fact, a giant hole in which the whole of the world existed. It had been difficult for him, through his life, to contain himself in such a great space. Most of his concentration, through the day and for the eight years he had lived, had been trying to hold his body together, to keep his limbs intact. Much of his life had been spent trying to remember he had a head, and at the same time he had arms and legs and fingers and toes also. Sometimes, he was everywhere. It came like the rain. His sensations spilled him out into the space. He could stand inside at home with his mother, and most of himself would be outside, high up in the branches of the tallest tree, waving along with the wind. Great effort, then, to pull himself back, to drag himself together, to stand fully present in front of his mother. She seemed to know when he was not there, when his body wouldn't do what his mind wanted. Before Ash was home from school, half of himself was already away and walking down the road to meet his brother. Out here it was easier. The walking, the constant rhythm, the use of his body in a methodical way helped him to know where he was. If part of himself disappeared into the sky, it didn't seem to matter. Now his feet ached. The time horizons beat a drum like heat. His heart pushed him into warm grass. His eyes slowed and close to the ground, a boy breathed in the sun. The road rattled as the day's light explored his skin.

The world was mystery. All around lay the codes. In the rain there were patterns he couldn't decipher. The multitudes of silver that sliced the air thin made him laugh. The small sting as each drop hit his skin. He tried to count the drops but they moved fast; too many, so much. It was as though the sky smiled and played a joke on him and smothered him in joy. His shirt stopped the raindrops short. He pulled the garment over his head, let it go and fly behind him. His skin sang with the drops that fell. He shouted and urged more of his body into the counting game. He made a start on the buckle of his belt, but Ash chased after him. Now there were two games; the sky's game and his brother's pursuit. Zuko laughed double-time to meet them both in the middle. 'Come here!' Ash shouted. Zuko's shirt flapped in his hand. He chuckled so hard his body lurched forward. He sank into the grass and sang in gurgles. He sank into freedom, an invisible layer attached to the world. He grew taller in the short grass. He shrank in the face of the giant trees and he knew from the bubbles in his chest how beautiful the world was. How wide. He breathed the air from where he sat, to the mountain and back. The rain abated and he gave up counting. There was no way to pick up

the drops up off the floor and say yes, there are seven zillion five hundred and fifty trillion raindrops today – they melted on the skin. The mystery lay in the vanishing trick of being there, and then not there. As he was to other people, because he had no words with which to etch his mark.

Trees swayed in time. Even the wind had a rhythm, if you listened closely enough. There and back, come and gone, ebb and flow, tide and out, neap and full, heavy and light, soft and loud, full and empty, there, not there. He too was contrast, a shadow to the world's light. He knew it when the sun shone and he looked down at himself dancing on the ground, separate from his own body but attached at the feet, weighted now by these shoes that came up and hugged his ankles. There, and not there. When he'd had to do things with his mother like eat his breakfast or dress in clothes, go to the toilet and wash his hands, bedtime story (she made them up) and blanket rolls; he'd been there. She'd made him know it by her own hands on his shoulders when she'd moved him the way he needed to go. Hand on his hand, heart on her son, willing him to do the things she knew would make his body more real. And then she'd turn away. To dust the sideboard, sweep the floor, prepare the eggs for breakfast, to shop away or to work in the house of the man with yellow hair. Slotted into shadow, he moved and acquired the grace it took to imagine himself an element; just a piece of the wind.

There were things that brought him back from shape-shifting and the fluid motion of space and time. The crunch of Cheerios. The crack of leaves under his feet. Striped shirts. Gravel-walking. The clicking sounds at the edge of his mouth, counting the sting of rain. Not words exactly, but something with which to slice the air. To intervene in the surrounding space, a sound of agency and exactness. Me. Zuko. *I make this. There.*

Now there was wetness around, a world away from the crackle and sting. Now it melted his face, his legs, into his jeans and socks and shoes. He became the water, a whole river. It weighed him down, and when he tried to get up he knew he'd lost the lightness.

Ash found him in the ditch and stood with the discarded t-shirt in his hand. Ash put his palm across his mouth and coughed. Zuko waited for the words: 'Get up.' They didn't come. Ash's hair gleamed with the raindrops that survived, shining still. Zuko suddenly longed for sun. He looked down. Everywhere was wet. He waited for Ash to lean down and take his wrist to pull him up against the weight of gravity he'd hold with his strength. Now his own weariness weighted him down. He didn't know how long the road would take to dry.

Ash abandoned the t-shirt and slumped beside him. Zuko leaned in and put his weight against the bigger body. Ash shivered violently. There was still warmth there, enough strength to take Zuko's gravity and his shadow at once. 'It's okay,' Ash said. He tilted his

head so Zuko's own was underneath his cheek. They pressed together. Ash put his arm around the small boy. His shoulders still trembled. Soft. Light and unsteady. Zuko sniffed at Ash's breath; sweet and something like the man with yellow hair's breath in the nights when he'd been with his mother. Ash hadn't been drinking, but something was different now. Nothing but burnt fish and bread (YUK) and polony (dead pig) in three days. What came flying on Ash's outward breath was hunger. Zuko inhaled as though he wanted to take it from his brother and allow the hunger to inhabit him. Ash yawned. A deep, in-drawn breath that lasted seconds, then out. Zuko closed his eyes. He couldn't look inside a mouth. No teeth were the same, the rows were bent in u-shapes and they made no sense except for chewing and being part of a face. Ash had one tooth missing, way at the back. Zuko looked away, to avoid seeing too far inside.

In his head there was poetry, but nothing rhymed. The words were static and varied as how the stars connect to a grain of sand, how the sound of waves can track the rhythm of a single heart. It was why he was able to stand for long, in a single place. People continually wanted him to *do* things. His mother and Ash, who loved him most, were irked when he stood too long. He knew deeply they understood; his mother especially. There were times before she'd got sick, she took him to the pine trees out at the back, when Ash was at school. She'd laughed when he'd thrown the pine needles into the air to watch them falling down. He'd slowed his vision to make another kind of pattern, another kind of rain. She hadn't tried to stop him, or make him clean up any mess. She hadn't told him to play with toy cars instead. Somehow, when she'd sat under the trees and let him be, it didn't seem to matter that she couldn't see inside his head. It was as though she understood his joy at the beauty of falling. Falling needles. Falling dreams. He was a boy who was always falling. Falling in shoes that itched his feet, too tight to walk. Falling out of expectation, falling into dreams, into light, and patterned dancing. It was as though, in those times behind the house, in sunshine and in pre-summer days of nothing-to-do, it stopped mattering to her he was different. She finally fell in love with her son.

The rain stopped. The road gleamed in persistent sunlight. Corn rows on either side stretched to touch a raw sky. They sat soaked to the skin. Ash put his arm out and pulled his brother closer to his own body, to transfer whatever warmth he might have left. Zuko yielded, and tucked himself in close.

The boy hummed softly as they resumed their walking. There was something different now. The sounds, the vibration, no longer seemed linear. They moved as though he'd suddenly found the capacity to explore a more nuanced dimension. There were vowels there too, Ash was certain. Still soft, still experimental. Tentative and flirting with potential possibility. There were no noticeable gaps, though Ash's mind detected the outlines of words in there somewhere. Ash thought he deciphered his own name amongst those sounds, but he might have been mistaken. A soft 'sh' sounded with a first vowel before it, blended before and after with a cacophony of soft mutterings he couldn't make out. 'What you talking about, Zuk?' he asked. He looked to the grey mountains on either side. 'What do you think in your head when the world carries on as though you don't matter?'

Zuko fell silent. He leaned too hard on his brother's arm.

'I don't know if you wanted to come all this way with me. I don't know if I did the right thing. I don't even know if we're going to survive this. I can't make promises. I can't even promise I'll find us another meal.'

Zuko pushed his head in, close to Ash's chest. Ash used the moment to propel him gently with his arm, to keep the momentum up. 'We have to keep walking. If we stop we might not move again.'

The empty road stretched forward. A dark shape emerged from between the mountains, too far away for Ash to be certain of its form. He tried to think what he would say when the shape became real, when more questions would demand more answers. He checked his sock for the hard push of the knife. He imagined he too might run out of words. He stood no more apart from the landscape now than the trees that fronted the mountain, suspended, to wait through time, for the nothing that came. The giant boulders appeared to have rolled from a great height and stopped, suddenly, at the pointlessness of it. He no more didn't belong as the birds gliding overhead, or the floating clouds or the thunder's rumble on the distant air. There was no separation now. They were part of it.

Slowly the shape grew, emerged, chugged, became whole and real, a machine and man together working for the sake of the land, or for the sake of something. But it was no man. The tractor drew up alongside the boys. Despite the giant farmer's hat and heavy boots, the slight figure, small of frame, was not much past girlhood. She hung onto the wheel with a single hand and tipped her hat with the other. 'Hey,' she said.

'Hey.' Ash lifted his own hand. Zuko made a sound beside him.

'You going somewhere?'

‘Why you want to know?’

She looked back at the road she’d come on and shaded her eyes against the sun despite her wide-brimmed hat, as though she measured the distance. ‘There’s not much further on,’ she said. ‘Ask me, it’s where I’ve been.’

‘How far to the next town?’

Her hair hung down her shoulders, combed out with straightener, a parting in the middle. Long and natural, a dark sandstone brown against the sky of her shirt. Her jeans were patched with dust that matched the wear on her boots.

‘You’re looking at fifty k’s,’ she said. Her sleeved navy shirt hung wet. She must have driven the tractor right through the soaking storm. Ash put his lips together and looked straight ahead, to give the impression he was thinking. In truth there was nothing in his brain but weariness, and the strange ache of longing. He couldn’t think any more.

‘You’re seriously going there?’

‘Further,’ he said.

‘You look terrible. How much further?’

‘A lot.’ Zuko weighed down on his arm. Ash’s head was light. He imagined lying down, closing his eyes.

‘Who’s your young friend?’ Her eyes shifted to Zuko. There was no way to tell what it was she was thinking.

‘He’s my brother.’

‘Does he speak for himself?’

‘Not really. Not to those who don’t understand his language.’

‘Molo,’ she greeted the kid.

Zuko made no reply. A hand moved up to the side of his face. His fingers spoke instead. He lowered the hand and allowed his eyes to rest on her.

‘He doesn’t say much,’ she said.

‘No, he doesn’t.’

She drew in a breath and looked to the mountains. ‘You look bad.’

‘Thanks.’

Her eyes returned to Ash’s face. ‘He looks worse. When last did you eat?’

‘We’ll get by.’

‘No you won’t. You stay in those clothes and get pneumonia and that child will die of starvation.’

She was a child herself, though she spoke as though she knew things he didn't. It was clear they had nothing warm on them to change into. No food, either.

'Get up here,' she said. 'Sit behind the tractor seat. I'll put the kid in front of me. I need to check on the animals and then we'll be home. Another half an hour.'

He looked at Zuko. The boy's eyes were on the ground. Ash detected a tiny movement at Zuko's feet. He bent closer and spotted a black soldier ant, carrying a leaf across the tar. He closed his fist and pushed Zuko's shoulder in a gentle nudge. 'You want to take this ride?' he said.

Zuko looked up, blinked twice at the girl. Suddenly his face broke out sideways in the light and joy only young children, like spacious vessels, can still contain.

Without a word Ash helped Zuko onto the tractor to sit between the girl's legs. Surprisingly, the boy yielded. Ash watched him lean into her. Though slight, her body was wiry, lean and strong. She'd worked. She was working still. He watched Zuko give himself over into her keeping.

She gazed down at Ash. 'Come on,' she said. 'You get up here too.'

He hesitated. He had no idea where she would lead them. The day was no longer his to control.

'I won't bite,' she said.

He vaulted up onto the rear and sat behind her. He tried to sit straight but as the tractor bounced, his head collided against her back. His eyes closed and he drifted. He jerked awake to catch himself each time his body slumped. The engine rumbled too loud for them to talk over, but he wasn't accustomed to talking much anymore. The urge to sleep was the strongest feeling he knew.

Cornfields stretched into the distance, the ears still young and shrouded in long leaves, green like blankets. He couldn't see Zuko where he sat in front of the girl. It was one of the few times his eyes had been off his brother for weeks. It was a relief, as though he'd focussed on the sun too long, now suddenly granted a respite. Within minutes the view seemed empty without Zuko in it.

She turned the belching tractor into a side-road that turned to gravel. Soon the corn gave way to grazing land. She shouted over her shoulder. He couldn't make out her words over the roar of the engine.

The puppy squirmed, soft with wide eyes set too far apart. Between the eyes and above the forehead wrinkled folded skin. The feet splayed broad, the legs too long for the body wiggling above them. The girl bent down on one knee. She held the hound's head in her hands. Their gaze focussed between them. Steady with love and dependence and understanding and companionship.

The floor of the hallway was paved in quarried stone, the walls washed a light ochre. Zuko stood beside him, the small boy's hands resting at his sides. Ash had never seen his brother so quiet, so little interested in the quality of air or the drum of the walls or the way the sound moved from his mouth in a hum to test the acoustics of the surrounding space.

Patterns of light and dark played at Ash's peripheral vision. His heart thudded unnecessarily in his chest. A surge of nausea rose to his throat. The girl moved forward, into the cavity of the hall. 'Here we are,' she said. As she passed him he caught the fullness of her scent. Perspiration already dried and the dust of the earth and manure and animals, the exhaust of the tractor and the sweat of horses. Also there was commitment and trying and dedication and hard work. He breathed too deeply. The puppy danced at her feet. She moved to the wall and hooked her keys into the peg there. She took off her hat and shook her head to air her hair from the confinement. As she flung the hat onto an arm of the hat stand, Ash's knees went weak and his heart thumped and the darkness took over the interplay of his peripheral vision. He sank like a sandbag to the floor.

31.

Zuko opened his eyes. Milk-white surrounded him. The sun warmed his body and he hummed its sound. Ash. His brother was gone and the room was strange. He didn't know what to do. The hum moved across his mouth. His lips parted into separate sounds and he told himself stories of another time he'd known. Before this one. Before walking.

The door opened. The girl stood in the doorway, clean now. No horses on her skin. 'Get up,' she said. 'It's breakfast time.'

He tried to move but in this house he didn't know how. He was stuck in the now, in the white. There were no memories yet made, no patterns or routines struck up to tell him what came next. She watched him for seconds. In his head he told himself the pattern of morning-time at home, the shape of the house and where his feet went. Now his mouth fell quiet. In her presence he was too shy to attempt his rambling, secret practice-words.

If the colour of loneliness was grey, then this house was something else entirely. He followed her, treading on tiptoes, not letting his heels down to the ground, but not because he couldn't bear the wooden floor, but rather he was afraid if he stood too hard, if his footstep sounded, this new comfort would shatter away. Lightness of foot allowed him to come and go and not destroy. Steps too heavy woke up the world, made people notice him. He did things wrong. He wanted to float. Then nothing in this house would change. He might watch it: the sun coming in through the curtains, the colour of her love, the sound of peace though the curtains and every brick the walls contained. If he could float or fly, he would not be responsible for destroying this dream. He made many mistakes. Sometimes at home he'd pulled a pot from the stove to the floor, only to find it was filled with boiling soup. He'd wanted to hear a clatter, and instead he'd filled the kitchen with a pea-green sea. His mother's anger was purple, at first, but it had faded quickly. The colour softened, some of the red drained from it. As he grew what was left was the blue, the colour of her love. The shade of her care. Here the colours were similarly muted, a shade of soft yellow so pronounced it became rich gold. He wanted to wrap himself in it. He kept his nose on the trail of her scent that led him down the corridor and past three doors that were closed, a sideboard that held a large, shiny and spotted cowry shell he imagined had teeth beneath it, a gold pot containing two pens, one with a green lid and the other black, and a soft cloth that ran long, from one end of the hall to the other, with tassels on either side. He wanted to stop and put his hands on that cloth. His fingers longed for the character of the wool, rough and reaffirming, the satisfaction of touch, what it gave to his body that spent too much time floating. He wanted his palms on the passage wall, the pattern of the cold brick and gaps of the floor. Her pace continued, determined. And he, equally determined not to lose himself in this house. His toes drank in the polished surface of the stone, glossed and shined and separated by uniform cracks, filled with cement. He dared not put his heels down.

In the kitchen she turned and rested her hands on her hips. She looked him up and down. He flung his own eyes into the corner, but it was too late. In distracting himself from the reality of his being through her eyes, he found a spider's web there, blinking in kitchen sunlight. He tried to count the threads. The girl did not try to talk to him. The sound in his chest beat a rhythm into his brain that subsided substantially before he realised it was the sound of his own anxiety, or his own heart's fear. It dampened, the rushing sound in his ears drifted down to the gentle wash of the sea. When he realised she hadn't moved, had not yet said a word, he turned his eyes back towards her.

The fur on her feet reminded him of the wild rabbits he used to see behind the house, between the pine trees where he'd stood for hours while Ash was in school. Her long skirt brushed the tops of her slipper-boots, and he had to force his mind back from disappearing into the complex pattern printed there. Swirls and shapes became flowers. He resisted counting the numbers of green shades the pattern held. He knew if he looked too long he'd get lost there. He pulled his eyes away and placed them instead on her shoulder. He knew her eyes were to the right, waiting for his. He was afraid they'd burn him down inside. It might be better if they were blank, looking at nothing, asking instead. By her stillness he knew there was kindness there; a fullness that would be too much for him to bear. If he met her through those vulnerable holes that went straight through a person, drilled out a soul, he wouldn't know if he'd have any way to contain himself. He was afraid the feeling would rise and his mouth would open and he'd shout or laugh like a person gone wild. His arms would fling upwards to match the feeling, or worse, he'd have to sit down and cry. Instead, he distracted himself by looking away, trying to reconstruct the exact pattern of her skirt in his head.

She took a step closer. His eyes jerked to her face. His fingers trembled, tempted to comb the air beside his head. She put out a hand. As her fingers landed on his shoulder he flinched, the touch too strong on his skin. She leaned in, applied a firmer pressure and looked down on him. 'Your brother's asleep,' she said. 'I don't think we should wake him. You want to get breakfast?'

His mouth widened, his soul expanded. Something filled his insides, a more intense yellow-gold than the sun outside. She hadn't asked him a question, or created a silence for him to try to jump across. He smiled broadly with his lips closed. He thought by the look on her face there might be stars or something else gleaming in his eyes.

She turned to the cupboard and took out a glass bowl. She put it down on the wooden table in the room's centre. 'Bowl,' she said. She broke eggs and named them also, as though he'd never seen them before, as though he hadn't grown up with chickens out the back beneath the pines, with eggs in his hands his fingers had craved to crush. He found the sound, the pattern of the single word. There was no confusion there. She named her steps for him, wrapped each movement up in a single, clear word. 'Milk,' she said, and poured the white liquid on the eggs. 'Salt,' then 'pepper,' and she ground both. 'Bread,' she said, and put the slices in a white toaster, plugged into the wall. 'Toast,' she said when she took it out. 'Plate,' she added when it landed. Each time she spoke she looked at him. Her eyes glowed with acknowledgement. Now, with the words included, he watched her. Now it wasn't only their eyes. She placed the things, her movements, the process of making the eggs, at the centre.

Whatever she noticed, what deficits he had, were no longer in focus between them. She smiled often, and wiped strands of her fine-ribbed brown hair from her face. ‘Butter.’ ‘Pan.’ ‘Knife.’ And ‘fork.’ ‘There,’ she said. She cleaned her hands off on that pattern and left a stain of grease the shape of Kenya on it. That disturbed him. He found himself longing for the moment before, when the pattern was untainted, complete, and still perfect.

She placed three plates on a tray, then filled three glasses with juice that came from a plastic bottle, three oranges cut in half on a paper label pasted on the side of it. She spooned the lemon-coloured cooked egg from the pan onto each of the plates, then picked up the tray. ‘Come on,’ she said.

He followed her, afraid the house would swallow him, or separate him from whatever moment must come next. His eyes were wide in yellow light. They took in the bricks and the furniture and the windows and a painting of two dogs asleep in a boat on a river with a fishing line attached to a red float on the water. He tried to imagine who the person was, who’d thrown that line in. He followed her as though his eyes were closed or the world was dark and he held onto a rope as the only means to guide him forward. There was no familiar pattern to map out his movements. As long as he stayed with her, he’d remain in the gold, as though at the centre of a sun.

They stopped at a closed door with a table placed outside. She placed the tray on the table and knocked gently. When no answer came she turned the shined brass knob and pushed the door open. The room pulled them both into dim shadow. Zuko stepped in behind her but stayed in the doorway while she moved to the bed against the far wall. She leaned over the mound there and shook the apex of it. The shape didn’t move. It was only when she drew back the cover a little way that the top of Ash’s head appeared. Zuko’s hands found the side of his face, and brushed the air. ‘Here,’ he said softly, forgetting the revelation of this one word would highlight the thousand others he couldn’t say or even repeat in any complex arrangement. ‘Here!’ She turned to look at him. Her eyes burned the side of his face. He launched into the room and threw himself beside his brother, but she hauled him off the bed. She put her fingers to her lips and made a shushing sound, then put her hand on Ash’s head. ‘He’s burning up,’ she said. ‘Your brother’s very sick.’

She allowed him to lean over Ash in a rocking movement, a metronome that marked his brother’s breathing. After some time she pulled him away, and took the tray from the bed. Zuko followed her back to the kitchen. She put the food on the table and sat him down. He looked at the plate. Soft egg and buttered toast. She ate in front of him without a word. She kept her eyes on him. His hand fluttered. He relied on the butterfly, conjured up at the

periphery of vision. His body rocked back and forth. He put up a hand to steady himself in the free-flowing air, but then his fingers moved independently at the side of his face, calming him, embarrassing him at the same time. His cheeks burned.

When she'd finished her meal, she laid her knife and fork side by side on her plate and moved around to sit beside him on the bench. She picked up a forkful of egg and held it to his mouth. He pursed his lips closed. 'What I'm telling you now is not to humour you nor to make you afraid,' she said. 'What I'm telling you now is not for your own good alone but also for mine. I don't want two dead bodies in this house. I'd have no idea what to do with them. I'm young but I've seen enough to last one whole lifetime. If you don't eat now, you'll end up in a bed like your brother. I can't guarantee you'll wake up. You have no idea what you look like. You'd frighten the dead if they were to wake up and walk out of their graves and be faced with you. I'll stay here until you eat a mouthful. You might think you're strong or you don't like egg, but I'm telling you I'm stronger. I can wait longer than you, to see you eat, and to see you live. Your brother might not make it, but I'm not having you die on me also.' While she spoke, she held the egg perfectly balanced on the fork, close but not quite touching his closed lips. 'You're going to eat,' she told him. 'Or I'm going to sit here and die trying to make you.'

Bile lifted into his throat. First he thought the egg was too hot, then he considered it too cold. Her scent overwhelmed him, at this close distance. Not perfume exactly, but a sweet, powdery softness. He leaned into her. The egg fork followed his mouth. 'Eat,' she said. The feeling of nausea grew. He would throw up, if there was anything in his stomach. He wanted to be close to her. The table waited, still as the earth, for all who ate there. The whole kitchen contained her spirit, an energy that rose around him. The connection vibrated at the base of himself. She centred him. He didn't want to lose her. His mouth opened. The fork moved forward an inch, then two. He closed his lips around the base of the fork, and she pulled the tines out, clean. 'That's the way,' she said softly. A smile tinkered at her lips. It was the first real one he'd seen.

32.

For four days, he followed her. She rose in the dark and cooked eggs for them both. Though the nausea still came with the eating, he looked into her eyes each time and knew they wouldn't leave that kitchen until he'd swallowed a stomachful. Before sunrise she boiled down animal bones. Into the broth she threw carrots and an onion and a diced-up handful of

herbs. Before they left the house she cooled a mugful and took it to Ash. She sat at his bedside, put it to his lips to make him drink, though his eyes were closed and he mumbled words Zuko barely heard, let alone understood. Fever burned Ash's skin. The sheets stayed damp. Zuko hovered over his brother, and did not know him.

Each day she wiped Ash down with a cold, wet sponge. His hands lay limp. His hair wet on the pillow. Afterwards, when the sun rose, she took Zuko out to the barn, and the puppy bounded after them.

At first he sat on a hay bale and tried to push the yapping animal away. The girl fed the chickens and raked hay for the horses and set them loose outside. She greeted grown men at the doorway to the barn where they made coffee over an open fire. The earth appeared solid and golden as the sun rose. The puppy jumped at him, annoying. Its paws scratched his legs. He wanted to cry out, but she was focussed on other things. Talking to the men. Fixing the horses. She wore the leather hat with a large round brim on her back. The third day she handed him the rake. Her boot gently pushed the puppy aside. 'If you're going to hang around, you're going to make yourself useful,' she told him. She stood behind him and showed his hands, his arms, his legs, how to move with the rake to collect the hay dispatched by the chickens across the barn floor in the night. She gathered eggs and handed them to him to hold. After he crushed the first three, she brought out a bowl and kept them apart from him. 'You break these, we can't eat them,' she told him. 'If you can't eat them, how are you going to stay strong?'

After the barn routine she fed the puppy and put him in the kitchen. One of the men, burly in blue overalls, brought the tractor across from the shed. She put her hat on, jumped into the seat of the tractor, and held her hand out. 'Come on, boy,' she said. 'Get up here. We're going out to check the cows.'

All day he stayed with her. He ran through corn while she rode fences. He sat on a ridge while she spoke to grown men. In the late afternoon she pulled him back onto the tractor and held him securely between her booted legs on the journey home. The first thing she did when she entered the house was to pat the puppy, then feed it. While she fetched the puppy food, it turned its attention to him and tried to leap up onto his legs. He pushed it away, crying softly in a way she wouldn't hear. He didn't want to disturb things. He needed her. She provided a centre-piece for his orbit. She heated the bone soup on top of the stove, and took a cupful to Ash. She pulled his body upright, and put the cup to his mouth. Ash didn't seem to know his own brother, or where he was. Zuko resisted nothing. He went with

her outside, because he needed the wind. His brother's body was there, but he didn't know where to find him.

On the fourth day Ash would not drink the soup. She put the mug on the bedside table, and stared at the wall. Zuko stood beside her, rocking on his toes. If he stayed high, if he stayed light, he might not land. It was too much. He needed to move. Her movement back and forth across the farm allowed him to do so. Now she sat with her eyes on something else. In the bed, Ash shook so badly the iron bars rattled against the wall. She put her palms together and put the tips of her fingers to her lips. She might have been thinking. She might have been praying. Zuko didn't know what to do.

She put a plate of pretzels and crackers in front of him at the kitchen table. She watched him crunch his way through them, but she didn't eat. Afterwards, she fetched them each a glass of milk. Now he drank or ate whatever she put in front of him. Now he knew why he should do so.

Before bed she put him in a tin bath and poured warm water she'd heated on the stove over his skin. 'You've got to be clean,' she told him. 'I'm sure your mother would have told you that. You can be anything else, but if you're not clean, nobody will ever take you seriously.'

Afterwards he lay in the bed under covers in the naked moonlight. He listened to her footsteps on the wooden floor. She moved in the kitchen, throwing out the last of the boiled bones, washing the pot and the plate and their empty glasses. He wanted to get up and cross the floor, to pace and breathe in the way that matched the way his heart worked. Instead he lay and listened. Her feet sounded on the floorboards, passing his room. The door of Ash's room clicked open; then softly closed.

33.

On the fifth morning she called him from his bed. He followed her to the kitchen. Ash sat at the table in a night-dress to his knees, grinning. 'Yo, brother,' he said. 'Sorry to have left you so long.'

Now, when they went out on the tractor Zuko sat on the back, clinging to the tow-hitch while Ash drove and the girl sat between Ash's knees. Sometimes she looked up at him

and smiled. Sometimes Ash looked down at her. When he did so, his face was serious. He said her name. 'Ela.' He did not smile.

They stopped at the first field and Zuko ran up the hill, his body joyous and springy, his eyes raised in salute at the bluest sky. While Ela checked the fences, Ash followed his brother. At the top of the hill he put an arm around Zuko and laid his face in the small boy's neck. 'You nearly didn't have me anymore,' he said. 'I nearly left you.'

Zuko laughed aloud, because what Ash said had nearly happened was not true now.

That night Ela made a fire outside, while Ash slept. Zuko waited with the puppy on his lap. It licked him with a thick tongue, repulsing and pleasing him at the same time. Ela continued to load sticks into the fire. She smiled as she worked, the flames warming her face.

She fetched two blankets and gave one to each of them. The vegetables she cooked on the open coals were wrapped in shiny paper, like presents at Christmas. When he woke, Ash ate half a potato and some corn. Zuko and Ela devoured the rest. 'When did you learn to eat?' Ash asked him.

'Question is, when did he learn to *not* eat?' Ela said.

Zuko's hands stayed quiet. His legs remained still. Unusually, his body found a peacefulness, suddenly at rest. He smiled into the fire, and watched the dancing patterns.

Later he fell asleep there. 'That's some brother you've got,' Ela said softly.

'I know it,' Ash replied.

'You wouldn't have left him, would you?'

'And what if I had?'

She looked away. 'I'm glad you didn't.'

They sat for some time without talking. Crickets called a last goodnight. A bat flitted in and out of their peripheral vision. 'I better get him into bed,' Ash said at last. He stood.

She nodded and looked up. 'There's something you don't know,' she said.

He studied her face. Then he bent to scoop his brother into his arms. The child's head and limbs hung down, pulled by gravity. 'There's a lot I don't know,' he said. 'Let's leave it like that for now.' He carried Zuko inside. The girl remained at the fire. As the stars emerged, they each thought only of each other.

Ash watched her over the days he tried to recover his strength. He observed the way she moved, the grace of her hand, her gentle voice as she talked to his brother, as she told him what she was doing, and why. What he should be doing, and why. When he watched her arms around Zuko as she taught him to sweep the leaves on the porch outside, something moved in

his chest. Later he thought it was jealousy's pleasure he'd felt. When he made her coffee at the big Aga stove and brought it to her, the flush on her cheeks caused something in him to stir that he couldn't, at first, recognise. All he knew was he wanted it more.

34.

The surface of the dam lay olive-dark and still, dotted with the gaudy green leaves of the hyacinth. Ash took a flat pebble from the ground and skimmed it against the surface of the water. It bounced three times. Rings expanded in the light on the surface tension. 'Thank you,' he told her.

'For what?'

'For helping me. Us. For getting me better.'

'Anyone would have done it.'

'Not anyone.'

'And it wasn't me that made you come round. That was your body that decided. Or something else. It wasn't me.'

'Maybe it was him.' When he looked up Zuko was already waist-deep in the water, a smile spread on his face. Ash moved forward with the intention of fetching him out, words of admonishment already forming at his lips. Ela's hand on his arm stopped him. 'Leave him,' she said. 'Look how happy the water makes him.'

'But his clothes ...'

'They'll dry.'

They sat together on a small bank overlooking the water, and watched the boy below. The girl's dust-caked knee remained inches from his, close enough to reach out his hand and cup it, to see how perfectly it would fit into his palm. 'This land,' he said. 'You don't work this alone.'

She leaned forward, licked her fore-finger and traced in the dirt of her boots. 'No,' she said. 'I don't.'

'Do you want to tell me?'

'No. I don't.' She sighed, leaned back. He breathed in her hair, mingled with the scent of the warm grass around them. Her back touched his arm, briefly.

She stood and kicked off her boots. 'I don't want to spoil this,' she said. She looked him in the eye, and took off her jeans. 'Let's swim,' she said.

She stripped down to her underwear. He pushed off the ground and, as though to meet her challenge, undressed also. They each stood, side by side and almost naked, facing the water. ‘You’re not taking it all off?’ he said.

She pointed with her eyes at Zuko, up to his chest now, and among the reeds. ‘There’s a kid in there,’ she said.

Still he took her in the water, pulled her pants down and entwined his legs with hers, their bodies pressed together. Across the damn, Zuko still splashed in the shallows.

He took her bottom lip in his mouth and bit down hard. He slid easily inside her. Blood appeared at the corner of her mouth, and he licked it off.

Afterwards they lay on their backs in the sun with their fingers touching.

‘You’re too young for me,’ she told him.

‘What’s the date?’

She told him. He closed his eyes and experienced the orange of his eyelids, against the warmth above. ‘I’m seventeen,’ he said. ‘My birthday’s already gone.’

‘You need to leave soon.’

He looked at her sideways. ‘Why?’

‘You don’t know what you’re in for. You don’t know what this is.’

‘I know what I feel. I think you feel it too.’ He pushed himself up and supported his torso on one elbow. ‘I can work for you, on your farm.’

‘What would be the purpose of your journey, then?’

‘Maybe this is it. Maybe this is the purpose. Meeting you.’

‘This is not it.’

He looked across the water. Zuko lay on his back on the bank, on the other side.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I need to find our father first.’

She sat up and put her t-shirt on. ‘This is nothing, Ash. You need to go on and forget this. There will be other girls. Many girls in the city. Soon you won’t even remember my name.’

‘There will only ever be you.’

‘It can’t be like that. You know nothing, yet.’

‘You think you’re too old?’

‘I think it’s your first time. You think like this now. Tomorrow everything will be different.’

‘That’s not true.’ He pulled her body towards him. He thought she must love him. She’d saved him, pulled him back from a place so dark, something close to death. Her body was the loveliest thing he’d known. He would give up his journey. It was that close.

She brushed him off, sat up and pulled her jeans up. Then she stood and walked around the dam to where Zuko lay. Ash watched her bend to his brother. She pulled a piece of grass from the ground and tickled the boy’s face with the end of tiny clustered seeds. Zuko giggled, and sat up. Ela tickled him again. This time Zuko laughed out loud. Ash observed his brother extend his hand, pluck a piece of grass and try, ineffectively, to tickle her also.

Ash brushed his hair with both hands to rid it of excess water. He stood and pulled on his shirt, his jeans, and his boots over his damp feet. He knew how thin he was. The loss of strength alerted him. A result of illness, a result of loving. Without saying goodbye he left Ela and Zuko at the dam, and walked back to the farm house alone. He passed cows and trees and smaller dams. He crossed a road and a mealie field, swaying green. Only when he neared the house, the crunch of the gravel driveway beneath his feet, did he hear the distant sound of the tractor’s rumble. His brother and his girl coming home.

Later Ela roasted a chicken over an open fire at the back of the house. She wrapped three potatoes in foil and cooked them until the outsides darkened and crisped and the insides were soft as cheese. They ate in camping chairs from floral plates that looked like they’d belonged to somebody’s grandmother. ‘Ash.’ She said his name as though it meant something to her mouth. ‘Is that short for something?’

‘My mother told me I was the result of a fire already burnt out.’

‘And your father?’

‘He used to come and stay near our house every year, in the holidays.’ He thought of the stranger, laughing. Light curls around his face. His mother would put her dark fingers into the middle of those curls, and twirl them.

‘Do you still see him?’

‘Not for years.’ He swallowed a mouthful of potato. It burned his throat. In his own chair, Zuko quietly ate his chicken.

At eight o’clock Zuko yawned. He stood and came over to Ash, lifted one leg to place a foot on his brother’s knee. ‘He wants to go to bed,’ Ash told her. He stood and took his brother inside.

He lay beside Zuko and sang softly to him in the dark. When the boy was asleep he lifted his own weary body from the bed and went back outside. Ela still sat in the same chair.

Now the stars were out and the lack of cloud cover took the warmth away. She'd pulled a blue woollen rug around her shoulders. 'You smoke?' she asked him as he sat down. 'There are some cigars in the study, if you want.'

'No.' He laughed. 'I'm only seventeen.'

She looked embarrassed. 'Seventeen year olds smoke. I've seen lots of them. Some of the farm workers' kids smoke.'

He looked at her straight on, half-closing one eye. 'You own this farm?' he asked her.

She stared at the embers, slowly burning down the chicken bones they'd thrown there after their meal.

'No,' she said. Then: 'Maybe it's half-mine. As long as I stay married.'

It was as though one of those bones had escaped that fire and stuck in his throat. He almost choked. 'You're *married*?'

She smiled, thinly, but not at him.

'How old are you, anyway?'

'Twenty-two.'

He might have run away, right then. He wanted to give up, to take Zuko back to their mother's house, no matter the rot, or even the memory, of her remains. Everything fell. His stomach, his heart. Even the stars seemed closer now, threatening to render the sky black and empty. 'Where ... where is your husband?'

Ela leaned towards the fire and rested her elbows on her knees. She breathed out, slowly, as though measuring the space between her words. 'He's away. He's on a buying trip.'

'Buying what?'

'Machinery. For the farm.'

'How long's he been gone?'

'A week and a half.'

'When's he coming back?'

'A week. Maybe two. I never know exactly.'

He licked his lips, suddenly dry, parched by the fire, the days of walking. A blanket of weariness overcame him. He wanted to be beside Zuko, out in the open with nothing between them and the sky but the tarp to keep off the rain. Zuko, his brother. Zuko was his. The constant in his life. The person he depended on. 'Will ... your husband ... mind we're here?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've never had visitors before.' She turned her brown eyes on him. 'I think he'll mind some things.'

‘You’re twenty-two. When did you get married?’

‘It was an arranged marriage,’ she said. ‘I grew up poor. He was someone my father knew from way back, someone from his own childhood. My father owed him a favour. He had the farm. He offered me a life outside of servitude.’

‘Jees,’ Ash said.

‘The farm gives me freedom. I can work it when he’s away.’ She looked directly at him. ‘He’s away a lot.’

Ash swallowed. ‘Do you like him?’

‘That doesn’t matter.’

He thought of his mother, unconstrained by marriage. But not by ties that bind. ‘How ... how old is he?’

‘Forty-seven.’

‘Shit. That’s old. That’s fucking ancient.’ He stood. A weariness crept into his blood. ‘Is he kind to you?’

She smiled. ‘What’s kindness? A roof over my head? Is it sex? Is it food on the table, a life I can push myself wholeheartedly into? Is kindness a man who speaks to me too much, or speaks to me too little?’

‘Do you love him?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I need to sleep,’ he said. ‘Thank you for your accommodation.’

35.

In the morning the room was still dark from the thick of the curtains when she came to him and laid her body over his. Her mouth covered him with kisses and she pulled her fingers through his hair. Later he held her astride him. He wanted to talk. There was much in his head but the words tumbled and halted and they seemed to stop at his mouth. He stared past her, to the ceiling. He thought of his brother, sleeping.

Later they sat in the kitchen, chewing toast in silence. ‘You can’t change things, you know,’ she told him.

‘You think because you’re older than me, you can give me this kind of cheap wisdom?’

‘I can hear you think, it’s so loud. I’m telling you not to waste your time thinking.’

‘You don’t understand.’

‘I do understand.’

He took a swab of butter on his knife, spread it across a new piece of toast. ‘Would you leave him?’ The puppy came in, and licked his toes.

‘What?’

‘And come with me now. We can leave today. Come with us.’

She leaned back in her chair. The back of her hand wiped imaginary crumbs from her mouth. ‘You want me to leave this farm, and walk with you to Cape Town?’

‘My father’s got money. He can help us out. We’ll get a life started. You, me and Zuko.’

‘You’re only a boy.’

‘And you? You’re hardly a grown woman.’

‘You wouldn’t have thought that an hour ago.’

‘We’re young. You can start again. With someone your own age.’

‘What will we eat?’

‘We’ll get by.’

‘Really? How will we get by, Ash?’

‘I’ll find work. Get a job.’

‘I have work. And it’s here. On this farm. With him.’

‘But you don’t love him!’

‘Love isn’t everything. Love is a luxury for people who can afford to dream. That’s not me. That shouldn’t be you, either.’

‘I can’t help how I feel.’

She looked down, into the abyss of her lap. ‘I feel it too,’ she said softly. Then she asked: ‘The boy?’

‘What about him?’

‘Do you think you’re doing right by him?’

‘What’s wrong with what I’m doing?’

