

# **The Strange Potential Of Ordinary Things**

**Novel and Critical Exegesis**

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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### Statement of Originality

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# Contents

Statement of Originality .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
Abstract .....	7
Ordinary Things .....	8
Travelling Home .....	9
Corn .....	21
Batz And Chouen .....	21
The Lords of Xibalba .....	23
One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu .....	23
One Death and Seven Death .....	24
Lady Blood .....	25
Lord Blood .....	25
Lady Blood .....	26
One Death and Seven Death .....	27
Grandma .....	28
Batz And Chouen .....	29
A Flat Tire .....	30
Kongo Is Not Kongo .....	36
Accelerator .....	44
Ash Child .....	54
A History of Rubber Tires .....	57
Japanese Graphic Design .....	62
Hungry Ghost .....	67
Pacman .....	67
Words and Stone .....	68
Silkworm .....	68
Pampas Reeds .....	71
Mushroom and Sweet Potato .....	73
Unrin-In .....	75
Tales of Ise .....	76
Vending Machine .....	82
Chilli .....	89

Xbalanque and Hunahpu.....	89
Batz And Chouen .....	89
The Rat In The Field.....	90
Xbalanque and Hunahpu.....	92
Grandma .....	93
Hands.....	95
Observing The Chicotte .....	95
Bath Of Sand.....	97
Talking.....	99
The Bridge.....	101
Bath Of Gold.....	101
Canned Beef.....	103
Site Inspection .....	104
Ukiyo.....	116
Fordlandia .....	116
Kitchen .....	117
Ukiyo.....	122
Sweet Potato .....	127
In Wood .....	130
Master's Will.....	132
Depreciation .....	140
Two Pines.....	152
Burning Mansion.....	152
Tokyo National Museum.....	161
Quitting Smoking.....	163
Surfaces.....	167
Authentic Peruvian Cuisine .....	172
A Bamboo Grove Near A Hamlet In The Mountains Near Kome, Okayama.....	173
How To Survive The Modern World .....	178
Missionary and Asmat People in New Guinea.....	178
Father and Daughter in Australia .....	179
Traditional Barbeque .....	181
Kinshasa .....	186
Machete .....	192

Fruit.....	197
Xbalanque and Hunahpu.....	197
Lady Blood.....	201
A Fisherman Of Xibalba.....	202
A Dog of Xibalba.....	203
Batz and Chouen.....	205
Anticlockwise.....	206
Exegesis .....	207
Introduction.....	208
Structure .....	209
Cybernetics.....	215
Embodiment: Connecting Flesh and Things.....	216
From Local And Mundane To Global And Historic .....	220
Systems And Tactics.....	223
Broken Things.....	229
Reading and Writing Others.....	233
Violence, Writing and Silence .....	233
Violence and Distance.....	235
The Ghost of The Author And Polyvocality.....	240
Theory and Resurrection .....	246
Incommensurability.....	248
In Relation To Essential Identity.....	252
Translation .....	255
Distant Influences.....	257
American Remembrance.....	259
Congolese Fragments .....	270
Japanese Allusions.....	284
Conclusion .....	302
Bibliography .....	303

## Abstract

The creative component of this thesis is a novel, *Ordinary Things*, which explores the potential meanings of ordinary things that are typically ignored in day-to-day living, with rubber tires as the main focus. This novel has a framing narrative that follows a contemporary individual whose day-to-day life and significant life events depend on rubber tires. These episodes are reflected in framed stories related to the history of rubber tires. The critical exegesis includes discussion of some of the central themes of, and influences on, the creative work, such as the cybernetic interaction of people and things within global systems and the ethics of reading and writing with a diverse, international and historic scope. The ways form, content and style in *Ordinary Things* have been influenced by literary sources related to the history of rubber tires is also discussed, concentrating on the literatures of Mesoamerica, the Congo region and Japan.

# Ordinary Things



## Travelling Home

When you are driving to work and arrive at an intersection, sometimes, if you come out of your daydream for a moment and notice what you're doing, it can be difficult to turn in the same direction you did yesterday.

When your mother locked you in the cupboard while she entertained three soldiers and your father came home, he was afraid of what they would do to him but he got you out of the cupboard anyway. You don't remember any of that but one day when you were older your father left the legal proceedings where you would find them as a way of telling you. Your mother always said what a liar your father was. Thinking about it, you figure he probably could convince a court. You asked him about that day:

"I was scared shitless. Here I was a civilian and most I'd seen were a few punch-ups. I was out of shape because I hadn't played footy for years. No time for footy with work and looking after you. So here I was going up against these three cocksure soldiers and they're all trained killers and full of themselves. I thought those fellas could kill me and no-one would ever know because those army blokes look after their own. I'd be swept under the carpet. But I couldn't just leave you there, so I went in, and the way I got away with it, I said to them, 'Now just wait a minute. I'm no match for you blokes. You might kill me but I swear one of you is going to lose an eye.' They cracked a few jokes to save face but it must of worked. That's one I walked away from."

Since then you've seen that line about the eye in a movie and heard the same story told here and there, except the way that story's usually told is with some gangsters trying to collect drug money. Even so, maybe he really did say that to the soldiers, just because he'd heard that story before. For all you know it might have been him who started that whole story in the first place. You've long since given up trying to figure out the truth. Too much trouble for nothing.

It must have got to her after a while, the joint custody, or she foresaw what your father had in mind, because one day without warning your mother took you to Proserpine.

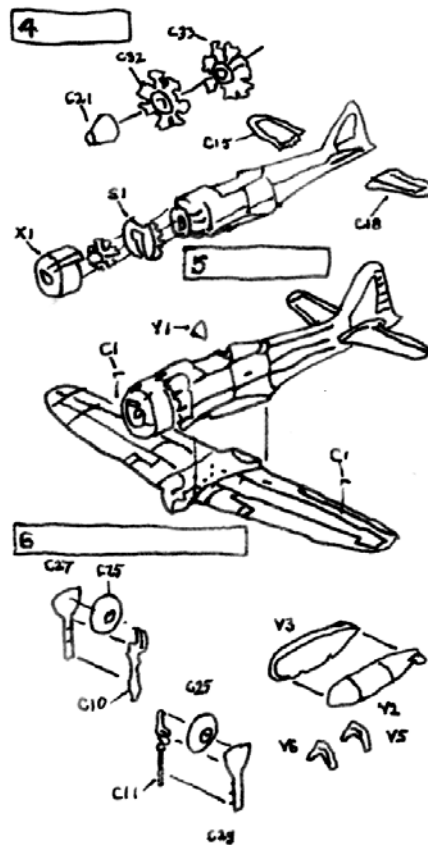


You lived in a tent for a while at a camping site, then in a small fibro flat. You went to the school there for a few months. Everyone there loved cricket but you hated it because standing out there in the hot sun waiting for a ball to come in your direction for an hour was boring and gave you a headache. It was stinking hot and humid. Every so often light flakes of black ash from the sugar refinery would drift down like opposite snow. The flat was crawling with huge cockroaches. Ones bigger than any you had seen before. You would lie there on the bed on hot afternoons watching the geckos chase them up the wall and across the ceiling. Sometimes you woke up suddenly in the night – geckos were chasing cockroaches across your bare chest.

Once you were in a shop and watched a quiet old man buy a bottle of milk with a twenty-dollar note. You were sure he only got a few coins in change and were confused. How could he let himself get ripped off like that? How could someone rip off someone who looked like they didn't have much money? You weren't sure of anything so you said nothing to anyone.