‘Maybe he should be in a children’s home.’

‘He can’t speak. He has no way to make his needs known.’

‘...’

Ash shook his head. ‘I’d never put him in a place like that. Not when he can’t say what’s going on. He can’t tell how people treat him. There’s no-one who knows him like I do.’ He looked at her eyes. ‘Do you know what I’m talking about?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You’re talking of belonging. We both are.’

She left Ash in the kitchen. In Zuko's room she opened the curtains. The light and dust mingled. She sat at the edge of his bed and she smiled. Zuko giggled at her. He couldn't meet her eyes without laughing; there was such joy in him, when he was in her presence. 'Listen,' she said. 'This morning I'm getting you in a bath. You can complain or not complain, I don't care. But you're getting some water on your body, and some soap, and together we're going to give you a good wash.'

36.

He liked to be with her, out on the farm. She didn't mind if he played in his own head, separate from her. She didn't mind that his concentration wavered while she tried to show him something. She waited. She understood where his mind was, and how it had slipped into something else. Sometimes she noticed what he saw: the silver in a spider's web, the glint of gold on the ground. She always spoke to him about what she thought he saw. 'The clouds are an incredible colour,' she said as he looked to the sky. 'Each grain of sand is perfect and exact, like a jewel,' she said when he dropped to the ground in examination of the miniature. She was like his mother in that she didn't expect him to be lazy. When she had potatoes fresh from the ground to wash, she gave him half of them and a bucket of water, even though it took twice as long. The day was something to move through. She never stopped moving, until the night came. Then she, like everyone else in the world, would wait until morning to begin again.

Sometimes she watched him too closely. When he returned her gaze she smiled. Other times she would throw her hoe or her rake or her spade down and grab him, and big as he was at eight years old she would swing him around until the world blurred and he laughed with the delirium. She seemed to know what his body needed, to feel alive. Suddenly joy and her involvement of his body in that physical way brought him together, connected his eyes to hers. He belonged.

In the afternoon Ash secured the chicken run for her. He ran mesh wire across the back where there were holes. There, she'd complained, the smallest chicks had escaped. Zuko darted behind the coop and tried to catch the tiny birds as they ran in a zig-zag motion, like the first letter of his name. Ela came outside at four o'clock with a tray that held three mugs of tea. 'I wanted to bake,' she said, 'But there hasn't been time.'

‘Why does he make you work like this?’ Ash asked. He threw the hammer down and picked a mug of steaming tea off the tray.

‘He doesn’t make me work. I want to do it.’

‘You want to?’

‘When we first married, I thought I would die. I wanted to die. Sitting in that kitchen, in this house. I would wake up every day and cry and wish I was still asleep. Or I wouldn’t wake up. I couldn’t take the crying anymore. Self-pity eats you from the inside. I couldn’t watch myself being useless, anymore. Being sad. I watched him. I watched him working. I watched him with the men, the labourers. As hard as he is, they respect him. He works. He’s not a happy man either, but he works. It helps him get through the day.’

‘He’s not happy? He’s got you.’

‘What you think you want doesn’t make you happy. Sometimes you get what you want, and you find it’s a burden. Especially if it’s a human being. He wanted me. He got me. He didn’t think I’d sit around and cry all day. He only saw my youth, and my body. He didn’t know that because of that youth, that he wanted so much, I have little experience baking bread. Keeping a house. I didn’t know how to talk with his friends, who are all my father’s age. He saw me as a trophy. That’s what he got. Something useless. Someone who sat around all day. Who couldn’t do anything. Someone who cried too much. Someone who didn’t even like him.’

‘Why are you still here? If you hate it so much.’

‘I couldn’t live my life like that. I’d rather kill myself. I thought about that. I wanted to be dead rather than rot out here on this farm, with no-one to talk to, no one who cared if I was alive or dead.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I dried my tears. I put on make-up. I made myself look attractive to him. I seduced him. I gave him the best night of his life. And then in the morning I told him if he wanted me to stay – and I mean stay alive – he had to let me work on the farm. Like one of the labourers. I wanted something to do from sun-up to sun-set. I wanted to be in the fields. I wanted my skin to burn and my hands to blister. If he wouldn’t allow that, if he wouldn’t teach me everything there was to know about farming, he would have blood on his hands. Mine. And he and my father would have to explain it to themselves, for all of their lives.’

‘You could have left.’

‘And done what? I had no skills. I had no money. My father would never have taken me back. I would have sat around in a mud house in the dust, waiting for another life to come. I would have grown old like that.’

‘So you’d rather stay with him. A man you don’t love.’

‘I’d rather work. I decided then, that work is the answer. Work is the antidote to everything. And it has been. For me.’

He put a hand out to draw her close to him, but she stepped away. He looked up. One of the workers was passing with a horse. He raised his hand and waved. ‘They’ll tell him,’ he said.

‘They’ll say nothing. He’s their boss. He’s my boss also. Nobody speaks to the boss about things that matter. Things that happen on the ground. I like to think I’ve earned their respect. I keep my mouth closed, and my hands busy. I’ve learnt from them. They do the same.’

He nodded and put the empty mug back on the tray. ‘I do understand,’ he said. ‘I know you think I don’t. But I do.’

She watched his face, waiting. Behind the coop, Zuko caught a chick. He squeezed it in one hand, and carefully examined the dark and shining eye.

‘I could have phoned my father when my mother died,’ he told her. ‘I could have sat around in that house after we buried her, and waited for the authorities to come and take my brother away. Maybe I should have waited for my father to arrive, not knowing if he ever would. I would have howled at the moon every night, like a dog. I might have buried myself at the bottom of a bottle, like most men around there end up doing. I couldn’t sit around. I couldn’t wait anymore. I was chewing my own flesh to get a chain off my arm. I had to do something. I had to take action. That was all.’

‘I think the boy likes it that you left,’ she said. ‘I think you did the right thing by him. And by yourself. You two are good together. You wouldn’t be who you are without him.’

37.

On the seventh day she came to him, wide-eyed. He crouched in the hall-way, playing with the puppy. In the distance, the sound of a car’s engine hummed like a dragonfly. He didn’t make the connection. Zuko paced the house somewhere else, weaving his body through the patches of sunlight that came through the windows. Ela grabbed at Ash’s arm. ‘He’s back,’ she hissed. ‘He’s back early! You have to leave. You have to get out of here!’

His arm came down. The puppy gnawed at his jeans, wanting more. ‘You didn’t tell me he’d be back so soon,’ he said.

‘I didn’t know.’

She ran to the bedroom and he followed. ‘I mean it,’ she said. She grabbed at the green bag on the floor and pushed Zuko’s jersey into it. Her eyes were wild, afraid. ‘You have to go!’

He ran a hand across the top of his head.

‘What do you need?’ she asked. ‘What can I give you?’

He followed her to the kitchen. He’d have to get Zuko. He was uncertain the boy would understand. The sound of the dragon-fly’s hum was closer. In the kitchen she took a pack of cigars from the shelf and pushed them into the bag. Tins – pears, beans, spaghetti – and an opener. A blue lighter, for the fires. He fetched the small frying pan that had made their morning eggs off the drying rack on the sink and added it to the bag. She ran to the bedroom and returned with a brimmed hat for him, a cap for Zuko. He took the bag from her hands. She looked at him. He looked at her. ‘Zuko,’ they said in unison. Her eyes welled. A void filled him. Its source lay deep inside.

38.

The window squared patterns, light on the floor, the dust between not counted, and through such filters Zuko’s transparent soul danced. This space was large and winding, with corners for him to creep into. Here aloneness was possible, but now he was never lonely. She worked. Her attention focussed and exact. He was not excluded. Now his heart expanded. Here was space for them, beyond the words they might or might not have learnt. Every day he awoke to the white walls. Every day he emerged from the bed with a spring in his heart that bubbled and raised his fingers and sparked his toes and made him move in ways of magic, that he hadn’t known before. He’d find her in the kitchen or the hallway with the puppy or out the back. Or she’d be collecting eggs in the barn, and when he appeared her eyes lit up and her warmth flowed to him across the space like a river. Her smile stretched smooth and as easily as her beautiful skin. She came to him and folded him in her arms. He knew here was a place to live. Here was the space and infinite time he needed. Here the stars and the days and the patterns that made him part of it were endless. Here he wasn’t such a burden to his brother. Her love was easy and free, without the weight of responsibility that gave him unspoken guilt. She took him in as she did the puppy and the lowing cows, the men

in the fields and his own brother. He'd never known his own wordlessness to matter so little. In the evenings, nature's light delighted him, in the distortion of his own eyes. In a distant sky, lightning flashed. Sheep moved into their pens as he narrowed his eyes to blur them, to soften their wake and leave a trail of light in his eyes. What remained was the pattern of the log on which he sat before black fell. She lit the world with fire. The deep etches into the wood of time and ants and warmth and growth and static movement.

When he played in light and freedom, clutching the seahorse, and hummed the yellow sun in the absence of toys, the acceptance of that light was as fascinating as the spin of a car's wheels, or the laugh of a clown or the thrill of a game. When she pulled him from that, when she, the giver of light and freedom and home, dug her nails into his skin, made her face different to how it was for the soft days before, when she looked at him with fire and ice and terror in her eyes, he fell to the ground in the fear of the sudden changing world, and screamed.

He wanted her back, the soft light touch of Ela. The warm eyes, the morning eggs and the grace with which they were served. A gentle approach, with no fear of ending. Now she was harsh, urgent, as she tried to pull him away.

When he didn't move and his fear emerged in that god-awful sound, she mustered the strength she'd built in labour despite her small body. She put her arms around his waist and carried him to the back door at the kitchen where Ash paced as he waited. The reflex of Zuko's body rose full and resistant. His hands pulled at her hair, his nails dug her skin, and if his mouth had not been so engaged in his screaming, he might have bitten her shoulder to prevent her from ending the dream. The bewilderment on his own brother's face made him more afraid. The open door and the bag packed and the chill outside and that he wasn't yet wearing his shoes. As though Ash knew his own brother's mind he suddenly said, 'His shoes! Zuko's shoes are still in the room!' Ela passed her hold on Zuko to Ash as she ran back to the room. Zuko's closed fists beat down on Ash's shoulder, his fingers grabbed at Ash's cheek bones. He clasped at face, flesh and tears also. He didn't want to be two anymore. Rounded and lonely, binary, dependent. Three gave space, dynamism, balance. Three was now the only number he wanted now.

Ela returned with the shoes and pushed them into the green bag. Zuko, now caught in the web of his own sound, continued to fight and to moan, though tiredness had overtaken his hands. His sobs, his sounds, made the others move too quickly. The dragon-fly's hum had reached its pinnacle. It stopped, suddenly. Ela pushed both boys out the kitchen door and closed it behind her. Ash carried Zuko to the barn. He pushed the child against a hay-bale,

and covered his mouth with his hand. Only when Zuko was caught by the wide and serious eyes did he stop his sounds. Zuko tried to bite down on the skin of the hand. Ash was too smart, too experienced. He stretched his fingers out, and Zuko's teeth failed to find a grip. 'You think I want to leave?' Ash hissed into his face. 'I love her! I don't want to go either! If you carry on like this, you'll get us both killed.' It wasn't his words, but the look in Ash's eyes that caused Zuko to finally be quiet. Then he understood the seriousness of it, without the words to say it.

39.

They left the farm over fields and fences. When they came to a dirt road, they followed it west. After an hour a cart approached, pulled by two donkeys; one dark, a chocolate brown, the other light with a white face, like an old man's beard. Zuko put his hand on the dark animal and buried his face into its neck. He breathed in the musty dust of animal hair and the sweat of the road. It calmed him. Stilled his heart. He remembered, suddenly, the rhythm of steps; the patterns of the open road.

The man who drove the beasts wore navy trousers over brown loafers and a checked shirt. A green cap perched on his head said 'I heart Riversdale'. The cart boasted a canopy and a rush of yellow flowers picked from the side of the road. He offered them a lift for a hundred rands. 'We're going to the city,' Ash said. 'That's too much money.'

'I can't take you there,' the man said. 'Too far. I lift people around this area. If they've got the money.'

'Which direction is the city?' Ash asked.

The man pointed. Beyond his finger sat grey and white clouds like cotton wool, waiting in the sky. 'You've got a way to go,' the man said.

'I know.'

'We'll take you to the main road.'

'It's okay.'

'What's that boy counting on his fingers?'

'He's not counting.' Ash shrugged in an afterthought. 'Or maybe he is.'

'Good luck,' the man said. He took the strap that held the bit in place in the blonde donkey's mouth and pulled it forward. Zuko stood and listened to the hollow sound of the hoof beats as they faded away.

They stayed on the gravel path, edged with scrub. Ahead of them rolled gentle hills of stone laid golden by the morning light. They emerged in the afternoon on an open plain, flat and broad and rimmed with folds that might have been real mountains if they'd tried hard enough. A dramatic escapade of gathering cloud threatened, but it was hard to tell the seriousness from the distance and space. In the open, Zuko ran. Once he tripped and fell, and Ash knelt beside him and helped him put his shoes on. By evening they had traversed the plain. They made their camp at the start of the folding hills where ravines and ridges created shadows and light. Ash thought only of the world's emptiness.

Their bodies were strange to each, after a week of separate beds and the warmth of down. While Zuko had discovered his own skin in the patterns of sun, Ash had found something else. Like a drug, he wanted it back. It haunted him now, with every step he took away from her.

40.

The hill that had loomed black through the night rose soft, covered in trees that at this distance had the appearance of the roughened wool on Ash's own head. His mother would have disapproved, but Ela didn't mind. He stretched his arms into the new morning and rubbed his eyes. It was already late. The leaves on a nearby sapling acacia gleamed like wax. In the distance the roar of the tea-stained river rapids persisted. Directly below, the still water sat, olive-green and silent, marked only by dark shadows from overhanging trees and the shrubbery lacing the edges. An occasional insect broke the surface tension.

There was no real silence. Across the river, trees broke sparingly into patches of grassland. Above it a section of sloping sandstone seemed easy to climb. He shook the small body beside him. Zuko murmured, then turned over onto his back and giggled. All this time, Ash had been waiting for him to wake up, and he hadn't been asleep. 'You little shit,' Ash said. He pulled up Zuko's shirt and tickled his brown stomach. 'Tick-a-tick-a-tick-a,' Zuko said, laughing, wanting more.

'No games this morning,' Ash told him. 'Get your boots on, we're heading west.'

Zuko sat up. It took him some time, but he pulled on his own high-tops and then pushed each foot at Ash, to have the laces tied. Ash stood and reached down to let his brother use his weight to pull himself up with. Ash pointed across the river. 'You see those rocks?' he said. The child's face was directed towards the warm sun, his lips closed in a mindful hum. 'That's where we're headed. We're going have to find a way to cross the water.'

He headed upstream and Zuko trailed behind, sometimes stopping to imbibe the texture of a tree-bark, or to stick his finger into an ant-lion's hole. The path they beat wound down to the river's edge. Further up an eddy of rocks emerged in the shallows, where they eventually crossed. Ash moved through the water backwards. The pack on his back stabilised him. He held both of Zuko's hands as he guided the boy, and talked him through it. 'Okay, next foot. I know the water's flowing over your feet it but it will be okay. Your shoes will dry in the sun on the other side. You have to lift one foot, put it down ... lift one foot ... down again ... that's it. Now you're getting there. Keep going, Zuko. You're doing well. When we get to the other side you can sit. Here's a deep bit. The water's fast. Lift your foot up ... that's it ... now step *right* over, onto this rock. Nice ... nice ... you did it. You won't fall. I've got you. We can sit down when we get there. I'm not going to let you go.'

His feet landed on the bank on the other side and he helped Zuko onto it. Zuko threw himself down onto the grass in a way that made Ash nervous that he might spend the next hour coaxing his brother to get to his feet. Ash lay down next to him. He put an arm across his back. 'You're fucking lovely,' he told him, his own relief unmasked at the success of the crossing. 'I'm so proud of you. What other eight year olds would cross a river this big?'

Zuko grinned. He grabbed at a blade of grass.

'Now we're going to stand,' Ash told him. 'We're going to make it to those rocks, all the way up that hill.'

Two hours later they found themselves on the plain on the other side. There was no road or electricity pylon or any sign of human habitation. Ash determined they were headed in the right direction. He guessed the main road lay over the small undulation of hills that ran parallel to their way on their right. Above them, the sun climbed. He tipped his hat further over his eyes and took out the peaked cap from the bag, pushed it down on Zuko's head. Zuko took it off and flung it to the side, and it landed on a nearby cactus.

'Damn it, Zukes!' Ash fetched it, put it back on his brother's head but Zuko only repeated the movement. He took it off, and flung it. Ash fetched it from the scrub-grass. Nearby a bumble-bee raided a bush of small purple wildflowers. The beating wings clicked rapidly. He replaced the cap on Zuko's head, but the small boy only took it off. This time he went around to Ash's back, reached up to pop the clip on the ruck-sack, and pushed the cap inside. 'Okay, okay,' Ash told him. 'You don't want to wear it. I don't understand why. This sun will eat us alive. The cap will protect your head. Stop your face from going darker than a piece of coal. Have it your way. Burn yourself alive. I don't care.' Zuko had overtaken him. Now he tramped three feet ahead. 'Okay, I take that back. Zuko!' Still the child walked,

without turning. ‘You won’t burn alive. I do care. The sun WILL burn you. Your face will be black. But if you don’t want to wear it, I can’t force you. It’s your own choice.’

41.

He drew on the shadow that had made him real. Moving figures on a wall. His other self had made him smile when he was small. Dancing against light, against himself; another version. One version led, while the other followed as though it cared about what he did. Against lightened walls he’d first made friends with the sun. The wall-shadow, created by light, first consented to play with him! The wall shadow believed what he did was important – a finger flick, head back and a laugh, and there it was. Someone, for once, wanted to follow him. His mother tried to stop him, believing it was odd. She’d pulled him away from the wall each time, and tried to engage him in other things, like helping her load the washing basket. She didn’t realise how important it was to him to have a friend, even one he imagined real. So like, and at the same time so unlike, himself.

Now he found that same echo in the trees. The branches danced with the kind of joy his spirit knew how to repeat. Now, out here and walking, the whole of the natural world understood, like the shadows did. They mirrored his movements in a way that was bigger than anything he had known. He stood in stillness and absorbed it. He allowed silence, the vast echo, to penetrate his heart, drown out the thud, to connect him to the infinite space. He danced in the wind, a gale force big enough to break whole branches, to strain the leaves in the pulling, to the point of exhaustion. He ran against it, shouting. He raged in ecstatic joy at the finding of a force much bigger than he was: the wind, the space, and the road ahead. Here he mattered to himself, because he was part of it.

They stood beneath an orange sky. ‘Do you dream, Zuko?’ Ash asked him. Their eyes were rapt on the heaven above. ‘You see things no-one else does. You know about beauty. And light. And patterns.’

But in this light there was no immediate pattern to believe in. Only the slow unfolding of the repetition of the every day. He liked to watch it for its predictability. The orange, how it emerged and blended, faded to the green-grey dusk, then the dependable stars. One by one. Pop. Pop. Pop. He knew which stars emerged first, which would follow. He jumped at the anticipation of what was to come. The stars were never late. They had been visiting him, reliably, since the start of his life. He knew the constellations because his mother had told him. First, she’d shown him the Milky Way. He’d thought it looked nothing like milk, but

each time she'd said it, he got this feeling of white chocolate, too sweet, stuck thick and melting in his throat. He knew a Milky Bar. He couldn't see how the sky could contain what came from a cow's udder. What could be turned into chocolate. Next, she'd pointed out the Southern Cross. This had made sense, eventually. But each time she'd said it, first he'd had to erase the pictures of angry faces in his head – or not quite angry, because cross was a lesser form; maybe half-way between grumpy and angry. And there was the bottle of Southern Comfort that sometimes sat in the kitchen in the summer times. He had to get rid of that thought too, the picture of the bottle half-filled with a liquid golden as sweet red tea, the words in old-fashioned lettering across the bottle's label. He had to think of the bottle and then the faces half-way between grump and angry and then eliminate these from his mind, before he could think of Southern being a direction, and cross was something like Jesus died on, or what one person used in a noughts and crosses game, or two roads that joined and then passed each other and had a centre point where they both essentially became, for a moment, one. Those four stars were not an actual cross. She'd explained to him if you pretended to draw a line from the top one to the bottom one, and then side to side, and you imagined those two lines in the sky as they joined up those four stars, they would intersect in the middle. That would be a real cross. But they weren't going there, where the Southern Cross pointed. They were going west, which was the next point on the compass after SW if you carried on around the edge as though it was a clock. West made him think of jungles and then cowboy hats. When his mother had said things like 'It's like the Wild West,' he'd thought of wild animals first and then cowboy hats, because in the westerns Ash spoke about, the men rode horses and wore wide-brimmed hats. Mostly there weren't cows in the stories. Just guns and wide spaces called deserts. And an orange sky. His eyes prickled, a wetness on his cheek. His nose ran too, but he couldn't move until the orange was gone. Even then, he doubted his hand would do the right thing, like wipe those tears away.

They slept beneath a tree. There was no fire. It was a warm night. Ash wrapped them both in the blue tarp. Zuko liked the feeling of tightness, no space between them against his skin, something holding them together, inside something else. Too often he experienced a looseness, under the big sky. The stars were many, and he couldn't stop his body from moving. He tired of trying to fight the feeling of wanting to float. Ash's body beside him was something to hold onto, the tarp a lid to keep the space away. He murmured as his eyes closed, to reassure himself with sound.

That night he dreamed of a pulsing star, swooped down from the sky. It changed from the bright white-blue light to the orange of the sunset and then the cream of the Southern Comfort label and then to the ochre earth of cowboy land. It grew a face that smiled at him. It had eyes like his mother's, its smile was hers, but when he reached up to take that star in his hand he found he couldn't hold it, for it was made of light only.

In the morning he opened his eyes. Ash sat a distance away. The sky painted grey with the dawn. Zuko shivered. Ash had his boots on, as though ready for walking. Something moved in Zuko's stomach. An emptiness threatened to take him over from the inside. 'Ch-ch-ch,' he said into the air. He imagined a box of Cheerios.

'That's a new sound.' Ash looked at him with hollow eyes.

He pushed the tarpaulin off and stood up. His shoes lay nearby, where Ash had removed them the previous night, before they'd gone to sleep. He crouched down in a place where the leaves and grass were thin. The dark of a rich earth showed through. He grabbed a full handful of soil and pushed it hard into his mouth. His teeth grated as they crunched on the grains. Ash leapt to his feet and ran to him, grabbed at his hand and stuck his finger in his mouth to get the earth out, but Zuko swallowed hard. He had to fill the hollow in his stomach, or it would overtake him. Ash collapsed next to him, covered his face with his hands. 'Oh Zuko, what have I done! We're going to starve here, I'm a murderer! I'm going to kill my own brother, and then myself!'

Zuko looked at him sideways. He knew it wasn't true. There was a difference between truth and lies and Ash was a good person, and would never kill him. He pulled at Ash's wrists to force his hands from his face. When at last they came away, Ash's eyes were red rimmed and watery. Zuko, afraid to look, lay on his back in the leaves. The rising sun warmed his front. It reached into the marrow of his bones, and banished the night's freeze.

Ash lay down beside him, breathing.

Zuko hummed.

'Zuk,' Ash said suddenly. 'You know there's no-where in the world I'd rather be.'

Zuko giggled. He wriggled so at least half of their bodies were touching. Ash knew it was true for Zuko also. Zuko's lips echoed the frequency of the rising temperature. Ash's voice found a similar tone, exploring softly the space of Zuko's sound. The humming, together, brought them to another place. Ash found the resonance of his brother's soul.

They walked until the sweat stung Zuko's eyes and the world drifted into white. Patterns danced across one eye, black orbs and then grey shadows with long strings of tail. Twice he fell to his knees where the hard stone ground offered greater comfort than being upright. His legs were no longer strong enough to carry him anywhere. There were no thoughts, anymore, in his head. He focussed only on the dark shapes that moved across his vision, sometimes fleeting, sometimes so slow the world went dark for whole seconds. Ash kept a grip on his arm, and held him upright to force his moving. The feeling of spiders crawled across his skin from the sweat and the heat. The grass chaffed his ankle, raw with mosquito bites, and he screamed. Ash stayed beside him and stared ahead, held him up as they walked, as though he couldn't hear. Zuko tried to push his brother's hand away and run, but his body found no energy.

They walked through a field of lush grass and a herd of jersey cows shifted lazily. Udders hung full to bursting. He waited for the moment when Ash's grip had lessened, but it was as though his brother knew his mind. Ash's hand tightened on his arm. 'Don't be crazy,' Ash told him. 'That cow will kick you to death if you go near that milk!' Ash steered him away from the animals, to the turnstile at the fence, where they crossed over to the next empty field. Zuko filled it with sound, the rich orchestra of his own howls.

When they reached the road he grew quiet. He tried to remember the sound of the sun. Now it was too high, the frequency as it landed on his skin so intense he couldn't find a pitch to match it. The sounds emerged in sharp bursts. It was the wrong sound. He had the wrong stomach. This was the wrong air, for his wrong skin.

At the road's edge they sat down. No cars passed for some time. Ash lay on his back, pulled a long piece of golden grass, and stuck it in his mouth. Zuko did the same, but the grass had a sharp end that jabbed his tongue. He spat it out. Zuko closed his eyes. The orange there burned against his eyelids, and threatened to take him into sleep. The dark shadows and creatures in his vision had gone. He opened his eyes and searched the sky for clouds. Beside him, Ash said nothing. From the sound of his breathing, Zuko thought he might be asleep. Zuko sat up. Ash didn't move. His hand rested on his stomach. No part of their bodies connected. Slowly, quietly, Zuko rose to his feet. He didn't want to leave Ash behind, but he wanted to know what it was to walk with no-one holding onto him. He wanted the sensation of becoming no more significant than a tree, a cloud in the sky, or a cow. He wanted to feel how it was with no one to notice him, no-one to hold him back. He could stop by himself, stand and wait for nothing. He could wait forever, if he wanted to, like a cow. No-one other than himself, so far as he knew, ever counted clouds. To be alone would be to be like a cloud,

with no-one to notice where or when he went. He watched his shadow beside him on the side of the road. He wanted to move deeper into the field, but then his shadow would break up in the grass, become incomplete, fractured. He needed it, whole, beside him. So long as it was there, he could still feel complete and attached.

A car passed, then two. He knew it only by the sound, so intensely focused he was on his shadow. He couldn't let it out of his sight! If Ash was gone, it would be worse if he couldn't find his own self. The hollow in his stomach had become a movement. It stretched into his legs, as though they were too thin to stand on. He rounded a bend that curved around a raised hill. He knew if he looked behind himself, Ash would be out of sight. Suddenly, he stopped. He didn't want to lose his brother. Brothers stuck together, his mother had told them. The word 'stuck' always made him think of the thick glue in the shed that looked like golden syrup. When he thought of brothers that way, stuck together, he first had to get away from the memory of that old glue tin with the rusty lid, the strong glue smell that had made him light-headed whenever he stuck his nose into it. He'd gone back for it, in a crazy, needy way, because it had the strength to overpower him, until his mother had taken it off the bottom shelf and put it away, high up, where she thought he couldn't reach it. It wasn't hard to push in the old wrought iron table from outside to stand on. But then Ash had pushed the tin behind a giant canister of oil, so he couldn't see it anymore. When Zuko couldn't see it he didn't think about it much. Then he'd stopped craving it. That had made it much easier to get on with other things. If you were stuck with someone, or you stuck together with someone, it was a kind of glue, because then you were two parts that became one thing. Whole. But only when he could think of a whole being an orange, cut in half and stuck together. He avoided thinking about a hole like the kind Ash had dug, and put their mother into. That kind of hole, he thought, he didn't want to be a part of.

He sat down. He listened to the sun, the way it burned down through the sky. No clouds to filter it. White-hot. He thought of a cool stream with clear water, wet brown rocks to watch as they dried in the sun. He would lick those rocks now, to feel the cool hard surface of them. To wet his mouth. He looked around for anything he could put his tongue on. There was nothing cool in sight. Everything baked. Hot. Dry.

He sat until Ash rounded the corner. He watched his own shadow where it remained beside him, but right up close now, as to almost touch him. 'Hey,' Ash said, standing over him. 'Can I sit down?'

Zuko shifted, wary of his shadow, but as usual it moved with him anyway. Ash sat beside him. They were quiet together, for a time. Ash rested his arms on his knees and stared

at nothing. Zuko thought of getting up, and walking, but then he thought of the glue in the shed and the word ‘stuck,’ and his mother. The two of them, himself and Ash, were two halves of the same orange. And the thought of the orange made him thirstier still.

A truck passed, heaving and stinking, so wide its tyres almost crushed their feet. Zuko buried his face in Ash’s shoulder to keep out the stench. Three goats put their heads through the wooden slats of the truck’s back. Above the noise of the engine, Zuko imagined their bleating. A car passed the other way, then another. After that, the silence stayed a long time.

Ash stood. He kicked around the scrub at the road’s edge. He bent to examine a stone. He walked a little away, bent, then straightened himself and came back. He held his hands out to Zuko, palms upwards. In his left hand was a stone so dark it was almost black. A single pale line ran through it. The second stone on his right hand sat pale, creamy, and almost opaque. It reminded Zuko of the mist rising off water after cold night. He reached out to take that stone, but Ash pulled his hand back. ‘Uh-uh,’ Ash said. ‘Wait.’

Zuko rolled his eyes to the sky.

‘Left hand,’ Ash said. ‘Black stone. Means “no,” okay?’

Left hand black stone no. Zuko imagined the word painted on the hand, and on the stone: NO.

Ash pushed his right hand forward, towards his brother’s chest. ‘Right hand, white stone. Means ‘yes.’

Zuko wanted to say the stone wasn’t white anyway, it was cream, but the word only came out as a strange and strangled ‘kkkaaaah’ sound, a cry a bird would make, that travelled across an empty landscape.

‘You want to speak, don’t you?’ Ash said.

The sky was fierce, barren. Zuko thought of the possibility that birds could drown in air.

Ash leaned in closer. The stones gleamed in his palms. He said: ‘You want to speak, don’t you?’ The way he said ‘don’t’ - it was a hard sound from his mouth. A word like a stone.

Zuko spotted a tiny puff of cloud. His hands moved at the side of his face, weakly waving in the pleasure and the relief he felt.

Ash’s voice raised, intensified. ‘Zuko!’

The boy glanced at the stones. First left, then right. The sky pulled his gaze.

‘You want to speak, Zuko? You want to speak?’

Slowly, uncertainly, Zuko wrenched his eyes down from the abyss above. Left black no. Right white (cream) yes. His vision came to Ash's face, briefly, but the burn in the gaze was too strong. Quickly, Zuko dropped his eyes to the white stone. It was true. He reached out a hand. It was yes.

42.

The next morning they walked as though the sky couldn't hold up without them. The road ascended to a face of sheer rock. Ash examined it on both sides, left and right, but Zuko had found a place where they could climb. Ash thought of people in the old days, navigating their way on horseback or in wagons and carts. He thought of the donkey carts that drove these paths. The animals that laboured for the purposes of humans.

The rocky downward path led them into a forest of yellow-woods and vine creepers and fig trees the size of small buildings, wild and dense. They progressed at a sloping gradient for so many hours it went dark before they found a place to sleep. They ate from a tin before they slept in a hollow on the other side of the forest. In the morning they woke and followed a river as it flowed towards the sea. At mid-day they stopped and swam in a cool pool to wash their bodies. Ash helped Zuko scrub the fabric of his underpants and t-shirt in a conflicting motion to loosen the fibres of the cloth. Above them, weavers worked their nests. The water swirled. They followed the flow down-river, until they came to a town heralded by a wagon that had lost a wheel, and a car gutted by fire. Empty window frames held the lost eyes of abandoned children in the ruins of derelict houses. At the end of the town a church stood in good repair, while the surrounding houses seemed hollow, broken, waiting. In the doorway of the last house a man watched them approach. He called out a greeting in English and in Xhosa, and waved a hand. Dark glasses shielded his eyes, his skin was pale and prematurely lined. They followed him into the front room of the house. On the holed settee a cat lay curled. In the corner a primus stove waited with a kettle placed on top, a stack of cups with a full plastic container of milk beside it. Zuko moved to the cat and sat beside it. He ran his hand over and across the tight black fur. The cat yawned and stretched; it did not seem to mind. The boy made a clicking noise with his tongue, as though he could speak the language of the animal. The cat put its head down on its paws and closed its eyes. The man gestured for Ash to sit but there was nowhere other than the settee, and the cat and Zuko dominated that. Ash squatted on the floor, against the wall, and the man followed his movements. 'You want a cup of tea?' he asked.

‘Yessir.’

‘The boy?’

Ash held the two stones out. ‘Black for water,’ he said. ‘White for tea. Which do you want?’

Zuko paused, considering his options. Though he did not touch either, his eyes settled on the black stone. Ash withdrew the stones and took it as Zuko’s choice. He replaced them in his pocket. ‘Water for him. That will be fine.’

While the kettle boiled the man went to the back of the house and brought Zuko a cup of water. The boy took it with both his hands and drank the contents down in a few swallows.

‘You boys are homeless,’ the man said. It might have been a question.

‘No,’ Ash said. ‘We’re between homes.’

‘That’s a way to put it.’

‘There’s my mother’s home. But she died. There’s my father’s home also. That’s where we’re going.’

The kettle steamed above the flame. The man tipped milk into the bottom of two cups, and added sugar to each. He poured the boiling water and dragged a tea bag through both, squeezing the bag at the side of each cup. He stirred, and handed one to Ash. Zuko lay horizontal now, on the settee, the cat’s fur pushed up against his face. The eyes of boy and animal were closed in tight companionship. The dank room was thick with damp, as though a pipe had burst beneath the rotten carpet.

‘Nobody’s been through this town for a month,’ the man said. He sat and rested the tea on his knee. ‘The last people who came through, they were sick.’

‘We’re not sick,’ the boy said.

‘What’s with him?’ the man asked. He looked at Zuko.

‘He’s not sick either. We escaped it. We’ve been on the road a long time. If we were sick, we’d know it by now.’

‘He likes cats.’ The man pushed the sunglasses onto his head. His eyes were narrower than Ash expected, and smaller. They didn’t rest anywhere for too long. A small mole rose from the creases at the outer edge of his left eye.

‘I guess. I didn’t know. Until now.’ Ash took a sip of his tea. The sweet intensity filled him with a kind of sudden, fleeting joy. ‘What happened to them?’

‘Who?’

‘The people who came here. The people who were sick.’

‘They died. The girl died in twenty-four hours. The men a day later. There was a lot of cleaning up to do.’

The tea tasted unlike anything else on the road. Everything else was dry, barren, and unwelcoming. ‘What do you do here?’

‘I look after the church.’

‘You’re a priest?’

‘Not exactly. The last priest left twenty years ago.’

‘Is it your job? To look after the church, I mean.’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Why do you do it?’

‘It’s a place for people to come to. When they’re sick. Or they have no money. Or they have a problem. It’s often their last port of call.’

‘You believe in God?’

The man laughed. ‘You should take him in there,’ he said, nodding at Zuko.

‘Why?’

‘Maybe God will help you with whatever’s wrong. You can ask, anyway.’

‘There’s nothing wrong.’

‘Okay,’ the man said. He shrugged. ‘That’s a good way to see it.’

‘It’s not a way to see it,’ Ash said. ‘It’s the way it is.’

‘Is he your brother?’

‘Yes.’

‘You wouldn’t say so.’

‘What?’

‘That you’re brothers. I wouldn’t have guessed.’

‘Oh.’ A pause expanded between them. Ash took another sip of his tea, to fill silence.

‘There’re a lot of people buried here, out the back,’ the man said eventually.

‘How many?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t count. Maybe fifty, sixty. The last lot, they were the third, fourth and fifth in a month.’

‘What do people come here for?’

‘Why does anyone go anywhere? Some want to get away from somewhere. Some, maybe like you, are travelling. Trying to get somewhere. Some have nowhere to go.’ He leaned back against the wall, still watching Zuko. ‘What’s that yellow thing? In the boy’s hand?’ he asked.

‘It’s a seahorse.’

‘A seahorse?’

‘He’s always got it. I don’t know why.’

‘He’s a bit old for toys like that.’

‘Like I said, I don’t know why he has it.’

The man nodded.

‘What day is it today?’ Ash asked.

‘Wednesday. Or thereabouts.’

‘Do you get papers around here?’

‘They stopped getting delivered. There was no-one to buy them, anymore.’

‘How do you get news?’

‘News of what?’

‘I don’t know. Of what happens in the world.’

‘What happens in the world happens here too. People come and go. There are children. Deaths. What else happens in the world?’

‘What’s your name?’ Ash asked.

‘Gift.’

‘Gift?’

He grinned. At least three of his teeth were missing. ‘I am a gift to this church. Maybe to this community. Who knows? That’s what they call me.’

‘Who calls you that?’

‘The children.’

Ash rubbed the back of his neck. His body stiffened. He remembered his illness. Ela’s voice penetrated through the mist of his mind. He’d nearly died also. He thought of the empty windows as they’d walked through the short town. The children looking out. He cleared his throat.

When his tea was done he put his mug on the floor and reached into the green bag. There were three cigars left. He offered the box to the man. Gift took one and bit the end off the cigar with his eye teeth. He accepted the lighter Ash passed him with an open palm. On the settee beside the cat, Zuko drifted into sleep.

They sat and smoked. The room retained the scent of age and decay, through the fresh tobacco and damp. It was a while before either spoke. ‘Are there any other adults in this town?’ Ash asked eventually.

Gift smiled. ‘If you stay, there will be two.’

‘Where do you get money from?’

‘The people that die, they sometimes leave it behind. Sometimes intentionally. Sometimes inadvertently.’

‘How did you come here?’

The smoke billowed, making clouds in the light. Gift coughed, and waved his hand through it. ‘Here?’

‘Here. To this town. Why are you here?’

‘Here I was born and here I live and here I will die.’

‘What happened to your parents?’

‘Same as what happens to everyone’s parents. They died.’

‘Was it sickness? Or old age?’

‘Does it matter? When life comes to claim you, your choices are over. My parents’ lives were done. We live our purpose, until that time comes. When it comes, we go in peace. When what we came here for is finished.’

‘What did you come here for?’

He leaned his head back, against the wall. ‘I take care of things. I am a custodian.’

‘Of the church? Or the children?’

‘Of whatever is placed before me. If you stay, I will take care of your brother.’ His eyes, fleeting, brushed Ash’s face. ‘Take care of you.’ He smoked more. Then he said, ‘Do you want to see the church?’

Ash thought it was the only living thing in the town. Freshly painted. He guessed the inside would be plush red velvet. Cushions to kneel on. Stained glass. Statues of people dead for a couple of thousand years. ‘No, thank you,’ he said.

‘It’s worth a look.’

‘I’m sure. I’m not a church-going person.’

Gift took a saucer from beside the primus stove and stubbed out his cigar at the edge. He pushed the saucer forward, and Ash did the same. Ash guessed the man would smoke the stubs of both cigars later, when he was alone. ‘Everybody needs something,’ Gift said. ‘Even if you think you’re independent, even if you think you can work it out alone. A time will come when you look up to the stars or to the sky or to your god or you go to your church. You’ll say please, please, not now. Please help me. Please save me.’

‘I’ve never said that,’ Ash said.

‘Then it hasn’t been bad enough. One day, you will. One day when you know what life can do. I’ve seen grown men crying in that church. Women begging for their children’s

lives. Or their own lives. Once a man came here. His wife and three children were killed on the farm where he grew up. Murdered by the labourers who had worked for his own father. The men who had taught him their language when he was a boy. The men whose children he'd played with in his own childhood. The men whose children and grandchildren went to the same school he'd built for them on the land. They killed his wife and they killed his children and they burnt his crops and I'm sure they had their own reason for doing this and I'm not here to judge what was right or what was not right. But I was here to make the man tea and to show him the inside of my church. I was here to take in the small baby lying in the cot in the bedroom, asleep, when the killings occurred.