When your father caught up with you and asked if you wanted to go to America, it didn't really matter to you much either way. Now you think back on it, it's hard to understand how or why you were so ambivalent. Maybe you thought you had spent some time with your mother so you could spend some time with your father. Maybe you missed him a little. Maybe you did think going to America would be a great opportunity like he said it would. You didn't care either way about Disneyland, but you were curious about why he said Americans were arrogant because they had good reason to be. They run the world.

But when all is said and done, you know at the time you didn't really think about it all that much at all. You just went along with whatever. You were too preoccupied with the cockroaches and geckos and black ash and hating cricket and wishing you had a model Mitsubishi Zero to glue together to go with your Messerschmitt and fight the Vought Corsair and Spitfire. Your dad explained that because of the law courts and so on, you might not be able to go if you told your mother, so you didn't.



*Hi Mum,*

*Last night I ate the biggest piece of cake I ever ate. It was mint chocolate and the chocolate was the strongest I ever tasted. Everything is really big here and the cheese is fluorescent orange. There are all these beggars. They always say, 'Buddy can you spare a dime.' I am collecting all the coins I find. I have a lot of quarters and have saved up \$5.35. Once we found a newspaper machine that when you pushed the change button it always gave you some money, even though you didn't put in any. I am ok.*

Sitting in the back of the car all the time made you think about different things. If someone asked you where you lived you could say, "Nowhere." It was good at least to be able to be so enigmatic. If anyone asked though, you still said nothing to anyone. Yet it was a place because you could live there, the road. "A Place Called Nowhere" sounded like the title of something. The story of your life when you had grown up and done something interesting.

At first you had hitch-hiked. Your dad was tickled pink that the first hitch you got was with a North American Indian in his beat-up orange car. Though he tried not to let on, even at your young age and even though you didn't know a word for it, you sensed it was a bit patronising of your dad to feel like that. That was all you found out about the driver though, since he was a quiet North American Indian.

Then you and your father got a station wagon of your own. You stayed in truck stops all over America and sometimes motels if you were living it up. Truck stops had good bathroom facilities and no-one usually bothered you. They were pretty much the same everywhere – brick toilet block, grassy area with park benches, some cars and trucks. Once in a while you saw something that freaked you out, like once you saw a big hole in the door to a cubicle peppered all around with small holes, like someone had taken a shotgun and shot a hole in it. Like someone had got their shotgun, walked in and picked a cubicle with someone in it and just shot a great big hole straight through the door and killed the person sitting there without even knowing who they were. It could have been anyone sitting there. It could have been you.

You were glad to finish your piss and get out of that place. And somebody had to clean it up. Somehow that was the saddest thing. That person with a mop and bucket. You could picture it all – the cops standing around scratching their heads and writing in notebooks, the body being hauled onto a stretcher and wheeled away, the journalists coming round asking questions and all the people with their important jobs bustling off and the hubbub

dying away, all right up to someone with a big mop and bucket cleaning the blood away. It was thick sticky stuff blood and hard to clean. That person who no-one spoke to because they had more important things to do, like catch the crook, or write newspaper articles, or be shocked about what happened. That one who mopped up the blood because he needed a job, going home after work to have dinner. The same boring dinner he had most nights because he couldn't afford anything fancy. Watching TV and going to bed and waking up and going to clean up another pool of blood.

It could happen anywhere, any time to anyone. They probably never caught who did it. How can they track down someone who drives up, shoots someone, then drives off in the millions of cars on the freeway? You were afraid to die like that, so pointlessly. You wanted to kill someone who would kill someone like that. With a shotgun. When they were on the toilet. You didn't put that stuff on the back of postcards. You said nothing about it to anyone. Sometimes you ate in Denny's for a treat, maybe once a week – mass-produced-standardised-fast-food-home-cooked-meals: minute steak, potatoes and apple sauce. But mostly it was cans of baked beans or ham, lettuce and tomato sandwiches.

It was a long time you lived like that, between truck stops and municipal libraries. Your dad would go off and do whatever he did to make money while you were in the library. You were never really sure what it was he did and you never asked because you figured if he wanted to tell you he would have. The library must have been the safest sort of place to leave you. There was no-one to say what was right or wrong for a kid to read, so you knew a lot of facts about American Indian nations from Yaghan to Inuit, about Asterix and Obelix and Tintin, the Punic Wars, Gauls, Goths and Vandals and Marcus Aurelius, Descartes and Camus and Robert Ludlum and Jean M Auel, silver working in India, stick insects, chimney sweeps, Dutch canals, angler fish, pilot fish and all you could understand of the physics of time travel without the maths. You read Damon Runyan and Jerzy Kozinski and Mark Twain and dreamed of running away and living as a guttersnipe stealing bread for a living. You knew how to make a Rokkaku kite but you never made one.

Eventually a woman scratched his knee. You slept in the front passenger seat while they were in the back. Your dad sometimes muttered about the normal state of peasants in the olden days and in some countries in one little room and politically-correct-social-worker-secret-police. One night you were in a motel and for no reason, before dinner, without saying anything, you went out and left them to it.

It was night and there'd been rain so the motel lights glimmered on the car park tarmac. You stepped over a concrete gutter into the woodchips between two shrubs to a footpath by the main road. You looked one way then the other. You took a good deep breath of cold air. It didn't matter which way you went. You went left, crossed the road at the lights and went down the next street off the main road. There were mainly small warehouses or factories, a few old brick ones but mostly new prefab ones. They were all closed down for the night, but each of them shone a solitary fluorescent light out the front over their little car parks. Smash repairs, tile warehouse, pool supplies.

You got a bit bored of walking along the road and saw down in the darkness between two warehouses a ladder. There were no cars coming either way so you went through their car park, wood chips and bushes and ducked along to the ladder. You were surprised there was no locked gate or chain on it. You went up three levels and came out onto the roof. It was a series of angled metal sheets in a sawtooth pattern. You walked along in one of the gulleys to the other side. There wasn't much below, just a dark space between the two buildings. There was a good view over the tops of the warehouses. Above, the clouds were clearing. You sat there for a while, looking at the stars.

You had read somewhere that to time travel you would have to go faster than the speed of light so you figured that to time travel in the one place – so you didn't end up a billion light years away – you could set up something that travels faster than the speed of light within some sort of donut shaped container, round and round, and to travel faster than the speed of light, you'd just need to figure out something that didn't just go, like most machines, but the thing about it was that it would just keep accelerating. And if its container would spin in the opposite direction neither would have to go faster than the speed of light relative to the world – only half the speed of light because relative to each other they'd go the speed of light. Then you could time travel. You wondered why nobody else thought of that before and wondered if you would actually be able to invent something like that when you grew up.

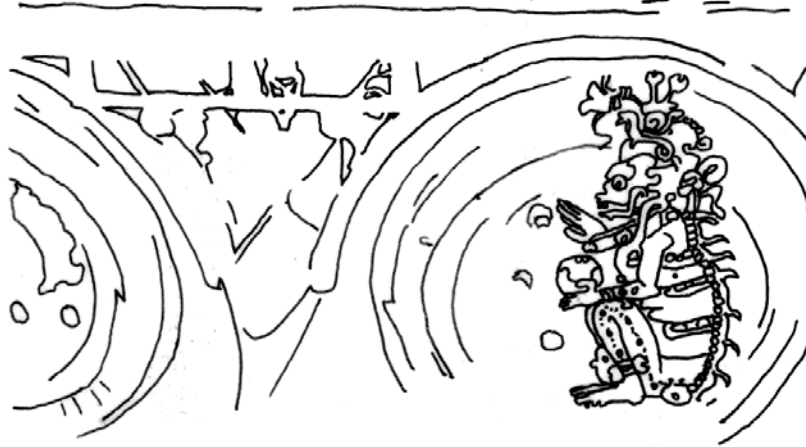
You thought your dad might be missing you and gone out looking, going crazy, as if you would just let yourself die. But tonight he could go rot. You climbed over the angled roofs of the warehouse to the back of the building. The building behind had been demolished so there was a vacant lot, but one of its walls was still standing, connected to the building you were on. It was about a foot wide and three stories high. You went and sat astride it.

It wasn't that you wanted to die but to feel like you could die was good. Legs dangling either side, you edged your way out till you were about six metres from the warehouse. There was a book called 'Birdy' where a boy had fallen off a building and because he was fixated on watching pigeons somehow managed to sort of fly to a safe landing. You always liked watching swallows weaving those long curved lines around the sky. You still do. You thought about how sad your father would be if you died so you edged back to the warehouse and went back to the motel. Everything was normal there. They didn't say anything. They just started heating up some baked beans and chopping up lettuce and tomato. When you were eating your dad said, "Where did you go?"

"Just for a walk," you said, looking at the wood pattern laminex. You were sad because if you were in a book you would have gone somewhere without him. You would have just left. You would have hitched your own ride and you would have met someone and something would have happened. But you knew it would make him sad if you disappeared like that and maybe you just didn't have the guts so the next day you were in the back seat again, looking out the window and pressing fingerprints in the degraded foam under the ripped lining on the ceiling.

It wasn't till Alaska that you really made proper friends with death. It was when his knee scratcher was driving and he was dozing in the passenger seat and you were looking out your side window. You were daydreaming about what you'd read: kids in the dust kick a rubber ball, four owls perch on a wall, monkeys play flutes, brothers lost at the crossroads, the black road saying, 'this way', laughing demons, cigars in the darkness, father decapitated, words falling from a skull into the hands of Lady Blood ... You were coasting along beside a big semi-trailer. Its wheels were so big that the bottom of the trailer was at about your eye level. The car started drifting over towards it. It wasn't unusual for a car to drift that much in its lane but normally the driver would set it straight. This time she didn't.

Everyone realised at the same time what was happening. Your father yelled out and grabbed the wheel, jerking the car back into its lane, waking up his fiancée who also cried out and took back the steering. Your father yelled at her about having almost killed us, about his son in the back seat.



In the hours that followed, knowing that you had been only one instant from being crushed to death under the wheels of that truck, knowing that there hadn't even been time to decide whether you should mention the truck to the people in front, you knew that when you died, there would be nothing you could do about it, and that because there was nothing you could do about it, you had better accept it. No use worrying. In that moment you would have done whatever you had done in your life and there was no use missing the future you wouldn't have because you couldn't have it. You pictured yourself dying however it happened, having no regret whatever you had done, feeling no loss for what could never come. After that you weren't afraid of death, except that it might be painful depending on how it happened. You could die any time and you didn't care. Whatever happened from then on, it was ok.

You stopped for a chocolate thick shake and drove down to Mexico. The border was all angry glaring heat and dust and traffic but looking over the tops of clouds in the mountains near Oaxaca was the most beautiful thing you ever saw. Your Dad said he had to go to Nicaragua. He said that all the media hype might be bullshit and that if it was safe enough down there that's where you'd be going next. The way he said the words "Pan America Highway" made it sound like a holy pilgrimage.

He left you in a motel in Mexico City with his fiancée. When he was gone you stewed for a day. Then when she had gone out for groceries, you grabbed the one tomato that was in the fridge and your orange juice bottle full of the small change you'd found on the streets of America, and the Mexican coins, one of every kind, that you'd been collecting from your father as a coin collection, and left a note that you'd be back so that no-one would panic



and start looking for you, and snuck out. You had read all about Teotihuacan and you wanted to go there and you didn't want anyone's opinion on anything and you didn't want permission. You knew how to find a tourist information centre easy enough and you'd been studying basic Spanish in a tourist book, so you could count and say, "Buenos Dias" and "Cuanto Cuesta?" It wasn't hard to get on the right bus.

You never felt so good, climbing to the top of the Temple of the Sun and looking all across the land all around, walking down the ancient Avenue of the Dead to the temple of Quetzalpapalotl and examining the intricate designs, putting your hand inside the stone mouth of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent. Feeling the eerie chill from deep inside the stone run up your spine you were convinced that what the guide book said was true, that human hearts put in there would be preserved like in a refrigerator, even on hot days like this.

When you got back your father's fiancée was angry and tried to lecture you, asking what your father would say, telling you you were too young to imagine the things that could happen to you. You weren't answerable to her and you didn't like her patronising tone so you shrugged it off. She sensed soon enough her words counted for nothing and said, "You're just like your father."

That night in bed before sleeping you made plans for Chichen Itza. In the darkness, "Chichen Itza" echoed in your skull the way "Pan American Highway" had sounded in your father's mouth. You'd read in a book that warriors who wanted to make a surprise raid would drink lots of water before they went to sleep so they would wake up needing to piss before dawn. You went to the bathroom and guzzled plenty from the tap.

While your father's fiancée still slept, you woke, found your shoes and clothes, stole the money from her purse and were gone. You got on the first bus to Merida and from there to Chichen Itza. It was a long trip but easy enough to sleep on the bus. You watched the shape of the pastel village houses change from rectangular cornered to round cornered. It was good to be surrounded by strangers again, to wander where you wanted. Why did Chac Mool recline in that position? What was on his plate? You wandered up the pyramid, around the observatory, through the ball-court ...

The way from South Chichen Itza to Old Chichen was down a long path through the jungle. Half-way down, a little way off the track was a local boy, a few years older than you.

He must have come from a village nearby. He had an animal that looked like some kind of anteater hanging upside down from a tree with its legs tied together. You couldn't stop and stare but as you passed slowly, he picked up a rock and added it to the ones in his hand. He sat down and, looking bored, started throwing the rocks at the animal. You couldn't figure out why he had caught it and tied it up there. Maybe he wanted someone to buy it for smuggling. Maybe he wanted a tourist to pay him to let it go and he'd catch it again for the next tourist. Maybe he just wanted to throw rocks at it.



Everywhere hieroglyphs swirled with detail. You took your time trying to decipher them – what was this row of dots? Did that spiral coming from someone's mouth mean breathing, or life, or the spirit escaping in death, or speech? What did it mean that this arrangement of feathers was different to that? Was this a king or a god or both? How many skulls were on the platform of skulls? How could anyone kick a ball through that narrow hoop so high up? Why did snakes spew from the decapitated body on the ball court?

And there, in the circle, the ball at the centre of the game, of the universe, there were the spirals again, wafting from the mouth of the skull. This was a language you wanted, more

than anything else, to read. If no-one had translated it by the time you were free of parents you would be the one to do it.

When the men in uniforms started coming around telling any stragglers it was time to leave you managed to slip into the jungle without being spotted. Near Akab Dzib that night you ate bread and tomato and practised sitting in the position of Chac Mool. You put your money in your shoes and, using your shoes as a pillow, dreamt you were under the world with feathered snakes writhing and hieroglyphs flowing from the mouths of talking skulls and you somehow understood them but couldn't put it in words what it was you understood. You noticed you weren't breathing. You hadn't been breathing since this began.