'Why didn't they kill him also?'

'Like I said, I'm not here to make judgements or to say what was right or wrong. My guess is they wanted him to suffer. To know what it feels like to have nothing. Like I said then, I'll say tomorrow, I don't know the real reasons for what people do. For what happens. But I can offer people a place to do their last pleadings. A final bargaining. Some kind of meaning.'

'Though you don't believe in any of it yourself.'

'That's right. I don't.'

'What happened to the man?'

'He died.'

'Did you see him die?'

'I was there to help him in his last hours.'

'How did he die?'

'That remains his business and none of yours. I was there for him at the end. There weren't going to be beginnings any more. Not for him.'

'Where is his child?'

Before the man could answer the cat stood on the settee, yawned and arched its back. Zuko's eyes opened. By the look on his face he was surprised to find himself here in this room in this particular light. 'The child is still here,' Gift said. 'She's become good with a needle. She helps to mend the children's clothes. She makes clothes too, when we get fabric in.'

'By hand?'

'You see any electricity around here? Anything off which to run machines?'

'My brother's awake,' Ash said. 'I think we need to go.'

‘If you leave him here, he will never have to deal with the hardships of the world,’ the man proffered. ‘Here there are only children. By the look of him, those hardships will only double for him, as he grows older.’

‘Why do you want him?’

‘This is a place for children. This is a place where young souls can rest, at least.’

‘This is no place for Zuko,’ Ash said. ‘Not for me either. I think you’ve been here too long. Thank you for the tea.’

The man stood, and pulled down the legs of his trousers into place. ‘What you say may be true,’ he said. ‘Maybe I have been here too long. Maybe I haven’t. What is true is if you stay anywhere too long, that’s where you end up belonging. It becomes too late to leave. Once you’ve tied yourself to a place, to people, for some time, that’s the end of it. That’s what your life will be, for the rest of time. It doesn’t matter when you die. It’s just more of the same.’

They passed the neat church. A dozen empty houses in ruin and disrepair marked their way. Gift stopped. He dropped his sunglasses over his eyes. He held his hand out and Ash shook it. Then he held his hand out to Zuko and Ash prompted the boy to raise his forearm and shake it also. Zuko’s eyes were already on the distance ahead.

Gift stood in the middle of the road and watched them go. He remained there, watching with mirrors for his eyes, until they were out of sight.

43.

They walked deeper into the low mountains and followed a trail that wound around the slopes and avoided the steep gradients. Sometimes the gentle path ceased to be a path at all, and they had to find their own footway. They crossed a small stream and on the opposite hill a peregrine falcon perched in the trees and watched them pass.

In the evening the cranes called overhead and gusts of wind harried down the channels in the hills. They found a place to sleep in a crevice, tucked between rocks for shelter. After they ate from the remaining tins, they pulled together between the rocks with the jacket over them and the tarp doubled over, on top of the jacket. *I am lucky*, Ash thought before he slept. *I have not been in any place yet for too long.*

When dawn rose, the sky stretched ahead in pink streaks that faded with the rising strength of the light. They washed in the first river they came to. Zuko’s body seemed to contain an enviable energy and sudden joy. Ash tried to follow his life-lust as the boy ran

down flowered embankments and laughed at sheep and chased insect wings that glinted in the morning sun. Even as they walked, the boy's strength seemed to only build. 'Your body is strange,' Ash told him. 'Most people would be worn down and full of complaints by now. Now you're keeping me focussed. Now you're keeping me strong.'

They navigated the downward slope of a steep pass that marked the end of the range of small mountains. Across a flat belly of land, they finally found the sea. It stretched blue and wide in the distance. Ash knew as long as they followed it, they would never be wholly lost.

They walked the afternoon on the hard wet sand, close to the water. The continuous waves sounded heavy and consistent as they crashed. The blur of the underlying roar seemed to calm Zuko, to mesmerise him. He kept his eyes out on the water. Ash couldn't be sure if he was watching the distant ships, the grey haze the sky became above the blue, or the endless swirl of water. Once they came across a family on the sand. The woman sat in a long robe, high up on the beach. Three children played in the shallows with their father. Ash waved at the woman but she looked the other way. 'Hello,' he said to the father. The man greeted him in return, but when Zuko approached the youngest of the children, no more than a toddler, the man pulled his children away and kept his eyes on them to ensure they were only passing.

44.

They spent the night on the flat white beach. Around the bend lay a wide lagoon. Before sunset Ash took the boy's dirty clothes and washed them in the shallows of the surf. He thought of Ela. He tried to conjure her in his mind, what she was doing; if she was in that house with that man, his bald head, his stomach like a barrel in front of him, his distant eyes, blue like the ice of a lake in a foreign land. Skin folds of age already lapped at the corners of those eyes. He shook his head and waded out to his waist, holding on to Zuko's clothes. Once he looked back to check the distance of his own boots, abandoned on the sand, from the collapsing shore-waves. He had ten minutes at most, before the tide would take them.

Out on the horizon three ships sat like the kinds of toys Zuko and Ash had never had. Zuko's t-shirt seemed small in his hand. It drifted beneath the surface of the icy water. Ash could let it go. He could open his hand and in a few seconds it would vanish into the ocean's vastness. He turned and checked the shore a second time. Zuko was there, sitting where Ash had left him, beside a collection of wood that would later burn to keep them warm. Ash already burned beyond cold. The ice of the water distorted the sensations on the surface of his

skin. *There are some things that do that*, he thought, *things that turn everything inside out: like extreme cold, and my mother's death.* Then he thought of Zuko. And Ela. And love.

A swell rose and knocked him back. As his skin emerged from the water he shivered. Below the surface his waist, his thighs, his legs were on fire, his toes crushed by the cold. Slowly, with a grip on Zuko's clothes, he backed out of the surf, and dragged a large purple strand of kelp and small nutty fronds of bright green seaweed along with him.

Zuko sat in their mother's over-sized jacket and traced patterns with his fingers in the sand. Ash made a circle of the dry collected sticks, then placed more sticks vertically at an angle where they met in the middle. He took the lighter from his pocket, the fire-lighters from the bag, and ignited the construction. Squatting beside the warmth, he tended it, nurtured it, until the blaze lit up his face in competition with the sunset that edged the sea. He found two large rocks and spread Zuko's underpants, jeans and t-shirt across them, then pushed the rocks a little further back to prevent the fire, now raging, from scorching them. He set a flat stone at the side of the fire, and cooked the kelp and seaweed briefly in the small pan until it shrunk and softened. While the meal cooled he dug a shallow hollow into the sand, deep and wide enough to call it a kind of bed. He stretched the tarpaulin over it. Zuko's eyes lifted and, as it darkened, he watched the sky. One by one, the stars emerged. Zuko knew their patterns, silently named them in his head. Ash took the pan of seaweed and sat beside his brother. They ate, not out of hunger, but from necessity. Their bodies sang with the ingestion in a way that had nothing to do with the stomach. Ash looked at his brother, chewing without complaint on the green strands of the sea grass. The child's skin was smooth, with a layer of subcutaneous fat that failed to diminish no matter how little he ate. His eyes moved like fish in his head, darting about, to the sky and the waves and the sand. 'You like it out here, don't you?' Ash said.

Zuko's eyes landed on his face, then away. He reached into the pan, took more of the weed in his fingers and brought it to his mouth.

'I guess you could say our diet now has a Japanese influence.' Ash smiled.

When they were done eating he took the cold pan and put it into Zuko's hands and told him to wash it in the shallows of the sea. The young boy stood. The jacket hung to his knees and he was naked underneath, still a young child with a straight body and no sign of manhood yet. Zuko carried the pan to the waves and crouched, and he washed the pan with his hands and the sand to scour, as Ash had taught him.

Later they sat together at the fire. The sky fell black and full of stars, and offered no barrier to keep the warmth close to the earth. Zuko watched the flames. Sometimes he stood

and jumped, his hands at the side of his face. When he did he smiled, or allowed a short blast of laughter to slip through. Then he knelt, and leaned into the heat.

Ash took a cigar from the pack, put it in his mouth and lit it. For some minutes Zuko tried to reach in and pull it from his lips, but Ash pulled his head back and repeatedly pushed his brother's hand down. 'Leave me alone,' he told Zuko. 'I've got little else to warm me.' He didn't say he wanted to smoke because he was thinking of Ela. He didn't say either he knew smoking was bad for him, but without knowing if he would ever see Ela again, he didn't care, anymore, what was bad, or what was good.

Before sleep he took Zuko's clothes from the rock. They were dry and rough with salt in his hands. He helped his brother dress. He thought of his mother, the way she'd put his own clothes in front of the fire in the cold winters when he was small. He hugged Zuko. 'Bed time,' he said. While he waited for the boy to drift he told him stories of the forest people from whom they were descended. How, for generations, the men had made their living from wood, and also their houses, and their fires, and their furniture. 'Maybe we shouldn't have left,' he said softly. 'But maybe it is time for a new world.'

45.

In the morning Ash opened the last tin of beans. He tipped it to his mouth and poured in a mouthful. He chewed, wishing he could still taste. He tried to get Zuko to follow suit. He held the child's head and put the tin to his lips and tipped it, but Zuko pursed his mouth and kept his lips tight. 'Shit, man! I also miss her,' Ash said eventually, giving up.

Ash put his boots on and stamped out the last embers of the dying fire. They walked west along the beach. Ash carried the bag that held Zuko's shoes while Zuko waded in the shallows, laughing at the small spontaneous waves that caught him each time by surprise. The beaches were different here, the sand white and fine, with giant boulders smooth and golden as the colour of the sand they'd left behind at home. The rocks watched over small coves created by the natural arc and ebb of the shoreline. The sea glinted a rich and icy blue, the surface studded with rough dark kelp as it skirted the beaches and bays. When the sun had cleared the horizon, they left the bag visible on a flat rock and clambered forward across the rocks to the edge of the sea. Ash pulled jagged clusters of dark mussels with his bare hands. They bashed the shells and dug out the soft olive and orange flesh, not minding the remnants of mussel beard that remained on the periphery of the meat. Zuko enjoyed the smashing motion, with Ash's hands over his, guiding the direction and the pattern until he'd

internalised it, and tried it on his own. They ate a hundred mussels or more between them as they moved, dodging sudden waves at the edge of a platform of rock, Ash leaning in towards the water to find the biggest shells. They came across a clear pool. Zuko discarded his clothes and waded in. With his head above the water, he swam and splashed with his face awash with a smile. Ash sat, satiated, a belly full of raw mussels. He watched the child play. Once Zuko came out of the water, took him by the hand and tried to pull him in. Ash only laughed and resisted, indicating his boots. 'It's too cold for me,' he said. 'Water doesn't mean the same thing to me, as it does to you.'

When Zuko had had enough, he lay on the rock beside his brother and dried his body in the sun. Afterwards, with his clothes back on, they retraced their steps and found the small bay with the flat rock where they'd left the bag. Only now there was no sign of it. Ash's heart thud, a single beat in his chest. In the bag were the frying pan, and the tarpaulin, the cigars and Zuko's high-tops. Instinctively, one hand found his pocket and the bulge of the money that remained, along with the hard thin covering of the lighter. He sat Zuko down. 'You stay here,' he told him firmly. 'You don't move.'

Ash skipped over boulders and onto the beach. He ran three coves back, then forwards towards the sea in case he'd mistaken the rock he'd left the bag on. There was no sign of any person. There was no sign of the bag, either. He couldn't fathom the mystery; how something could be there, and then not be there. That you could have something one day and believe you'd have it always. The next day, for no reason, the world will take it away.

He looked for Zuko. His arms ached to hold him, he couldn't bear to lose his brother also. The salty air reached his lungs, thick with kelp. Zuko was right there where he'd left him, on the rock, waiting. 'I've lost the bag,' Ash told him.

'Ba ...' Zuko said.

'What?'

Zuko didn't repeat the sound. 'You tried to say 'bag,' Ash said. 'I know you did. I *heard* you!'

Zuko looked away. He squinted his eyes, finding patterns in the silver light, bouncing off the ocean, to play with.

They walked through the noonday sun and into the afternoon before they came to a bay with a wide lagoon and a whitewashed building with blue awnings and shutters and blue

umbrellas outside. People sat in the shade behind sunglasses, sipping on drinks of different colours, loaded with ice. Their eyes were out to sea. Ash's throat nearly closed with the surge of unbearable thirst. As he swallowed a small trickle of anticipatory saliva, Zuko dashed in a burst of unstoppable speed, jumped up the steps onto the wide, peopled veranda, and snatched a glass from a man in a navy cap and a shirt of blue and white stripes. The woman beside the man screamed. A man at another table shouted. Ash followed behind his brother, up the stairs, two at a time. The moment after Zuko tipped the glass back and opened his throat, Ash pulled it from the boy. Zuko opened his mouth. A terrible roar of protest emerged. 'Sorry,' Ash said, 'sorry!' He tried to replace the glass on the table and move Zuko off the deck in the same movement. Zuko's strength matched the force of his sudden will. The child's hands wrapped the frosted glass a second time. The man in the striped shirt stepped forward. 'Let him have it,' he said, but the woman beside him stared with hatred and distaste. Ash burned with shame, aware of how they looked. Who they were. 'Please, sir ...' he tried to speak. His voice was drowned by the woman's accusations of hysteria.

'Dirty little urchins! How dare you?'

People at the other tables stared transfixed by Zuko's audacity and the scene before them. A man emerged from inside the white building in a long-sleeved shirt and a silver badge attached to the breast pocket. 'What's going on?' he asked. Zuko poured the last of the golden liquid down his throat.

As Zuko's hand came down to put the glass back on the table, Ash wrapped his own fingers around his brother's wrist in a concentrated vice. 'It's okay,' the man in the cap said. 'I can get him another one, if he's thirsty.'

'Get the fuck away from here,' the shirted man shouted. He flicked a dish cloth at Zuko's legs as Ash dragged his brother from the deck down the stairs, and around the side of the building. He wedged them both into the small gap between a water tank and a cement block stained dark with blood that glittered with scales and broken shell and stank of fresh-cleaned fish. 'Shhht!' he hissed at Zuko. He pushed the boy further into the corner and held him there with the full strength of his own body. Zuko giggled at the pressure, or the seriousness of Ash's expression. 'Shhht!' he told Ash back.

Ash curtailed his surprise at the sound, and held them both in expectant silence until it was clear nobody had followed. No-one was coming to look for them. He jerked his head as a spider ran from the wall across his hair, onto Zuko's shoulder, and then disappeared. 'Fuck!' he whispered, too close to his brother's face.

'Fuck,' Zuko said in return.

‘No!’ Ash told him, their faces inches apart. ‘That will *not* be your first word. Mama would shit herself, if she heard you say that! She’d give you a hiding from here to next week.’ In his heart, Ash doubted that. He thought in reality if his mother had witnessed Zuko say a word, any word, she might have teared up with joy. She would have flung her arms around them both and ululated in ecstasy in the face of such a blessing from God.

Ash paused, listening. In the absence of human sounds, he pulled his brother out from the wedged space and tightly held his hand as he crept around the corner to the back of the building. An old man stood in a white chef’s uniform beside a low stone wall, smoking. He looked up at the sight of the boys, and exhaled a thin stream of blue smoke. ‘You don’t want to be caught back here,’ he said. ‘The boss has his eyes out for you.’

‘Please,’ Ash whispered. ‘Don’t tell him we’re here.’

The man laughed, and crossed one leg over the other at the knees. ‘You think I’m on that bastard’s side?’ He drew on the cigarette and looked out, as though establishing the nature of the lagoon tide beyond. Then he pulled his attention back to the boys, as though noticing them for the first time. ‘Go on,’ he said, ‘Scoot. Get out of here. We don’t need street kids hanging round, making trouble.’

‘Please,’ Ash said. ‘May we have a cup of water?’

The man eyed them. He seemed to make an assessment. ‘You want me to risk my ass for yours?’ He stubbed the cigarette out on a stone and flicked it clean into a nearby bin. A boy not much older than Ash appeared in the doorway. His head was shaved and he wore a white string vest. The top of his bicep bulged blue with tattoos in a traditional ethnic pattern. Behind him Ash glimpsed the vast stainless steel counter tops of a restaurant kitchen.

‘How far is the city?’ Ash asked.

‘You heading there? It’ll take you the rest of the day,’ the youth said.

‘My dad’s there.’ Ash looked at Zuko. ‘Our dad’s there.’

‘You two don’t look like brothers, I have to say it,’ the man said, rising. He snorted, deep in his throat, then spat at the ground. ‘And there’s no chance anyone here would give you a lift. Not when you look like that.’

Ash had an arm around Zuko. He held him to keep him from running, one hand on the boy’s chest. He held him to keep himself together. He absorbed the thump of his brother’s heart, the heaving chest. Despite his stillness, Ash remembered his brother’s capacity to hold and contain such heightened, unbridled anxiety. ‘Please,’ Ash said. ‘Can you get us some water?’

‘If the boss catches you here you’ll get the shit kicked out of you,’ the man said. The youth stared at them from the doorway. ‘Is that the kid who grabbed the drink, Tinus?’

‘Get back inside. And keep your mouth shut,’ the man said. The youngster turned, but before he was gone, Tinus spoke: ‘Get a bottle of water. Leave it on the counter inside the door. Two dogs also, off the kid’s menu.’

As the youth disappeared inside Ash spoke. ‘You have anything crunchy? Any Cheerios? My brother likes Cheerios. Dry, even.’

‘You’ve got a cheek on you,’ Tinus said. He tucked the cigarette box into his top pocket. ‘Wait five minutes. If I don’t come out, scram. Don’t come back. If everything’s good I’ll put the water and the hot dogs on the wall. Then get out of here, okay?’

He disappeared into the kitchen. Ash leaned his shoulder against the wall. The stone gave off the trapped warmth of the sun. Smells from the kitchen turned his stomach with hunger. Fish frying. Baked bread. Warmed apple pie.

Zuko drifted off onto the dry bank of grass above the wall. From there the view of the lagoon and the estuary and the ocean beyond expanded calm as a painting. It was the vista Zuko craved. Dandelions dotted the grass, round puffs of seeds ready to float, jagged leaves spouted small yellow flowers. Ash’s eyes smarted. He pulled his eyes away. If Zuko looked that bad, how would he himself appear, when he finally faced his father in the city? His heart deadened. The address. It had been in the envelope, in the green bag. The bag was gone. The knife was gone. He swallowed the thought and leaned back. The guy with the tattoos re-emerged, an unlit cigarette in his hands. He cupped it against the imaginary wind and lit it with a yellow lighter. ‘Want a drag?’ he asked, exhaling blue smoke.

Ash shook his head. ‘No. I don’t smoke. What’s your name?’

‘Lwandle.’

‘You from around here?’

The youth laughed. ‘No-one’s from around here. Unless you were born four hundred years ago.’

‘So?’

‘The flats, man. The township, outside the city. The pay here’s shit but the accommodation’s free.’

‘Is your family there?’

The boy nodded. ‘Yours?’

Ash indicated Zuko with his eyes. ‘Mine’s up there. My mother’s dead. We’re going to my father.’

The boy held the burning cigarette. He didn't smoke it. It looked as though he was still learning how. 'What she die of? Your mom.'

Ash shrugged. Seagulls hung about, low in the sky. 'She got sick. My little sister too.'

'Well, if you want my opinion, you look like shit. How'd you get here anyway? You crawl through a bush backwards?'

Ash thought of Ela. He put his head down. Shame cloaked him. Would she want to be near him, even, when he looked like this?

'Your water and hot dogs are inside,' Lwandle said. He lifted his leg and placed the ankle on his knee. He stubbed the cigarette out on the underside of his shoe, then he reached into the doorway and pulled out a plate with two hot dogs on it, and a plastic bottle of water. Ash took the plate and held it up. Zuko scooted down the bank, jumped from to the ground beside Ash and chewed at one of the hotdogs. 'Jees, he's hungry,' Lwandle said. 'He doesn't talk?'

'Uh-uh.'

'Some people, they're like that. Like, talking's too much effort, man. I get like that sometimes.'

'Okay,' Ash said. He didn't try to put him straight.

Zuko grabbed at the other hot dog. Ash hesitated. His own guilt at his thoughts for himself checked him. He wanted that hot dog as desperately as Zuko did, but the guilt lost him the deal. Before he could take it back or engage in a scuffle of control, it was in Zuko's mouth, and down his throat. Ash watched him chew. He swigged at the water bottle, then handed it to Zuko. Someone shouted from the kitchen and Lwandle flinched, then lifted a hand and simultaneously stepped back through the doorway, after he hissed: 'The boss! Get going now!'

47.

Ash jogged to the narrow gravel road that led up to the tar. He turned back only once to see his brother following. Zuko limped, a strange, lopsided gait without the canvass shoes he'd grown used to. At the gate at the top of the path Ash paused to allow his brother to catch up. 'You got the food,' Ash said. 'Now you'd better damn walk for the rest of the day.'

But the time night fell, they hadn't yet reached the city. Lights created a distant haze where the city lay beneath a mountain, purple and majestic as though it were alive. They couldn't get to it yet. The yellow lights of the peripheral town they reached after sunset

illuminated the strange sense of evening shut-down. Everything was closing. Zuko whimpered. His hand tightened on the smiling seahorse. This place of buildings and roads and construction confined him. He couldn't understand, when the sun had already dropped to warm the other side of the earth, why they weren't out in a field somewhere, spreading out the sheet of blue plastic and collecting sticks with which to make a fire. Ash held out his arm to keep Zuko from running into the road.

Ash pulled the last of the money from his pocket. Though now in sight, the city still floated before him as an illusionary dream. His overwhelming tiredness weighted his body. He counted the money, then replaced it in his pocket and approached a woman with a blue handbag, waiting at the side of the road. 'Ya Ma,' he said. The woman's eyes flicked him a once-over. A quick risk assessment. After dark, this was no country for old women. Or young children in the streets.

'How much is a taxi to the city?' he asked her.

She bore him down over the top of her glasses. 'I have no idea. I never go that far.'

'How do I get one from here?'

She examined the road, a deep crease dividing her brows. 'Stay here with me. The taxis on this road go straight through the town and out the other side. Some might keep going, if you're lucky.'

Ash stood. He held onto Zuko's shoulder.

'This your brother?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'He doesn't look like you.'

'I've heard.'

'You kids should bath sometimes.'

'I've heard that too.'

'You live on the street?'

'No,' Ash said. Then he knew he was wrong. 'Maybe.'

A white minibus pulled up to the curb, empty apart from the driver and the man riding shotgun, and an old man wearing a Fedora who sat in the second row from the back. 'These boys want to go to the city,' the woman told the driver as she climbed in. The worn weave of the fabric seats was shredded in places. 'How much is it?'

'How much you got?' the driver asked.

'Forty,' Ash said. 'Twenty each.' He had more, but he didn't want to say. They would need money in the city, something to eat.

They clambered in after the woman and found their seats in the back row. Zuko pushed up against the window while Ash used his own body to give him some security, to hold him in. Outside, above the edge of the world, the sky stretched in random cerise patterns of cloud, before it deepened into darkness. Mountains loomed in. Far away the city lay gleaming in a wash of light.

The driver looked ahead at the road. 'That won't get you to the city. Not in an empty cab. I'll take you as far as I can.' As he spoke, his left hand cleared something from the inside tip of his nose. 'I have to get the taxi back by nine. I'll drive you out half the time I have left, after I've dropped off Gogo here.'

Ash pulled the money from his pocket. He passed it forward to the man in the hat in front of him, who handed it on to the woman. She added her own fare and gave it to the passenger in the front seat who studied the coins in the cup of his hand, took a couple and passed her the change.

They watched the world grow dark from the ground up as the town diminished and country sprung up sleeping on either side. Before them the city threatened never to sleep. The taxi stopped twice, the first time to let the old man off, and a second time for the woman and the man who rode shotgun in front to disembark. Before he put his foot on the accelerator, the driver spoke over his shoulder. 'Hey boy, come and sit up here.'

'I can't leave my brother,' Ash said.

'Bring him,' the driver said, indicating the seat behind his own. In the dark, Ash couldn't make out the expression on his face.

'Okay,' he said. He exited the vehicle and Zuko climbed out also, his face alive in the taxi's low blue light at the dark and the space and night to come. Ash pushed him back into the minibus, one seat back from the front, then slammed the sliding door shut, and pulled himself up into the seat beside the driver.

'Put the heater on, if you like,' the man said. He stayed quiet after that. Ash watched the lights on the road and the wings of the insects, glinting in the peripheral haze. The driver wiped his sleeve across his nose. Then he said: 'You in trouble or something?'

'Not really.'

'Running away?'

'No.'

'Something to do with a girl?'

'Maybe.'

The driver shook his head. ‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘It’s not worth it. You’re still young. Plenty time.’

‘You don’t know what you talking about. It’s not a girl. Maybe it’s become about a girl.’

‘You’re a youth on the road alone with ... he your brother?’

Behind them, Zuko slumped down. He’d fallen asleep. ‘Ya,’ Ash said.

‘There must be something wrong with that.’

‘Lots of boys on the streets at this time. Any time, for that matter.’

‘Lots of runaways. Lots of street kids. Not lots of boys who look like you. Sorry. You don’t have it. The right look. For the street.’

Ash scratched at his shoulder.

‘So what’s the girl thing?’

‘I ...’ he shook his head. ‘I can’t even remember what she looks like properly anymore.’

‘And a few days ago you loved her, right?’

Ash went quiet.

The driver sniffed. ‘That’s the mystery of it. Feels like you need them so much, can’t live without them. Once they’re gone, you wonder what it was that took over your head like that.’

‘...’

‘That it?’

‘Maybe. Something like that.’

‘So you’re going to find her?’

‘Not now.’

‘Is she in the city?’

‘No.’

‘Not one for talking, are you?’

‘No.’

‘Have it how you like.’ The driver leaned over Ash and opened the glove compartment. Inside was tucked a yellow supermarket bag. He pulled the bag out by the handles, and with one hand he unwrapped a sandwich, sliced neatly in half from corner to corner. ‘Take half,’ he said, handing on to Ash. ‘God knows you look like you need it.’

Ash chewed slowly on half the bread, then handed the rest to Zuko behind him.

The driver dropped them 20 kilometres outside the small town. Ash's legs ached. His eyes drooped heavy. He didn't know how much more he could take. He pulled his brother down from the taxi. 'How far is it to the city?' he asked.

'Another 30 kilometres,' the driver said. 'A day or two's walking. If you take it slow.' *We can do it in one*, Ash thought. He didn't say it.

'You want to walk all night? Or d'you want to sleep?' he asked Zuko.

'leep,' Zuko said. Dark pockets folded in Ash's vision. He braced himself with a hand on his brother's shoulder. If he'd noticed Zuko's uttered word, he didn't comment.

They slept beneath a bush a field's-length away from the road, their eyes wide open most of the night for the sound of cars passing, pedestrian voices, the threat of someone finding them. Zuko murmured to the yellow seahorse, comforting sounds that Ash eventually fell asleep to.

48.

Exploring space when he was very young, he'd looked out at the blanket of black between the stars. He grew in spirit at the touch of glass, an echo of the external stellar mysteries reflected in light. To others, the world was real and one thing only. Somehow, in the absence of words, he found he could divide his brain equally in two. One half knew exactly what the others saw. But the other! Here he could create space in his head, here were the shapes of his thoughts, round, smooth and brown, like rocks or pebbles the sea had washed over through endless time. Here the flow in his head ran bigger than in the other side where words mattered — spikey sounds with sharp edges.

When Zuko was five he learned how things could be grouped in twos and threes with spaces to part them. That two could unite into one and he could see, whole and completely, the gaps between. The palm tree near the river gave off yellow dates, all pip and inedible. He'd put them in his mouth to suck them when he was a small boy, for the sensation they gave his inside cheeks. When his mother took him to the water on a Sunday afternoon he would sit on the grass and feel the shape of the dates with his tongue, never minding the thick taste, as his mouth gave him feedback about the form of that perfect offering. Later, once he knew his mouth would never obey him, he gathered the small fruits and created space. First he made patterns with the hard dates that would have stretched from the tree to the house if his mother had allowed him to continue. Later, when he learned two could also be one, as could three be two, tied together with a gap, he circled the patterns around the tree as if it was the sun. These dates, these trees, took on the characteristics of heavenly bodies, like the stars

he had not yet learned to name. While others were scooting toy cars or swinging from a rope into the river, this pattern, this habit of childhood, took his mind and his heart completely. From this he learned if things ceased to exist, he would remain in the space between, where the only sound was the hum of the sun.



1.

They walked from sunrise until the sun dropped in the sky, and came to the city on a long, straight road that carried them into the evening. As dusk appeared, the lights emerged like stars in the distance. They walked until the flat lands became settlements of sparse mud dwellings with shining roofs, until the mud walls were interspersed with sheets of plastic and corrugated iron, until the shacks moved closer and closer together until two people could barely pass in narrow passageways between. They walked as the cars floated past them. Ash held his brother upright with one hand, and traced the fence with the other to keep himself steady. Zuko stumbled once, and fell. Ash let him rest on the ground for some minutes before he cupped both his hands in his brother's armpits to lift him up. They passed a woman with a bag on her head and sky streaked bright crimson behind her. 'What you boys doing?' she asked them.

'Walking.

'I can see that.'

'Why d'you ask, then?'

'Don't be smart with me.'

Zuko's weight pulled him down. Gravity. Zuko wanted the earth. 'Do you have any food?' Ash asked.

The woman shifted the bundle from her head and it landed with a thud on the ground. She bent at the waist, her legs still straight, and untied the fabric knot. 'What's wrong with him?'

'Nothing. He's hungry.'

'You can let him speak for himself.'

'You might not understand him.'

The woman stretched an arm into her fabric and pulled out two apples and a piece of bread. 'Don't tell me what I will and won't do. She handed the food over. 'Here, eat this.'

Zuko took an apple and bit into it faster than he could chew. He kept his eyes on the fruit while he swallowed.

'Where are you from?' the woman asked.

Ash held the bread and remaining apple in one hand. His mind had already eaten the food, but he knew it might be many hours before they found any more. 'It doesn't matter anymore,' he said.

'You've been on the road a long time.'

'Yes.'

'Do you need a place to sleep?'

Ash kept his eyes on the lights in the distance. 'No,' he said. 'We need to get to the city.'

'What's there?'

'Our father.'

She nodded. She tied her bundle together and heaved it back onto her head. She steadied it with one hand when it threatened, momentarily, to fall. 'You don't have a cell phone?'

'We do,' Ash lied.

'Why don't you use it?'

'I ... We want it to be a surprise.'

'Cape Town's a big place,' she said. 'Don't get lost. For the sake of a surprise.'

Zuko swallowed the last of the apple core. Without a good-bye the woman passed them, and then she was gone in the other direction. Yet another person behind them now. Like Ela.

Ash ate the remaining apple and folded the piece of bread and put it into the jacket pocket. He reached into his jeans and fingered the two stones in his pocket. He pulled them out and stepped in front of Zuko, still walking as he talked, but now stepping backwards. Zuko smiled weakly and leaned in too close to Ash's face, his eyes wide. 'White for yes and black for no,' Ash told him. He held out the stones in front of Zuko, one in each hand. 'Do you like Ela?'

Zuko raised a hand. It came down hard on the white stone. The corner of Ash's mouth lifted. He tried a second time. 'And ... do you think she likes me?'

Zuko chose the white stone, one more time.

On either side of the road, the dwellings sprawled. On the furthest outskirts of the city, the roofs of the shanties glinted above corrugated iron and makeshift walls of cardboard. This didn't look like any city Ash had imagined. As they walked, the number of cars that passed increased. Ash steadied his brother from the startle response that racked his body each time at the sound. 'It's okay,' he told Zuko. 'Get used to it. This is how it's going to be.'

As the kilometres lessened the dwellings changed from impermanent structures made from castaways to small brick boxes with neatened streets, though still dusty and unpaved.

Youths lurked at corners with long looks and nothing to do. The closer the mountain came, the more the houses increased in size and quality. Soon the spaces between the passing cars grew smaller. Zuko's hands stayed on his ears, shutting out the sounds, his vision fixed straight ahead. Still his feet kept up the rhythm they had learned, the pattern that kept him moving forward.

Beneath a pedestrian bridge a taxi stopped. A man leaned forward in the front seat, and offered them a lift. 'How much?' Ash asked.

'Twenty bucks, all the way in.'

He brought out the money and paid, once they were seated in the vehicle. 'Thanks,' he said to the man.

'Don't thank me. It's what I do.'

2.

They slept the night in a side-alley behind a factory where they found a gate unlocked. In the absence of wood, there was no fire. They sipped from the water-bottle. Ash made a bed for his brother on the ground with a piece of plastic doubled over, the jacket folded into a makeshift pillow. Their breaths steamed out on the cold air. The concrete beneath them forced its hard chill into their bones. Once a man staggered around a corner, a paper bag in his hand. A beard that hadn't seen scissors in years hugged his cheeks and chin. The man started at the sight of them, and mumbled words Ash failed to understand. Then he was gone. Behind him, a faint scent of urine remained.

They slept, or Zuko slept, wrapped in the sheet of thin plastic that rustled each time he turned over, while Ash kept watch. They were out of sight of the street but through the dark hours men shouted, bottles clinked and broke against hard glass, against walls. Women laughed with pleasure, and screamed in pain or anger. He could not understand the sounds. For the first time since they'd left their home, Ash knew fear. His right hand wrapped itself around the base of an abandoned and empty glass bottle, ready for anyone who came around the corner and demanded he strike. He would kill for his brother. He knew it was true.

There were no stars. For some time, Ash kept his eyes on the sky. Although there were no clouds, the sky remained a dark, an orange-tinged blur behind the mountain. Here Zuko slept deeply, with no patterns of light and space above. No mysteries to contemplate and figure out. Here, perhaps, there was no reason, anymore, to look up.

Through the disturbing, the breaking, the piercing, the cries of the city, Zuko slept. Ash watched his eyelids moving in some unknowable dream happening deep beneath them. The child could sleep in the dangerous city, and not be afraid. Ash knew his brother's soul was steadfast, the most solid being he could know. Now they were finally here, his eyes smarted at the sight of his sleeping brother, his companion, his blood. Light from the factory windows blurred as his eyes filmed over. He wiped his face and his teeth gripped the side of his lip, pressed down until the pain there was stronger than what was in his heart. When he tasted blood, he released his teeth's grip on his flesh. His tongue found the wound and tried to ease it, licking the blood away. He stilled his mind and thought of his mother. His fingers tightened their grip on the bottle.

When morning came it emerged gentle, quiet, and soft. He didn't expect this kind of peace. Not from the inside of the city.

3.

With the city came the smell. Zuko breathed. With each inhalation the particles invaded his nose and attached themselves there, covered in layers of grime and dust and chemical film. Since they'd first approached the city, a vague nausea had sat solid in his stomach. It created more saliva in his mouth, gave a constant sour sensation to each corner of his jawbone, at the start of his ear canal.

He stood, unmoving, at the side of the road, and tried to count the cars. He found a larger rhythm in the way they moved, connected to the lights that changed from green to orange to red in a rhythmic and predictable pattern. The timing was perfect. Each repetition miraculous and exact. His joy rose, and along with it, his hands. They shook as an extension of that joy, in the same way the leaves of trees clapped in the wind. Ash tried to take his hand, to move him away from the road, but Ash's touch landed light and insignificant in comparison with the lights, the timing, the perfection of the repeating pattern he found on the street, potentially limitless and infinite. Predictable, yet still full of anticipation. 'What, Zuko, what?' Ash said. Zuko couldn't describe the rhythm, the pattern, the joy. He could only grab his brother's arm, and bite down hard.

There were shadows everywhere. Everything in this giant and moving place possessed a double, a shadow-side that danced and moved and warped along with it. Everything floated and shimmered, and struck him with its vibrancy. He should have hated the city; the noise and the traffic and the cars and the hoots and the people. Instead his insides built up to a

crescendo. Deep in his body, something knew it would be a startling height from which to come crashing down.

4.

Zuko spotted two approaching children. Both held ice-creams. The boy licked his chocolate cone in a desperate gesture to prevent it dripping. The girl mouthed the melting strawberry. The air sparkled, light everywhere. It might have been day. Zuko wasn't sure. He couldn't feel the heat of the sun, too much other light emanated from every direction. People moved in cars, in buses, along the pavement and across the street in every direction. He located patterns in their movements, in the lights that told them when to stop and when to go and where to shop and what to buy. The only patterns were individual, in the step of each person's walk. Together they made a jumble of movements he couldn't fathom or figure out. The pink ice-cream, though, was stronger than anything else he could see. It brought a juice into his mouth, his own saliva. His tongue loosened. He'd been hot, burning up under perspiration on his skin. Was it days, weeks, months even? How could he tell? There'd been only the sunrises and sunsets, the days that endlessly fell into each other, one like the next. The heat was the thing he'd breathed in the most, when he'd longed for the merry dance of air or rain or movement through trees. That he could celebrate and move with them. The city, in contrast, pulsed, thick and dark. As the children passed, he caught the scent of the strawberry sweetness. The lightness and the fresh, the promise and cold. He reached out and took the cone from the girl, and pushed it into his mouth.

5.

They found a bus stop on a main road. An old man waited wearing a gentleman's cap and a home-knitted jersey, reading a folded newspaper, alongside a woman with a baby strapped to her back by a piece of vibrant and colourful fabric. 'Excuse me,' Ash said to the woman. She turned her bulging eyes on him said something in another language. She pushed the air with her hands in a shrug.

'Can I help you?' the man asked. Ash bit his lip and spoke an address from memory. He hoped it was correct. The man furrowed his brow and looked at Ash in a long-sighted way, as though he needed glasses. 'Shortmarket Street,' he said. 'That's way over in the City Bowl. You need to take the next bus, son. But get yourselves a meal first.' He dug into his

pocket, and drew out a blue note. 'Here, buy something to eat, at least.' He put his nose back into his paper.

On the bus they sat at the back where Zuko occupied the window seat. He watched the world, the people and children and the women wrapped up against the cold in dark scarves. The bus stopped and two boys disembarked. A woman with long hair wearing a cowboy hat and beads around her neck climbed on, and sat beside Ash. He told her the address, and his father's name. She nodded, as though calculating a sum in her head. She smiled. 'I'll show you where to get off,' she said. She watched them with the kind of curiosity that told Ash that to her they were still both children. Her nose twitched, and her thin mouth flinched involuntarily downwards. He knew they smelled bad. She watched Zuko. Perhaps she thought the boy rude, the way he faced outwards towards the wide world, without acknowledging her presence or saying hello. The way his hands played softly with the air beside his face. The rapture there, at the light and the mountain. 'Your brother?' she asked him at last.

Ash nodded.

'You don't look too much alike.'

'I know.'

'You got your mother or your father's face?'

'My mother's. He looks more like my father.'

'He has autism, right?'

Ash looked at her. 'That's a seahorse,' he said. He looked at Zuko's hand.

'What?'

'He has a seahorse.'

'No, I mean his condition. He has autism.'

'Autism?'

'Your brother.' She nodded in his direction, as though he were an object, or an interesting pile of rocks.

'What's that?' Ash scanned Zuko's skin for lesions or a rash, his head for lice or other insects. There was nothing Zuko had, besides the yellow seahorse, that he could tell. Perhaps his eyes had grown too accustomed to his brother, the way they'd lived together on the road.

'Autism. You know ... he looks like he has a neurological difference.'

'Autism.' Ash said the word slowly. Rolled it around in his mouth. 'I don't know what that is.'