You woke up. Someone was kicking you. There was more than one of them, kids a little older than you. It was still dark. You tried to get up but they pushed you down. They grabbed at your pockets. When you tried to hit their hands away they kicked you again, in the back and the head. They must have thought you were a tourist and had some money. You might die out here, you might as well die out here – you were friends with death so you were ok with it but it hurt to be kicked.

"No habla! No habla!" The words finally came to you. They stopped for a moment when you said that and you managed to get up to your knees and turn out your pockets. They pushed you down, kicked you in the mouth and spat on you.

Still, something felt good about that fat lip on the bus on the way home. You stayed at the motel after that. It had been a few days you were away and that was long enough. You didn't know when your father would return and you didn't want anyone to worry too much. You didn't know what your father would say when he returned but if it came down to it, you figured you could always leave and sell chiclets like all the other kids.



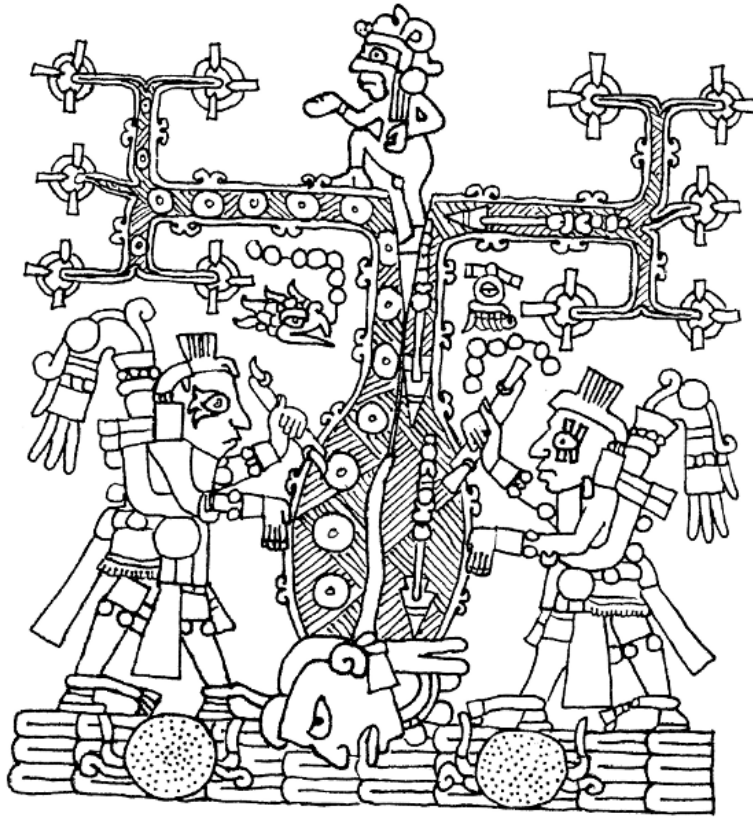
When he did come back and heard what happened he just said, "cheeky bugger" and left it at that. You all went out and ate enchiladas with limes and bottles of coke and he told a story about Nicaragua. "I almost had my head cut off. I hitched a ride in this old open truck, with the peasants and chickens. We were driving up through the mountains on this old dirt road when these guerrillas came out with guns and stopped the truck. They made everyone get off the truck and line up. Then suddenly one of them, from behind, yelled out something and they dragged one poor bloke off into the jungle. I wasn't sure what was going on, but back on the truck this guy explained, with a bit of English and hand movements and so on, that they'd called out 'Attention!' If anyone flinched, they'd know he'd been in the army, so they took him into the jungle and cut off his head."

You didn't go any further south. Instead you got in the car again and when you came to a T-junction, your dad asked you, "Right or left?"

"I don't have the map. Where are we going anyway?"

"We'll see when we get there. Now, right or left?"

## Corn



### Batz And Chouen

People laugh because I'm naked. Next to my brother, I write the best glyphs this side of the mountains, turquoise, blood red, corn yellow, bone white and ash black. I play flute. I work jade, gold and silver. I climb trees and sleep on people's patios. Let them laugh.

A long time ago we were tired of idle work. So we got up and played batey against our father and uncle. With a life of its own the ball bounced from foot to foot, brother to brother, two brothers against two brothers. We didn't notice the owls until they were already perched on top of the stone walls. We stopped to look at them settling their feathers. One of them spoke.

"The Lords of Xibalba hear you stomping and shouting on their ceiling. They've noticed you're skilful enough to challenge them. Gather your feathers and masks, your ball and yokes. The Lords of Xibalba challenge you to play against them." Our father and uncle could not refuse.

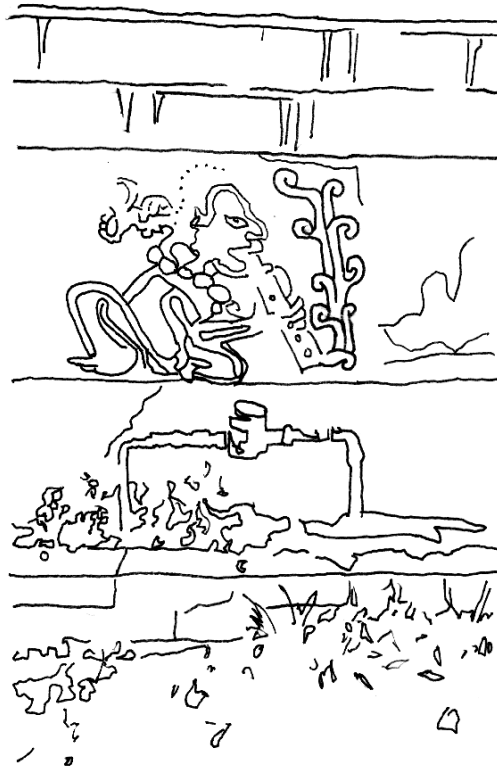
Grandma's tears made small dark spots in the clay floor of our house. Our uncle was gathering the batey gear. By that time we had no mother for them to say goodbye to. "Don't worry," our father said. "We'll come back. We'll put our ball up here in the rafters. I promise we'll play with it again one day."

"You'll never come back," Grandma said.

"While we're gone, Batz and Chouen will play their flutes for you. They'll keep you warm with their singing and writing."

They followed the owls away down the track that goes past our fields and into the forest. We followed them as far as the gorge. It's steep there and the path winds back and forth. We watched them follow the owls down until they disappeared in the shadows of the forest.

We went back home to Grandma. My brother played flute while I remembered what happened in turquoise, blood red, corn yellow, bone white and ash black.



### **The Lords of Xibalba**

My brother broods in the dark. He's been sitting for a long time. Like he's trying to think of something. The thumping over our heads has gone on too long for him. He suddenly stands up. "What's that thumping on our ceiling again?" he says.

"Whoever it is, they have no respect."

"We'll teach them honour." He calls for the owls.

### **One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu**

Passing the cornfields I stop and pick a few weeds out of habit. The dirt is dry. If I leave them the weeds could overrun the whole field by the time we see them again. My brother calls out from up ahead, "The owls are flying away. We have to keep up." We might not see the cornfields again at all.

In the gorge they fly straight down while we lug our gear around the winding path. We push through green shadows until we don't know where we are anymore. The owls are flying in the mist over a river. The river seethes in a way that isn't water. It's crawling. It's a river of scorpions. The owls are perched in a tree on the opposite shore, waiting. There is a canoe at this river crossing. We know it's for us. We load our gear in and push it into the river of scorpions. Arriving on the other side without a sting we see the owls have already flown on, small dots in mist. Next we cross a river of blood. After the river of pus we lose sight of the owls. We continue, lost. We find a road and follow it until we arrive at a crossroads.

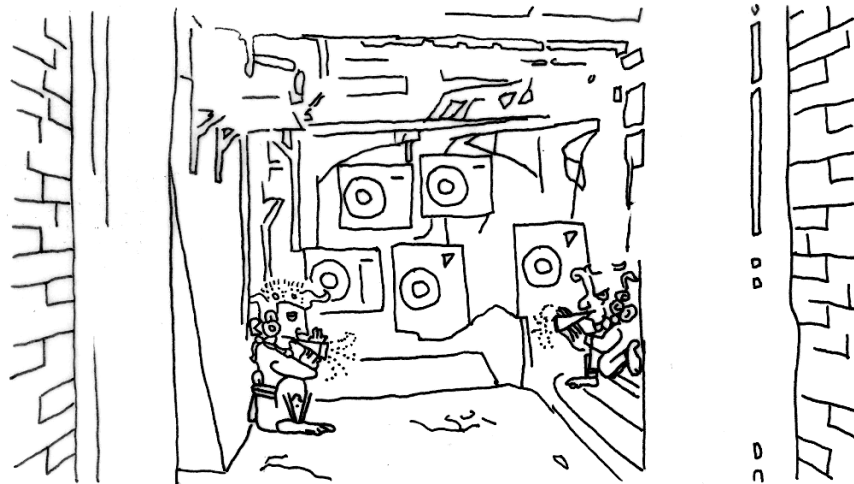
One road is yellow, one red, one white and one black. Not knowing which way to go we look around and at each other. The owls are nowhere. "Whichever way we go, this is the beginning of the end," my brother says. As soon as it is said, a voice comes down the black road, saying, "I am the road you must take." We look at each other. There's no other choice. We go down the black road, walking all night. We arrive in darkness, exhausted, at the Court of Xibalba. The place is quiet and deserted. As we approach there are dim god-like shapes so we greet them respectfully, "Good morning Lords of Xibalba." There is laughter in the darkness from all sides. Dim figures roll on the floor, laughing, gripping their stomachs. We see that the shapes we greeted are only wooden statues. The Gods are laughing at us.

Two Lords, we can't be sure of their names, step close enough for us to see them. They have no flesh. Large black spots are on their skin. Their skin stretches over their bones like a drum. Their spines are jagged ridges.

"Welcome! We're glad you came," they say. "Tomorrow we'll put those batey yokes and arm guards to good use. For now, please sit down."

We sit on the stone but it's scorching hot. It burns us and we jump up in pain. The Lords all around us break into laughter again. Again, the two Death Lords come forward, "Don't worry. You're our guests. Go to the House of Darkness for some sleep. Someone will bring you cigars and torches."

I look at my brother and he looks at me. We follow the servants to the House of Darkness. They leave us there waiting for a while. I can't see my brother but I know he's there. We don't say anything. A messenger brings torches and cigars. The faces are flickering shadows and orange light. The servant says, "These must not be used up before dawn." For a long time my brother and I sit, trying to smoke as slowly as we can. My cigar burns out. The torches go out. For a moment I can still see my brother's face in the dark orange glow of his cigar before it too runs out and there is only the dark. My brother says, "Why are they doing this to us?"



### **One Death and Seven Death**

When they've gone I say, "They won't even make it to Shivering House, Jaguar House, Bat House or Blade House." We laugh again. Will we get tired of this laughing?



"They won't be playing with a ball tomorrow," my brother laughs. "They'll be playing with the white dagger."

### **Lady Blood**

My father's late home. He looks like he's seen something he doesn't understand and he doesn't know if it's good or bad. He's saying, "... One Death and Seven Death killed them on Crushing Court. They buried Seven Hunahpu but the other one's head they cut off. They took it to a tree by the side of the road and hung it there as an example. Now this tree has been there for a long time. No one has ever seen it bear fruit before but as soon as they hung the head in it there was fruit all over. They were all white calabash fruit, like skulls, and as soon as they hung this head it also became like a calabash. Nobody has seen anything like that happen before. No one is allowed near that tree. Do you understand me Lady Blood? Do not go near that tree."

The tree is full of large round white calabashes. There're so many there's no way to tell which, if any, might be the skull. What if I ate one? Would it poison me? They look ripe. Would anyone hear me if I took one and ate it?

"Why do you want this fruit?" One of the fruits is talking. It's the skull.

"Because I was told not to."

"Then show me your right hand."

I hold out my hand. The skull opens its mouth as if to speak, but its word is white, like spit, and it lands in my open palm.

### **Lord Blood**

Her feet turn outwards. I can't ignore it anymore. She's so large now. That belly isn't fat with food. I've known for long enough. I don't want to believe it. What father wants to admit his daughter has been scratching knees? But I can't ignore the shape of that belly anymore. One Death and Seven Death have told me what I must do. "Look to see if her feet turn outwards," they said. "Try to dig the truth out of her mouth and when she lies, send her away for sacrifice."

"Lady Blood. My daughter! You've been scratching knees. Who? Tell me who is the father?"

She's upset. Now I know it's true. She's trying to think of some excuse. "I've seen no face of any father of my children." A lie. She paused too long.

"So you've seen no man's face?"

"No face, no."

"Lies."

"I've seen no father's face."

"Owls! Take her far from here. Sacrifice her. Take her heart to One Death and Seven Death."

**Lady Blood**



Their claws pierce my skin, digging deep into my back and shoulders. Blood weeps. Pain stabs. Tears fall from my cheek, vanishing into the sky far below. We fly higher and higher above Xibalba. The owls' wings flap powerfully and silently. I look down on Xibalba. We have risen quickly. The land is unfamiliar and I can't see where my house would be any more. It's hard to talk through the pain. "Don't sacrifice me," I say. The owls say nothing. "Don't sacrifice me. I haven't been scratching knees. I haven't told any lies. I only went to look at the skull in the calabash tree from Crushing Court. It has no face."

"We have orders," they said. "What do you think will happen to us if we don't take your heart to One Death and Seven Death?"

"If you help me you will be loved by everyone above. You won't need to sacrifice anyone anymore. Take them the blood of the Croton plant instead. Burn that sap before their eyes."

The owls lower me into the forest. We search for a while until we see the red and green leaves we need. It hurts to move my arms but I make a rough bowl from a broad leaf and squeeze the Croton sap into it. It congeals into the shape of a human heart.

I wait for the owls in the forest. I go downhill to a stream and wash the blood from my back and shoulders. Lying in the cool damp underneath the leaves, listening to the water, looking up at the sky through a gap in the trees above the stream I catch a hint of the sweet aroma filling Xibalba and I know it has been done. Their claws grip me again and we fly up above the underworld. They set me down beside a dusty road. I sit and rest for a moment. The sun is bright and it's hot. "There's a house down this road," one of the owls says. "Your mother-in-law lives there. You'll know it by the flutes of her grandsons. They're always playing." I hear the song of distant flutes and the owls are already flying away.

### **One Death and Seven Death**

"Here come the owls."

My brother put his hands on his hips and watched. When they landed at our feet he said, "So you failed? Where is the heart?"

"No," one of them said. And another, "We succeeded." And another, "Here's her heart in the bowl."

"Bring it over the fire." Over the fire the heart begins to smoke. The smoke drifts up, filling Xibalba with a delicious aroma. I breathe it deeply through my nose. Other Lords come to see where it is coming from. "Stay where you are," I say. My brother and I lean over the smoking heart to smell it deeply. The smoke stings our eyes. The stinging doesn't stop. We are on the floor holding our burning eyes. We are blind.