The woman paused, pursed her lips. In a sudden flurry of movement she scabbled in her bag, pulled out a pen and a piece of paper and scrawled a number down. 'Here,' she said. 'Call this number. They'll help you with him. Tell you what to do. Find him a school, even. Where's your mother?'

'She's ... she's not here.'

'You from Cape Town?'

'No.'

'Okay.' She nodded. 'Well, you call that number. They'll help you out.'

'Will they give us a place to live?'

She looked confused, briefly. 'Him, maybe. Not you. Not both of you.' She pointed at Zuko. 'They might let him stay in the hostel. Depends on your family's needs.'

'A hostel? What about me?'

Her eyebrows squinted together. She seemed to be assessing if he was for real. 'It's special education. They'll take care of him.'

'But I take care of him.'

'I'm sure you do. But ... it might help your mother.'

Ash looked beyond the window. The bus crawled up a hill. People sat at tables, eating food, on both sides of the road. 'Nothing's going to help my mother now,' he said. Still, she pushed the piece of paper into his hand. He folded it, and put it in the back pocket of his jeans.

'Quick, here!' she said suddenly. 'This is where you get off.' She rose to her feet and pressed a small red button on the bus's ceiling. The bus stalled, changed down a gear, then shifted to the side of the road and slowed. Ash stood and Zuko followed. 'Good luck,' the woman said. Neither of the boys turned around.

As Ash walked, Zuko trailed behind him. The boy seemed tired, and it slowed him. Ash was his compass. He'd learnt to follow his true north. Ash stopped two women and asked the way to the address imprinted on his memory from the envelope lost along with the green bag. They looked at him distastefully and tried to brush him away as they moved past. Ash turned to a man in a navy business suit, but it was as though the boys were invisible and he hadn't seen them. He tried to ask a small man who wore an open collared shirt with a round, smiling face, but as he approached him the man uttered 'Fuck off!' too forcefully. Ash sank back, suddenly shamed. Zuko stood like a rock in moving water amidst the people who were going places. A faint smile hovered on his face. He enjoyed the movement around him, but it rendered him unable to move himself. He looked, Ash thought, like a street urchin. His

legs paled with dust, his feet were bare, his clothes old, worn, faded. Ash couldn't bear to look down at his own body. He put a hand to his pocket. He still had some money left. In a shop window hung a sign: Half Price Sale. He pulled Zuko inside, and where it said '8 to 9 years' above a rail in the children's section, he selected a blue t-shirt and a new pair of jeans. 'Cheap, nasty fabric, certainly from China,' his mother would have said while she rubbed the clothes between the tips of her thumb and forefinger. She would never have purchased these. She would have waited and saved and bought something of quality and given it as a present to each of them at Christmas time. Ash couldn't wait, or afford anything better. Zuko would have to continue to do without shoes.

He took the clothes to the till point and placed them on the counter. The woman behind the till, round with enormous breasts and her two front teeth missing, looked at him askance. Ash averted his eyes. He pulled out the packet that held the remaining money.

'Where'd you get that?' She eyed him suspiciously.

'What?'

'That money. You steal it?'

His blood rose. 'Fuck, no.' He wished he still had the knife in his boot, that he hadn't stashed it away in the green bag when they were on the rocks, collecting mussels. The anger in him rose sharply, so suddenly, the thought occurred to him he could have pulled it out, stabbed her right here, right now, in front of them.

'I don't want trouble around here,' she barked. 'I don't want anyone coming in and saying you kids have stolen their money.'

Ash kept his eyes away from her face. Until now, until the city, shame was not a feeling his body had known. He handed her his last hundred rand note. Now, apart from some leftover coins, he had no more. She took the money too quickly, rang up the till, and handed him the change. 'Get out of here,' she said. 'I don't want to see you again.'

'Please, I'd like a bag.'

She rummaged under the counter, came out with a plastic bag with the shop's logo printed on the front. She almost threw it at him. 'Go away,' she said.

He took Zuko's hand and walked up the hill in the direction of the mountain. He came to a sign that said 'Toilet' and led his brother inside. At the shining metallic basin he sponged Zuko down with a wad of damp toilet paper, and cleaned, as best he could, the earth's dust from his brother's skin. He undressed the boy and helped him put on his new clothes. Then he checked Zuko's hair, and wiped his face down. He stood behind the boy, holding his shoulders in front of the large mirror that backed the washbasins. 'You look amazing,' he told

him. 'Mama would have been proud of you.' The sight of his own self, the darkness beneath his eyes and the haunting sadness in them, made him want to weep.

He took the stones from his pocket. He held his palms open, one stone on each open hand. 'Last chance.' Zuko turned around and Ash looked into his brother's eyes. Zuko leaned forward, until they were nose to nose. Ash laughed, and Zuko looked away, out of the depth of their together-gaze and towards the freer mountain through the small, open window. Zuko laughed also. 'After this, there's no turning back. Black stone. This hand ...' Ash held the left hand up slightly, '... black stone is no. This hand ...' he marginally elevated the right hand, '... white stone is yes.'

Zuko reached out for the right hand, and Ash pulled back. 'Wait. Wait for the question. I'll trust your decision. White for yes. Black for no. Do you want to find our father? Do you want to find Mr Dominic Rahl?'

Zuko's hand raised, and hit down on Ash's right hand, covering the white stone. 'Yeah ...' It may have been an outward breath or a sigh, but Ash was sure the sound from his brother's mouth reinforced the affirmative. Their path was set.

6.

Outside in the sun he blinked in the sun's glare, and Zuko hummed. The air, however, moved with a cold wind that seemed to sweep off the surrounding rock. People walked around them: men in suits and men with bags, women in heels and women in flat takkies, girls pushing prams and grandmothers holding onto the arms of carers. Waiters haunted doorways as they waited for customers, and customers inside who waited for clients. Children who ran with free abandon, and others restrained by the strict arms of parents. Ash studied them. Finally, his eyes landed on a youth who leaned against a wall. Still with a firm grip on Zuko's hand, Ash approached the youth. 'S'cuse,' he said. 'Do you know where this is?' He told him the address.

'Fancy lawyer's offices,' the youth said. 'Round the corner.' He used his thumb to indicate direction. 'Third building down, yellow brick. I think that's on the second floor.'

'Thanks,' Ash said.

They found the building easily. Yellow brick, as the youth had said. The wooden door arched at the top. Beside it ran a row of square buttons, with names handwritten beside each one. The second name up was the same as the name on the envelope. He pressed the button, and almost immediately the door clicked. Ash pushed it open.

They climbed the stairs and on the second floor they stood before giant glass doors. Behind them, a woman at the reception desk looked up. Her eyes widened behind thick-framed spectacles, and stayed on the boys. 'Push the doors,' she said. She made a gesture with one hand. Zuko pushed at one door with both his hands. It opened, and Ash followed him inside. They stood. The woman stared at them. She pushed her lips together, and seemed to draw a breath sharply inwards through her nose. She leaned forward and pressed a button on a phone, and spoke into a small speaker. 'Hi Dominic. Two boys are here. I think you might like to see them.'

'Thanks,' a voice said. Immediately, Ash knew it. They were at the right place. Or they were at a place, anyway.

The man who emerged from a door to the right of reception was large-built and tanned, with his hair cut short. His eyes gleamed blue. There were creases at the corners. He wore a dark suit with a pale blue shirt, open at the collar. Ash had not yet imagined this moment. In its reality, he was unsure what to do. His legs, now motionless, ached with fatigue, as though a step more was no longer possible. The fleeting up and down glance Dominic Rahl offered was almost imperceptible, but Ash's face burned in the afterglow. There was judgement there. Assessment and calculation. The blue eyes remained faultless, but gave nothing of their conclusion away. He held out one arm. 'Come,' he said. 'Come into my office. Thank you, Rita.' He nodded to the receptionist.

In the office a large dark leather sofa hugged the corner. Above it a giant window overlooked the city, out to the sea. Zuko ran to the couch and sprawled, belly down, as though he wanted to sleep there. 'Sit,' the man said. 'I've been waiting for you. I wondered when you two would show up.'

Ash sat. The stranger remained standing. He leaned against the big wooden desk that fronted most of the opposite wall, and crossed his legs in front of him. 'What can I get you?' he asked. 'You hungry? Thirsty?'

Ash said nothing. The stranger leaned over and pushed the button on the black phone that sat on the desk. 'Rita,' he said. 'Please get a couple of Cokes in here. And ...' He looked at the boys, his eyebrows raised. 'Two pies?' Ash said nothing. Zuko turned over on the couch, onto his back. He laughed at something, looking up at the ceiling. Ash pulled on Zuko's arm, forcing him upright. 'You sit and behave,' he whispered. 'This isn't the bloody bush. This is a proper office, with proper things in it.' Zuko stood up as though his legs were springs, bounced on his toes across the room, to the window. 'I guess he likes the view,' Ash said. 'He's never seen a city before.'

‘Have you?’

‘Not really.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘I don’t know yet. We only came in yesterday.’

The man crossed and uncrossed his arms in front of him. ‘How ...’ He looked at the window and back. ‘How did you get here?’

‘We walked.’

‘You *walked*?’

‘My mother died,’ Ash said.

‘I know.’ He wiped a hand across his mouth. ‘And you disappeared. I didn’t know whether to report you missing to the police or not.’

‘The police?’

‘They found the grave you dug. They wanted to know where you’d got to. I said you were okay. That priest fellow backed me up.’

‘My mother was sick.’

‘I know. It’s okay.’

‘We couldn’t stay there anymore.’

The door opened and the woman from reception stood with a tray with two cans of cokes and two soft pies balanced there.

‘Sir,’ Ash said. ‘He won’t eat a pie.’

‘Please. Call me Dominic. What will he eat?’

‘Chips, maybe. Some Cheerios, if you’ve got them.’

‘Cheerios?’

‘Something crunchy. He likes circles too. Shapes. I think it’s something to do with the way they never end.’

Rita disappeared. Ash sat on the couch and drank the whole Coke down. Zuko seemed uninterested in the food, so transfixed he was on the view outside. Dominic sat down beside Ash on the couch. ‘How’s it been, with your brother?’ He clasped his hands together in front of him.

‘What do you mean?’ Though he didn’t turn around, Ash could tell Zuko was listening.

‘With his autism. How have things been?’

Ash took a bit of a pie and chewed. When he swallowed, a faint residue of grease coated his palate. ‘That’s the second time someone’s said that word to me today,’ he said.

‘What word?’

‘Autism.’

‘You’ve never heard it before?’

‘No.’

The silence crashed in on them, as though the glass between the inside and the outside worlds could no longer keep them separate. ‘I told your mother when he was four years old,’ Dominic said finally.

‘You told her what?’

‘That she could come back with me, let him have tests, get a formal diagnosis. Get him help.’

Ash furrowed his brow. ‘Help?’ Outside the sky gleamed white. ‘We got all the help we needed, with the money you sent us.’

‘But Zuko ...’

‘He’s here.’

‘I know.’

‘Don’t speak like he’s not.’

‘Okay.’

Still Zuko stayed at the window, looking out. He paid no attention to the man whose eyes he had inherited, whose pale complexion had diluted his mother’s dark skin to make his own a coffee brown. Now, to Ash, it was obvious.

‘Look,’ Dominic said. You’ve had a long journey. I’m going to call a car for you, to take you to my house. My wife is there. She’ll give you a bedroom, and show you where the bath is. You can borrow my clothes, if you like. I’ll call Sané ... that’s my wife. She’ll wait for you. I’ll see you back at the house, this evening.’

‘You’re married?’

‘That surprises you?’

‘What about my mother?’

The man leaned forward. He cupped his hands over his mouth and breathed hard through his fingers. Ash caught the faint scent of aftershave. ‘I haven’t seen your mother for four years,’ Dominic said. ‘I’ve been married, already, for three.’ He went to the table, picked up the phone and spoke into it. ‘Rita, please call a cab and see these boys to my house. And phone Sané, warn her they’re on their way.’

Ash hadn’t imagined it like this. He didn’t know what he’d imagined, or how his father would be.

While they waited, he remained on the couch. Zuko moved beside him and picked up the spare can of Coke. He turned it over in his hands, then put his fingernails beneath the tin pull and pulled. The gas blew in a fountain of dark liquid, across the couch. ‘Sorry,’ Ash said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Rahl replied. He left the office and seconds later returned with a navy blue hand towel in his hands. He leaned onto the couch and wiped the leather around the bodies of the boys. ‘You let him drink Coke?’ Rahl asked.

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘All that sugar.’

‘Is sugar bad?’

‘You could say that. Maybe worse for him.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe it makes him ...’

‘What?’

‘Hyper?’

Ash shrugged. ‘He’s walked across the bottom of the country. You think a can of Coke is too much, after he hasn’t had a meal in so long?’

‘Really?’

‘Don’t you see how thin he is?’

‘Now that you say it. You both certainly need a bath.’

Rahl went to the window, and turned his back on the boys. Beyond the window the sky drifted into evening pink. The water in the harbour had already faded to soft grey. He put his hands into his pockets.

‘You have other children?’ Ash asked him.

‘Yes, actually. I ... we have a six month old baby. A little girl.

‘A girl.’

‘Yes.’

‘My sister died.’

‘I know. Your mother called me.’

‘Now we have another sister. Half a one.’

Rahl remained silent. He did not turn around.

The car that took them to the house smelled of stale cigarette smoke and mothballs, though the seats were new leather and the driver wore a jacket and a cap with a peak and the windows were clean. Zuko turned his whole body to the window and watched the passing houses. He narrowed his eyes until he peered out between the small forests of his eyelashes, blurring his own vision deliberately.

‘What do you see?’ Ash asked him. He had no expectation of an answer, but it was important to ask. Zuko leaned forward, closed the sliding glass between the back seat and the driver. The man’s head turned a quarter inch, then snapped back to his attention on the road. The boys were alone. Ash pulled Zuko back down onto the seat. His arm followed the arch of the boy’s shoulders, and rested there. ‘Whatever they say you got or haven’t got,’ Ash said, ‘Maybe they’re right and maybe they’re not. What I know is right, is you’ve got me, and I’ve got you. And we’re here, Zuko. We made it to the city.’

From Zuko’s closed fist, the little yellow seahorse grinned.

7.

The house stood proud, held up at the porch by two colossal pillars. Ash scratched his nose, looked the other way, then back. The driver leaned over and pushed the glass partition open. ‘Here you are, offload yourselves. The madam is waiting for you inside.’

‘How will we know which room to go to?’ Ash asked.

‘It’s not which room. The whole house is Rahl’s.’

As they ascended the polished steps, the great wooden door opened. A woman appeared in a green dress of soft cotton, an over-sized cardigan over her shoulders. Her hair was pushed up in a knot away from her long neck that supported a string of pearls. The toenails on her bare feet gleamed a dark navy. If she found the boys’ smell offensive, or was shocked by what she saw, she didn’t say. She didn’t embrace them either. She smiled, and stood back, opening the way for them to enter. ‘Dominic called ahead of you,’ she said. ‘Can I get you something in the kitchen?’

They sat at a table and drank glasses of milk with biscuits. Zuko revelled in every downward crunch. For every biscuit Ash ate, Zuko crammed three into his mouth. The woman left them, and seconds later two more women appeared, wearing black pinafores with white aprons and apron caps. The younger, leaner woman moved straight to the sink and scoured the dishes there, while the older woman bent to peer into the darkened glass of the

oven door. Then she turned to face them. 'Mr Rahl gone all soft on street children?' she asked.

'We've been walking,' Ash said.

'That's nice.'

'A long way.'

'You walk to this particular house and knock on this particular door and some lady opens it and lets you sit in this particular kitchen and eat biscuits this particular woman right in front of you now baked?'

'It's more complicated than that,' Ash said.

'I bet it is.' She wiped her hands on a dish towel. 'Khanya, come and look at this.'

The woman from the sink moved and stood beside her, her hands still wet and sudded with soap. 'Ya?'

The larger woman pointed at Zuko. 'Look at his boy.'

'Ya?'

'Something look strange to you?'

'I don't know.'

'Something in the eyes?'

The younger woman drew a breath in to answer but Ash would never know what that answer would be.

The swing door to the kitchen opened suddenly, and the woman in the green dress appeared. Now she wore flat shoes on her feet. 'Boys,' she said. 'There's a bath running. I think you'll both be glad of it. We don't have any clothes his size in this house,' she pointed towards Zuko, 'but I've put out a pair of old pyjamas, he can wear those.' She cast her eyes to where Zuko sat, licking the biscuit crumbs from the plate. She looked back at Ash. 'Dominic is way bigger than you are. They'll be over-sized, but there's a pair of track suit pants, a t-shirt and a sweater out. They'll have to do for this evening. We can go shopping in the morning, and get you some decent clothes.'

'Thank you,' Ash said.

'Don't thank me. It's what he wants.'

'He said you have a baby.'

The woman looked startled, then reconstructed her face into a smile. 'Yes. She's sleeping now. She'll be awake before supper. You can see her then.'

'Where's the bathroom?' Ash asked.

‘You can use the bathroom downstairs for now. Khanya will show you to it. I’ve left towels out on the cupboard, with your clothes. Once you’ve bathed you can wait here in the kitchen or out the back until you’re called for supper. Dominic will be home by then. If there’s anything you need, please ask Khanya or Delores. I’ll be upstairs until supper.’

‘Thank you,’ Ash said.

The woman was small and light-framed, as his mother had been. He, Ash, had his mother’s bone structure, and her grace of movement. Zuko’s physique was like his father’s. As were his eyes.

The steam rose against the cold air and condensed on the clean white tiles of the bathroom walls. A thick white rug covered the floor. Ash rolled it up and left it against the side of the room while they bathed.

Zuko put his leg over the edge of the bath, one foot in the water. Ash pulled him back and reminded him to take his clothes off first. He helped the boy tug the new blue shirt over his head, but Zuko discarded the pants himself. Then Ash took his own clothes off. As he sat in the warm bath, the water filled him on the inside in a way he’d never imagined. Even at home with his mother, they’d never had a hot bath. They’d washed, summer and winter, in a round blue plastic tub faded from the sun, the same tub she’d used to wash great mounds of clothes by hand, with a thick green soap, and to scrub the curtains and the rug from her room when the winter was over. The water they’d used always had to be fetched from somewhere. The community tap stood close to the other houses, and gave water, clear and disinfected with chlorine. The water from the river was closer - brown, dark and unknowable. What it contained was smaller than the eye could see. Their mother had never boiled a kettle for their baths, even when Zuko was born. ‘If you start him with warm water and it suddenly goes cold, he’s going to scream blue murder, expecting something else,’ she said early in Zuko’s life. ‘When you’re used to the cold you don’t complain. That’s the way it’s always been.’

Before he climbed in, Zuko stood at the edge of the bath and grimaced. From his mouth came a small groan. ‘What?’ Ash asked. ‘Tell me, what?’

Zuko’s hands came up to the side of his face. Now he was not measuring patterns nor feeling the way the warm air circulated the bathroom. His expression, Ash knew, was pure anxiety. ‘It’s not too hot,’ Ash said. ‘I know you’ve never had a hot bath before. It’s how they’re supposed to be. You open the tap and hot water comes out. But there’s a tap for cold and you have to open that too, to make sure you don’t burn yourself.’

Still, Zuko hopped in his anxiety. He kept his eyes on his brother, pleading. Ash couldn't figure it, until he said, 'Show me! What the hell do you want?'

Zuko went to the clothes Ash had carefully stashed on the shelf and pulled them. They fell from the shelf, and landed on the floor. 'We'll wash them later, if that's what you want,' Ash said.

Zuko picked up Ash's jeans, whimpering. Ash stood up, dripping. The cold air bit his skin. The weight of his loins dragged downwards. He leaned across the bath and grabbed the jeans from Zuko's hands. He shook them hard in irritation, and in the movement something fell, and clattered on the cold white floor. The yellow seahorse. Zuko laughed suddenly, grabbed the toy and took it into the bath as though it was something living, with feelings and knowledge, as though it was unthinkable to enter the warm bathwater without inviting that seahorse in also.

After their bath, the woman called Khanya took their clothes and showed them back to the kitchen, where they waited until dinner. Zuko clutched the seahorse. In the kitchen, Delores prepared gravy and meat edged with roasted potatoes and green peas. 'Wow,' Ash said. 'All for us?'

'Don't think you're special. It's how they eat every night.'

'Every night?'

'Maybe not Sundays. That's when I'm off. Then they have boiled eggs and toast. The missus, she can't cook for anything.'

'You like working here?'

'What's to like?'

'It's such a big house. They have everything.'

'You ever worked?'

'No. I was at school. Then I came here.'

'Then you don't know working anywhere is not something you like. It's something you do. It's eight or twelve hours of the day when someone else gives the instructions. When someone else decides things for you. You don't decide. Then they give you money for it. That's the trade. You give yourself up for those hours, and those you give yourself up to, they're the ones who pay you. And it's not what you think you're worth. They decide that also. There's no such thing as liking it. There's no such thing as enjoying putting yourself aside, pretending you're not as important as someone or something else. It's something you do. Like a game. Working for someone else is playing a game, and always letting that someone else win.'

‘What if you work for yourself?’ He thought of Ela.

‘Someone’s still got to pay you.’ She put a teaspoon to her lips to taste the gravy. Not satisfied, she added a pinch of salt from an open pot.

Zuko sat at the table with the seahorse between his fingers. He stared at the painted eye. Delores washed six carrots in a bowl of water, and put them on a board with a knife. She placed the board in front of Zuko. ‘Here, boy,’ she said. ‘You chop these for me. I’ll show you how.’ She demonstrated putting the knife on the carrot and pushing down repeatedly to create penny pieces, and he copied her. She left him there and returned to the stove. She stirred the peas, then eyed the boys suspiciously. ‘Who are you, then?’ she asked.

‘My name is Ash,’ he said. ‘My brother’s called Zuko.’

She leaned against the counter and faced them, folding her arms. ‘I know your names. They say you’re his sons. Is that true?’

‘Who’s they?’

‘There’s a grapevine here, you know. The stems get twisted sometimes. Though that boy’s got his eyes, for sure.’

‘You believe them?’

Before she could answer, the kitchen doors swung wide. Dominic Rahl entered. He bowed his head as he walked through so as not to hit it above on the door frame. His eyes crinkled at the corners. ‘Hello Delores. Hello boys.’ He stood, an anxious giant, in front of them. As collected and prepared as he’d seemed at his office in the centre of town, now he seemed, in his own home, suddenly awkward. Each of his hands clutched at the other in front of him. ‘I’m glad you made it,’ he said. ‘Supper will be in 10 minutes. Delores? That right?’

The woman nodded.

‘You boys look good and clean. I hope you put your clothes in the wash? Maybe tomorrow we can organise haircuts.’

Zuko still chopped at the carrots, listening to the sound of the knife hitting the chopping board, trying to make the gaps between the sounds as equally apart as possible. He hadn’t noticed the pieces of carrot he’d cut had diminished to wafer-thin. ‘He’s never let anyone cut his hair before, except my mother,’ Ash said.

‘He’ll have to get used to it now.’ Rahl said. The man turned abruptly, and left the room.

After dinner the woman took them upstairs to a room with a double bed covered with a duvet, white and soft as marshmallow. The ceiling was painted white and the walls were white and a soft white rug covered the polished wooden floorboards. Up the stairs, Ash held onto Zuko's hand

Zuko perched on the edge of the bed while Ash took off his brother's shoes. 'Do the rest yourself,' he said when the laces were undone.

He put Zuko into the bed, then kneeled down at the side of it, his face inches from where Zuko's lay on the pillow. Zuko's blinked slowly. He was tired. He would sleep soon. 'Now you listen to me,' Ash told him. 'It's ten o'clock, and you're only eight years old.' Then he thought, maybe nine. Maybe Zuko's birthday had come and gone, unnoticed. He didn't know what day it was. What month they were in. 'Boys need to be asleep at night. I'll come back. I'm going downstairs. I'm going to talk more, then I'm coming upstairs. I'll sleep next to you. But you stay here. Don't get up. Don't get out of bed, you hear me?'

Zuko blinked, a slow consent. He was too tired to laugh even, or to make patterns in his mind.

Downstairs, Rahl had left the table. He stood now at the open window, staring out at darkness. He turned when Ash came in. 'You're not tired?' he asked. 'Sané made up that bed for both of you.'

Ash stood in the middle of the room and imagined he was the last tree left; what remained of what was once an entire forest.

'Sané seems nice,' he said.

'She is. She's a good mother, too.'

'Why did you do it?' he asked the man.

'Do what?'

'Leave us.'

'Leave you?'

'You only came in the summer time. Then you always left.'

'My home has always been in Cape Town. I never lived at the river.' He put his hands into his pockets.

'Why did you come there, then?'

'It was my family's holiday home. I was three years old when my father bought into that syndicate. I've been going there every year since then.'

Ash sat down at the table, on the chair nearest to him. ‘Did you know my mother a long time?’

‘I grew up with your mother.’

‘Were you friends?’

‘My father employed her mother. Her mother worked in the kitchen, when we were there.’

‘My mother loved you,’ Ash said. ‘I know she did. You could have brought us back here. We could have been your family. You could have given a damn when you knew she was dying!’

Rahl lifted one side of his mouth in what seemed like a leer. He shook his head. A hand came up to his breast pocket. He took out a box of cigarettes.

‘When did you learn to speak my language?’ Ash asked.

‘I told you, we were friends. I grew up with it. She ...’ He broke off. His voice strained. ‘She taught me.’ Slowly his head turned. His eyes were fixed on Ash. Something in them remained hard and smooth, like a polished stone. ‘And you think I abandoned your mother.’

‘Four years. You didn’t come before she died. I’d say you abandoned her.’

‘I fell in love with your mother when we were both 16. Probably younger than you are now.’

‘You *fell in love* with my mother? She was a maid in your holiday house.’

‘We always got on well. One thing led to another.’

‘But didn’t lead so far you would ever take care of us.’

Rahl pulled a cigarette and a blue transparent lighter from the box. He put the cigarette to his lips, ignited the end and pulled hard on it, then released his breath in an outpour of grey smoke. He didn’t reply. There were footsteps behind Ash, on the stairs. The sound of Sané’s heels, coming closer. She appeared in the doorway. ‘Give us a minute,’ Rahl said to her. ‘I’ll be up in a moment.’

She vanished like a spirit from the door.

‘Did Sané even know about us?’ Ash asked. ‘I mean, before now?’

Rahl turned back to the window. He opened the window and smoked, facing out. The dining room table was strewn with dirty dishes and empty glasses. Ash imagined his mother here in the mornings, clearing this mess away. Dominic stubbed his cigarette against the wall to extinguish it, half-smoked, and flicked the remainder through the open window. He walked

to the table and sat opposite Ash. He fixed the boy with his eyes. 'I loved your mother,' he said. 'Four years ago, the last time you saw me, I asked her to marry me.'

Ash swallowed hard, and looked away.

'Look at me. This is the truth, I swear it. I wanted to bring her ... you, all of you, here to Cape Town. I wanted to get help for Zuko, to find him a school that would understand him.'

'We understood him fine,' Ash said.

'He needs more than you, Ash. He's going to need more than you.'

Ash's mouth went dry. He looked at the empty glass in front of him. He wished there was water there.

'Yonela didn't want me in the end, you know.' Rahl took the wine bottle and tipped it as he held it up to the light. He replaced it on the table when he realised there was no wine left. 'Or she didn't want to live with me here. She didn't want this life. Maybe she already knew she was sick. I could have helped her. But she never asked.' He wiped at his mouth with the back of his sleeve, held together with cufflinks. Ash had never seen cufflinks before. They gleamed in an abstract pattern, the small shine of success. 'She said I'd already given her everything she ever wanted. She didn't want you boys to grow up in the city. She wanted you to know the farm and the forests, to have the same life she'd had, when she was young.'

Inextricable weariness overcame Ash. Curiosity, the fired up desire to know and understand, had gone. Now it barely burned warm in the embers of what energy he had left. 'That afternoon ... that day when you left ... she told you then?'

Rahl nodded. 'I was broken. I thought I mattered more. To her.'

'She was broken too,' Ash said. He shrugged at the word.

'That was her decision. The finality of it. I'd told her if her answer was no, I could never see her, or the children ... you ... It was selfish of me, I know that now. A gamble. A risk. I never imagined she'd turn me down. But that's how important she was to me.'

'I thought you didn't want us anymore.'

'Maybe, on some level, I didn't.' He put his forehead into his hands, then ran his fingers through his hair. 'Maybe I wanted to get on with my life, and leave that part of it behind me.'

'You never came back to that house.'

'I did, once or twice after that. Then I gave it to my brother, when my parents died. I was uncomfortable taking Sané there. With the memories. I wanted to start again. I didn't

ever want to see your mother, if she wouldn't make the choice and live fully, openly, with me.'

'Maybe you knew she wouldn't.'

'Maybe. And now ... this is something I'm not sure how to handle, now you've brought Zuko all the way here.'

'Or Zuko's brought me.'

Rahl looked at Ash, unsure. Ash could smell the carpet, the new glue. Dominick stood, and pushed the chair under the table. 'I need to go to bed now,' he said. 'We have a lot of thinking to do.'

'We came to you because you're family,' Ash told him. 'You're the only family we have now.'

9.

He thought of the beauty in a snail's trail, and how Zuko had shown him that. He thought of the boy growing, unknowing and unknown, his hands at the height of his shoulders and flapping like some ridiculous overgrown bird with stunted wings. Sometimes Zuko's feet couldn't resist a spontaneous little jump either, though when Ash had asked him to jump with him over stones and sticks that made up a child's hopscotch, Zuko had looked to the distance as though he didn't understand what Ash was talking about. But a snail's trail! You wouldn't notice it at first. You'd only notice him, flapping in excitement, and his tongue going like that, in between jumps. Zuko put his excitement on the outside, for everyone to see. That thrilled feeling when it was his birthday, or the first day of the holidays, Ash would wake at dawn. He'd known joy in his stomach and it made him want to burst, but most of the time he didn't know what to do with it. Before he knew it, the time was past, and he didn't feel it anymore. Zuko was different. Ash knew when Zuko's body moved in excitement. And the snail trail, silver lines criss-crossing each other like rivers in the moonlight from outer space. The tiny glints, the detail, the exact beauty that remained after the journey, randomly washed away by the rains. Most people never experienced that. Ash only knew it now, because of Zuko.

10.

In the morning they woke and waited on the marshmallow bed until Khanya knocked politely and entered the room carrying a tray with two mugs of steaming hot chocolate. Ash

asked her to put the tray over on the table near the window until the chocolate had cooled. Zuko might tip his over, onto the white bed linen. The woman shrugged. ‘Whatever you say.’

Ash tried to explain. ‘He will make a mess. I’m not trying to instruct you or anything.’

‘Whatever you say,’ she said again, and left the room.

Downstairs in the dining room the glasses and dirty plates of the previous evening had gone from the table, replaced by the clean sweep of a crocheted morning cloth. On top of the cloth sat three boxes of cereals, including Cheerios, a bowl of stewed fruit, a rack of toast and a striped bowl of boiled eggs. Sané sat at one end of the table in a blue dressing gown, her long hair draped over one shoulder, the opposite breast exposed with a small baby’s mouth latched onto it. Zuko sat, took the box of Cheerios, slit it open at the top and poured the cereal circles into his bowl. He positioned the yellow seahorse beside the bowl. He sat for a long time, watching the circles and the seahorse. Eventually, he took a spoon as his mother had taught him, and began to eat. Ash sat opposite him. ‘Don’t you want milk?’ he asked, and handed Zuko the blue ceramic jug. Zuko pushed it away with his hand. He wanted only the slow crunch of the cereal between his teeth, and no milk to dilute it.

‘Did you boys sleep well?’ Sané asked.

‘Zuko misses the road. He was up half the night and kept me awake. That bed is soft, it’s nearly impossible to sleep in.’

Sané failed to answer. She raised her eyebrows and lowered them in a small movement. She looked down at her sucking baby.

Ash took a boiled egg from the bowl and peeled the orb. It was gone in two bites. ‘How old is she?’ he asked.

‘Six months.’

‘I can’t believe I have another sister.’

The woman looked up sharply. ‘Her name is Frances,’ she said. She couldn’t hold Ash’s gaze too long. He reached out, took another egg, and noticed his hands were shaking as he peeled it. Zuko reached out also, took the Cheerios and poured himself another bowlful.

In the end, Ash ate the five eggs in the bowl. Zuko was on his third bowl of dry Cheerios when Khanya came through and took the cereal box away first, before she cleared the rest of the table.

After breakfast the boys explored the back garden. Ash’s jacket, socks and Zuko’s jersey hung out to dry on the washing line. Zuko held the seahorse clenched tight in his fist. Ash sat on a bench beneath a giant oak tree. Zuko stood in front of him, and rocked from side

to side. Ash bent and wrote a series of numbers in the sand sequentially, from one to twenty. He broke a stick off a nearby branch that had a slight curve, perfect for pointing. With the end of the stick, he pointed at the digit '5.' 'Five,' he said. He moved the stick further down the line. 'Ten.'

He drew the stick back, and pointed to number two. 'Two.' Then he turned the stick around, and placed it in Zuko's right hand. He put his own hands together, knitted them with his fingers, and looked up, into his brother's eyes. 'Enough messing around,' he said. 'It's time for your formal education to start. Where's number 1?'

Zuko carefully placed the yellow seahorse down in the sand. He positioned the stick in the sand below the numbers and moved it from side to side. He knew the answer, but his body failed to demonstrate it. His body failed him. Ash reached out, steadied the stick, and guided it to the correct digit. Slowly, they worked their way up the number line. Ash helped his brother to hold the stick while Zuko laughed at the success of it, feeling the power in his brother's support.

On the fourth round, Ash let go of the stick after number three. Still he counted aloud as Zuko continued with the learned movement, moving the end of the pointer sequentially upwards, until he hit twenty. 'Where's five?' Ash asked. It was only a small nudge of Zuko's hand. The child landed on the right number. 'Ten?' This time, Zuko did it alone. 'Two?' Correct. Ash took the stick back from him, tapped him gently on the shoulder. There was pride in Zuko's eyes. 'You can count,' Ash said. 'You can bloody count.'

The back door opened and Delores emerged. She unpegged their clothes from the line, and turned to the boys. 'I'm putting these in the dryer,' she said. 'In 20 minutes, you'll go upstairs to change. The missus is leaving for town in half an hour. You'll be ready. Wait for her at the front door.'

The arcade opened up into a vibrant street in the town centre. Pigeons circled above and settled on the roofs of buildings. Ash held Zuko's hand and kept him close. The child's eyes were alight with the reflections and the lights and the colours of the mall. Suddenly Zuko remembered something. He opened Ash's hands and searched between the fingers. Then he opened his own, but they were empty. He tried to look inside Ash's pocket. 'You left the seahorse back at the house,' Ash told him. 'Remember? Under the tree. Where we were writing numbers.' Ash intuited his brother's energy, startled and excited at once. At any moment, Ash thought, he might engage the overwhelming impulse to run.

Sané took them to a store that sold clothes for babies and children in front, women's clothes and shoes and sleepwear on the left, and men's clothes and shoes to the right. At the front of the store were five tills at a counter wide enough to be used as a bed.

Sané went to the t-shirts in the boy's section, and selected three garments in varying shades. Ash stood nearby, holding Zuko. She looked up, over the hangers draped with the shirts. 'He won't like those,' Ash said. 'That one's the wrong fabric, too hard; and he doesn't wear green or yellow.'

She pursed her lips, and put the hangers back. 'Fine,' she said. 'You do it.' She walked to the front of the store where there was a bench backed against the glass of the store front and sat down. She'd left the baby at home.

They perused the isles, up and down. Ash walked slowly, with Zuko beside him. Once Zuko stopped beside a white t-shirt with a picture of a rabbit in a gold bow-tie on the front. 'You like it?' Ash asked. But Zuko walked on. He dragged his fingers over rows of shirts, jeans, small chinos made for boys waiting to become the men their parents imagined they would be. Finally, his hand settled. The blue shirt of an intentionally faded denim. On the front, embossed in yellow, a more serious seahorse was inscribed.

Ash held up three pairs of jeans. 'Which colours?' he asked. 'Blue, black or purple?' Zuko put his hand on the blue pair. 'Choose one more,' Ash said. 'They're paying.' Zuko put a flat palm on the blue pair. 'Okay, I get you,' Ash said. 'Blue is everything today. Two blue pairs. Coming up.'

They chose two more t-shirts, underwear and socks and a pair of brown leather boots for the boy. When they found Sané at the till, she'd picked out a woollen beanie, a scarf and a ribbed corduroy jacket. They piled the clothes on the counter. Sané turned to Ash. 'And what for yourself?' she asked.

Zuko, Ash knew, had never had new clothes. Everything he'd owned had come down from him, Ash, and was made to fit no matter what. Honey had sometimes received a new dress at Christmas time. It was because she was a girl, their mother had said. She needed to know how to make the best of herself.

He himself had sometimes received a new shirt, or a pair of boots. These had mostly come in the summer around Christmas, when the cash was good. He'd never picked out a whole wardrobe in a clothes store in a mall before. Here, he shrank in stature. Undeserving. It was a waste, that they should be spending good money on him, when they had a baby to take care of, and his clothes from the road were drying on the line. 'It's okay,' he told Sané when she pulled out a credit card. 'I can wear what I have. The boots are not that old. They'll do.'

She looked at him in a way that made him know that in this place, he understood nothing. Who he was on the road or carrying potatoes or walking to school or chopping wood outside his mother's house, had nothing to do with who he was expected to be in the city. Nothing to do with who he would become, in his own father's house.

12.

Later, after they'd been back to the house for lunch, a sleep, and for Zuko to drink a glass of milk and retrieve the seahorse from the dirt beside the tree, Sané strapped the baby into a car seat. She told Zuko gently, but with a firm edge to her voice, to get into the back beside the baby's carrier. 'Where are we going now?' Ash asked.

'Dominic wants to see you.'

'We can wait for him to come home.'

'He wants to talk to you today.'

'Are you coming with us?'

'I'll drop you off. His secretary will call me when you're done.'

The leafy suburbs blurred through streets before they made way for a highway that took them around the mountain and into town. Ash stared ahead, aware of his brother behind him. Zuko gazed at the baby, oblivious to the scenery, and the baby grinned back. Gently, Zuko stretched out a hand and stroked the baby's head, entranced by the softness. Ash wanted to lean back and caution him for the sake of the mother, but it wasn't necessary. Zuko's gentleness inspired the sacred and profound.

Ash swallowed. There was a lump in his throat that had developed only since they'd become part of the city. He thought it must have something to do with his increased heart-

beat. He looked at Sané, edged sharp and defined, her hair caught neatly, casually in a knot, held together with two pins at the back of her head. She seemed much younger than his mother had been. More poised, more controlled, but less certain. ‘What is autism?’ Ash asked her.

She took her eyes off the road for only a moment to cast him a fleeting glance, before she recovered. ‘You don’t know?’

‘Twice yesterday, my father and another woman on the bus, they both said it. That Zuko has it.’

‘You’re not having me on?’

‘About what?’

She took one hand off the wheel and wiped the back of it across her forehead. The car climbed higher along a winding road. Below the road, the city appeared. ‘It’s a condition,’ she said at last. ‘A disability. It’s what your brother has.’

‘I thought he couldn’t talk.’

‘That’s part of it.’

‘What else is part of it?’

‘Doesn’t he do things over and over?’

Ash thought. ‘Some things,’ he said. ‘But they’re things he likes doing.’

‘And he’s not social. He doesn’t mix with people, or play with children his own age.’

‘He mixes with me. He plays with us ... he was close to my mother. We taught him to throw and catch. It’s not that he doesn’t mix, it’s that people don’t understand him, because he doesn’t talk. If you know Zuko, if you really know him, you’ll know he’s social.’ He thought of Ela, how unquestioning she’d been. She’d accepted Zuko, and included him, as though she’d always known who he was. Zuko had followed her around like a puppy. He had learnt from her, how to be in the world. He looked at Zuko to see if he was listening, but the boy showed no sign. He was absorbed by the baby, and the light of her smile.

Outside the law offices the boys disembarked. Before he left the car, Zuko leaned forward and put his mouth on the baby’s head in his own attempt at a kiss. ‘Come on,’ Ash said. They walked together up the stairs. The woman at the counter behind the huge glass doors greeted them as though she knew they were coming.

Rahl’s office waited sunlit and empty. ‘He’s in a meeting,’ the secretary said. ‘You can wait here. Please sit on the couch until he arrives.’

The city below was etched clear in the bright day. Cranes rose up from the harbour. Beyond the bay the sea lay flat and waited. The sky was bigger than anything Zuko had seen.

He stood at the window, clutching the seahorse. Above him, two windows were open, close enough to reach with his hands if he stretched up, but not close enough for him to step out of. ‘You ever been so high?’ Ash asked him. ‘Could you be happy here, growing up in this city, Zuko? It will be a different kind of life for us. But we’d have a sister. Sané will never be our real mother, but she could be like a mother. And we’ll always have him.’

Zuko stayed motionless, aware of every word. He did not turn around. ‘We’ll have all we ever wanted to eat,’ Ash continued. ‘And you can eat Cheerios every morning for the rest of your life. If you want to.’

The door opened. Rahl stood in the archway. Ash rose to his feet. His heart rate increased. The man was big, and kind-looking. Behind the easy surfer’s smile, there was something hard as steel. He wore an open-necked shirt over navy chinos and black loafers; more casual than the previous day. ‘Boys,’ he said, as though their presence was a reminder, a thought in front of something much larger and more important. He crossed the room and sat down behind the vast oak desk against the far wall. On the desk, piles of papers and files and books spread, beside a holdall filled with pens and pencils. ‘I heard you both had a good breakfast this morning,’ he said.

‘Oh. Yes, sir.’

‘Please. Sit down.’

Ash sat. At the window, Zuko did not turn around.

The man laced his fingers together, his elbows resting on the desk. ‘Look, Ash ...’ he said. His fingers unhooked and he rubbed his eyes. He indicated a swivel chair in front of the desk. ‘Why don’t you come and sit here?’

Ash moved from the couch and sank into the brown leather. The chair swivelled, unstable, the way it moved easily in either direction.

Rahl considered him too carefully. His eyes were on Ash’s, but there was discomfort in their observation, rather than connection.

‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ Rahl said.

‘I ... I wanted to thank you,’ Ash said. ‘For supporting us all this time. You know ... my mother had nothing. I know you sent her money.’

The man nodded. He looked beyond the window. His eyes seemed not to focus. ‘It’s right for a man to support his children. Even when he can’t live with them,’ he said.

‘Things will be different,’ Ash said, ‘now we’re here.’

Rahl shifted in his seat. ‘Look. I don’t know if there’s any easy way to break this to you.’

Ash thought he should follow this with his own words. He found nothing appropriate with which to fill the silence.

‘You both have done an extraordinary thing,’ the man continued. ‘Walking all this way. Coming to find me. But you might have phoned me first.’

Now the words came easily. ‘I didn’t want to scare you off,’ Ash said. ‘I wanted you to see us, to see we’re real. I didn’t want to shock you, by calling you like that.’

‘I’m pretty shocked, regardless.’

‘Sorry.’

Dominic nodded. ‘Now. I have to say this ... the thing is ...’

‘The house is still there,’ Ash interjected. ‘If you don’t want us, we can go back. I’m old enough. I think I’m 17 already. I can find a job. I don’t need school. I haven’t been for so long, anyway.’

Rahl raised his brows in a gesture of scepticism. ‘Who will look after him while you’re working?’

Ash shrugged. ‘I’ll make a plan.’

The man’s eyes went to the window, unable to settle on the face in front of him. ‘No. This is what I need to say now. And you need to listen.’

Into the silence that followed, Ash spoke: ‘What?’

‘I want *him*,’ the man said.

Ash frowned. ‘Him?’

‘I loved your mother. I did. And now ... I want our son. My son.’ Rahl looked him square on. For the first time, his eyes actually took in the object of their attention. ‘You ...’ His throat moved as he swallowed. ‘You’re not my son,’ he said.

Ash’s eyes scanned the room. The old oak furniture stood as witness to the business conducted here. Through the years, the money had come first. The time and the hours and the shirts and ties and the affairs and the drinks and the loneliness and the lies. He couldn’t see the river here, his home and where he’d come from. He couldn’t see this man there, either. This stranger, in the arms of his mother. He didn’t know who Rahl was. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Rahl leaned back against the desk and crossed one leg over the other, as though the gesture was an answer.

‘I remember you,’ Ash said.

‘Of course you do.’

‘You’re my father.’

‘No. I’m not. It’s easy. I’ll take a paternity test if you want. Zuko’s my son. Honey was my daughter. I ... your mother and I ... we weren’t together when you were conceived.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘When is your birthday?’

‘May.’

‘Nine months before May. Work it out.’

‘August.’

‘I spent eight weeks at the river for 26 years. Six weeks over December and two weeks into January, and another two weeks straddling June and July. I was never at the river in August. I was never your father.’

The silence that overwhelmed Ash’s mind was as large and unknowable as the ocean they’d walked beside. Rahl checked his watch. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘I finish work in a few hours. If you’re waiting at the front door at five o’clock you can come home with me. We can talk about this with Sané.’

Ash thought of talking, of how useless words were. Zuko hummed beside him. The day was warm. ‘Okay,’ he said.

‘Leave Zuko here, if you want to. I’m sure you’re tired of looking after him.’

Something moved in the pit of Ash’s stomach. It brought him close to anger.

‘Look, Ash,’ Rahl said. ‘I have the money. There are schools for children like Zuko. There are therapists who work exclusively on his condition, with children like him. We can pay for his therapy. I’ve researched this extensively. We can give him the hours he needs. We can pay, we can afford it. We can help him. We can fix everything.’

Ash watched his brother at the window. He watched as Zuko’s one hand reached up, to touch the bottom of the open window. He watched as Zuko brought up the other hand also, as though he was somehow measuring the distance. Zuko held onto the yellow seahorse only until it found the open space. It was then Zuko’s hand opened. The seahorse dropped out of the window, and plummeted to the street below.

‘But nothing is broken,’ Ash said at last.

13.

Back at the house they found Sané in the lounge, feeding the baby. Zuko ran to the child and tried to pick her up. A sudden fear flared in the woman’s eyes. She jerked back in an attempt to protect her daughter.

‘He’s not going to do anything,’ Ash said. ‘He only wants to hold her.’

Still Sané seemed uncomfortable. She shifted in the seat, covering her breast and buttoning her top.

‘Honey,’ Zuko said. He said it clear, loud. Unmistakable. Sané and Ash looked at him, startled, then at each other.

‘He speaks?’ she said.

‘That’s the first thing I’ve heard him say. I think he’s always trying but ... it’s mainly sounds.’

Sané put the child down. She put a hand out to stop Zuko from touching her.

‘I’ve seen you before, you know,’ Ash said suddenly.

Sané looked at him, startled. She leaned back, and bit her finger nail.

‘At the river. One night. I watched you and Mr Rahl swimming. It was late. Nearly midnight. I think you were both a bit drunk.’

‘You *spied* on us?’

‘I wanted to see where he was. What he was doing. How easily he’d moved on.’

Her eyes changed to a flat grey, like the impartial sea. ‘You’re old enough to make a life of your own,’ she said. ‘I’m only starting out. This is my family now. I don’t want you here. You need to go and do something with your life, for yourself.’ The baby gurgled. ‘You’re not a part of this family.’

‘It was *you*,’ Ash said.

‘What was me?’

‘This morning, when Mr Rahl wanted to speak to me, to tell me I’m not his son. I thought it was genuine. I thought it was him, that he didn’t want me. But it was you.’

‘Dominic and I discussed it. We hardly slept last night, talking.’ She leaned back in the chair to focus on her baby’s face. In his peripheral vision, Ash watched Zuko retreat to the corner of the room. Zuko moved the long gold curtains aside, and went behind them. Ash knew what his brother intended to do. He said nothing. ‘But you want Zuko,’ he said.

‘It’s not that we don’t *want* you,’ she replied. ‘It’s that you’re pretty much grown up already. With Zuko and the baby, I’d have my hands full. And the fact you’re not actually Dominic’s son ... well, I don’t know *why* you’d want to stay around here anyway.’

‘But you’d take my brother. You’d take him from me.’

‘Your *half*-brother. Dominic has the money. And, in truth, he has a responsibility to the boy.’

‘And to my mother.’

‘Your mother has nothing to do with this. Your mother’s life was your mother’s choice.’

‘She didn’t want us to grow up in the city. She didn’t want his money to tell her what she should do. She would have lost our house. The land her grandparents lived on.’

‘Like I said, it was her choice.’ Sané stood. She put the baby on the couch, and pressed a bell against the wall. Zuko emerged slowly from behind the curtain, inching his body along the wall. His pants were up, but Ash noticed the look on his young face. ‘We can afford what Zuko needs,’ Sané continued. ‘With what he has, his condition, the way he is, he needs a lot of money. We have that. We can give him everything.’

That Zuko needed vast amounts of money had never occurred to Ash. He thought back over the last eight years. Mostly, there had been almost no money. They had done just fine.

Sané sat. She picked up her baby and kissed its cheek, then settled it on her lap. The door opened and Delores appeared, her face shiny with perspiration. ‘Please Delores, would you bring me a gin and tonic?’ Sané asked. ‘No ice. A twist of lemon rind.’

The older woman shuffled backwards, out the door. ‘You drink in the morning?’ Ash asked. Sané shot him a look of distaste. Zuko lolled against the wall, then leaned forward, into the room, and picked up the baby’s dummy from a table and put the teat in his mouth. Sané shot up, still holding the baby to her chest, and yanked it from the boy’s mouth. ‘Don’t!’ she cried. Zuko yelled and tried to grab the pacifier back. In the process, he grasped the baby’s towelling outfit and pulled hard. The infant tumbled from her mother, and landed on her back on the floor with a dull thud. The baby screamed. Sané screamed in echo. Zuko wailed louder. Ash was afraid of his brother’s meltdown, or that he’d go to the swishing gold curtains, and try to pull them down. A cabinet of cut glass stood against the wall. Ash edged closer to it, instinctively putting his body between his brother and the display as prevention. Instead, Zuko ran to the window, the only square of light in the room though which daylight entered. Daylight and the sky and the natural world, the place that didn’t threaten him. He tried to put his head outside but it banged against the clear, immaculately clean glass of the window pane. He lifted his hand and put it clean through, to break what kept him from freedom and comfort.

In the evening Rahl called Ash into the lounge. The blood from his brother’s hand still matted the soft carpet beneath the window as a reminder. The glass had already been replaced, the new pane opaque with putty fingerprints, waiting for the sealant to dry.

Rahl leaned back on the long beige couch where Sané had sat earlier in the day. ‘Please, sit,’ he said. He indicated the single leather chair across from him. Ash obeyed. Rahl swirled a glass that contained a golden liquid and a lot of ice in his hands. ‘Sané was upset by what happened this afternoon,’ he said.

‘Sané was upset? What about Zuko?’

‘Where is your brother now?’

‘He’s sleeping. He was upset also.’

‘This is what I’m talking about,’ Dominic said. Ash’s confusion was genuine, though he doubted Dominic read it that way. ‘Your brother needs help. He needs proper care. I think today has indicated he probably needs a live-in facility.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘It’s like a boarding school. Run by people who understand autism. He’d come home for the holidays.’

‘Home? Here?’

‘Yes. As I said this morning, we intend to take him in.’

‘Take him in and turn him out. It’s not the same thing!’

‘You’re upset. I can see that. This is hard for you. I’m sure the prospect of having to grow up, and losing your mother too, and thinking of going out to earn your own living, is frightening. Your mother coddled you. I always told her that.’

‘My mother loved me. She always told me that.’

The man shifted in his seat. He leaned forwards, stuck a finger into his drink and stirred it around. ‘We can’t keep having these talks. They’re not going to lead us anywhere. You need to decide, right now, what you’re going to do. If you want to go back to your mother’s house, I will pay for your bus fare. You can leave in the morning. If you’d like to stay in the city, I can organise you a job on a building site. I have my connections. It won’t pay much, but it’s a start. You can find cheap accommodation at the builder’s hostel. You can be around people of your own kind. I think you’d feel more comfortable there.’

‘My own kind?’

‘You know ...’

‘Zuko is my own kind.’

‘I’m his father. I have decided. I’ve already called the school. He’s booked in for a screening interview next week.’

Ash’s face revealed his confusion.

‘They’ll meet him, meet us, and decide if he’s acceptable for their school and hostel.’

‘They decide if he’s acceptable? On what grounds? That he’s not too smart? Or not too dumb?’

‘Don’t get difficult. Please. This is for his own good.’

Ash shook his head. ‘You have no idea who Zuko is, or what his own good means.’ He stood and went to the door. With a hand on the door knob, he thought of turning around and asking Dominic, the man who was not his father, but who claimed to be Zuko’s, to go to the gold drop curtain and move it aside to see what was there. Then he changed his mind, and simply left the room.

They ate together in the dining room at the long table. Delores served spaghetti and a red meat sauce, with a salad containing different types of cheeses on the side. Sané wore a dark blue velvet dress and Rahl retained his clothes from work. Ash kept his eyes on the plate. Despite his hunger, he hardly ate. At Delores’s persistent coaxing, Zuko took a mouthful of the spaghetti and sauce, and then spat it out over the plate once he’d rolled it around his tongue. Sané rolled her eyes and uttered a word under her breath. She continued to eat. Dominic put his fork down. ‘Delores,’ he said. ‘Please take the child’s plate away.’

Delores did as he asked.

‘It takes him a long time to get used to different foods,’ Ash said. ‘He obviously doesn’t like it.’

‘He should be grateful for what’s put in front of him.’

‘It doesn’t work like that.’

‘Under my roof, it’s going to start working like that.’

Silence hung over the rest of the meal like a soft white net, containing the thoughts and minds of those who sat around the table.

Later Ash waited in the upstairs room at the window. Zuko slept. The blood from the boy’s cut and broken hand seeped through the bandage. It had acquired a brown tinge. His eyelids fluttered as though he dreamed of the stars, the sand, the endless ocean. Now, when Zuko opened his eyes, there would only be white paint on ceiling boards above him. Soon, he might wake in a place and have nothing that was recognisable to him. ‘I am your family,’ Ash whispered to the sleeping boy. ‘And you are enough.’

Zuko woke. The moon through the window emerged from a misty halo. The sky outside stretched up, though he looked at it sideways, from an angle of two o'clock. In the city there were few stars. The blackness no longer seemed infinite, dulled as it was by the orange hue of the city lights below. He looked for God, but in the city it seemed less likely. On the road the stars thrilled the sky. He had swum between them often, so numerous they had formed a river above him, where he sank his eyes and imagined, so far away and high up, as he only found in his own thoughts. Beyond that river of stars lay infinity. And after that, perhaps God. Here, in the city, there seemed no such possibility. It dampened his soul. It prevented any real extension of his sleep. He thought of love. That he should love God. He imagined God must be like a plastic seahorse, because he loved the small thing so much. Or a box of Cheerios that never emptied, no matter how many bowls he ate. Or maybe God was like Ela's house, because he knew he'd loved it there.

In the daytime, in the city, the sky became more tolerable. The blue created a lid, and made him feel more at ease. If gravity was sucked from the earth, then he would stop there, at the blue. He might hit his head, maybe, but he wouldn't go further than that. If gravity returned, then he'd safely land on the earth or the ground or the mountains or the sand below. The night was more frightening, but exhilarating at the same time. Infinite with the possibilities of what was up there, the space between the stars, the possibility of God as a seahorse or infinite Cheerios. Only at night did he imagine he might go further, float away into a space where there was no hope of return, but no guarantee either. Of God or love or whatever was out there. To stay in safety or to risk everything and let go. At night, this seemed to Zuko to be the most important question to contemplate.

Once he'd had a dream. It was a real dream, while he was sleeping. A butterfly with beautiful wings had flown a long way to hover above him. After that night, he carried the dream with him always, wherever he went. When he was lonely, or afraid, he imagined the butterfly coming to him, to land on a bush or a leaf or a branch nearby. 'Flap your wings!' he commanded the beautiful creature. In his own head, and in his own dreams, he had a voice. The butterfly would flap those wings like crazy, but it would not fly away. If he needed a friend, he'd say to the butterfly, 'Come and land on my finger!' And the butterfly, with crazy-coloured wings, would do as his mind commanded.

Nobody else in the world, as far as he knew, saw that butterfly. They only saw his fingers moving in the air, beside his face, waiting for his winged friend to land there. 'Jump to my nose!' he would say. On his nose, the insect would land. To the people around him, the

boy closed his eyes and turned his face upwards, as though to the sky. He couldn't describe the butterfly, its gentleness and proximity. He couldn't tell his mother or Ash or anyone else, because of the jamming of the words, the whole sentences stopped before they reached his mouth. Sometimes that butterfly, with its beauty and its loyalty, had made his heart burst with love, then break with loneliness. He knew at the end of it, that the butterfly had only come from his dreams. Though he commanded it to do whatever he wished, it remained a dream-creature, without the words or the will to talk back to him. 'Make your wings black,' he shouted at the butterfly, the anger burning in his heart. The butterfly did as he requested. And then, when he imagined it was gone, it was.

After the butterfly had appeared, he'd made friends with the seahorse he'd found on the road. The seahorse had turned out to be a much better friend. Though he'd found it in the dust, forgotten, it still wore a smile on its face. All the time he kept it, and took it with them on their long walk, the seahorse never tired. It never complained, and never changed. He tried to command it with his thoughts, but the seahorse didn't respond. It didn't mind either, that it couldn't. Day or night, it continued in its yellowness. He understood that its large bright eyes, the smile, the turned-up corners of its mouth, meant some kind of happiness. 'I love you,' his heart had whispered to the seahorse every night beneath the stars. 'I love you, because you never change.'

He'd dropped the seahorse from the stranger's office window not by mistake, or because he was careless, or because he didn't want it anymore. He'd dropped it from the height of the window in the greatest test. He had wanted to know, if the worse disaster happened, what the seahorse would do. If the seahorse fell from a great height and landed, lonely, in a place it didn't know, how would it be? If it fell on a surface so hard it hurt, if it landed alone, and people passed it without noticing, or it was driven over by a car, what would happen? If it lay on the pavement cracked and broken and with no-one and nothing to help it, would the seahorse still smile?

Ash shifted beside him. Breathed, in and out. They called it a sigh, when it was big, exaggerated, loud like that. He wondered if Ash was awake, if the moon blurred in Ash's eyes also. Light lay across the floor in panels. At first, he imagined they were made by the moon. Then he noticed the light panels did not move. It was the street light outside, shaped by the window, casting its glow on the wooden floor. He rose from the bed. His mind didn't want to, but his body often did things that surprised him. Now it needed to move, though his mind told it not to. It was not like the butterfly he commanded and controlled at will. His body was a law unto itself. It moved across the floor, across the light, delineating the space

that separated the darkness. Light and dark. Dark and light. His body's fear was always falling into the space between. His mind, though, knew better.

His brother sat up. Broad-chested and musty, he was already a man. 'Zuko,' Ash said in a forced whisper. 'What are you doing?'

Still the questions came, and he couldn't answer them. He collected the words he might use in his mind, and arranged a sentence from them. A sentence he might never say. Instead, his body gave a small jump. He put out a finger and conjured the butterfly, then commanded it to land. Ash climbed from the big bed and took Zuko by the arm, and made him sit at the bed's edge. He wore cotton shorts that belonged to the stranger. His hair was awry, as though he'd slept some of the night, at least. He sat close to Zuko. The boy had to turn his head away, so powerful was the new man-smell that surrounded Ash's skin. Zuko's throat closed. The butterfly evaporated as his hands found his knees. 'Listen,' Ash said. 'I can't sleep. We have to talk. We have to make a decision, Zuko. I can't do this alone. You have to help me. You have to use your powers of concentration now, your will, and focus on communication. You have to tell me what you want.'

Outside the window, the moon waited. The trees were still. The whole world summoned itself to hear his voice. A mockery of him! They knew, every one, every moon, leaf, every tree and sky and grain of sand he'd ever known, they knew the truth. Zuko put his head down, ashamed.

'I don't want to pressure you,' Ash whispered. 'But, if you understand me, you have to take responsibility now. I can choose for you, but I might make a mistake. This is your life, Zuko. Your life. You have to help me decide what to do.'

Zuko raised his head. The moon sank into black behind him, beyond the window. He couldn't see its face.

'Dominic doesn't want me. He says I'm a man already, I must make my life, but my life is no such thing if you're not in it. I don't want to leave you here. I don't want to go off and not know when I'll see you.' Ash paused. He looked around the room, made dimly visible by the street light. 'This is a nice house. These people have money, they can give you everything you need. You'll always have nice clothes. I can't promise you that. I can't promise you anything. Except that I'll always be your brother.'

Wings pulsed at the corner of his vision. 'Turn blue!' he commanded in his mind. He saw the strain, but still the butterfly did as he asked.

'I love Ela,' Ash said. 'I don't want to stay in the city. I know she's married, but I'm going to go back there, back to her. If she rejects me, I'll deal with that. I need her to tell me

to my face. It's my destiny. I need to do it.' Ash turned his head and looked at Zuko. 'I don't know yet, what your destiny is. And it's not for me to decide.'

When he was done speaking Ash stood, and found his jeans neatly folded on a wicker chair in the corner. In the coins pocket, despite the jeans' recent tumble through a washing machine, the two decision stones waited. He took them out, folded the jeans on the chair, and re-seated himself beside Zuko. He turned his naked torso towards his brother, and held his two hands out, palms upwards. 'Left hand, black, is for no. Right hand, white stone, is for yes.' He paused.

Zuko's eyes found the stones. They darted between the two.

'Do you like the city?' Ash asked.

Zuko didn't move. His eyes landed, but Ash wasn't sure. In a quick movement he tapped the elbow of Zuko's right arm to mobilise it, and offered the choice. Zuko's right hand raised itself, and chose the white stone. Yes.

Ash nodded. He licked his lips, realising suddenly how dry his mouth was. He offered the choice again, and repeated the options. Black for no. White for yes. He nudged Zuko's right arm, reminding it to move. He swapped the stones around. The white stone now lay in his left palm, and the black stone lay in the right. 'Tell me, do you like the city?'

Zuko's head throbbed from the concentration his body demanded, to do this one thing. He brushed the white stone in Ash's left hand.

'Okay,' Ash said. 'Thank you. Don't lose focus. Another one. White stone for yes, black for no, remember? 'Do you like this house?'

Zuko's fingertips skimmed the white stone.

'And do you like Sané?'

Zuko chose the white stone and smiled, though he was thinking of her baby. His little sister.

'Do you like Dominic?'

Zuko paused. The white stone.

'Oh hell,' Ash said, and dropped his hands. 'I think you just like the white stone.' He raised his hands once more. 'Let's test this. Do you like bread?'

Zuko's hand acknowledged the black stone, and he grinned, knowing his brother's relief. His body moved more easily as it gained repeated practice at using the stones to answer questions.

'Okay, you're still with me,' Ash said. 'Another one. You can stay here, you can go to a school. Or you can come with me.' He swallowed. 'You'll be safe here. Out there, it's

dangerous. We made it here. We were lucky. The way back might not be so lucky. We might not make it.'

The butterfly flared huge in Zuko's vision. It roared an ugly red, and showed its teeth. 'Stay blue!' he screamed at the insect in his mind, but it defied him, and flapped its wings in his face. Suddenly Ash's arms were around him, his voice trying to sooth him, calm him. Zuko hadn't realised it was he himself who'd been screaming.

The door opened. Rahl stood with Sané in a dressing gown behind him. 'Everything okay here?' the stranger asked.

'He'll be all right,' Ash said. 'I think he had a nightmare.'

'Please, keep it down. You'll wake the baby.'

'It's okay,' Ash said. 'I'm sorry. There's nothing to do. The fewer people around him when he's like this, the better it is for him.'

Dominic hesitated. He looked as though he might say something more, but changed his mind. He and his wife backed out of the doorway, and the door closed behind them.

Ash clenched the stones, one in each hand. He lay back on the bed while Zuko calmed himself by rocking, muttering admonishments to the butterfly and to himself. At last, after minutes, both boys calmed. The room stilled. The moon watched still, blurred in the sky. Ash sat up. He turned to his brother, and offered him the stones. 'Do you want to stay here?' he asked Zuko softly. Without prompting, Zuko reached out to the black stone. 'Do you want to come with me?' Ash whispered, barely breathing.

Zuko bent to the white stone. With the movement came an utterance, blurred, like the moon. 'Yes.'

15.

When they'd left the office that afternoon, Ash had taken Zuko's hand at the bottom of the steps. He'd pulled the boy straight over to the waiting car, opened the door and made sure he climbed inside. But Zuko had resisted, pulling away, which had only made Ash more forceful and insistent. Zuko's resistance wasn't at the car, or the stranger's house with its Cheerios and the soft marshmallow bed. Zuko strained, his eyes fleeced the pavement, searching for the fallen seahorse.

He found it eventually where it lay in the gutter, still yellow, still optimistic. Its eyes stayed bright and staring, though its head was cracked in half, broken, and separated from the

broken body. Zuko paused before he climbed into the car, and looked carefully. He knew, then, how it would always be. The seahorse still smiled.

16.

Ash dressed quietly and crept down the stairs in the pre-dawn light. Behind him, in the room, Zuko had finally fallen asleep. In the kitchen, as he reached to switch the kettle on, he realised it was already warm. Delores entered from the back door as he poured his tea. ‘A good habit for our kind,’ she said quietly, ‘to learn to get up early.’

‘Our kind?’

‘You’re not like him.’

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he said.

‘You’ll learn to do that, once the hard work starts.’ She smiled at him, as though remembering her own youth, and sat with him at the wooden table. He stirred three sugars into his tea. ‘You don’t look like him, you know,’ she told him. ‘Whatever your brother’s condition, you look like a different kind.’

‘What do I look like?’

‘You look like you know the world, and what it can do. You look like you might forget dreaming. You look like your hands and how they work are what will matter.’

‘And this is your dream, working here?’

She smiled. There was no bitterness there. ‘This is someone’s dream. If not mine. I made myself part of it. We’re still free to choose which story we want to be part of. This is my choice. Maybe it’s part of something bigger. Something that contains your brother, even. Let it be.’

‘We’re going away,’ he told her. ‘I’m taking him with me.’

If she was surprised, there was no revelation. ‘Go as fast as you can,’ she said. ‘Go until you cannot turn back. Indecision is the worst sin. Commit to your choices, whatever they are.’

‘Sometimes you don’t get to choose.’ He was thinking of Ela.

‘You always get to choose.’

‘You think people can do what they like, become who they like, and decide for themselves who they will be?’

‘There’s a world much bigger than we are. We’re only born into it. What it does with us is not up to us. Except for our responses. Only these are in our reach.’

‘You chose to be a maid.’

‘I chose to feed my children.’

‘I’m choosing to go.’

‘He told you to.’

‘Zuko wants to come with me. That’s his choice.’

‘Then make of your lives what you can.’

They talked until his tea was cold, then he swallowed it down. ‘You think he’ll come after us?’

She shrugged. ‘No one knows what’s in a man’s heart. He knew you were out there, somewhere on the road. He didn’t try to find you. He waited for you to come to him.’

Later he woke Zuko and they left the house before Rahl and his wife were awake. At the door, Delores pushed a small red bag with a zip into Ash’s hand. ‘A few things,’ she said. ‘You might need them later. When it’s cold.’

17.

They waited in a car park until night fell, and slept that night in an abandoned guard’s hut at the entrance to an industrial park. A large container stood on the wet concrete beside a green truck. Behind the buildings a high road arced, on which cars criss-crossed each other as they passed. Above it the mountain darkened with the night until it became invisible, like a force or an apparition or a guardian or watchman that would keep the city and those who inhabited her safe until the morning. A witness to those who suffered the city’s violence.

It rained sometime past midnight. They woke simultaneously and listened to the dull sound of the drops on the wooden roof. Ash moved the blanket over Zuko’s shoulders, and tried to sleep. Before dawn he dreamed of his mother. He dreamed of her draped in a blue blanket, her face covered with white markings as though they’d been painted there by hand with chalk or paint or some other decorative and careful ancient art. In the dream, Zuko cried out at the recognition of their mother. He ran to her, and told her of the stranger in Cape Town, how he’d taken them in, promised them a home and a sanctuary, and how he promised she’d live with them also. Only when Ash had watched for some time did he realise his brother had words at last. That Zuko spoke without effort while their mother stood, smiling and holding him, talking back as though she still belonged to the living. From behind her there emerged another figure, the stranger, and Ash ran towards him. He hoped in his dream that the man, Dominic Rahl, would tell him there’d been a terrible mistake. But the man’s

eyes grew large and his hair long, and suddenly the green bag he carried, the same bag they'd lost on the rocks before they reached the city, transformed into an infant, a crying child. The man he'd thought had been his father looked at him with hollow, pleading eyes and said, 'Please leave us alone. This is my family now.'

When he awoke, Zuko stood over him, shivering. The boy's clothes were wet. He'd been out already, walking alone in the rain. Outside across the tarmac a man stood in a doorway in a guard's uniform. He cooked coffee on a pot over a gas flame above a canister on the ground. 'I've been waiting for you to wake up,' the man called. 'You look like you could do with a cup of coffee.'

'Is that your hut?' Ash asked the man as the three sheltered in the doorway, watching the rain.

'I was late for my shift last night. My wife is ill in hospital. When I came in, you were both already asleep.'

'You should have woken us.'

'Bad luck to interrupt a man's dreams. It leaves things unfinished. Half-formed.'

'Are things ever finished?' Ash asked.

The man blew on his steaming coffee. 'Not until the end of everything,' he said.

18.

They caught a lift in the blue truck that took them on the high road out of town. After the rain the day was cold. Zuko wore his boots laced up, his scarf around his neck and the woollen beanie on his head. He liked the weight of his new jacket. It contained his skin, provided substance and a heaviness that grounded him. It allowed him to feel where his being ended, and where the hugeness of the world's space began. Now he didn't feel such a tendency to float away, if gravity failed him. He imagined sleeping under the jacket, the pleasure of the weighting-down. Beneath the stars and a black, open sky, he would be safe. The truck dropped them at the side of the road. They were out of the city. To the left, over flatlands and low hills, they glimpsed the sea. Ahead lay dark mountains. They would get over these, eventually. There was always time.

As they walked, Zuko knew he'd experienced something like this before. It was not anger or fear or hopelessness. These were things he knew you never got over. Instead, it had something to do with the unknown. In his head he could not name it, or know exactly what it was.

Beside his brother, and on the gravel of the roadside, his feet in the boots found a sound, a rhythm in counterpoint to Ash's own. Zuko counted. As they walked the clouds cleared. The air grew solid. Grass evaporated. Transparent trees played tricks with his eyes. The minutes drew themselves out into whole days, the way a week went by like a single second. He tried to summon the butterfly back to him. The insect had done his bidding, day after day, and eventually grown so red and so angry it threatened to explode. Out here, heading away from the city, his ability to call it up had vanished. His eyes found other creatures instead. A swooping bird. A darting skink. His hands opened and closed, empty. He remembered the way the seahorse had felt, smooth and light in his hands. The way he'd only have to look down, to see his plastic friend smile.

They passed a stone trough and waiting cows, chewing in a field. Cows, in their wisdom, never had to hurry. As he walked the air was still. He knew the definitive cacophony of silence. The yellow-gold blooms in the field buzzed in his ears, colours mixed and blurred as sound, the gold and the greens and the blue of small flowers. In the afternoon the searing sun burned his vision, each time he looked up. Ash took his jacket from him, and tied it around his waist. The scent of the warm air mixed up with his skin, and threatened to destroy his own boundaries, to merge him with the world. A breeze stirred, promising nothing. A flock of birds carried his eyes with them, across the blue. They walked until the perspiration stung their eyes, until their boots wore down and cut blisters into their skin, and mountains were crossed and they swallowed rivers that offered them respite. They slept together beneath an open sky. Ash counted stars aloud for his bedtime stories. They followed days and weeks of walking, and when they were tired they sat on white stones and watched beetles that laboured to push whole worlds across time. Above them sang an African sky. Zuko alone heard the sound.

END

Author's Note

The way Zuko's autism presents within the pages of this book is in no way definitive of the condition. Zuko's fears, his love of pattern and nature, his gentle disposition is not meant to mirror the fears or the loves or the disposition of all people with autism everywhere. The fact that Zuko is not in school does not present an inability to learn, but that there is no system in his environment that adequately caters for his autism and learning style. Zuko's sensory experiences and perceptions are unique to his own body, biochemical make-up and way of being, in the same way that his language deficits and difficulties are in no way typical of all autistic language differences. Zuko's autism is specific to his own body, just as people with the condition are affected differently and experience and respond to the world in their own unique way. There is no single condition or experience of autism, just as there is no single experience or way of being human.

The purpose of this book, then, is not to try and define or explain the condition of autism. My purpose in writing a character with autism into this story is instead to expand on the collection of autism narratives and perspectives we find in literary fiction.

Acknowledgement must go to Tito Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree* (2000), as inspiration for the creation of some of Zuko's experience and imaginings.

**Autism and Representation:
A Critical Essay**

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Introduction

The hand had made a strange relationship with its shadow, and he fluttered it and spent his hours, contented with the lone company of his shadow. And his worries stopped. He shut away the world and felt secure in the presence of his shadow. If only the world could be a game with the shadow! But the reality was that he was drawing himself away and away into the world of his shadow (Mukhopadhyay 2011:2).

According to Autism South Africa, the national support and advocacy organisation for the condition, Autism Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong, extremely complex condition that appears to result from a genetic predisposition that is triggered by environmental factors. The global statistic of incidents of autism as 1:68 children affected is now accepted by Autism South Africa. It is also globally accepted that boys are four times more likely to have the condition than girls. Those who fall into these very generalised and impersonal statistics are diagnosed by observable behaviours. These behaviours and manifestations must appear before the child is three years old, and they affect individuals differently. At the risk of oversimplifying and understating the vast scope of neurodiversity that currently exists as a result of the condition, autism is marked by difficulties with expressive or spoken communication, deficits in social and emotional reciprocity, deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, deficits in developing and maintaining relationships, and stereotyped or repetitive activities or use of objects. Such deficits typically manifest as developing spoken language late, presenting with atypical speech patterns, or no development of spoken language at all. In addition to language difficulties, people with autism present with extreme adherence to routines, ritualised patterns and fixed interests and hyper-or hypo-reactivity to sensory input (or have an unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment). Such difficulties and differences experienced by people with autism can present as a wide range of varying degrees of difficulties across all developmental areas. The common catch-all term Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) speaks of the heterogeneity of the condition.

Aside from the language and behavioural markers described above, examination of the brain and MRI studies have shown that autism is related to both structural and functional differences in the brain that result in abnormal biology or chemistry. That said, however, recognition of the condition of autism clearly relies on the notion of deficit or lack in relation to an understood and widely-recognised mean or normal standard of communication, sociability and range of interests. The term ‘deficit’, used widely in diagnostic and academic literature on autism, implies that there is a mean or norm against which people with the condition are measured. As deviance from a developmental and social norm, the condition is stigmatised by public perceptions of alienation, aloneness and isolation, because of the communication and social difficulties experienced by people with the condition.

As a precursor to the broader questions of the representation of autism that are the focus of this essay, it is necessary to briefly highlight the history of the condition and its construction in discourse. The history of autism as presented in this essay traces back to the 1940s, to the time of Kanner and Asperger and their naming of the condition. For the purposes of this study, I have limited my research to this time period, from the 1940s to the present, and I do not touch on earlier discourses from which autism also arose, or that existed further back in time. The condition of autism came into being when the word was used by psychiatrist Leo Kanner to describe a sub-set of his patients at John Hopkins University in the United States in 1943. Kanner had already established the first child psychiatry clinic at the university, and he also authored the first English textbook of child psychiatry. Just a year later, Viennese physician Hans Asperger used the same term to describe a group of children who presented with specific patterns of behaviour. However, the word ‘autism’ itself was not new. Derived from the Greek word ‘autos’, meaning ‘self,’ it was introduced at the start of the 20th century by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler as a defining symptom of schizophrenia. What this history suggests, is that neither the word ‘autism’ nor the condition that came to be associated with it emerged in a vacuum, independent of other social developments of the time, such as developments in psychology and theories of child development. Hacking contends that there are also precedents in German literature, before Kanner and Asperger used the term ‘autism’ for specific groups of their patients:

[I]n the 1930s there was an American guru named Arnold Gessel, who had a role similar to that of Dr Spock in the 1960s. In such books as *The Mental Growth of the Pre-*

School Child: A Psychological Outline of Normal Development from Birth to the Sixth Year, including a System of Developmental Diagnosis (1925), he told parents exactly how their children should develop, the age at which they would be able to tie their shoelaces etc. Middle-class people knew their Gesell. Thanks to him, you knew when there was something awry with your child's development (2006:3-7: accessed online).

Bleuler's book, *The Group of Schizophrenias* (1950), later helped to spread the word *autism*, when it was used to denote the self-absorption of some of his patients (Hacking 2006).

Both Kanner and Asperger began their lives in Austria-Hungary. The prevailing modernist climate in Europe at the time created the perfect soil from which the field of child development, and thus the condition of autism, could grow. Revolutions in art, literature, philosophy, and science at the start of the twentieth century also allowed for sudden growth-spurts in fields such as special education, parenting, and psychiatry. These advances created an environment that facilitated a more intensive focus on children and their development (Nadesan, 2008:84). It can be said, therefore, that autism grew out of a context of modernism, alongside an emerging practice of psychology that focused on the individual, and a sense of an alienated self in relation to the 'other' that emerged simultaneously in other spheres such as philosophy and literature. This notion of the 'self' in relation to the 'other' within the field of autism was reflected in Austrian-born psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's detailed theory of the 'refrigerator mother' in his 1967 book *The Empty Fortress*. The basic premise of this theory is that autism was caused either by maternal neglect or the lack of proper bonding. This inability to bond resulted in separation and social isolation from the other within the family unit. The symptoms of autism, then, were caused by the child's trauma at his or her mother's rejection. This narrative of the 'refrigerator mother' and her inability to bond properly with her child dominated the discourse around autism at the time. This illustrates the important point that, since the naming of the condition, society has tried to provide some form of explanatory framework for the condition. Bettelheim's famous book defined autism as a condition that should be treated through psychoanalysis of the mother, whose parenting skills were blamed for her child's interrupted and incomplete emotional development and her inability to bond with others. Texts such as Bettelheim's were a product of their time, and

illustrate how autism as a condition emerged out of a specific social and intellectual context. Majia Holmer Nadesan sums up the link between how the condition of autism and our attitudes towards it are created and interpreted according to the social developments of the time: “The convergence of new ideas about childhood, new systems of surveillance, new expert authorities, and new institutional arrangements – provided the condition of possibility for autism to be identified, named and interpreted” (2008:125). By attending to these changing contexts, we are able to track a discursive history of the condition of autism by paying close attention to the professional texts that emerged in the period that followed.