### **Grandma**

The sound of Batz and Chouen's flute stops. I listen and hear nothing more. No talking or moving. Just the hum of the insects. I dust the flour from my hands and go to the door. Batz and Chouen sit on the porch, their flutes in their laps, their colours and paper and writing tables beside them, staring up the road. A woman is walking towards us. As she comes closer it's clear there's more than one person coming – she's pregnant. She comes right to our doorstep and says, "Mother-in-law, I am your daughter. Here are your sons, inside me. Welcome them home."

I can't let just any girl come and say she's carrying my grandchildren. I already have two to feed and since my sons went away there's no one to care for the cornfields.

"One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu are dead in Xibalba. Batz and Chouen here are the only trace left of them. Today's a good day for goodbyes. Goodbye." I turn back inside but she stays on our doorstep.

"One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu are still alive," she calls out. "You'll see for yourself when the sunshine sees their faces."

"You're not my daughter-in-law. You've just been scratching knees and now you say the children are mine."

"It's true."

The net is hanging there by the door. I go out and look at her again. "If it's true then go to my grandsons' field and fill this net with their corn to feed them."

Near sunset she's standing in my kitchen again with the net, overflowing with fresh picked cobs. "Where did you get it? You can't have picked all that yourself. You must have stolen it." I go to the fields to see for myself. There's nothing in the field. I can't ignore it

anymore. She wouldn't have done all that work if she weren't honest, if it weren't Hunahpu's children inside her. I go back and say, "Welcome home."

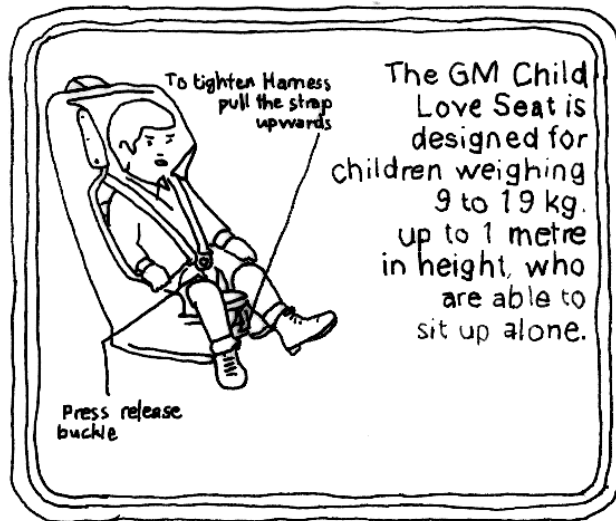
### **Batz And Chouen**

The strange girl is standing on our doorstep and Grandma says, "Go and fill this net with corn." Me and my brother laugh quietly at each other. We don't tell Grandma there isn't any corn in the field to gather. We follow her to the field to see what she'll do. She sees that there's only one stalk and falls to her knees crying. "I'm in debt," she says.

We watch for a while to see if she'll give up or what she'll do to get the corn for Grandma. When she's finished crying she calls out again, "Four Guardians of Food! Rise up!" She lays the net under the ear of corn and pulls at a strand of silk on it. The more she pulls the more corn there is, cob after cob, filling up the whole net with corn. She leaves the field, leaving that one cob standing.

## A Flat Tire

You drive the car to work. It was to get to work that you first learned to drive. You were in a new house in a new town with a new job to pay your first mortgage and your first kid was starting school.



The public transport wasn't so good so to be where you had to be on time you had to drive. Driving was hard at first, especially since you had to use the wrong leg.

Like everyone does at first, you had to concentrate on every little thing – what order to put on the seat belt, turn the ignition, check mirrors, indicate and accelerate. You would over steer and under steer and stop and go in jerks. Everyone else had been through that long ago, so it was a bit embarrassing to learn so late but since it was for the kids there was no question. You had tried to learn to drive once before, but that's a story you try not to remember, even though you can't forget, especially when your leg does something unexpected.

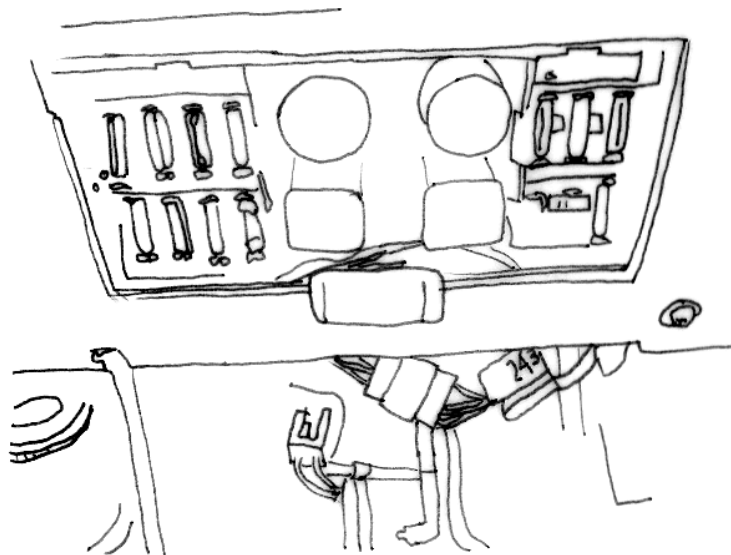
It was an old car when you first got it – your grandfather's car passed on to you by your father, already a little rusty back then and the plastic controls already brittle. Now you've lengthened the tears in the vinyl seats, let the rust go a little further and added to the greasy, dusty dross that fills the passenger side floor and the ashtrays:

- matchsticks
- blown blinker bulbs

- old gaffer tape
- lead petrol supplement bottles
- an oyster shell with a calcium build up that looks like a bird's head
- dried mandarin skin
- faded docketts
- a soft drink bottle half full of water.

The annual service was costing more each year but you couldn't scrap it.

Once when your grandfather still owned it it had been hotwired by joyriding teenagers. The police had said there wasn't much chance of catching the thieves but he should count himself lucky he got the car back at all. 'They'd usually burn it. "The electrics have been playing up ever since, bloody kids," your father had said when he gave it to you, and there's lots of burned out fuses among the crap in the tray near the handbrake to prove it. So when you were learning and the indicator didn't seem to be coming on, you thought it was because you hadn't pushed the arm up enough. You forced it and the whole thing snapped off in your hand.



After a while you didn't need to think about what to do, you just needed to think about where to go and the car would go there. It was like your kids learning to walk. Your synapses were properly wired up to your arms and legs and levers, pedals and wheels. You, the car and the road all fused into one fully automatic bio-electro-mechanical-bituminous system. It's gone even further than that.

You've done the trip so many times you don't even think about where you're going at all. Your mind just wanders like when you're lying in bed staring at the ceiling or standing in the shower and then you notice you've stopped because you've arrived where you are supposed to be. Then as you walk from the car to work and even as you do your job, sometimes you can become so automatic your mind wanders so far it's like you're not even there.

But you drive with your left foot instead of the right on the pedals because 'Jules', your right leg, hasn't behaved too well since the crash. You don't remember much about it. All you remember is one afternoon, staring at the ceiling of your room in your mother's house when you were 15, you got a call from Jules.

He asked if you wanted to go for a drive. You organised to meet him around the other side of the block. Your mother was watching something mindless on TV. You grabbed your pipe and film canister, said, "I'm going round to Chris's," and left.

When he turned up and you got in he gave you a big cheeky mongrel grin, saying "Hey man! Check it out, motherfucker!" In typical style he used a hunting knife in the ignition to start it up. You asked him how you get a car to start up that way, with a knife. He tried to explain but you couldn't quite figure out what a slide hammer was from his clumsy description.

As you drove out west you packed a few cones for him and yourself. You lit the pipe for him so he could keep one hand on the steering wheel. The suburbs went on for an hour at least. "Where are we?" you said.

"I don't know."

"You know if you get stuck in a labyrinth, you can always get out by just keep turning left. It always works."

"It always works?"

"Yep."

"Keep turning left? But we'd just keep going round the fucking block."



You pissed yourselves laughing but then, watching the houses and the cars and shops float by, you couldn't puzzle out how such an ancient and eternally mathematically true solution to every maze could be so simply thwarted. You worried quietly if it were theoretically possible to ever get out of the suburbs.

You gave the finger to some dickhead waving a fence paling at you when you did a donut up a cul-de-sac. When you finally found a way out it was good to cruise at 180 round the winding country roads. You talked him out of starting a bushfire, then when you were passing a pineapple plantation with all the little fruits standing up on their stalks with their spiky crowns you said, "Stop."

"What for?"

"Pineapples, man, let's get some pineapples."

"I'm not stopping for pineapples, you fucking conehead."

"Imagine what they'd taste like though. Yum! Look at all those fucking pineapples! When else are we ever going to get to go stand in a field of pineapples?"

"Alright, ya fuckin fruitloop. But not too long. What if a cop car comes along?"

So you got out, climbed over a fence and up through the spiky plants to the top of a hill. It was pineapples all the way down the valley and over the opposite hill.

Sitting overlooking the valley, you borrowed his knife to chop one up into chunks. They were a bit under ripe and even more sour than usual but it was good. The whole world was pineapples.

"Fuck this shit stings," he was saying.

"What?"

"This." He showed you the palms of his hands. They were covered in tiny fine little cuts. The pineapple juice was getting in them. "Fucking dermatitis."

"What the fuck is that?"

"I got it from my dad. He got hit with agent orange in Vietnam."

You shook your head over it. "I got my Dad's tinea. He got it from his dad who got it when he was a commando in New Guinea. His whole toenail on his big toe went all manky and peeled off once."

He threw the pineapple away, stood up and licked his hands, "Let's go. This is freaking me out. The farmer might have a gun."

"Oh yeah. Do they really shoot trespassers?"

When you got back to the car he asked if you wanted to drive.

"I don't know how to drive."

"It's ok, it's automatic. When else ya gunna learn?"

So you got in the driver seat and he fished around for a water bottle to wash off his hands but there wasn't one. He ended up just saying, "Arggh" in frustration and holding them in the air to let the spit dry. "Let's go back," he said. "I gotta find a tap."

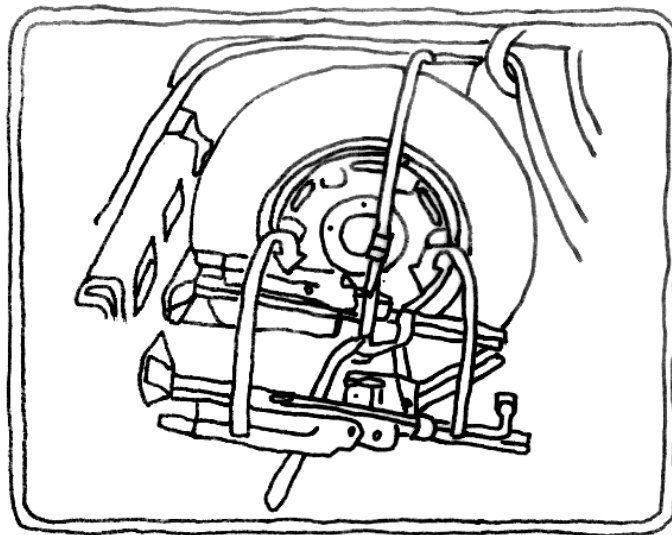
You still had the knife so you put it in the ignition and got it started. You'd watched enough to know it went in drive next and you lurched forwards. You managed to turn around and head towards town. Soon enough you were going along fine. You needed to concentrate on the steering and the pedals but there were no other cars on the road so it was all working out. You got faster and faster until you reached that bend going up a hill that was sharper than you thought and instead of hitting the brake you hit the accelerator and because you didn't expect to go faster, you tried to brake harder so you went faster.

The pain in your leg woke you up. There didn't seem much time to think but you knew he wouldn't want you to go to jail so you moved him into the driver's seat and limped through the state forest for a long time till you came to some houses. Then you limped for a long time until you found a railway and limped along it until you found a station. The police must have been happy to accept that he'd driven himself to death on his own because they never knocked on your door. You didn't get your leg seen to because a doctor might be able to tell it wasn't from whatever you might have said it was from and you might have caved. You didn't let your friends know you were doing anything other than staring at the

ceiling at home at the time it happened. Neither of your parents ever asked you any questions they didn't want to know the truth about anyway.

So you didn't learn to drive for a long time, until you had to for your kids, and you tend to keep a bottle of water in the car, and your leg twitches every so often and doesn't always move when you tell it because its electrics are shot, like it's got a mind of its own, so in your head you think of it as 'Jules'.

9 years and 6 months, give or take, minus 4 weeks a year for holidays ... it takes a while to do the maths in your head but it comes out to about 3183 times you've driven to work like this. Today you get a flat tire.



## Kongo Is Not Kongo



Sleepless, the King rose from his bed.

Memory, he said, Listen. Kongo is not Kongo.

Look at this carving. Songye. In this wood the sculptor found power. Look at these languid eyes, this serene face. Power has a smooth forehead. The soul in this wood will be here long after my head is white and smooth. It lives as long as you do.

I can see 30 days in all directions. I have a hundred thousand hands. A hundred thousand hands give to me. I give to a hundred thousand hands. I meet my enemy holding a hundred thousand spears. When a stranger sees my skull, will my grandchildren's grandchildren know what to tell them? Memory, I'll tell you something worth the time. About how Lavinia pointed without hands, spoke without a tongue.

I was hunting leopards for the wedding of the new King Afonso and the Queen of Ndongo. I heard strange noises. Strange noises not like an animal, not like a human. In a hollow at the root of a tree, there was the Governor of Songyo lying dead and my daughter, Lavinia, was with him, bleeding, without hands, without tongue. The most innocent, punished most cruelly.

Remember when all the raffia of the East, all the copper from Katanga, all the salt from the Coast, all the nzimbu of Luanda, all the slaves from every border passed through these

crossroads? Mbanza Kongo was the centre of everything. Now our Kingdom's knees are bent. My life has been a long war. I brought leopard skins and slaves to strengthen our provinces. Now the provinces plot against each other. Coming back from the campaigns, I saw our fields run wild, yams rotting in the soil, eleusine uncut, mounds unseeded. Weavers and carvers forget their craft and only buy and sell instead. Copper disappears down new roads untaxed. Pombeiro's ply the roads and rivers. Nzimbu buy half as much, yet half as many arrive in tribute.

No one can sleep, afraid his neighbour will sell him in the middle of the night. Once we made slaves of enemies and criminals. Now fathers brand their free children so they look like slaves already owned, so no one will take and sell them. To keep peace we must make constant war against Jaga, Ndongo and Portugal. Our hands have no time to sow. Too busy harvesting blood.

Memory, when I returned victorious from our Southern border, the nobles in the capital and the governors in the provinces were always drunk.

The Governor of Sonyo was rich from trade with Portugal. The rhetoric of riches dies quickly. When a man who only has riches dies he has no heirs, only hyenas. When a stranger sees his skull his grandchildren's grandchildren can't say who he is.