In the decades of the 1970s and '80s, the theory of cognitive behaviourism came to the fore, and the story of autism changed. Behaviourism emerged from the conditioning theories of people such as John B. Watson and Burrhus Frederic Skinner, ideas which were absorbed into existing approaches to treating autism. Conditioning theory operates on the premise that environmental stimuli shape our behaviour. When applied to autism, it came to be believed that autistic behaviours could be either reduced or reinforced, depending on the response of the therapist, teacher, parent or environment. In this approach, no consideration is given to internal mental or emotional states as these are considered too subjective. The assumption was that if parents, doctors, therapists and teachers worked the children hard enough, and responded correctly and timeously to their behaviour, then the autism, or the behaviours it presented, might be eliminated. Language might even be learned. Behavioural approaches are still used in autism, predominantly in the United States, and also in pockets of South Africa. However, in the United Kingdom and Europe, and increasingly in South Africa, pure behaviourism as an approach to autism has largely been replaced with a combination approach. In some cases, it has been completely rejected in favour of social-developmental approaches which take the child's experience into account. Currently, neuroscience, the biochemistry of the brain and the role of genetics serve as the current discourse or 'lens' through which autism is viewed, constructed and deconstructed. In this view, the common anxieties, restlessness and other problems with concentration and social behaviour associated with autism are seen to be causally related to brain structure. Medical interventions to control these symptoms are now commonplace, even in children as young as two. Genetic interpretations of autism such as the ones described above are often based on research into twins (Leung, 2012:7). Despite their differences, all of the approaches outlined above – encompassing psychological, behavioural, neurological and genetic explanations – are in agreement that someone or something be made to answer for the condition. Whether it

be the mother, the doctor, the therapist, the neurobiology or the ‘systems thinker’ father whose career falls into the technical rather than social arena such as engineering or computers, and family genes, society demands that someone own up and be responsible.

In recent years, there has been a considerable rise in interest in, and fascination with, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from the media and general public. This has led to an increase in depictions of, and narratives centring on, autism in various forms of popular culture. Judging by the plethora of books, films and movies which engage with characters on the autism spectrum since Dustin Hoffman’s performance in the film *Rain Man* (1988), it seems clear that the public fascination with the condition has never been as strong. As Ching-man Leung asserts, “The public anxiety, speculation and curiosity on autism have aroused a more visible and intensified autistic presence not only in clinical, scientific or academic literature, but also in popular culture including film and literature” (2012:2). According to Thomas G. Crouser, popular culture is saturated with images of disability; in fact, he suggests that disabled people in mainstream culture have in fact been *hyper*represented, even obsessively, and often as a prompt or a prop for narrative. Ian Hacking concurs with this view: he predicts that despite the absence of definitive knowledge of the condition, “[a]utism will figure this year in dozens, maybe hundreds of cheap novels, thrillers and maybe a good book or two, just as multiple personality did fifteen years ago” (2006:3). Despite their relatively recent description in the scientific literature, modern Western literature and popular culture are littered with stereotypes of some of the facets of autism and Asperger syndrome (Bates 2010:47). As such, the condition of autism as well as the ideas and images surrounding it are represented in a variety of ways, whether through professional literature, academia, memoir, autobiography or fiction. These narratives and stories, digested and interpreted by the general public, have been key to that public’s impression and understanding of the condition.

Autism remains a spectrum disorder, with a wide range of presentations. In the light of this, what popular representations surrounding autism have emerged tend to be rather limited, even to the extent of collaborating with stereotypical public perceptions of the condition. This view of autism, therefore, is limited to its function within the narrative. The majority of fictional books and films with ASD characters at their centre portray these characters as verbal, and located on the high end of the spectrum (what was previously classified as Asperger’s syndrome). Less represented in fiction is what is commonly termed

‘classic autism’, where communication, social, and sensory difficulties are so severe that they impede ‘normal’ functioning to a profound degree. It is possible that we are presented with only one side of the ASD coin. As Bates suggests, “novels containing characters who show the full triad of primary symptoms of autistic disorder, with impairment of language and socialising and a preference for routine, are relatively rare” (47). Additionally, in these and other popular representational forms, autism remains a *disability*, an alternate way of being, deviant from an established norm. A further critique of popular autism representation comes from Murray who suggests that autism narratives have primarily been used to tell the stories of the *non-disabled* (2008:328). Murray’s position is that people with disabilities have been placed in movies, fiction and other forms of narrative as supporting acts, as characters to highlight or support the pain, the growth, or the journeys of the non-disabled. As an alternative to this, and considering the many ways in which a person with ASD might be affected, it is equally possible to imagine the many ways in which autism might be constructed and portrayed. It may be argued that the depiction of autism in popular culture tends to serve the general public’s fascination with the condition, rather than portraying any real or authentic account of what autism is.

ASD continues to capture the public imagination, and even to feed it. Perhaps this recent hunger for stories concerning people with marked neurological and social difference is rooted in the depths of a human psyche that relies on metaphor. Metaphor has persisted through time and across cultures as a fundamental way in which human beings understand and explain their experiences. Perhaps the condition of autism has come to stand as a larger metaphor for our society. We may, for example, be inspired by popular narratives of the savant with an extraordinary skill in a single area, a narrative which also feeds into the hope that our brains are more capable and contain more potential than we realise. Perhaps, at the same time, narratives of autism at once fascinate and make us afraid when we are faced with the threat of our own loneliness, our sense of existential alienation. Alternatively, perhaps current popular representations of autism find resonance within us because of our own personal struggles between our social selves with our desires for interaction and reassurance on the one hand and our craving for solitude on the other. In these and other ways, the popular narratives around autism that have emerged in the past twenty years have fed not only our collective imaginations, but also our preoccupation with the state of the self. Just as the named condition of autism emerged in the context of modernist ideas of alienation and aloneness, it is equally possible that the condition of post-modernity with its own heightened

anxieties, stresses, informational overload and data-filled human experiences has contributed to our definition and construction of high-functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome. Common perceptions of people on the high end of the spectrum are that they are pattern and numbers proficient and focussed, rather than socially and emotionally driven. They have the ability to retain extraordinary amounts of information about limited and detailed subject matter, and have limited and stereotypical ways of communication. The way our society is now perceived and structured, as well as the growth of special education as a specialist field and the necessity of funding for such education, have likely contributed to the ways in which autism is perceived in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much of this, I would argue, is related to our heightened anxieties about how we, as individuals and collectively, 'should be.'

As the foregoing suggests, the question of autism and its representation raises important questions about the epistemological importance of narrative itself. Stuart Murray states that Mitchell and Snyder are correct to say that "Americans learn perspective on disability from books and films more than from policies or personal interactions," and that this is true of non-American locations as well (2008:4). As Lewis, Rogers and Woolcock (2008) attest, literature can constitute a key form of social evidence and testimony. Autism is a condition lived and experienced by many people. Writing about autism, or writing about characters on the ASD spectrum, allows for an interpretation of the condition, and those who live with it, for a wider reading world. As Woolcock et al suggest, arguing in the contexts of the social sciences, narrative or stories about particular conditions or events can offer as many, if not more, insights than empirical studies. Bates makes a similar point about the role of narrative in the understanding of autism in particular:

Some writers have illuminated aspects of the autistic triad of social impairments, abnormalities of language and need for sameness. Other writers have opened our eyes to the autistic world view in its strangeness and richness. Still more have started to examine prejudice, disability rights and the implications of an international autism community. As in other areas of mental health, literature can help inform, entertain and question our attitudes and values (2010:47).

According to Woolcock et al, “T[t]he power of literature to effectively convey complex ideas should not be surprising” (2010:4).

As Crouser suggests, however, the cultural representation of disability generally has functioned at the expense of disabled people in part because they have not controlled their own images (2005:603). As Mark Osteen notes in his book, *Autism and Representation*, “cognitively disabled people are often deemed incompetent to manage their own therapy, or even their own daily lives, let alone write about those lives. Thus, autism has been represented over the years by mostly non-autistic people” (2008:20). According to Osteen, these difficulties are compounded by the fact that disability scholarship has perhaps focussed more on physical disability, and largely ignored cognitive, intellectual, or neurological disabilities, thereby excluding the intellectually disabled just as mainstream society has done. In his review of Osteen’s book, however, Chris Gabbard points out that what interest mainstream society has given the intellectually disabled has largely been directed toward autism. Thus “*autism* is rapidly becoming a catchall term, colonizing a broad swathe of mistaken associations in the way that the term *idiocy* once did” (2010:13).

Leung’s work on autism and representation provides an important critique of these dominant representational forms and a suggestive departure point for my own study. Of particular concern for Leung is the extent to which the autistic subject is imagined, represented, misrepresented and fantasised as ‘other’. Leung also examines the conventional, stereotypical and monolithic representations of autism in popular culture: “Autistic characters are consistently portrayed as lonely, uncommunicative, rigid, logical and highly vulnerable individuals, who can hardly fit themselves into ordinary lives. In respect of plot formulation, [many autism narratives] are structured by detective framework and adopt the classic run-away-home formula, to create the thrilling and dangerous self-discovery journeys of the innocent and powerless autistic characters” (2012:72). Like Leung, Osteen is also concerned with the conventions of autism representation and possible alternatives. Of particular importance here is the question of whether and how people with autism should be ‘spoken for’. He asks the questions of ‘who speaks’ particularly strongly (Gabbard 2010). Perhaps in this regard, the answer to questions of stereotyping, voice and portrayal in representation might lie in the variation of and number of ways that autism is represented in literature.

In this essay, I build on the work of these critics by offering a comparative analysis of autism representation in the genres of medicine, popular fiction and the emerging field of autism autobiography (or ‘autism from the inside’). Selected examples of the medico-professional literature include *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* (2013); *The Me Book* (O Ivar Lovaas 1981), instrumental in bringing the Behavioural approach of ABA to the fore-front; *Engaging Autism* (Greenspan and Wieder 2007) which describes a developmental and relationship approach; and my own book *Children on the Bridge: A Story of Autism in South Africa* (2006), that describes my own early experiences working in the field of autism. Outside of professional texts, the condition of autism has been represented in literature both ‘from the inside’ by writers with autism (primarily narrative non-fiction) and by neurotypical writers through both fiction and non-fiction. I will extend my analysis of autism representation by looking at the representation of autism and characters with autism in two popular and well-known works of fiction, Jodi Picoult’s *House Rules* (2010), followed by Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (2003). Following my exploration of autism and representation in these two fictional texts, I will extend my discussion by exploring examples of autobiography and memoir written by people on the autism spectrum. *Different... Not Less*, edited by the world’s most famous autistic Temple Grandin (2012), is a recent collection of life stories written by adults on the autism spectrum. *The Mind Tree* by Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay (2011) was written when Mukhopadhyay, diagnosed at two years old with severe non-verbal autism, was between the ages of eight and eleven. Daniel Tammet’s *Embracing the Wide Sky* (2009) is equally interesting and unique in that it describes the detailed workings of the mind of an autistic savant. Through a comparative reading of three distinct genres of contemporary autism representation, I will be able to explore the contributions made by recent books containing characters on the autism spectrum as well as the way in which the condition of autism has been represented in the wider public domain. The choice of professional, autobiographical and fictional works discussed here aims neither to be exhaustive nor prescriptive, but emerges from the extent of my own personal reading and experience and are offered simply as examples of the broad range of literature available in the field of autism. It is not my intention to compare fiction in terms of its value with either professional texts or life writing in understanding the condition of autism, but instead to examine how the way literature is framed affects its impact and intention, and to explore how different narratives can potentially offer and reveal different truths about the condition of ASD.

As has been suggested in my earlier introductory comments, an important thematic focus has to do with the epistemological role of literature and its relation to ‘truth’. This is also the position informing Bates’ argument that some novels have brought important issues of autism culture to a wider audience, and that fictional and autobiographical accounts can help us to start to understand the autistic experience, while at the same time encouraging empathy with those affected and their families (2010:51). Of particular interest will be the question of whether the fictional representation of autism can contribute to forms of knowledge about autism. Also of interest are the ways in which the abilities and specifics of autism serve the story or greater narrative. I will explore the contributions that the chosen works of popular fiction potentially make to further our knowledge of the condition, what devices are used to portray autism, and I will compare and contrast these with the contributions made by professional literature, and autobiographical writing by people on the autism spectrum.

I conclude this study of the representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the ‘autistic character’ by exploring some of the ethical and aesthetic questions of representing autism in the writing of my own novel, *The Hum of the Sun*. Of special interest in this regard are questions of narrative arc and strategy, language, common stereotypes, plot devices, resolution and common presuppositions. These questions take on a particular resonance when applied to the representation of autism and characters on the autism spectrum, characters and situations which in many respects may be considered ‘unrepresentable’. The critical essay will therefore connect to my own novel writing experience by reflecting on and informing the creative choices I make in constructing characters, voice and relationship within the narrative.

The primary focus of this research project (both its critical and creative dimensions) concerns the potential contribution that works of literary fiction can make to the representation of autism, and my own understanding and experience of writing. This perspective provides a starting point for the construction of my own novel, *The Hum of the Sun*, in which I portray and represent a character on the autism spectrum. The purpose of the critical essay is to bring both autism and its representation through literature together, and to explore the ways in which autism is represented in a variety of discursive modes. This will serve to illuminate some of the aesthetic and ethical implications of writing a fictional character with autism in my own work.

Narrative, Representation, Discourse

According to film theorist David Bordwell a narrative can be studied through representation, structure or narration. When we examine a narrative through the lens of *representation*, we are “considering the story’s world, its portrayal of some reality, or its broader meanings” (1986:17). In other words, representation is how a narrative refers to a world or signifies a body of ideas. In Bordwell’s view, most studies of realism or character in fiction exemplify an interest in narrative as representation. He explains that representation often criss-crosses with the other two approaches of structure and narration but, for the purposes of this study, I will focus on the question of representation, and apply it to autism. In the pursuit of a definition of representation, Stuart Hall describes representation as “the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning” (1997:61). This implies that there is no intrinsic or fixed meaning in anything in the world, but that meaning is ascribed by humans: “It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify”. As a result, meanings will be subject to specific cultures and time periods, and also change across cultures and time. Representation becomes part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged within a culture. It is therefore important to accept cultural relativism when examining any form of representation.

The Foucauldian concept of discourse and the way in which knowledge is produced in particular ways by different discourses is relevant here. What is interesting is that different discourses – medical, legal, scientific – produce or construct their ‘knowledge-objects’ in different ways. As Stuart Hall puts it, “This idea that physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse, is at the heart of the constructionist theory of meaning and representation” (Hall 2013:30). For my purposes then, autism only exists in the meaning/s created around it in particular discourses. As such, the particular representation of autism – the particular construction it is given – is directly dependent on, or mediated by, the discourse within which it is embedded, whether medico-professional text, memoir or popular works of fiction. Foucault’s concept of discourse also enables us to understand how *what* is said fits into a network that has its own history and conditions of existence, all of which have an impact on how that object is understood (Barrett

1991:126). Accordingly, this study will give attention to the different orders of representation (dominant narratives, symbols, motifs and language styles) which characterise the genres of fiction, autobiography and professional literature respectively, in order to highlight the range of meanings and forms of sense-making which these genres encourage.

Nadesan places the condition of autism within the frame of discourse when she reminds us that autism as a “meaningful diagnostic category” only emerged in the 1940s, and that we must understand this “in relation to a matrix of professional and parental practices that marked the cultural and economic transition to the twentieth century” (2008:115). This observation adds to our awareness of the role of cultural systems and related discourses in the construction and ‘invention’ of particular conditions such as autism spectrum disorder in literature, as well as how they are interpreted in later years. Nadesan argues that “[a]utism is a disorder that emerged and was created in relation to cultural practices and discourses specific to particular points in time: the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and, more recently, the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century” (120). She makes the point that we must contextualise the history of autism in all its forms within the evolution and transformation of medical practices and the development of professions (122). Hall makes a similar point when arguing about the value of Foucault’s notion of discourse in contrast to what he sees as the rather ahistorical tendency in the field of semiotic theory: “Things meant something and were ‘true’... *only within a specific historical context*” (2013:31). Taking these and other points into consideration, I would argue that it is only within a particular discursive formation that the object – autism – can appear at all as a meaningful construct. Or to put it slightly differently, the meaning of autism will shift depending on the historical period, and the particular discourse, in which it is produced.

In the light of this, it is interesting to examine also how discourse creates meaning, how meaning creates knowledge, and how knowledge becomes linked to different forms of power. Hall expands on this idea when he says that “Foucault argued that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not” (Hall 2013:33). Hall also points out that knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’, but has the power to *make itself true*. Hall’s reading of Foucault also highlights the classic Foucauldian argument that power circulates rather than being monopolised by one centre. “This suggests”, Hall argues, “that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation – oppressors and

oppressed” (34). We can apply the Foucauldian link between knowledge and power to the potential vulnerability of people with ASD. With limited or no language with which to express themselves, their rights or their objections, their very bodies are vulnerable to becoming subject to the discursive definition and therefore the control of others. To apply Hall’s formulation to the condition of autism: “The [autistic] body is *produced* within discourse, according to the different discursive formations, the state of knowledge ... what counts as ‘true’ about how to change [autistic behaviour] the specific apparatus and technologies of punishment prevailing at the time” (2013:35). Expanding on the idea of power and how it is inferred or disseminated by discourse, Hall writes that far from being a purely linguistic concept, discourse is as much about language as it is about *practice* (italics mine). The word discourse itself “attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between what one *says* (language) and what one *does* (practice) ... It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others”. Thus meaning and meaningful practice, as well as power relations, are created. In order to gain knowledge from discourse, it is never enough to examine one statement, one text, one action or one source. Instead, one looks at the general outlines of the particular discourse across a range of texts. It is therefore the discourse, and not the texts in themselves, that construct knowledge. When examining discourse and autism through Foucault’s lens, one would include not only statements about autism but also the rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about autism (and exclude other ways), the ‘subjects’ who personify autism, how this knowledge acquires authority, the practices within institutions for dealing with autism, and the acknowledgement that a different discourse will arise at a later historical moment and supplant the existing one (Hall 2013:29).

As I have already suggested, the notion of power that emerges within discourse also has application in relation to the social function of autism texts. An historical reading of autism literature reveals an earlier consensus that suggested that a mother’s coldness was to blame for her inability to bond with her own child, thereby making her responsible for the disruption of his emotional development. It also records a time in cognitive behavioural therapy when a lack of response by the therapist, parent or teacher, or even punishment, were considered acceptable forms of intervention. As already discussed, within the framework of behavioural literature and practice, the cognitive and emotional mind of the person with autism tended to be discounted. Only the body and the extent to which its behaviours could be altered by the reinforcement or reaction of others was granted importance. A more recent

discursive consensus, based on the discourse of human rights and autism advocacy, would even go as far as to reject the notion that people with autism should be ‘therapied’ at all, let alone punished for behaviours or responses that are part of their condition. In this way, the autistic body is subject to notions of power created by knowledge and literature as a result of prevailing discourse.

Also pertinent to the critical analysis pursued in this essay, and working in productive tension with the idea of discourse, is Roland Barthes’ notion of textuality and the artifice of writing – a focus which draws attention to the ‘writerliness’ of the text, its textuality, sensuality, its literarity (Barrett, 1991:124). Such an approach advocates an appreciation of the character of language, and that the literary ‘text’ should be engaged with on its own terms, rather than as information about the ‘world out there’. In its focus on language and literary style, which Barthes argues are a feature of all texts, Barthes’ work poses a challenge to “traditional distinctions between academic and creative writing” (Barrett, 1991:125). Neither text, in other words, offers unmediated access to reality: “At the root of this position lies the understanding that language is not a medium for the transmission of content – it is not ‘transparent’ in such a way as to convey its contents without interference: on the contrary, language *is* the producer of meaning” (124). Hall makes a similar distinction between the reflective account of representation, where it is assumed that literature reflects a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, the intentional approach, where it is argued that language expresses only what the writer wants to say, and the constructionist approach, where meaning is understood to be constructed in and through language. “Many traditional as well as recent forms of literacy, art and film concern themselves principally with the object of study as a ‘text’ to be engaged with in its *own* terms rather than something to be explained with reference to external factors such as historical, social or biographical context” (Barret, 1991:124). This attention to textuality emphasises an appreciation of the particular characteristics of language itself.

Lewis, Rogers and Woolcock et al make a similar point in relation to conventional notions of discursive ‘truth’. Different modes of representation will impart different visions of the world, and thus knowledge of reality is mediated by the various forms that represent it (2008:3). Nevertheless, there exists a perceived hierarchy of authority according to which the general population makes assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge. Thus in order to find out about autism, one is more likely to consult a medical text rather than read a work

of fiction. As Woolcock et al go on to explain, however, the line between literature and the social sciences is difficult to distinguish with any clarity: “it can be contended that all forms of ... knowledge can be – and historically have been – largely understood as a series of ‘stories’ (2008:1) and that storytelling is one of humankind’s oldest methods of possessing information and representing reality. They argue further that, “Storytelling as a narrative form and research method has long existed within the social sciences ... It can come in the shape of case study material of individual experience or more broadly as ethnographic writing within anthropological texts ...” (2008:10). Also citing the work of Foucault, Woolcock et al point out that the texts that we today categorise as ‘literary fiction’ – stories, poems, plays – were in fact once accepted as the primary media for the expression of essential truths about human dilemmas and understandings of the world, “in the same way that in this day and age positivist scientific discourse is received as authoritative *pro forma*” (2008:3).

With these and other questions in mind, I go on to consider the various ways in which autism and the autistic character has been named and constructed in a wide range of fictional and non-fictional texts. Here, I engage not only with the broader question of representation and discourse but extend this to include a comparative analysis of the constraints and possibilities of different discursive modes and the ways in which they influence how the ‘knowledge-object’ is defined and understood. How, for example, is the condition of autism determined and shaped by the particular discourse in which it is inscribed/invented? What is the influence of particular narrative conventions and forms? And in what sense is it possible to consider non-factual discourses such as fiction or autobiography as the revelation of some kind of truth?

Autism in the discourse of medicine/psychology

Regarding the general characteristics of diagnostic and professional literature, Charlotte Brownlow and Lindsay O’Dell offer the following observation: “Generally such approaches to understanding autism draw on a deficit model, seeking to identify impairments and deficiencies in people with autism” (2009:18). Such texts are also distinctive in the way they are marked by clinical descriptions, depersonalised language that is devoid of metaphor, and by the lack of personal or subjective accounts. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V or DSM edition V* (2013) is the primary world-wide resource for diagnosing autism, to which all medical practitioners must refer. As the definitive work on how the condition is identified

and interpreted, it is worth noting how the arrangement of information and the language used in the *DSM*, is subject to change. For example, the new 2013 edition included a fundamental change with regard to Autism Spectrum Disorders. Previously, ASD was defined as four separate conditions (autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified). These have now been collapsed into one umbrella disorder. The fact that the language describing the condition can change so fundamentally is indicative of how the condition is subject to the pressures of changes in the wider society, which also speaks to notions of knowledge and power. In a Foucauldian reading, this manual of mental health disorders not only becomes the definitive text on autism; it also creates it. In 1981, Dr Lorna Wing initially conceptualised the condition of autism as a 'triad of impairments' that included social deficits and obsession with order. This is the language and conceptualisation that provided the groundwork for the diagnosis of autism as it is described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Brownlow & O'Dell 2009:3). An interesting contrast to the clinical and precise language of deficit and exclusion which has characterised the work of Wing and others in the *DSM* is to be found in Wing's Introduction to Tito Mukhopadhyay's book *The Mind Tree*. In this context, she writes: "Those like Tito, with remarkable skills in contrast to their general level of disability, arouse feeling of wonder, astonishment and intellectual curiosity, which are among the many rewards experienced by those working in this field" (2011:xii). Unlike the previous example, the language used here is positive and affirming. I draw attention to this contrast to illustrate just how different the formal language of experts can be, in different contexts and in relation to other types of literature, even when written by these same experts.

Another typical example of professional or diagnostic literature on autism is Ivar Lovaas' *The Me Book* (1981), a text which was instrumental in bringing the Behavioural approach of Applied Behavioural Analysis to the forefront on autism studies. This approach presents autism as something to be controlled and extinguished through the repetition of discreet trials and behavioural intervention. As the introduction to the book explains: "This book is intended for teachers and parents to help developmentally disabled persons learn to live more meaningful lives" (1). The presumption on which much of the medical and professional literature around autism is based is that a life is not meaningful until it conforms closely to what is considered neurotypical. Lovaas later switched to a process known as intensive operant conditioning or pure behaviourism, which he called Applied Behavioural Analysis (Hacking 2006). Hacking describes this approach as follows:

At the earliest possible age, even 30 months, the child begins to work with a trainer, seven hours a day, six days a week. Anything good, a single sound at the right time, a look in the right direction, is reinforced with smiles and even sweets. Bad behaviour is rigorously discouraged. The Lovaas method costs about £40,000 a year. The claim is that after this gruelling preparation, the child with an assistant can start in the state school system, and by the age of 12 be fully integrated. A lot of experts do not accept this (2006:5).

Like other examples of professional literature on autism, the Lovaas method, as described above, is primarily concerned with the gap between neurotypical 'norms' and how children affected by autism fall short of these. The Lovaas method aims at language acquisition and behavioural regulation through intensive trials of response and reward or punishment (although punishment has largely been dropped from the regime in recent decades). The narrative arc that is implied in this discourse assumes a notion of some kind of 'betterment': It begins with a story of lack and deficit, and stretches towards improvement, and even cure. The professional literature on autism is thus distinguished by the dominant theme of transformation, thus providing a fitting example of Foucault's arguments regarding

the ways in which knowledge is put to work through discursive practices in specific institutional settings to regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2013:32).

In addition to this narrative of promised betterment or improvement, is what might be called the ‘narrative of expertise’ or ‘good doctor narrative’. In this particular subset of the professional literature (associated with Kanner, Bettelheim, Lovaas and others), the doctor or specialist is cast as a character who is possibly older, more experienced and more knowledgeable to whom parents, caught in the early stages of the story, can turn to for help. The ‘good doctor narrative’ is one that persists through time, despite the way that autism’s definition has been shaped and re-shaped through developments in the fields of psychology, child development, education and psychiatry. The character at the centre of such a narrative, even more than the children themselves, is the expert, the ‘good doctor’ or the great therapist who will lead the children out of the ‘darkness’. Lovaas’ account provides an illustrative example: “Our programmes help parents and teachers better understand these problem behaviours and teach children and students to better manage their behaviours” (1981:1). Despite the fact that the behavioural approach has been refuted by theorists of the stature of Noam Chomsky, these methods persist in the United States and in affluent parts of South Africa today. Lovaas is, by all accounts, the ‘good doctor’ and hands his mantle of conversion and agency on to whichever parent, teacher or therapist adopts his methods. Katherine Severson, James Arnt Aune and Demise Jodlowski make a similar point when describing Bettelheim’s approach: “His insights into the children’s behaviour, his ‘milieu’ therapy, his expressed sympathy for the children all ravaged by autism, all further his image of the Good Doctor. It is perhaps the fundamental need to believe in the figure of the good doctor that underlies the mythic rhetorical structure of the persistent belief in the maternal-cause theory of autism” (2008:111). This ‘good doctor’ narrative returns us to Foucault’s notion of the micro-physics of power and the regulation or ‘disciplining’ of the body. As we have seen in the earlier reference to the behavioural literature of the 1980s, therapists and teachers work with a model of the body as that which should be controlled, ‘drilled’ and imposed upon. As a corollary to this, little attention is paid to how the person with autism experiences his or her body, or how a person with autism feels about what is imposed upon them.

In sharp contrast to these more traditional discourses with the suggestion of a redemption narrative at their heart, the new discourse of advocacy and self-representation in

autism studies foregrounds the sensory issues of the autistic body, autism from the internal perspective. These notions begin to serve as a primary narrative to explain how autism feels from the inside. In recent years, the subjective account has come to be held in much higher regard. The power has shifted to the person with autism telling the world how it is, towards empathy from the outside, and agency from the inside.

Examples of the professional literature around autism which is less behavioural and more social and empathetic include Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder's *Engaging Autism* (2007). This book describes a developmental and relationship approach, where the child with autism is seen as more than something that can be controlled and modified through repetitive programming. It is, however, still a text that foregrounds intervention in the sense that it also aims at transformation of the child. Even in this more benign example, the transformation narrative still holds centre sway. This is true of many other alternative methods of approach such as biomedical, diet and other therapies and theories that are too broad to include in this study in any detail. These transformation narratives repeat the dominant trope of the boundary between normality and pathology, and describe narratives of technique and practice to bridge such differences between the state of autism and neurotypical thinking. As in the work of Lovaas, the starting point for the narration of autism in these texts tends to be that of abnormality and deviance. The parent, therapist or teacher needs to work towards a normative ideal, to approach a place on the continuum closer to what is defined as normalcy. In the narrative of change and redemption, the child's 'saving' rests in the hands of the parent, therapist, doctor, nutritionist or teacher, and their personal abilities and prowess, even if the approach is kinder or the 'good doctor' a lot more empathetic.

As a supplement to these two colossal characters in the narrative of autism therapy, Lovaas and Greenspan, it is worth examining my own book, *Children on the Bridge – a Story of Autism in South Africa* (2006). Although my own practice and training drew on the works of both Lovaas and Greenspan, amongst others, it favoured a hybrid and eclectic approach that attempted to take into account the emotional life and being behind the children's autism, a development that occurred in response to the broader changes in autism discourse in the early years of the twenty-first century. The more personalised emphasis in this account allows the children to enter the narrative as defined and complex characters in their own right:

I am deeply respectful of Jerome, and am careful how I treat and acknowledge him each time I go there. Behind the agile, monkey-like movements, the lack of speech and the rapid hand movements, I am aware of a being that is deeply intuitive on an emotional level, who feels his own happiness and pain intensely, and is no fool when it comes to his assessment of people (Miller, 2006:192)

As the example suggests, the language is less formal than standard professional literature, and attempts to bridge the gap between professional literature and the ordinary reader. It does this by straddling two genres – that of professional literature and life-writing. The book includes formal information about autism from professional sources, and also describes my personal journey and my own feelings, thoughts and challenges, while engaged in this work. The authorial persona which I adopted shifts between that of the good therapist or teacher and that of the more ordinary observer, sometimes flawed, sometimes uncertain. In this way the style and shifting narrative style of *Children on the Bridge* puts into question the narrative of the ‘good doctor’.

As I have argued, the focus in both diagnostic and other professional literature is deviance from a norm, and includes corrective therapies and measures to ‘normalise’ behaviour and cognitive function. Typically, in its narrative arc from deviance to a neurotypical ideal, it most often shows little acknowledgement of the developed skills or positive characteristics of the child. Brownlow and O’Dell’s 2009 study of discussion group postings on the Internet by people with autism reveal a rejection by ASD people of the goal of ‘normalising’ people with autism through therapeutic intervention. This is a view which is opposed to the more traditional goal of bringing people with autism out of their ‘other world’, the world into which autism takes them, into the ‘normal’ world. In my own work, at the time of writing my book, I too held an impression of, and articulated, two different worlds: the neurotypical world, and the world of autism: “I ask you to imagine two worlds, two remote and distant lands connected by a narrow wooden bridge precarious in its height, its distance across, and the brittle timber of its construction” (2006: 17). The importance of metaphor for an understanding of extreme neurodiversity by the neurotypical imagination is indicated again in the above example. The polarisation implied in this metaphor of different worlds is now largely rejected by professionals who prefer the new understanding that we all, both

neurotypicals and those on the ASD spectrum, occupy the *same* world. However, that the notion of different ‘worlds’ is still a compelling one is indicated in Brownlow and O’Dell’s recognition of the number of people with ASD who reject full immersion into a neurotypical social world. What is more strongly favoured is the employment of a ‘social interpreter’ to negotiate between the two ‘worlds’. In this way, the person with autism is not required “to adapt/change completely and fully immerse him or herself in the social world”. In their online discussion groups, intervention as a means of making individuals more ‘normal’ and less autistic was therefore rejected (2009:7). So it seems that while professionals might have loosened their grip on the ‘different worlds’ narrative, some on the ASD spectrum actually prefer polarity.

In addition to their research described in the paragraph above, Brownlow and O’Dell also suggest moving towards an alternative view of autism as ‘impairments’ (2009:10). This might be achieved by more diverse representation within medico-professional literature leading to a more enabling vision of practice: “By including the wider views of people with autism in professional representations a less negative and less stigmatised view of autism can be presented. By including the alternative representations of autism in health and social care practice ideas the voice of individuals with direct experience of autism can be accessed, which may provide a new agenda with which to discuss autism” (2009:10). Brownlow and O’Dell clarify that their position is not to deny that there are difficulties for people with ASD, but that they feel that it is important to start from a position of acknowledging capability (in whatever form that may take) rather than deficit.

In pursuit of the question of how professional literature about autism might be representative of some kind of ‘truth’, I will now examine some of the misconceptions and stereotypes in professional literature. Some of the stereotypes and misconceptions in professional representations have encompassed ideas about memory, imagination, creativity and other mental processes. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV*, among other criteria, the diagnosis for autism included poor flexibility in language, overly literal cognition and a relative lack of creativity and fantasy in thought processes. According to Daniel Tammet, however, “[s]uch notions have been upended in recent years by a range of studies showing that individuals with autism are capable of considerable creativity and enrich our understanding of what it means to be truly creative” (2009:224). Tammet confirms what others have also explained, that at the heart of autistic thought is a fluent ability to form

associations between seemingly unconnected objects or ideas. Tammet, also diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, himself writes poems to explore and express emotional states and special experiences.

I too, was limited in my understanding of the brain while writing *Children on the Bridge*. For example, I wrote that “I was also able to explore my own notions of my own creative life, to realise what it was that held me back in my writing, and I marvelled over the fact that I also worked with what were possibly the most creatively challenged humans on the planet – my autistic kids” (2006:214). In keeping with this general shift in autism discourse, Ilona Roth also notes the tendency in some medical and scientific accounts of autistic spectrum conditions to underplay creative and imaginative ability, ideas which “sit uncomfortably with the skills and achievements we encounter in some individuals on the spectrum” (2008:199). Such claims in professional literature that dismiss creativity in autism, to the point of becoming a dominant theme, as in my own book, are clearly now understood as incorrect. As Roth explains, “Even if the claim is that *no* autistic individual other than these high-profile individuals has any creativity this is also untrue. Most people who work with autistic people know of many who can draw well, play music, or who have quirkily creative ideas, even if they cannot express them well on paper” (2008:201). Tammet concurs that this misunderstanding about creativity is the result of how autism is defined in diagnostic literature, rather than a reflection of how people with autism think (2009:225).

Commenting further on the way the medical model contributes to the representation of autism in a more general sense, Chris Gabbard describes the medical model as “the most entrenched, pernicious, and widely circulating of all the representations”, the one that “drives public perception and fear. This is the model that divides people with autism into low and high functioning categories, that sees the autistic as a “hopelessly isolated and pathologized entity that embodies lack and that forever is bereft of the mental capacity to attain fundamental communication and social skills”. In Osteen’s book, *Autism and Representation* (2008), common generalisations in the medical model as set out by medical literature are challenged or re-thought, through the concept of ‘local coherence’, which presents the idea that the autistic mind works in unusual and creative ways from which non-autistic people can benefit. Such ideas presented in this book offer an alternative to the limiting and negative misconception of autistic consciousness, ideas such as ‘mind-blindness’ and obsessive, self-directed mental processes. Only by widening our perspective of autism do we start to

diminish stereotypes and generalisations contained in certain types of literature, and move beyond limited portrayals of children as isolated, ineducable and socially-unable. Increasingly, writers are engaging in the paradigm shift away from the traditional psychological and medical model of autism that is rooted in ideas of limitation, deviance and lack. Leung argues the point that the medical model of autism – “a metanarrative of deviance, lack and tragedy” – is established on a modernist framework, whereas the social model of disability arises as a ‘counter-culture’ which sees disability as socially created in a postmodern perspective (2012:11). “The paradigm shift from medical and psychological to social and cultural perspectives in understanding autism as a form of disability underlines our progression from modernity to postmodernity” (2012:9). By widening the professional literature to acknowledge and encompass personal perspectives of autism, the kind of truths traditionally upheld by this literature are bound to change.

Autism in the discourse of fiction

Within the hierarchy of knowledge that defines the field of autism discourse – including medical/diagnostic texts, life writing and narrative fiction – works of popular fiction are still considered a rather lowly contender. In this section, I give attention to two examples of popular fiction in the genre of autism writing, namely *House Rules* (2010), by Jodi Picoult and *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon, paying attention not only to the particular ways in which autism is inscribed and represented in these texts but also to the related question of fiction as a form of knowledge or insight.

House Rules is about Jacob Hunt, an eighteen year old boy with Asperger’s syndrome, who lives with his mother and younger brother. Jacob’s obsession with forensic analysis makes him a perfectly suitable character for this type of popular genre fiction. In the exposition, Jacob sets up a crime scene for his mother to solve. We learn through this, and through his enthusiasm for observing and commenting on a local real-life crime scene, that crime and forensics are his forte and his primary interest. In the rising action, we learn of Jacob’s autism and social difficulties, and about his crush on his tutor, Jess. When he stumbles on the accidental death of Jess, he recreates a crime scene in order to detract from his brother’s implication in her murder. Beyond the climax of the book, the falling action takes the form of a court-room drama, a common feature of Picoult’s popular novels. The

resolution of the novel happens when it is finally shown that Jacob's reconstruction of the crime scene was intentional, in order to protect his brother from the suspicion of murder. Jess, in fact, slipped and hit her face on the edge of the bathroom sink. Jacob's condition and his resulting obsession serve the plot of a murder mystery right to the end, when the real cause of Jess's death is revealed.

One of the most interesting challenges in presenting a character on the ASD spectrum through fiction is how to portray the mind of that character. This is especially the case when autism is characterised as a delay or absence of spoken language and, in more profound cases, of the understanding of language (what is technically referred to as 'receptive language'). Picoult avoids some of these difficulties by choosing to represent the condition through a character with a high-functioning and, more importantly, *verbal* form of autism. There is no language deficit here. It may be argued that using a character with verbal Asperger's syndrome is the easiest way to represent autism in a novel. It eliminates the need to grapple with representation when the person with autism cannot speak for himself through dialogue. The language in *House Rules* is also deeply personal, as the story is told from the first-person perspectives of the various characters in the book, including Jacob, his mother, his brother and his lawyer, among others. Such shifting perspectives allow the story to be told through various voices and registers an approach that offers multiple-perspectives on autism and the larger story. Each character uses colloquial and informal language, and light is cast on the complexities of the condition from various angles. As I have already established, the conventional view of language use in people with autism is that it is 'deviant': it is understood as resolutely literal, visually motivated and devoid of metaphor. However, Picoult's language for Jacob, the defining character on the ASD spectrum, is at times distinctly metaphorical as is evidenced in the following passage:

This is where I go, when I go. It's a room with no windows and no doors, and walls that are thin enough for me to see and hear everything but too thick to break through. This is where I go, when I go. To the place where my body becomes a piano, full of black keys only – the sharps and the flats, when everyone knows that to play a song other people want to hear, you need some white

keys. This is why I come back: To find those white keys
(Picoult 2010:110).

Picoult's reliance on metaphor in the depiction of the character with autism may be attributed to the fact that the author does not have a full grasp of the profound difference in thinking that extends to language that people with autism display. On the other hand, it may be because it is still necessary to engage a readership on a metaphorical level, even when portraying a character with autism, in order to draw them into the story. Seeking further, we could also surmise that it may be that the character of Jacob is so far up the ASD scale of difference, so close to neurotypical in his thinking, that metaphor is not a difficult language device for him to understand, and even use. This, however, would be a highly unusual phenomenon.

Much of the exploration of character is taken up with Jacob Hunt's reflections on his own limitations, his social, linguistic and other 'failings':

I never get called on the weekends. I just don't get the social hints that other people do. So if I'm talking to someone in class and he says, 'Man, is it one o'clock already?' I look at the clock and tell him that yes, it is one o'clock already, when in reality he is trying to find a polite way to get away from me. I don't understand why people never say what they mean. It's like immigrants who come to a country and learn the language but are completely baffled by idioms (21).

In this passage, Picoult's character is able to make the mental leap of empathy in his ability to compare his own situation with immigrants, an unlikely comparison for someone with autism. As is seen from this passage, because of his difficulties with the nuance of language, rather than with language itself, Jacob's interpretation of events and what is said is not entirely reliable. He interprets events in a unique way, a way that is specific to him. This gives the reader a sense that his narration and interpretation of events is unreliable. With a primary narrator such as Jacob as an unreliable witness of events, the reader realises early on that he/she will have to take a sceptical view, even reinterpreting the character's perceptions

and account of events in relation to other information the narrative provides. The result is that the reader understands more than the narrator of the story.

As is evident from the discussion above, the focus on language and metaphor in autism fiction provides an easy entrance point to a discussion of common stereotypes. What emerges from this perspective is that Picoult has tended to rely on orthodox or textbook descriptions and examples of features of autism in her book as a means of enhancing the narrative depiction of autism. Jacob's behaviours, his quirks, his mental processes and his social difficulties are explained endlessly by himself and his mother through typical and clinical narratives and explanations about ASD. Just about every possible way that autism may be applied to an individual, seems to apply to Jacob also. Picoult has certainly tried to cover all the bases in ensuring that her book is adequately illustrative and representational. The first-person account offered by the character of Emma, Jacob's mother, is apposite here: "They think there is no greater hell than having a son who is locked in his own world, unaware that there's a wider one to explore. But try having a son who is locked in his own world and still *wants* to make a connection" (5). Jacob tells us the reason he gets his hair cut every three weeks is that three is a good, safe number, unlike four, for example, and "the only way I can handle someone touching my hair is if I know it's coming in advance" (20). Later in the book, as another example, Jacob tells us that fluorescent bulbs make him dizzy, that he can hear many conversations and background noises at once, and that sometimes it is hard for him to focus on just one thing at a time (321). Picoult, it seems, has tried to fit in as much 'true' or 'scientific' information about autism as possible, throughout the book. Although not all such difficulties or eccentricities are a feature of autism in every case, particularly in characters who are as seemingly capable as Jacob (he can visit a crime scene and Jess's house by himself, for example), Picoult seems to have provided Jacob with as many illustrative medical 'truths' that might apply to him as possible, to show and explain his autism. This could be construed as an attempt to ground the fictional construction in 'truth'. What remains pertinent, however, is that Jacob is still a construct, a fictional character rather than a living individual.

Another of the standard autism stereotypes presented in this novel is one of social isolation. Jacob shows the typical, almost clichéd autistic characteristics of social isolation, a condition which is exacerbated by his self-focus. Jacob has no friends. He spends most of his time with his mother and brother, and his tutor, Jess. Jacob is in love with Jess, but the

reasons he gives for why he thinks she should be his girlfriend are entirely self-focussed and practical, rather than emotional or psychological: she is allergic to mangoes and he doesn't like them; she has seen him wear the same shirt twice in a row and doesn't make a big deal out of it and, if he had a girlfriend, he would appear to be more normal. In keeping with the tendency to present Jacob as a 'textbook' autism character, he is also depicted as displaying difficulties with central coherence and 'theory of mind', or the ability to imagine what another person might be thinking or feeling. As Leung suggests, this cognitive difficulty in the character forces the reader to apply their own insight, knowledge or empathy in the gaps evident in the autistic narrator's stories (2012:21). In this way, Jacob is revealed as an increasingly unreliable narrator. This, along with the autism character as lacking in 'theory of mind' has become an increasingly common narrative device in the genre of autism fiction. Writers such as Gyasi Burks-Abbot and others have criticised the "uncritical and inconsistent acceptance of the autistic character as lacking theory of mind" (cited in Leung, 2012:17). I would concur with this position and suggest that this blanket view of 'theory of mind' and central coherence deficits is a dangerous one, considering how many different forms autism takes, how individuals are affected differently, and how it is often not the feeling or intention that is missing, but the ability to express those feelings, intentions or thoughts. In support of this, Burks-Abbot argues that such popular novels and representations in fiction work against autistic self-representation, and promote further stereotyping (2008:389). Contrary to the idea of literature as a form of revelation, therefore – literature as a kind of counter to myth-making – myths and stereotypes about autism may also be perpetuated by fiction (just as they are in the professional literature).

Stereotypical facts and information appear to appeal to the understanding of a broad audience. A further example of such audience appeal is to be found in the narrative trope of special ability. *House Rules* presents Jacob as being especially gifted in terms of his talent for forensics. He makes up and writes detailed cases and scenarios for crime scenes in his notebooks, and is good at solving them:

Fibres were also found in Littlejohn's residence that matched those on the packing tape on the victim's body. Littlejohn was also arraigned for a second kidnapping and assault of another college student who managed to get

away from him after he impersonated a police officer,
handcuffed her, and threw her into his van. (2010:43)

Jacob is obsessed with crime scenes and the solving thereof, to the extent that he ultimately manipulates the death scene that is central to the plot of *House Rules*, to make it appear as a crime scene. It would be easy to imagine that Jacob's 'gift' could be purposefully utilised in a solid career as an adult. In reality, few people with autism are successfully employed.

If Picoult's *House Rules* – and other works of popular autism fiction – remain vulnerable to stereotypical representation, what is to be observed in relation to other aspects of the narrative form? In *House Rules*, Picoult uses a plot device which is typical of narratives containing people with autism. That is, that the neurotypical people surrounding Jacob are represented as fragile, alone, and in need of some kind of comfort or help of their own. Jacob's parents are divorced. Emma struggles as a single mother, and Jacob's father is alienated from his original family, caught up in his new family. During the trial at which he is the centre, Jacob becomes the catalyst for the neurotypical characters 'coming together', or learning to communicate better at the end of the book. Jacob's mother finds an attraction and emotional reciprocity with Jacob's younger lawyer. The crisis of the trial brings Jacob's alienated father back into the fold. The text appears to ascribe a larger social autism to the neurotypical people in Jacob's life. In this way, Jacob becomes a vehicle for both the plot and the resolution in the same way that Picoult makes the book a vehicle for Asperger's syndrome, and all the possible explanations and descriptions for the condition. What is important to note is that the resolution of the novel is enabled by Jacob's 'saving action' – his confession that he set up an elaborate crime scene in order to save his brother from being accused. This 'saving action', however, represents a significant departure from traditional understandings of the autistic condition. A common assumption in relation to autism is that people on the spectrum fail to be socially or emotionally motivated, and yet Jacob has devised an intricate scheme in order to foil the professionals and keep suspicion away from his brother. The reversal of this stereotype is represented as a moment of triumph for Jacob: "To all of those experts who said that because I have Asperger's I can't empathise: *So there*. People who can't empathize surely don't try to protect the people they love, even if it means having to go to court" (600). Of all the autism stereotypes and explanations presented in the book, this unexpected reversal seems above all to serve the needs of the story rather than to

demonstrate the complexity and diversity of the condition of autism. Questions of accuracy notwithstanding, perhaps the greater awareness of autism that fiction such as *House Rules* serves makes up for minor inaccuracies and the kind of stereotypes that serve a popular genre.

The second popular work I have chosen for this study is Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2004). *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* tells the story of a 15-year-old boy, Christopher Boone, who has Asperger's syndrome and lives in Swindon in the United Kingdom. The book has reportedly sold more than 10 million copies. It won the Whitbread Book Awards for Best Novel and Book of the Year in 2003, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. It was also the joint winner of the 2004 Boeke Prize. In addition, Haddon was one of the winners of the 2004 Alex Awards, and long-listed for the Man-Booker Prize. The book was released simultaneously as a book for adults and a book for teenagers, with two different covers, a marketing decision that accounted for much of the book's popularity. This success supersedes the success of any other book about autism, and certainly has reached a wider audience than any professional text on the subject thus far.

"This is a murder mystery novel", explains Haddon's primary character, Christopher Boone:

Siobahn said that I should write something I would want to read myself. Mostly I read books about science and maths. I do not like proper novels. In proper novels people say things like, 'I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus.' What does this mean? I do not know. Nor does Father. Nor do Siobhan or Mr Jeavons. I have asked them (2004:5).

Curious Incident follows a clear narrative arc from beginning to end. The novel's exposition describes Christopher's discovery of his neighbour's dog's dead body, and his decision to investigate the murder. The action rises as Christopher sets out on his earnest quest, engaging

in detective work and interviewing neighbours. In the process he discovers that his mother has left his father for another man, and that his father has lied about her death. This discovery is the climax of the book, and Christopher's quest and detective work are the catalysts for his father's emotional growth and ultimate confession to Christopher. Christopher then runs away from home and travels to London by train to live with his mother. On his arrival, which coupled with the journey could be described as the falling action of the book, there is tension between his mother and her boyfriend Mr Shears. Through Christopher's alienation and separation from home, his mother realises the impact of her own emotional instability and infidelity on her son, and she decides to leave Mr Shears and re-commit to her life in Swindon. Christopher is finally able to write his A level maths exam. This concludes the book, and allows for a happy resolution, along with the news that he is also allowed to keep a dog.

As in my reading of Picoult's novel, I begin with the question of language. The first point to note concerns the way Haddon defines Christopher's condition. Nowhere in the book are the terms 'autism' or 'Asperger's' used. Instead, the condition is revealed through Haddon's clever characterisation and through his use of the technique of first-person narrative, where Christopher uses a reporting style of language, devoid of emotion or affect, to tell the story. This style renders Christopher's story all the more poignant to the reader, in the light of Christopher's innocence in the surrounding emotional turmoil and dysfunction. The entire narrative of *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is told from the first-person perspective, from Christopher Boone's own viewpoint and voice. This perspective is possible because Christopher falls on the high end of the spectrum. Unlike many other people with different forms of ASD, but just like Jacob Hunt in *House Rules*, Christopher has verbal language. That said, Christopher's language could still be considered 'deviant': it is firmly literal, visually motivated and devoid of metaphor. However, it is not deviant enough for the reader to be unable to relate to Christopher. Instead, the language used by Christopher, including the literal, didactic and methodical thought processes and speech patterns employed, would seem to confirm a view of Christopher, like Jacob in *House Rules*, as an unreliable or, more accurately, fallible narrator. As Greta Olson suggests:

fallible narrators do not reliably report on narrative events
because they are mistaken about their judgements or
perceptions or are biased. Fallible narrators' perceptions

can be impaired because they are children with limited education and experience, as in Huckleberry Finn; or, as in the case of Marlow in Lord Jim, their reports can seem insufficient because their sources of information are biased or incomplete (2003:101).

In this way, Haddon uses the device of Christopher's language, and his position as an unreliable narrator, to make a point about a common perception of people with autism – that people with autism are very literal with strong visual skills, that they do not understand metaphors, are socially incompetent and that you should always 'say what you mean and mean what you say' when talking to them. What sets Haddon's book apart is that it is written without the use of metaphor, as it is told entirely in the first-person voice of the character with autism (Gyasi Burks-Abbot, 2008:388). Kristina Chew confirms that metaphors are intrinsically embedded in our [neurotypical] understanding of the world: "Because metaphors and other types of figurative language are fundamentally woven into neurotypical cognitive processing and language, they are one aspect of language that is particularly difficult for autistic persons to understand" (2008:187). Chew differentiates between the intrinsic functioning of metaphors in both our linguistic and general understanding, and an autistic person's experience of language and of senses and stimuli, which creates for them a metonymic (where something is called not by its name but by something associated with that particular thing) rather than a metaphorical cosmos (188). Metaphor is based on analogy whereas metonymy is based on association. This is often an association particular to an autistic person's own experience. An associate with an autistic nephew gave an example of his nephew's rather literal interpretation of the Christian holiday of Easter: that 'Jesus died on a hot cross bun'. Autistic idioms such as this one can give us insight into the way a person with autism thinks – that is, by association rather than metaphor. In addition, such literal, didactic and formal, overly-inclusive speech devoid of metaphor, such as used by Christopher, adds to the comic element contained in the novel. In an interaction with a neighbour, Christopher tells her he has a rat named Toby. Her response is a simple 'Oh,' but Christopher immediately launches into a detailed but impersonal speech about rats:

And I said, 'Most people don't like rats because they think they carry diseases like bubonic plague. But that's only

because they lived in sewers and stowed away on ships coming from foreign countries where there were strange diseases. But rats are very clean. Toby is always washing himself. And you don't have to take him out for walks. I just let him run around my room so that he gets some exercise and sometimes he sits on my shoulder or hides in my sleeve like it's a burrow. But rats don't live in burrows in nature (50).

Such a speech avoids the neurotypical rules of conversational reciprocity. It is content-rich, however, and tells us a lot about rats, which is amusing in the way that it confounds conventional notions of social conversation. Christopher does not pause for the neighbour to take her turn to speak, nor does he consider whether she is interested in what he has to say. At the same time, such language and dialogue informs us about the nature and the difficulties of autism.

As Leung points out in his reading of the novel, Christopher's own confessions of his social difficulties highlight his conscious and self-conscious deviation from language rules and narrative norms (2012:22). Christopher warns us that "[t]his will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them" (8). Christopher not only struggles with social and conversational rules, but also cannot infer meaning from what other people say:

I decided that I was going to find out who killed Wellington even though father had told me to stay out of other people's business. This is because I do not always do what I am told. And this is because when people tell you what to do it is usually confusing and does not make sense. For example, people often say 'Be quiet,' but they don't tell you how long to be quiet for. Or you see a sign which says KEEP OFF THE GRASS but it should say KEEP OFF THE GRASS AROUND THIS SIGN or KEEP OFF ALL THE GRASS IN THIS PARK because there is lots of grass you are allowed to walk on (38).

A further aspect of the language Haddon uses for particular effect in this book is the simplicity and child-likeness of Christopher's voice, which portrays a kind of naivety often ascribed to people with autism. As Bates suggests, this is narrative which is "written in simple, child-like language, with its associations of innocence and naivety". Bates explains that, with the use of such language, the emotional response of the narrator is in contrast to our expectations of how children should react to the events portrayed. In this way, the writers fail to focus on "the distressing experience of the events and describe either no emotional response or a seemingly inappropriate one" (2010: 48). This is further emphasised by the simple sans serif font employed throughout the book with its associations of informality, simplicity, technology and youth.

As demonstrated by the passage above, language plays an important role in the narration of a character or in signalling a character's social ability and understanding, as well as creating humour and amusement. From a slightly different perspective, the particular use of language in popular works of autism fiction can also be seen as reinforcing a common stereotype about people on the ASD spectrum. It would be easy to assume from this novel, for example, that people with Asperger's are always quirky, amusing, verbal (even verbose), and very good at maths. If we look at Asperger's as part of the autism profile, this is most often *not* the case, and such novels are therefore in danger of perpetuating common stereotypes. As in Picoult's *House Rules*, Haddon's *Curious Incident* could also be seen as feeding into a common representation of autism as a lack of empathy or an inability to understand what others are thinking and feeling. According to Bates, a lack of empathy and a lack of self-awareness in characters is often an important factor in the creation of comic situations: "If you cannot pick up others' cues, you cannot know how you are being perceived. The resulting lack of restraint is an important component of many comedic creations" (2010: 49). In *Curious Incident*, during a rather poignant scene where the truth of Christopher's mother's life has been revealed, she asks if Christopher will hold her hand, "just for once". Christopher's response takes the reader by surprise: "And I said, I don't like people holding my hand." So his mother takes her hand back and tells him "No. OK. That's OK" (237).

Christopher's reaction to his mother's need for comfort is also an example of the stereotypical notion that people with autism don't like affection. Expanding on this, this apparent dislike of affection stems from the perceived broader social isolation that people on the ASD spectrum might feel. This notion is reinforced in *Curious Incident* when Christopher

explains: “I like dogs. “You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating” (2003:4). Christopher, it seems, prefers dogs to humans; they’re easier to understand. But in this way, although the narrative voice is Christopher’s alone, Haddon offers alternative perspectives on autism through the actions and reactions of the other characters. Christopher’s father, in his own anxiety and depression that has stemmed in part from caring for a neurologically different son while watching the break-down of his marriage, puts a fork through Mrs Shears’ dog. As shown above, Christopher’s mother must face constant emotional rejection by her son, which is made all the more poignant because Christopher cannot see it.

Further to the discussion of common stereotypes presented and perpetuated in popular fiction, *Curious Incident*, like *House Rules*, presents its primary character on the autism spectrum as being a ‘techie’ or technically gifted in some way. Despite Christopher’s disability (a disability that places him in special education), his ability with numbers is outstanding:

... if you see someone’s name and you give each letter a value from 1 to 26 (**a = 1, b = 2** etc.) and you add the numbers up in your head and you find that it makes a prime number, like Jesus Christ (151), or Scooby Doo (113), or Sherlock Holmes(163), or **Doctor Watson** (167) (2003:32).

Christopher knows a great deal about maths, he likes prime numbers and he sets out to solve the mystery of the neighbour’s murdered dog. As brilliant as Christopher is at maths and related subjects, he is still reliant on the support that a special needs school offers, which makes the likelihood of him functioning in a neurotypical working environment without support very unlikely. Glamourising autism by presenting accompanying hyper-abilities is a common stereotype used in popular representations. Unusual ability is certainly not a standard feature of having autism, just as it is not a standard feature of being neurotypical either. Presenting autism in this way, with some accompanying magical ability or special gift, once again reduces the condition to a particular homogenising stereotype which may be enormously misleading to a person with no other knowledge of autism.

Questions of representation are also usefully addressed from the perspective of narrative form. As I have suggested, a number of critics have established the importance of the detective structure for contemporary stories containing a person with autism. In this respect, *Curious Incident*, like *House Rules*, conforms to the emerging conventions. In *Curious Incident*, Christopher, because of his social disability, uses different strategies and attempts to order his world, and make sense of it. In order to do this, because of his Asperger's and aided by his penchant for visual and indexical thinking, Christopher has become skilled at detective work. In this sense, the narrative logic of the crime narrative appears well suited to the depiction of the inquiring autistic mind. As Leung suggests, detective fiction helps to craft the autistic mind that strongly favours order and clarity: "The classical detective genre consists of the criminal writing the crime and the detective reading and making sense of the meanings" (2012:15). Christopher notices things, and is adept at activities of logic. He favours strict rules and is not distracted by social complexity. He also has the ability to concentrate intensely on the task at hand. The film *Mercury Rising* (1998) and the book-turned-movie *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) are just two other examples where the focussed and obsessive autistic interests of the character with autism serve to solve a mystery or crime. According to James Berger, *Curious Incident* goes further, using Christopher's autistic tendencies not only to play detective, but also to highlight the autism of the surrounding neurotypical world: "What Christopher discovers – or, more accurately what readers discover through Christopher's investigation – is that social order is itself on the autistic spectrum. That is, his society is characterised by its members' isolation and inability to communicate with each other" (2008:372). This argument is substantiated by the fact that Christopher's parents are separated. Neither his mother nor father is happy, but rather are portrayed as emotionally fraught and unable to make their personal lives work. As in *House Rules*, Christopher is given the role of catalyst for the neurotypical characters 'coming together', or learning to communicate better at the end of the book. This is a classic plot device in autism fiction – the common structure of human alienation or misunderstanding, followed by reconciliation. The character with autism, perceived as an outsider, innocent and vulnerable, is well positioned to play the role of catalyst for change. In this way, Haddon touches on a larger social autism pervasive even in a neurotypical world. There is the nuance, though not overtly stated or forming any obvious theme, that a kind of social autism, disconnection and violation is, to some degree, endemic to all human experience.

A further narrative device in Haddon's work is his use of a visual non-linguistic form. This technique has resonance with the prevailing understanding of people on the autism spectrum as being particularly visually dominant and visually reliant. Peppered through *Curious Incident* are maps, diagrams, lists and illustrations that serve as an additional narrative technique, and that offer examples of Christopher's preferred thinking and communication style:

in a fan, and I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other.
Then I got out a piece of paper from my bag and I did a map of the zoo from memory as a test. The map was like this



Then we went and looked at the giraffes. And the smell of their poo was like the smell inside the gerbil cage at school when we had gerbils, and when they ran their legs were so long it looked like they were running in slow motion.

Then father said we had to get home before the roads got busy.

¹⁰ The Dhole is *The Indian Wild Dog* and it looks like a fox.
¹¹ The Langur is *The Entellus Monkey*.

I like Sherlock Holmes, but I do not like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. That is because he wasn't like Sherlock Holmes and he believed in the supernatural. And when he got old he joined the Spiritualist Society which meant that he believed you could communicate with the dead. This was because his son died of influenza during the First World War and he still wanted to talk to him.

And in 1917 something famous happened called **The Case of the Cottingley Fairies**. 2 cousins called Frances Griffiths, who was 9 years old, and Elsie Wright, who was 16 years old, said they used to play with fairies by a stream called Cottingley Beck and they used Frances's father's camera to take 5 photographs of the fairies like this



Other examples are his lists for liking and disliking colours:

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These are some of the reasons why I hate yellow and brown.

YELLOW

1. Custard

2. **Bananas** (bananas also turn brown)

3. Double Yellow Lines

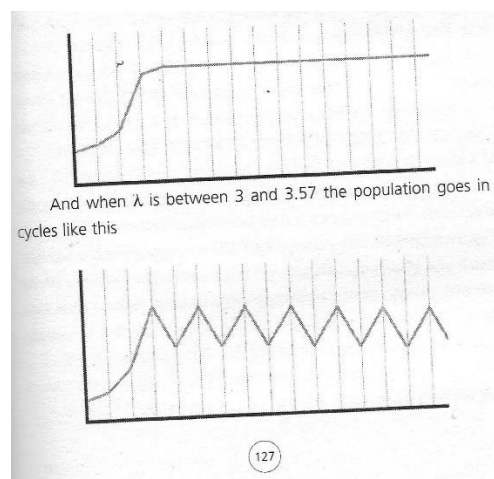
4. **Yellow Fever** (which is a disease from tropical America and West Africa which causes a high fever, acute nephritis, jaundice and haemorrhages, and it is caused by a virus transmitted by the bite of a mosquito called *Aedes aegypti*, which used to be called *Stegomyia fasciata*; and nephritis is inflammation of the kidneys)

5. **Yellow Flowers** (because I get hay fever from flower pollen, which is one of 3 sorts of hay fever, and the others are from grass pollen and fungus pollen, and it makes me feel ill)

6. **Sweetcorn** (because it comes out in your poo and you don't digest it so you are not really meant to eat it, like grass or leaves)

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And his population graphs:



In order to explain Christopher's use of visuals, it is valuable to note that autism educational and intervention practices are reliant on visual devices such as visual schedules, augmented and assisted communication and the use of visuals to supplement and scaffold language learning as well as communication. The reason for this may be twofold. First, that people with autism naturally have visual strengths in comparison to neurotypicals due to the different way their brains function. Second, because of language difficulty and deficits, people with autism have a tendency to over-compensate in the visual area in order to provide feedback and information about the world. Leung explains that in a simple sense, visual narrative is to tell a story or represent the event through visual media such as pictures, photographs, maps, drawings, film or video (2012:20). Employing such techniques of visual narrative therefore highlights the dominance of visual thinking in the autistic mind (25). If we consider people with autism as more partial to visual thinking and ability, Haddon's inclusion of visual narrative that helps to tell Christopher's story is an attempt to achieve authenticity. In Leung's view, the distinct and innovative use of visual narrative contributes significantly to the popularity of such novels (2012:29).

In his work on autism representation in film, Baker identifies four characteristics or strategies used in contemporary cinema in the portrayal of autism. These strategies are first, to introduce a character identifiable as autistic; second, to make the autistic character cute, endearing, innocent or attractively quirky; then to endow the autistic character with savant skills or superhuman powers; and finally, to establish the autistic character's reliance on parents or caregivers and separate them, to endanger the autistic character. According to Baker, "The most troubling feature embedded in this formula is the spectacularization of autism. Plots hinge on the way that some other character can use the autistic character's special powers. Autism is a viable plot device – and autistic characters are viable characters – only if a spectacular skill or power is among the character's defining traits" (2008:231). Baker has identified the most common stereotypes of autism narratives in fiction that straddle a wider body of forms than just cinema. His arguments about film are equally applicable to fiction and narrative containing autism in a wider sense.

It is pertinent, then, to consider whether Baker's model fits the two narratives under discussion here. Both the characters of Jacob and Christopher are clearly defined as autistic. Whereas Haddon refrains from stating it overtly, Picoult drums the point home through her endless descriptions of autism features and characteristics. As Jacob's mother tells us: "In my

mind, Asperger's is a label to describe not the traits Jacob *has* but rather the ones he lost. It was sometime around two years old when he began to drop words, to stop making eye contact, to avoid connections with people" (2010:6). In Haddon's book, the information is provided in more subtle ways. As Christopher explains:

It takes me a long time to get used to people I do not know. For example, when there is a new member of staff at school I do not talk to them for weeks and weeks. I just watch them until I know that they are safe. Then I ask them questions about themselves, like whether they have pets and what is their favourite colour and what do they know about the Apollo space missions and I get them to draw a plan of their house and I ask them what kind of car they drive, so I get to know them (46).

The implication of this information is that Christopher experiences the kinds of severe social difficulties, the over-focus on small details, and the lack of interest in the emotional life of others, that are associated with the condition of Asperger's. Both characters are also portrayed as both innocent and quirky. This is evident in Jacob's description of his experience of his grandfather's death, and his desire to see his body:

It's pointless to expect me to look at someone and know how she is feeling simply because her smile is too tight and she is hunched over and hugging her arms to herself... Which means that when I asked to have my grandfather's coffin opened, I shouldn't be blamed for not realising it would upset my mother even more. I just wanted to see if the body inside was still my grandfather... (2010:163).

The same characterisation is evident in the case of Christopher, who is described as quirky in his interests, his mannerisms, and innocent in the way that he neither understands the motives of others or knows the truth of his family situation.

Although neither of the characters are savants in the true sense of the word (like Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rain Man*), both Christopher and Jacob have special interests and skills that are unusual and emerge to serve the plot. Jacob's skill and obsession with crime scenes ends him up on trial for murder, and Christopher is particularly gifted at maths and maps, which gets him to London in search of his mother. Although he is at a special school, he tells a neighbour, Mrs Alexander, that he's going to do his A level maths the following month, and that he'll get an A (71).

Finally, as in Baker's scheme, the characters in both books are reliant on others, and are then separated from them, events which endanger their safety. On suspicion for the murder of his tutor, Jacob is detained in a holding cell, where he is separated from all he has ever known. Jacob is alone, defenceless and vulnerable. It is also implied that he is dependent on his family and unable to live independently at any future time. Similarly, in *Curious Incident*, Christopher goes by himself to London to find his mother. On the train "... I closed my eyes and did some more maths puzzles so I didn't think about where I was going (205). Christopher too, is vulnerable and alone. Baker objects to this standard autistic plot feature, arguing that it could have the unintended consequence that people with autism be seen as consistently dependent, vulnerable and without agency: "The erasure of parents, families and homes in [films] with autistic characters is a simplistic shortcut; with the absence of a loving family, the autistic character is alone, pitiable, vulnerable, in need of a protector or saviour" (2008:321). Baker further contends that locating the value of autistic characters in their special powers or skills renders all of their other autistic or non-autistic characteristics worthless or undesirable; that only autistic individuals with savant abilities have any function in society, which places unreasonable expectation on people with autism in society, when savant skills or even special skills are not a prerequisite feature of the condition (2008:317). Both Jacob and Christopher show little capacity for growth or change through both books, but instead are witness to and bystanders of the changes in the lives of the people around them. Such stripping of agency, Baker argues, freezes a character developmentally, showing no evolution or changes over time when they are locked into their childhood obsessions. Furthermore, although Jacob is eighteen, he is still essentially portrayed as a dependent child, with a preoccupation with his long-term interest. In *Curious Incident*, Christopher is a child who likes and finds security in maths and animals, not people. It is highly questionable that most people on the autism spectrum do not find comfort and support in others, particularly their immediate families, dysfunctional or not.

In terms of their knowledge or advocacy value in the representation of autism to non-specialist readerships, both *House Rules* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* have reached a wider audience than any medical or professional account of the condition, simply due to the way that popular fiction is marketed to a wide reading public. A case could be made, then, that popular fiction has the potential to be a ‘voice’ for autism in a larger way than any other genre writing about autism. It should, therefore, assume a responsibility for how people with autism are represented, if this is to be how a general public is informed about the condition and how it presents. In this respect, as Woolcock et al argue, literary fiction could be seen as a more effective source of knowledge than academic or policy texts, “as it is clear that they will generally reach far more people and may therefore be more influential than academic or policy works in shaping public knowledge and understanding...” (2008:8).

If, Woolcock et al suggest, literature is indeed a powerful medium to convey ideas , then it is worth examining contemporary representations of autism in the popular media in particular. Stuart Murray, however, questions whether or not these texts have actually led to a profitable revision of public knowledge about what the condition is. Rather, he suggests, “we might feel that such narratives have overlaid the condition not with understanding but with the complex desires of a society that wishes to be fascinated with a topic that seems precisely to elude comprehension” (2008:4). Ian Hacking concurs:

As well as core autism we now have the autistic spectrum. We have Asperger’s. We have ‘high-functioning’ autists. The success of the high-functioning, their foibles and their triumphs, tends to make the general reader think, ah, so *that* is what autism is like. Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* acts, among other things, as a wonderful means of raising awareness. But life is not always like that. Downers don’t sell unless there is something sensational to tell (2006).

Here it might be useful to make recourse to James Young’s distinction between semantic (those found in science and history) and illustrative representations as well as his caution that

there is a temptation to think that literary representations are semantic ones: “The first indication that literary representations are not semantic representations is that many of the sentences in literature are false and many of the terms employed in literature refer to nothing” (1999:137). It is certainly the case that the characters with autism in novels are not real, and nor were they actual people who once lived, although many are based on research into autism and have characteristics pertaining to people living with the ‘high-functioning’ forms of the condition. In her Acknowledgements, Picoult seeks authenticity for her writing by mentioning her various contacts with those who have personal experience with Asperger’s syndrome, those with autistic children as well as a teenager with Asperger’s:

As a teen with Asperger’s, [Jess] not only allowed me to pick through her life and her mind and steal specific memories and incidents for fiction; but she also read every word of this book with lightning speed, told me what made her laugh and what needed to be fixed. She’s the heart of this novel; I could not have created a character like Jacob without her (2010).

In contrast to Picoult, Haddon actively resists the idea that he did any extensive research or aimed to champion the autism cause. As he writes on his website:

1) i know very little about the subject. i did no research for curious incident (other than photographing the interiors of swindon and paddington stations). i’d read oliver sacks’s essay about temple grandin and a handful of newspaper and magazine articles about, or by, people with asperger’s and autism. i deliberately didn’t add to this list. imagination always trumps research. i thought that if i could make Christopher real to me then he’d be real to readers. i gave him some rules to live by and some character traits and opinions, all of which i borrowed from people i know, none of whom would be labelled as having a disability. judging by the reaction, it seems to have worked.

2) *Curious Incident* is not a book about asperger's. it's a novel whose central character describes himself as 'a mathematician with some behavioural difficulties'. indeed he never uses the words 'asperger's' or 'autism' (i slightly regret that fact that the word 'asperger's' was used on the cover). if anything it's a novel about difference, about being an outsider, about seeing the world in a surprising and revealing way. it's as much a novel about us as it is about Christopher (2009).

As these comments suggest, Haddon has actively tried to avoid labelling himself as a spokesperson for autism. Despite this stance, and the fact that nowhere in the book does Christopher claim ASD as part of who he is, the book has perhaps become the most widely-recognised and successful portrayal of a character on the autism spectrum in literature today. Perhaps the broader value of these fictional texts is to be found in the way in which they engage with what Matthew Belmonte defines as a problem of control with which all humans grapple. As we see through these fictions, it is not only Jacob and Christopher who struggle to order and create meaning in their lives, but this is also the struggle of those who live with and care for them: As Belmonte explains, "... people with autism differ from other human beings only in the degree of concreteness with which they approach this problem of control: the tension between our moral nature and our capacity to contemplate the eternal makes us desperate to impute narrative order and authorial intent in a universe where there may be only chaos and arbitrariness ..." (2008:243).

As has been suggested, some commentators have argued that the autism story in popular fiction serves as nothing more than a handy plot gimmick (Gabbard 2010). My view, however, is that works such as *Curious Incident* and *House Rules* can also offer much more than an academic or professional text. This not only because of the extended possibilities for nuance, complexity and detailed description available to the novel form but also for the rich possibilities it makes available for the exploration of moral questions and the insights of the subjective mode. Both novels highlight the social and communication difficulties experienced by those with autism. Even in the highest-functioning forms of the condition, this can result in a severe sense of alienation and social isolation, even in the midst of family. From a wider perspective, each novel also highlights the difficulties, challenges and the joys

experienced by families surrounding a person with the condition. Through the portrayal of autism from a first-person perspective, we can also attempt to enter the skin of a person who thinks differently to us, and who communicates and experiences the world in a different way. Both the characters Jacob Hunt and Christopher Boone fit classically into the medical model's master representation of high-functioning ASD, that of the person with autism as a socially isolated entity, detail-orientated with extraordinary but narrowly focussed memories. As many writers on autism have suggested, however, autism is not 'one thing'; it cannot be reduced to a single case, representation or definition (Berger 2010:363). In this respect, both characters in these novels are presented as more than just a 'case' of autism; as both narrator and protagonist, the characters allow for a complex and active construction and reconstruction of Asperger's identity, language and consciousness. Finally, because of the genre's potential for offering multiple perspectives, fiction also has the means to provide different understandings and experiences of the condition simultaneously; in other words, it enables a form of polyvocality which is difficult to achieve in empirical studies. In this sense, I would argue, although they cannot be said to offer the 'truth' about autism, they can be seen as having an important revelatory function. Fiction does not have to be accurate to hold up a truth.

Representation of autism in forms of popular memoir

In this section of the essay, I extend the discussion of autism representation by looking at the depiction of autism in the genres of memoir and life writing. The focus here, as in other sections, is to explore the ways in which different discourses present and inscribe the subject of autism and the character with autism in different ways and to continue an enquiry into the relationship between literature and 'truth'. Crouser has noted that one of the most significant developments – if not *the* most significant development – in life writing in North America over the last three decades has been the upsurge in the publication of book-length accounts (from both first- and third-person points of view) of living with illness and disability:

“Whereas in the 1970s it was difficult to find any representation of most disabling conditions in life writing, today one can find multiple representations of many conditions. Equally significant, and more remarkable, one can find autobiographical accounts of conditions that would seem to preclude first-person testimony – for example, autism, locked-in syndrome, and (early) Alzheimer's disease” (2005:604). According to Crouser, life writing by disabled

people, including people with autism, is a cultural manifestation of the broader human rights movement. Significantly, the rise in personal narratives of disability has roughly coincided with the disability rights movement. This has followed a similar trajectory to other life writing by other marginalised groups such as women and African Americans. As Crouser suggests, “Long the objects of others’ classification and examination, disabled people have only recently assumed the initiative in representing themselves; in disability autobiography particularly, disabled people counter their historical subjection by occupying the subject position” (2005:605).

A growing form of representation that characterises autism literature is ‘insider autobiography’, accounts of autism written by people on the spectrum of autism. These are people who publicly identify themselves as being on the spectrum of autism disorders, which falls into the field of disability. Disability in literature is hardly new. Crouser describes disability as an inescapable aspect of human existence and a fundamental aspect of human diversity (2005:602). He argues that autobiography can be an especially powerful medium “in which disabled people can demonstrate that they *have* lives, in defiance of others’ common-sense perceptions of them” (2005:605). Memoir and life-writing make a potentially valuable contribution to autism representations, because of the first-person perspectives possible by people who are actually on the autism spectrum. These personal accounts allow for detailed descriptions of actual experiences, perceptions and difficulties experienced by people with autism, thus enabling professionals and those not on the spectrum an insider perspective on the condition. The narrative structures that dominate are the arc of life stories, yet these are incomplete, as are the writers’ lives. These stories are constructed from personal experience, thus potentially linking the text more securely to notions of absolute ‘truth’. As we have established, however, all texts – even autobiographical narratives – are in part fictional constructs and mediated by language. In the case of first person narrative, the problem is also confounded by the constraints of a single perspective.

Such texts where people with autism are able to speak for themselves are a unique feature of the current time and context. Tito Mukhopadhyay’s *The Mind Tree* (2011) and Daniel Tammet’s *Embracing the Wide Sky* (2009) explain the experience of having autism from the perspective of the person affected by the condition, and serve as two of my primary examples. Grandin’s *Different...Not Less* (2012) is a recent text that has adults on the spectrum explain in their own words various aspects of their condition, thus de-mystifying

the condition for a wider audience. This book chronicles the life details under consistent explanatory headings such as ‘Early Years’, ‘School Years and Bullying’, ‘Relationships’, ‘Employment’, ‘On Autism’, ‘Inspiration and Outlook’. Each of the people described has a diagnosis of ASD; yet they have all emerged with some success in adulthood, with careers ranging from tour guide and special education professor, to successful physician and creative director of an advertising agency. The language use and communication style through the book are unique to each writer, and there are descriptions of aspects of their lives ranging from social naivety and vulnerability to sensory difficulties. One of the ASD writers in Grandin’s book, Stephen Shore, is a special education professor and autism advocate. Shore is able to explain how severe sensory issues common to autism can create misunderstanding:

One day, while we were playing on a swing set, I was sensorily overloaded by contacting the cold bars of the gym set with the underside of my knees. This caused a meltdown, and I banged my head against some flagstones and had to get stitches. It was many years before I told my parents that it was in fact the sensory overload that had caused the incident, and not anything my brother had done (2012:47).

In the particular construction of autism that life writing provides, such insider perspectives and explanations become possible. Suddenly, through life writing, people with autism become advocates and agents in their own stories; they are no longer passive characters defined primarily by the deficits described in the medico-professional literature. People with autism can now explain their experiences to a neurotypical audience. Young people with autism still experience enormous social difficulty even when they function on the ‘high’ end of the spectrum, have verbal skills and are able to attend mainstream schools, colleges and places of work. The social aspect of life is one of the defining aspects of the condition, and may be explored and revealed through insider autobiography, giving neurotypical readers a chance to reflect on their own attitudes to those with neurological differences. Another writer in Grandin’s book, tour guide Charli Devnet explains: “Bullies reappeared in my life. These bullies did not chase me around the schoolyard. They walked right through me, refused to move when I walked by them, and generally acted as though I was not there – which, in a way, I was not (2012:28). Shore also makes mention of bullies as

well as the problem of (mis)communication. He discovered that there was a ‘secret channel’ of communication consisting of eye and body movements and postures, “which led one to spend hours in book-stores, reading up on body language and non-verbal communication in general” (67).

People like Grandin, Devnet and Shore can tell us about the social experience of having autism, where the professional literature and fiction written by neurotypical writers can only guess at it. What we learn through insider autobiography is that people on the autism spectrum often have a desperate need to be social, but that they lack the skills to function effectively in a social world. As Devnet comments: “I wanted very much to be social. I tried very hard to make friends, but I was constantly rebuffed” (2012:31). The misunderstandings and misinterpretations that can occur when autism is not understood can be damaging to reputations, and insider literature can help the ‘outsiders’ understand how people can be marginalised because their behaviour is often neither typical nor expected. Through this kind of personal narrative, we also learn that people with autism also often have their own personal space abused, when their condition is not understood. Devnet offers the following example: “The school administration attributed my weird behaviour to drugs, which was a fair assumption. Illegal drugs were rampant on college campuses in those days, and it was known that students who abused drugs acted in strange ways. In truth, I never really took drugs, but the college officials searched my dorm room regularly anyway” (2012:31). As the above examples suggest, insider literature can clear up misconceptions about autism, where people on the spectrum are painted with the same broad brush due to incomplete understanding about their condition. As I have established, a particularly intractable stereotype is that people with autism fall into the technologically gifted or artistic sector of the population, or are often computer or math geeks. Grandin explains how this too is a misconception: “The ‘techie’-type person, for example, represents only a portion of the population on the autism spectrum. A huge percentage of autistic individuals do not have primary strengths in technical subjects or art to rely on for employment. They long for satisfying relationships and often have a more difficult time finding work” (2012:6).

As is shown through each of the personal stories in Grandin’s book, such insider literature can refute rather than perpetuate stereotypes, and thus reveal a different truth about autism – which is that every person on the spectrum of autism presents in a unique and different way. Within the broad range of possible ways of being, insider literature can inform

and correct misperceptions in ways that both professional literature and fiction cannot. As Grandin suggests, “In my own life, I have gained great insight from reading the writings of other individuals on the spectrum” (2012:12). Crouser supports this argument when he makes an important observation that life narrative – when properly conceived and carried out – can provide the public with controlled access to lives that might otherwise remain opaque or exotic to them (2005:605). If many of these stories speak of capability and achievement against myths of helplessness and dependency, they also open up the possibility for broader kinds of engagement. Shore, for example, sees his first book *Beyond the Wall* as “employing an autobiographical structure in which to address the issues of education, accommodations, sensory issues, and a successful transition to adulthood in the areas of self-advocacy, relationships, continuing education, and, in short, having a real life, working and doing things just like everyone else. One can *be* autistic rather than *living a life* of autism” (2012:71). It may also be concluded from the above discussion that insider literature can also reveal a wider truth about being human to a wider reading audience: that is, that people with autism equally struggle with life issues such as loneliness, a desire to fit in, and finding and sustaining employment. In this sense, such literature might reveal that having autism is perhaps a more intense way of being human.

As well as revealing our commonalities, however, insider literature might also have the potential to deconstruct and explain the ways in which the autistic brain might be different. In his book, the savant Tammet tries to explain the way his own brain deals with language and numbers differently: “What is so different from the universal instincts for language and counting in my mind that enables it to create numerical landscapes (like those for pi) from a random string of digits, invent my own words and concepts in numerous languages and solve a sum by picturing it as the manipulation of complex shapes?” (Tammet 2009:205). In this example, the use of language is particular to the individual, and speaks of his desire to express who he is, as someone with a difference.

In all the examples of insider life-writing presented, the protagonist of the story is a person with autism. Furthermore, in most of the stories, perhaps with the exception of Tammet’s, the conflict presented is the autism itself, or the difficulties that it presents for the writers, and for the writer’s families. The plot line follows the trajectory of the narrator’s life. Tammet’s book is an exception in this regard. It is not directly about the life of the autistic person, but rather about the nature and abilities of the mind, and the author uses his own life

experiences and examples from the workings of his own thought processes to illustrate points though the book. What the texts have in common, however, is that autism is constructed as something inseparable from the person who has it:

When you are trying to think blue but end up thinking of black, you can be sure to be frustrated. Time and again, it happens to me, and I'm sure that I get quite helpless. Otherwise, why should I get up and spin myself?

Spinning my body brings some sort of harmony to my thoughts, so that I can centrifuge away all the black thoughts. I have realised that the faster I spin, faster it gets to drive away the black (Mukhopadhyay 2011:150).

As this passage demonstrates, the autism is not independent of Mukhopadhyay, or something separate. Suddenly, the behaviour of spinning – usually portrayed as stereotypical and repetitive in the medical literature – suddenly emerges with a purpose behind it. The features of Mukhopadhyay's autism, in fact, not only add to the creation of his conflict, but they also serve to find a solution.

The writers in all three texts in my study also speak with a strong self-knowledge and authority, not only about themselves but also about the particular way their autism presents itself in their lives. In all cases, the narrative voice is marked by surety of self and strong sense of identity, confidence and determination. One might ask whether such confidence and determination is a feature of autism itself, a consequence of having lived with and navigated a sense of being different, or whether it is an aspect of the kind of personality that is necessary to write successfully and have one's story published. Steve Selpal, a self-employed artist with Asperger's, writes in Grandin's book:

Autistic people are focussed individuals, and I see that as our strongest attribute, because we can impact society in a very positive way. Our difference from the norm is a good thing, not a bad thing. The awareness of and legislation for autism is an

ongoing movement, similar to civil rights and women's rights movements throughout the world. This movement will eventually help autistic individuals and their parents overcome their differences and show their similarities. It will also help bridge the differences between neurologically typical people and autistic people. In our global culture, our definition of what it is to be human will surely change for the better (2012:162).

What underlies all these stories, particularly those dealing with the early or childhood years, is a sense of struggle with being neurologically different, of not fitting in. The narrative arc almost always culminates in the overcoming of such difficulties, in finding a 'place' in the world, often through finding a good career fit or, more rarely, a life partner, and some sort of transformation. Such a transformation is seen as affecting not only the writer's own sense of self, but is also projected onto a wider society: that is, that autism can contribute to a societal change of acceptance, and a celebration of diversity. Against the traditional notions of deficit and lack found so often in medical and fictional forms, these first-person narratives, by contrast, are strong voices of fortitude, optimism, self-belief and advocacy.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, forms of 'insider autobiography' or non-fictional accounts in the first person allow for the authentic voice of the unique individual to emerge. With Tammet's work, or the writers from Grandin's book, this gives the sense that the person telling his or her story might be sitting beside us, or in our own living room. It could be argued therefore that people with autism rely heavily on textuality for their identity, albeit in very different ways. The particular language used is thus crucial for the ways in which the self is represented. Whereas professional language is formal, even clinical, memoir or autobiographical language tends to be more personal and accessible to a wider readership. In the case of Mukhopaghy's writing, the departure is even more significant due to his attempts to mimic non-neurotypical language and syntax patterns:

Today, the fragmented self of hand and body parts which I once saw myself as, have unified to a living 'me,' striving

for a complete 'me'. Not in the abstract existence in the impossible world of dreams but a hope for a concrete dream of this book to reach those who would like to understand us through me (2011:89).

Mukhopadhyay's text is interesting and perhaps uniquely valuable in that it allows us insight into the language of autism, particular the dominant mode of metonymy. Chew explains how metaphors are intrinsically embedded in our understanding of the world, and that this intrinsic functioning of metaphors in both our linguistic and general understanding further attests to the ways in which an autistic person's experience of language and of the world of senses and stimuli as a whole is fundamentally different from that of neurotypicals because of their preference for metonymic association (2008:188). What is exceptional about Mukhopadhyay's use of language and writing, says Chew, is not only his language disability and the severity of his autism, but his use of autistic idiom, which allows us further insight into the ways he thinks. Mukhopadhyay mixes perspectives, he shifts from the first-person perspective to the more objective quality of the third-person perspective and back again, and he jumps from writing about himself as a child, to more general observations about his difficulties with coordinating his own mind and body:

The boy went to an ecstasy as he rotated himself faster and faster. If anybody tried to stop him he felt scattered again. A new environment became very difficult to cope with, as he felt that he was not able to find his body. Only if he ran fast or flapped his hands he was able to find his presence. The helplessness of a scattered self was to taunt him for years together – even as I write this page (2011:28).

As this passage suggests, Mukhopadhyay experiences language and its usage as distant, foreign, alien, but just as language seems disjointed and not connected to anything, so his writing illustrates his feelings of disconnection from his own body, as though it is something separate from himself. In another example, Mukhopadhyay's mother tells him a story about a crow, and he describes his response:

The boy could actually feel the heat of the midday sun and the dry landscape. The crow became his favourite bird. Black became his favourite colour for a while. He could ‘feel’ the variety of other colours mocking the darkness of the black (29).

What is suggested here is that his writing becomes more about experience than explanation, but the experience naturally then becomes the explanation. According to Chew, the observations of chance occurrences are thus elevated to truth.

Against what might be seen as a kind of uncritical celebration of ‘insider autobiography’, Osteen reminds us of the fact that the genre of autism self-advocacy is dominated by those who can communicate well. Thus, says Osteen, “those who can’t speak or write, or who are severely antisocial or intellectually impaired, are often left out in the cold. Who speaks for them?” (2008:22). Hacking sounds a similar caution when he writes “There is even a new movement afoot: we are all right, we are just different from you, we do some things better than you, you do some things better than we do. But let’s not forget the vast majority of core autists who at best barely compensate for their difficulties”.

Also important here is to be alert to the dangers of homogenising the autistic experience. When considering the vast range of possible narratives, from the savantism of Daniel Tammet to the severe impairment of Mukhopadhyay, Hacking questions whether all these stories are stories about people with the same neurobiological disorder, but in varying degrees, or whether we are really talking about different things: “It is an enormously important question, for neuro-bio-genic research, whether we are dealing with one fundamental entity or not”:

We say ‘autistic spectrum’, which is not quite right, because a spectrum is a one-dimensional range. Autism ranges in at least three dimensions: language deficit, social deficit and obsession with order. We should talk of an autistic space. So, are all the individuals that we now place in this space of symptoms in the same neurobiological space?

This question becomes pertinent when considering what kind of truths literature can offer on the condition of autism. The truths shared about Tammet's autism may be very different from what Mukhopadhyay can reveal about his own condition. Bates' position is that however accurately (or inaccurately) a single autobiographical text is able to represent the condition of autism, it is still worth celebrating the fact that people on the autistic spectrum now command their own story lines, where once they took only peripheral parts in a narrative. Through autobiography and life writing, they are now "revealed as fellow humans, albeit those with a fundamentally different way of understanding the world" (2010:51).

The current renaissance in disability representation is reflected in the emergence of life writing by people with autism, and also in other forms of art, media and literature, as well as fiction. This emerging self-representation and advocacy can be seen as more than simple creative expression, but as a manifestation or part of a larger movement or backlash against traditional representation (or misrepresentation) of disability in literature and the broader popular culture. As Hacking contends, "The raising of consciousness by autism advocates and others, including novelists, has immeasurably improved the lives of autists not only by aiding the provision of better services but also by making it possible for others to accept them as they are" (2006). Insider autobiography offers a deeply personal and challenging account of what it means to have autism, and it is yet another form of knowledge to set beside professional literature and fiction. In addition to their potential to open up the real experiences of those who live with autism, examples of 'insider autobiography' also signify a change in society's attitudes towards people with autism. No longer are they seen as supporting characters in the narratives of the lives of neurotypicals, but they have become characters in their own right (Bates 2010: 47). The current trend in narratives written 'from the inside', however, rests also on the communicative possibilities of the present historical moment: the age of the internet and technology has expanded the reach of the 'voice' of people with autism, offering opportunities for awareness that never existed before on the same scale. In their research into on-line discussion groups of people with ASD, Brownlow and O'Dell successfully demonstrate that "there is the possibility for some people with autism to have sophisticated conversations with others in an online environment" (2009:9). Coupled with easier communication through devices and with a wider world on the Internet, is the growth and momentum of the current age of advocacy in autism. As a result of the recent surge in middle-class parents putting their weight behind obtaining better education

and recognition for their children with autism and the recognition of life-writing that is done by people with autism and its emergence into mainstream literature, the condition is now considered an advocacy disorder.

Writing an autism narrative

If we consider how autism is represented in the dominant arc or plot structure of all the works examined here, it becomes apparent that the dominant narrative across all genres discussed is one of redemption or overcoming. Both the characters of Jacob Hunt and Christopher Boone, for example, must not only solve their particular dilemmas related to their murder mysteries, but the secondary characters of their families have their own social and emotional anxieties and isolations to overcome. Professional literature too, shows such a conversion arc, where the ‘good doctor’ reveals techniques and strategies to improve not only communication and behaviour, and in which the child with autism is offered a chance to move closer to a neurotypical norm. The front cover of Grandin’s *Different ... Not Less* promises us “Inspiring Stories of Achievement and Successful Employment from Adults with Autism, Asperger’s, and ADHD”. Tammet’s work also highlights an uplifting theme of savantism and skill not only with numbers and concepts but with writing. The central feature of all of these stories is that they offer hope. Among all the stories I have examined, there is no narrative of failure. This view is corroborated by James T. Fisher who writes of a dominance of ‘conversion narratives’ in the telling of stories about autism, narratives which are based on the assumption of a transformed or a redeemed self. What is suggested in this narrative structure is that living through autism can result either in a rite of passage or at least in significant changes and that these become central to the narrative or story being told. Murray (2008) observes that the movement from the representation of an impairment to the overcoming of the difficulties that come from it is the dominant arc of most disability narratives, and that this narrative is so dominant in representation that it almost seems that there is no alternative. Laura Schreibman makes a similar point about narratives of autism treatment. For Schreibman, it is typically the positive and successful outcomes and experiences that are reported in the literature on autism: “People who experience failures are not likely to write magazine articles or chat with Katie Couric on the *Today Show*. Yet failures may be just as frequent or more frequent than the successes” (2005:10). The problem with the dominance of the conversion or cure narrative is that other paradigms and stories

tend to be pushed out. In my own novel, *The Hum of the Sun*, I have attempted to transcend the recovery narrative by avoiding the temptation to use autism either as a device to drive the plot, or to inform or ‘teach’ about the condition of autism.

The Hum of the Sun is set in contemporary South Africa and explores the relationship between two brothers who embark on a journey in order to find their biological father. Ash, the eldest boy, is sixteen. His brother Zuko, eight, has classic autism, with no functional speech. When Ash’s mother passes away, Ash takes his younger brother and begins the long journey on foot, ‘close to the edge of the world’. What Ash wants most is to find their father, a mythical figure in his mind. Years later Ash remembers his brother’s face the way it was, as though he still sleeps two inches away, the only time he was ever still. Ash searches the landscape of his memory and his brother is always there on the dust-ochre earth, clicking his tongue and flicking fingers into the air, whirling about as though the only thing he ever wanted was to become the wind. Through the book the reader traverses the diversity of an economically unstable and often visually epic part of South Africa. The two boys must survive on the food they can scavenge, with only a small knife to defend themselves, the clothes on their backs, and each other. My novel is a meditation on communication, relationship and identity, where these are mirrored by the exterior landscape that the brothers traverse. Also central to the book are themes of belonging and identity using place and dislocation, where the outer journey mirrors a perpetual inner state of non-belonging, and the freedom within such a state.

A second challenge, beyond awareness of the conversion narrative in the placement of a character with autism within a novel, is that of the construction of the setting. The notion of context has significant implications for the kind of care a person with autism will receive. It would be important that this is dealt with effectively in a novel, to allow the audience to suspend their disbelief in order to experience autism in a new way. When considering context as it relates to care, I have turned to the work of James Baker. At the end of his essay on alterity and autism, Baker speaks of the care required for someone on the autism spectrum. “But this care requires a social setting: families, communities, institutions” (2008:382). He argues that different social arrangements and institutions make possible different types and degrees of caring: “Caring for the most vulnerable, fostering their gifts and their agency, and learning from them is more possible in some societies than in others, and to identify obstacles to caring is a beginning of social critique” (2008:383). All the works I have examined in this

essay speak to the importance of the context of caring and support. Furthermore, all these works – my own included, which is set in South Africa – present autism in a developed context, where there are few barriers to access to health care and information, and financial means for education and therapy. Both Christopher and Jacob, for example, not only have special schools to attend that cater for their specific style of learning, but they are also each assigned a tutor who helps them in their learning and social difficulties. My aim in writing my own work of fiction is to challenge or question some of these conventional Western notions of neurological conditions, institutions, communities and care. Zuko exists in a setting in which Western notions of care in autism are limited or non-existent, until he reaches the city in the last third of the book. Placing a fictional character with autism in a uniquely South African context has the potential to allow both the author and reader to grapple with and highlight some of these issues that are largely ignored by most mainstream literature about autism.

As is evident from the selection of fictional works discussed above, people with autism who display the full diagnostic symptoms that include impairment or absence of language are relatively rare (Bates 2010:47). Not only is classic autism (with severe language, communication and social deficit) an under-represented area in contemporary fiction, it is virtually non-existent in fiction in a South African context. The challenge of creating a unique character on the ASD spectrum who has a severe language impairment is thus very appealing to myself as a writer who has an interest in autism. The primary core deficits of autism lie in language and communication and the social arena. This is in direct contrast to the novel form in which communication through language is paramount. In *The Hum of the Sun* I will attempt to represent the extreme scenario of classic autism, where language is very limited or non-existent. Language, specifically dialogue, is a common device used by novelists to create character, identity and relationship. The novel-writing process provides a rich arena in which to reflect on the questions pertaining to the representation of autism when the language deficit is severe. The novel form itself offers creative opportunities to play with voice, perspective and language – even if a character has no ‘voice’.

In the various works of fiction and life writing I have examined, the first person narrative is the preferred way to represent the autistic ‘voice,’ even for non-verbal Makhpadhyay. In *The Hum of the Sun* I wanted to avoid the easy trap of using the first person

narrative as a way to get into the mind of the person with autism. What I wanted to avoid in particular is the growing convention in autism representation of using simple, child-like language and placing the reader in the position of having to reinterpret perceptions and versions. I have also tried to actively resist using an unreliable narrator as a device within the story. This seems a too easy and too commonly-used device, which perhaps potentially negates the true experience of a human being with autism. I wanted Zuko's vision and interpretation of the world to be recognised by the reader as equally valid and 'real' when compared with his neurotypical brother's. Because of this, I chose instead to tell the story in the third-person, and to use a shifting narrative perspectives (oscillating between Ash and Zuko) in order to illustrate their varying experiences and interpretations. Using a third-person narrative also eliminates the need to use child-like or 'innocent' language, which is a technique used in many texts containing an autistic character to signify social awkwardness and naivety. In *The Hum of the Sun*, unlike in the two novels analysed in this study, the reader does not know or infer anything more than what is provided by the experiential descriptions concerning Zuko. The idea of an unreliable or fallible narrator itself depends on the idea that one form of thinking or knowing is more valuable than another. I have tried to avoid this idea of a 'hierarchy of knowledge' within my own text. Zuko's experience is real and valid enough to inform the reader about what needs to be known.

The Hum of the Sun details the inner and outer journeys that both brothers must endure, and the mystery and the emotional minefield that is the other. It explores shifting perspectives and emphasises the differences in the perception and experience of the brothers. As I have suggested, Zuko's perspective is founded on a more visceral, sensory focus and experience. The writing of this character has in part been informed and inflected by the writings of Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, whose description of his own autism is filled with sensory experience. Mukhopadhyay also uses a disordered sentence construction, imaginary worlds, and switches between first and third person when writing about himself: "He spun round and round to be faster than the fan. He felt so that way! ... The helplessness of a scattered self was to taunt him for years together – even as I write this page" (2011:28). The perceptual experience offered by Mukhopadhyay offers much of the story's content. I have tried to incorporate some of these qualities into my own work when representing Zuko's autism.

Aside from language, the issue of common stereotypes in the popular representation of autism has deserved considered attention throughout this essay. I have already argued how characters with autism in works of fiction are often employed for how they can, through stereotypical notions of autism, enhance or serve that plot, thereby deepening the stereotype within the public imagination. The stereotypes already presented and discussed in this essay include notions of social alienation and withdrawal, the autist with particularly developed special skills (Christopher's maths ability and Jacob's penchant for solving crimes) or the 'techie' personality and the notion that people with autism are childlike and naive. It is also common for characters with autism in fiction to contribute to the moral change or moments of enlightenment for the non-autistic characters. In my opinion, the lives of people with ASD are no more or less meaningful than any other life, nor do they offer more or less meaning to those who live with them, as is so often portrayed through narratives of screen and print. People with autism are not here to save us, to solve mysteries, or to teach us about ourselves, as common themes in fiction might suggest. Such themes in fiction potentially present a rather narrow representation of autism. It is against this background of the rather limited representations of autism that I have attempted to extend the range and focus of existing literary representation by exploring a condition of severely impaired communication in my own novel, *The Hum of the Sun*.

As has been suggested, many of the characters in the works of fiction and autobiography discussed above take stereotypical or extreme form. In direct contrast to these larger-than-life forms of autism – what amounts to a kind of *hyper*-representation – Richard Roy Grinker offers a view of autism as invisibility:

A child who seems physically normal and causes no fuss may not even be noticed. A child who seems physically normal but behaves abnormally may be thought to be undisciplined, or, among some black populations in South Africa, possessed by an evil spirit. But such children are not often seen as simply disabled (2007:252).

Autism's invisibility in the wider social world (outside the text) literature is exacerbated by a history of colonialism and occlusion. Grinker tells us that in twentieth century Africa, mentally ill Europeans went to hospitals that were more like retreats for rest

and recuperation, while mentally ill Africans were put in hospitals that were more like prisons: “In the nineteenth century, Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent much of his life as a political prisoner, housed the destitute, the lepers, and the chronically mentally ill ... Not surprisingly, many Africans ... remember the history of the psychiatric prisons, and they are suspicious about psychiatry in general” (206). Such notions are in direct contrast to the hope-inspired and stereotypical narratives of autism emerging from America and the UK.

The questions of context and its impact on the ways in which particular conditions are understood have important implications for the writer of autism fiction. Creating a character with autism places a great responsibility on the writer to consider, respect and incorporate the context in which the autism features and particularly to understand how the autism presents itself and is interpreted within such a context. In South Africa, children tend to be diagnosed later than in ‘developed’ countries, usually at school-going age (2007:155). Grinker found that South Africans, including rural and poor South Africans, made use of several different treatments when it came to autism. Whites tend to seek only Western medical care, while Zulu and Xhosa people use a variety of health care systems, including Western medicine, traditional medicine, and healing rituals (12). All of these factors need to be taken into account when one intends to write about the condition of autism in a context that presents alternative realities to the master model of autism that is constructed in Western notions of psychology, psychiatry and medical texts. A different reality presents itself in a context that is not affluent and that does not reliably offer facilities of support such as access to diagnosis, medication, special needs schools, and respite care.

Placing the character of Zuko in this context offers particular challenges, but also a surprising amount of freedom, in that Zuko’s condition remains interpretable through the narrative without the constraints of conventional ideas of autism. He is a person who has not been pre-defined by any early diagnosis. Neither has he been defined by either his surrounding context or his family’s and community’s notion of ASD. This is not to say that issues of diagnosis, education, information and advocacy should be negated, but rather that in writing about the condition in such circumstances, the character, and therefore the writer, is perhaps less bound by his condition and his society’s notions of it, and may be less inclined towards stereotypes. The shift in conventional autism setting also has the potential to highlight some of the clichés and stereotypes of Western thinking about the so-called ‘third world’. Although Christopher’s story in *Curious Incident* does entail a journey to London to

find his mother, which can be compared with Ash and Zuko's journey in my own book, Christopher is spotted before his train even leaves the station, and he must hide away in order for his journey to continue. Ash and Zuko's experiences, by contrast, are less limited because of the absence of a strong civil society. Although, on the surface, *The Hum of the Sun* appears to draw on the stereotype of loss of or separation of parents, this does not have the effect of the character with autism appearing more vulnerable and helpless. Instead, the opposite occurs: here the brothers demonstrate the ability to survive, as well as the strength to care for each other. This narrative aims to refute the idea of the character with autism as helpless, isolated and alone, particularly in the context of family. In this sense, it accords with Leung's conclusion in his own study of the representation of autism in which he makes the following call: "Let us go beyond a fictional novel or Hollywood cinema, but reach out to meet them in our community and listen to their voices." It is my intention through my own novel to actively subvert stereotypes as far as possible, to attempt to meet the character of Zuko in his own community, and to acknowledge the individual with his own "gifts, limitations, abilities and disabilities" (2012:73). Osteen seems to make a similar point when he asks "What innovative fictional and nonfictional strategies can authors both autistic and non-autistic use to represent autism *from within*? Is narrative even a suitable genre for autism? If not, what is? How will authors transcend the recovery narrative or at least transform it into a less conventional shape" (2008:404)? Baker tells us that the composite definitions of autism offered by feature films and other popular texts are only challenged and replaced when new public narratives or private experiences render them insufficient or inaccurate (2008:321). In my own work, I have tried to avoid both the 'good doctor' and the 'absent family' themes identified in the earlier discussion that might perpetuate the idea that parents and families are not the best care-takers for people with autism, or that the miracle cure, breakthrough, or even 'teaching moment' happens with someone outside of the family. As Baker argues, when stories of autism fail to portray strong family relationships, families' real experiences with their children are ignored, or even erased (323). Despite his autism, nobody in Zuko's life finds him hard to live with, or abandons him. Zuko is loved and wanted by his mother, who passes away, but equally so by his brother Ash, and his biological father. He is not vulnerable or isolated; he is part of a family, who hold him in high regard, and who are prepared to fight for him.

As much of the foregoing discussion has suggested, novels about autism are read primarily for the insights they might reveal about the condition of autism itself. This raises

important ethical questions for the writer of such a text. In the first place, there is a need to resist portraying people with autism as savants or helpless victims, as the majority of people with autism, just like the majority of neurotypicals, are not outstanding or gifted in any extraordinary way, but have strengths and challenges like everyone else. Osteen describes an alternative position, one which embraces the idea of the person with autism as 'normal'. Osteen's notion of the 'normally autistic', then, goes hand in hand with an aversion to conversion: "together these attitudes promote scepticism about fad cures, and a resistance to sensationalising autism and overgeneralising about autistic people" (2008: 401). My own character Zuko does not have any extraordinary skills or savant abilities that define him. Along with a distorted and disordered sensory system and a severe communication impairment, his challenges are his frustrations when not understood, his passivity, and his lack of neurotypical motivation or drive. He also, however, has strengths and good points such as gentleness, a love of nature, and a sense of humour.

The idea of a character's motivation ties in directly to the notion of the story's resolution. Motivation, however, is one of the particular challenges which arises in the writing of a character with autism. People with classic autism are not necessarily motivated by the same things that we are. Character motivation (the reasons behind their actions and the goals to which they are striving) is clearly a key element in the building of a story. These are the elements that serve as 'hooks' for the reader, elements that the reader might relate to. What if a character seems to have no immediately obvious motivation apart from feeling the wind on his face, or the crunch of burnt grass under his bare feet? What if the character has no goal that any neurotypical person can relate to, and what if there is no epiphany, moral or otherwise? A particular challenge in the writing of this kind of fiction is not to automatically impose the neurotypical wants and desires for conversion onto Zuko. However, although Zuko is neurologically different, his difference does not cast him into a static stock-character representation of autism. He is not stuck in one developmental phase, but passes through different and varying phases, as is more realistic of the condition of autism. Zuko is both as special and as ordinary as any of us, with the same potential to develop and mature along with the passing of time.

A final consideration regarding the ethics of creating a character with autism is empathy. Osteen writes that understanding autism requires extraordinary flexibility and an unusual willingness to accept atypical modes of communication and sociability (2010:397). It

is not enough for the author to rely on the reader's own flexibility and unusual willingness, particularly when the reader has no prior knowledge of autism. It therefore becomes the author's responsibility to portray such empathy from within the novel. In *The Hum of the Sun* I have tried to engage with Osteen's idea by means of the character of Ash who, rather than being the neurotypical beneficiary of a conversion narrative, displays these characteristics of flexibility and acceptance of difference in communication and sociability from the start, thereby demonstrating to the reader how such alternative notions and approaches can be possible. For Ash, Zuko is 'normal' – they are family, what the other has always known. It was important for me to respect who Zuko is, just as Ash does, and that he play a central role in the story, not simply a prop for the other characters or a vehicle for the narrative. Most importantly, I hope that I have allowed Zuko's character to unfold in a way that is true to autism, but that is in no way clichéd.

Conclusion

The body of literature across all genres that represents autism in some way continues to grow, reflecting both the continuing increase in the number of people affected as well as society's fascination with the condition and neurodiversity in general. Currently, we are experiencing a shift towards a more humanistic approach in an age of increasing advocacy. The huge surge in life writing by people on the autism spectrum has played no small part in this shift. Those concerned with the social and political implications of autism representation, such as Osteen, have called for a more empathetic scholarship on autism, where a convergence of the personal and professional, experiential knowledge and scholarly rigor is made possible (2010:397). In Osteen's view, the wide range of genres containing autism narratives on offer allow for a broader, more nuanced representation of autism than any one genre can offer alone. In order to be truly empathetic to the condition where people with autism can also recognise themselves through literature, autism scholarship should perhaps take the viewpoints of all available genres into account.

In examining the representation of autism in literature, I have made recourse to Foucault's notion of discourse, with a particular emphasis on the impact of particular discursive regimes on the way in which the subject of autism constructed, viewed and 'managed' in particular historical periods. For Foucault, it is discourse, not the subject, which

produces knowledge. Extending further, the meaning of the different texts discussed here is as much constructed around what is left out of a particular discourse as about what it contains. It is also inflected by particular reading communities or audience. As a means of engaging more fully with these questions, this essay has offered a comparative analysis of three main forms of literature in which autism emerges as a central theme – the discourse of medicine, the discourse of fiction and the emergent discourse of autobiography or life writing. In my analysis of medico-professional texts, I argue that professional approaches draw largely on a deficit model that relies on notions of normality and deviance from that norm. Professional works are often limited in reach, not accessible to a broad readership, and de-personalised in style and content. The approaches shown in the different therapeutic texts all draw heavily on a narrative of expertise to which people can turn for help. This places the professional literature well within a narrative of transformation. Such narratives also rely on ideas of the regulation of the body, an idea which echoes Foucault's notion that the body is at the centre of the struggles between varying forms of power, constructed through knowledge. What has also emerged is the extent to which the professional literature has relied on certain misconceptions about aspects of autism such as memory, creativity, 'theory of mind' and 'local coherence', misconceptions that are partly responsible for creating stereotypes. The medical model of autism as presented in professional literature is regarded the master model, the most entrenched and widely circulating, which disseminates information about autism to other disciplines and sectors of society (Gabbard 2010). This form of literature is considered to contain the most 'truth' about autism. Read as a form of discourse, these truths can be seen as dependant on time and context.

In my examination of the representation of autism through popular fiction, I place two recent works, *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon 2003) and *House Rules* (Picoult 2010) at the centre of this discussion. In this discussion, I have shown that fiction tends to employ autistic characters on the high end of the spectrum – characters who do not show severe language deficits, who exhibit autism through their use of quirky, literal use of language and the avoidance of metaphor. Such works of fiction also tend to rely on a number of common stereotypes about autism: that of social isolation and alienation, and difficulties with theory of mind or the ability to empathise or imagine another's thoughts. Furthermore, the character with autism is often presented as technically brilliant in some way, or as having special skills. Both *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and *House Rules* are told from the first-person perspective. Christopher Boone and Jacob Hunt are young narrators, and

both fall on the high end of the spectrum. Such first person perspectives, in this case those of Jacob and Christopher, force the reader to share the autistic world view (Bates 2010:48). Both novels offer a very distinct profile of a high-functioning version of autism, but in different ways. Although the characters in both *House Rules* and *Curious Incident* are literal in the expression of their thoughts, neither one embraces the full use of metonymic language that a person with autism might use. In addition, both characters in these two books, Jacob Hunt and Christopher Boone, are agents or catalysts for the emotional growth or ‘coming together’ of the neurotypical people around them; they both perform a saving action in some way. Both books also draw heavily on a detective narrative structure, a very common feature of narratives about autism, and rely on a ‘run away from home’ or separation scenario as a plot device in anticipation of the resolution at the end. I have also shown how Haddon draws heavily on the use of visual narrative in his work, which emphasises the notion or accepted idea that people with autism are visual thinkers. As Burks-Abbot suggests, “*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* also encompasses aspects of the picaresque in its focus on the adventures of a single character, the involuted novel in its description of its own creation, the realistic novel in its attempt at authenticity, the postmodern novel in its melding of several genres, and the anti-novel in its disruption of conventional literary expectation” (2010:387).

Where Picoult’s work goes out of its way to present the subject of autism, Haddon, by contrast, actively resists being a spokesperson for the condition. In both cases however, the works have contributed enormously to the public’s perception of the condition. The popular success and distribution of both books make a contribution to autism awareness to a wider audience than any other genre is able to access. Fiction also offers us perspective, nuance, detail and description more freely than other genres, and can highlight the difficulties and challenges as well as the humour and joys of the condition. My view is that fiction can go a long way to challenge conventional or dominant notions about autism, informing not only academic and professional approaches, but also policy for education and other kinds of intervention. Fiction can offer a greater readability and a wider range of insights than either professional literature or autobiographical accounts. As discussed in this essay, despite the surge in life-writing by people on the autism spectrum, fiction is often more accessible to a wider audience, engages the lay person more easily, and is more accessible to a greatest number of people. Literature, particularly fiction, becomes more influential than any other type of literature in how people understand the condition of autism.

In interesting parallel to the genre of fiction, memoir or life-writing contributes a third area of discussion in an analysis of representation of autism in literature. There has been an enormous surge in life writing by people living with illness or disability in recent decades. The literature in this genre that includes autism is a cultural manifestation of an advocacy movement. In my examination of the representation of autism in popular memoir, particularly *Different ... Not Less* by Temple Grandin (2012), *Embracing the Wide Sky* by Daniel Tammet (2009), and Tito Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree* (2011), I have argued that such texts serve as a resource for both people on the spectrum and for neurotypical people. The value of such texts lies in their ability to explain the experience of autism from the inside, to clear up misconceptions, and to refute stereotypes, such as notions of savantism, the 'techie' personality, and ideas around social isolation and alienation. Collectively, these texts have the ability to represent autism as a varied, dynamic and individual condition that affects people differently. My reading of these texts presents life-writing as a form of self-advocacy for people with autism, and as a way to address issues such as sensory difficulties, education and relationships. The style of life writing, unlike professional literature and even sometimes fiction, is usually first-person, and thus easily accessible. In rare cases, such as in the writings of Mukhopadhyay, we can actually learn more about his cognitive processes and thinking style through the language used. Through memoir or life-writing, not only is a channel opened up for the voices of those on the ASD spectrum, but the genre is a reflection that signifies (and is part of) a change in societal attitudes. A further argument is made, however, that such representations again are biased towards the verbal or Asperger's form of autism, and that more severe cognitive and language difficulties prevent people with classic autism from accessing or representing themselves through this genre. It is still of concern that representations of autism are largely limited to those who can speak for people with autism, or those who have a functioning and understandable means of communication. It is necessary then, to heed Osteen's call that "[w]e must endeavour to hear and appreciate the words, thoughts and emotions of those with the most limited capacity to express them" (2008:404).

My own novel is written against the background of the many ethical and aesthetic questions which are raised in the writing of literature on autism. As I have suggested, certain narrative structures, such as the detective narrative in fiction, and more widely, the narrative of redemption, conversion or recovery have come to dominate the field. Within fiction and memoir particularly, there seem to be few narratives of failure. In *The Hum of the Sun* I present an alternative to the recovery narrative, in the creation of Zuko as an alternative

character to the almost stereotypical verbal, Asperger's character common to both fiction and memoir. I have also chosen to place Zuko outside of an affluent, Western context where autism is classified, understood, therapied and provided for. Here, a recovery narrative is less probable. As secure as this Western context seems, it also offers limited scope for diverse narratives, and in moving beyond this, in a less economically able South Africa, variations of story and interpretation in the representation of the condition become possible.

I have also chosen to move away from the first-person narrative used in both *Curious Incident* and *House Rules*, and employ instead a third person narrative to describe the experience of Zuko through a visceral, sensory language that focuses on quality and immediate experience rather than cognitive processes. Leung has demonstrated that the fictional narration in the autistic point of view poses a critical challenge “against the inability of language for constructing meaningful narrative” (2012:21). Thus I found it necessary to my own understanding of representation and growth as a writer to create a character that does not fall into the verbal, savant cliché categorisation that seems to dominate portrayals of autism in both film and literary narratives. I have used my own personal understanding of a very different kind of autism to inform the way I have approached the creation of the character of Zuko, and the role of his brother Ash in the story. In essence, I wanted to explore the depth of communication possible in the absence of spoken language. I have actively resisted the employment of an unreliable narrator, as is used by both Picoult and Haddon. In this way, I avoid presenting a hierarchy of knowledge where Ash's experience is fuller or more valuable than Zuko's, thereby equalising their experiences and validity within the novel. I have also chosen to avoid the use of the attendant modes of comic relief or amusement and the corresponding emphasis on cognitive difference. In this way, I have tried to avoid using Zuko as a *hyper*-representation of autism, but instead to present him as a child who rather faces challenges of invisibility within his own context.

There are, however, two choices I have made that are at risk of falling into the common narrative stereotypes in the representation of autism in fiction. First, that Zuko is a child, and is therefore innocent and ‘helpless’ to some degree. Within the narrative, he is also separated from his parents and his home. This separation, however, avoids the effect of automatic vulnerability and helplessness. Instead it binds the brothers further and emphasises the validity of family bonds above all others. Here, there is no ‘good doctor’ or any other character to intervene and rescue them. Here there are family bonds that *are* good enough,

that do not need to grow through some sort of moral revelation or enlightenment. It is my intention to portray Zuko as an equal human agent, despite his differences.

Through this essay I have tried to demonstrate that there is no one autism, and so no single representation of autism in literature can be regarded as an accurate and true representation of all people with autism. Osteen makes a similar point when he suggests that “To view autism as a monolith is, indeed, to perpetuate one of the very misrepresentations we have tried to explode” (2008:398). One character with autism in fiction is as unique an individual as any character in a work of fiction, whether neurotypical or neuro-diverse. The diversity of opinions and approaches to autism is a natural consequence of the diversity of people with autism and their loved ones (Osteen 2008:397). There is no one autism, and so no single representation of autism can ever satisfy the condition, despite the simple and clear criteria for diagnosis of deviance in expressive language, ability to socialise and the presence of rigid and repetitive activities or interests. That said, the range of autism literature across genres that has emerged in recent years has done much to bring knowledge of the condition to a wider reading world. If we take Crouser’s view that disability is a fundamental aspect of human diversity (2005:602), then autism and other neurological differences will continue to pepper contemporary literature to satisfy our hunger to understand, process and deal with our own fascination with such differences.

I concur with Bates’ view that autism literature gives us insight into the autistic world, as he says, “in all its alien glory”: “We can shrink away from it or relish the multiplicity of viewpoints that it offers” (2010:51). Autism fiction and autobiography also allow us an understanding of society’s attitudes towards autism. As Bates suggests, “Sometimes the autistic world view is even shown as superior. This represents a massive change in societal attitudes” (2010:51). It becomes clear that a deeper and more textured perspective on autism and the experience of the condition by those who live with it and their families becomes possible when the literature of the professionals, of people with autism themselves, and fiction are held together and examined collectively, a discussion which should not be burdened by anxieties about which is most ‘true.’ The challenge becomes to be able to better understand the links and relationships between different narrative forms that represent autism, as well as navigating the different approaches, texts and ‘voices’. As Woodcock et al caution, we cannot fall into the trap of intellectual relativism, “in which all ‘stories’ are viewed as equal and thus none can claim to be superior” (2008:10).

So long as the condition of autism is still seen as a single entity, as a deficit or lack, as a disability and an impairment rather than an alternative way of viewing and experiencing the world, then portrayals of autism in fiction and professional literature will continue to persist with clichés and stereotypes. As a writer, and as someone who has been fascinated by the condition of autism for many years, I have had many interesting, rich and varied associations with people on the ASD spectrum and their families. It has been extremely gratifying to take on the task of representing autism through fiction. In my attempts to deviate from the stereotypes and misconceptions I have identified in the works of others, I attempt, through my own novel, to grapple with the primary difficulties common to people with autism: language deficit and social motivation difficulties. In *The Hum of the Sun* I have tried to present an alternative reality within popular fiction: a portrayal and celebration of the ‘normally autistic’. The character of Zuko is not a composite character, nor an assimilation of autism ‘facts’, behaviours and features. I have attempted to represent the condition of autism through Zuko who, though fictional, is a unique human being, placed in his own context and story within his own time. Rather than serving autism well, which may be too broad a subject and condition to ever adequately represent through a single person, I hope that I have served Zuko well. He is, after all, a unique and varied human being with his own character and strengths, as well as struggles and challenges. He was a pleasure to write.

End

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