Afonso's faction said, by our mother's line, they had a better claim than my sons. The Afonso faction would say the sun is guilty of usurping the day.

When the time came for the Mwissikongo council to choose the king, in every Kanda my name was on a hundred thousand tongues. But I was already too old. I was made for war, not plots, and my sons were their father's sons. The time had come for me to pass on the staff.

I said, "Give me a kingdom united against its enemies. Peace puts me at war with myself. War puts me at peace. Honour the 21 sons who died by my side. Give me a staff of martial honour, not a staff to rule." So they asked who should be king. I said, "Afonso will be king. King Afonso, take the hand of this daughter of my first wife. Lavinia will be the best of wives and the best of mothers. Many times, I've seen her with her young brothers in her lap, filling their bellies with food and their heads with stories. When she sings, the stones

listen, the leaves dance. Her touch on the harp commands all that strength cannot. I pass these hands to you."

My youngest son, too young for war, had been raised by Lavinia. He said, "You don't know your own daughter. Give her to the man she admires. Give her to Sonyo or you will dishonour Marriage."

"She should not have taught you to speak if you speak against your father."



As soon as King Afonso accepted Lavinia he forgot her. I also gave him, first among my captured slaves, the Queen of Ndongo, her two sons and the Portuguese ambassador. When he saw among my captured slaves the Queen of Ndongo, King Afonso fell under her spell. He couldn't see anyone but her. She was water, moving without bones. Her face was serene but her breath shook the earth. "King of Kongo," she said, "I am the Queen of Ndongo. I'm your slave. Do as you please. We have all lost many sons in this war. I have only these two left. Kill me and you will fight another war with the next King of Ndongo. All our children and their children's children will fight the same war, again and again. Or make me your loyal wife and our children will know peace. Who could challenge the children of our wedded nations? Soldiers will be farmers again. Yams will grow. Markets will prosper. Mothers will keep their children." King Afonso made himself her slave.

So there was a leopard hunt for their marriage. That's when I found Lavinia. Without hands. Without tongue. Unable to say who had killed Sonyo and done this to her. I would

never hear songs dancing from her tongue, hear her hands on the harp again. I wanted to cut off my own hands. Why had they conquered? Why had they defended us from anyone? These hands had done nothing for Lavinia. We moved our broken house from the centre to the edge of Mbanza Kongo.

One morning, after breakfast, I sat in the courtyard looking into my empty calabash. Calabash, two hands forever cupped, receiving food, giving food. Better for holding things than these two hands. The sun edged over my feet and up my shins. Through a window across the courtyard I could hear my youngest son. The one who had said I dishonoured Marriage, who knew her best because he was too young to come to war. I remembered, when she was small, Lavinia had heard the story of Princess Calabash from a slave from the East. She must have told it to her brother when he was small. Now, he repeated it to her.

"What was that one you told me, Lavinia? The one from the East, about Calabash and the Drunken King ... There was a girl, a princess, called Calabash. Although she was the daughter of the King her brothers and sisters always teased her about her common name.

"You aren't really a royal child," they said. "You're just a slave. 'Calabash' is the name of an ordinary thing, not a princess."

When she grew up she asked her mother, "Why do I have such an ordinary name, when my brothers and sisters have royal names?"

"Calabash, you're a woman now. I've seen you with that blue hunter. It's time you knew the truth." Her mother said, "My father, your grandfather, was not from this kingdom but lived far to the west. He came to pay tribute to your father, the King of Luba. When he came and was drinking at court the calabash he was drinking from cracked. The King ordered my father to give him a woman to pay for the damage to royal property."

"My father agreed but while he stayed at court the King tried to trick him again and again. He challenged him to chop down a tree and burn every part of it. My father cut it down and burned every part of it. The King said it would be an insult if my father or his men shat on royal land. They kept all their shit in baskets. The King had a trap dug under a mat and invited him to court to dance. During his dance my father thrust his spear through the mat into the trap. The crowd cheered when they saw how he'd uncovered the King's trick. My

father was a noble man. He could not be tricked but he honoured the King's request for a woman as payment for the broken calabash. That woman was me and so you were named Calabash, after the broken cup that brought you here."

"Can I go to see my Grandfather?" asked Calabash.

"No, he's dead. You mustn't go to Nkongolo. There's a terrible king there now. He's rainbow coloured and wherever he goes the land turns red. He's rude, cruel and a bad judge. He laughs at serious things and takes offence at nothing. He punishes too hard or too soft. He married his own sister. When he rises from his throne, he has someone placed under his spear and leans on it to stand. He's always drunk."

Calabash was tired of her brothers' and sisters' teasing her so she decided to go to her grandfather's country. Her mother had forbidden her so she could tell no one. She couldn't even tell her lover before she left.

She travelled west for a long time, crossing the Luembe and Lubilash rivers until one night she came to a fire where someone had been burning palm branches to make salt. No one was near by so she rested and fell asleep near the warmth of the fire. When the salt maker returned she was amazed at the beauty and royal clothes of the sleeping stranger. She went to the chief.

No one could be sure who the the stranger was until an old chief from another village who knew Calabash's grandfather recognised who she must be. He told the story about her father and mother. A third chief broke eggs in front of her to check her blood. He said, "Welcome mother, come into the house where it's warm." He beat the lips of the talking drum and called everyone to see the beautiful woman. Everyone was happy to welcome a real princess from Luba. They accepted her as chief.

As people brought her gifts, she named the people after their gifts – Meat, Beans, Broadleaf, Fish, Chicken. She named those who brought Palm Sticks to braid her hair, 'Palm Sticks' and she named 'Hair Braiders'. She named everyone.

Soon her lover in Luba, the blue hunter, Mwamba Ciluu, missed her. When he finally traced her to her new ancestral home the old women guarding it blocked his way, but Calabash welcomed him. They entered her hut as man and wife and ruled together.



The Drunken King, Nkongolo, heard about Calabash and her husband and how much the people admired her. He was angry and came to challenge her, saying her husband couldn't rule because he was only a hunter. Mwamba Ciluu's face was smooth. The blue hunter quickly killed the Drunken King. Soon Calabash had a son, Shimat.

Everything went well until Calabash planned to host a great feast for the people. Vast quantities of cassava, meat and calabashes of palm wine were carried to her capital. Just as everything was ready and the people had assembled, Calabash began to menstruate. She went into the forest for 6 days. Her husband also couldn't be the host because he had no royal blood. Her son, Shimat, although still a child, became the host. From that day on, only descendants of Shimat can take the throne.

So said my son to my daughter as I stared into the smooth white empty calabash.

When the clots had cleared from Lavinia's mouth and wrists, her brother tied spoons and knives to her wrists. She could cook and move things. In the evenings after dinner, with her knife, she began plucking the strings of her harp again.

For long hours every day she practiced until one evening I heard her speak again. With two knives, one fastened to each arm, plucking strings, she shaped their tones and rhythms into words. The more I listened the clearer those words became. She could see that I heard the voice of her hands. She named the two sons of the Ndongo Queen and cut the strings of the harp.

I sat in the diviner's house. With the smell of burning palm leaves from somebody's fire in the air and the wind spinning leaves in the dust outside the door, the doctor brewed the substance in the belly of the nkisi. With my surviving sons, that moonless night we followed the doctor and his nkisi. It led not to the two sons of the Ndongo Queen but to the ambassador from Portugal. Portugal had strayed far from his bed. We followed the nkisi from Portugal's house through Mbanza Kongo and into the forest to a Pombeiro camp. There by the light of a fire he crooned over a Pombeiro baby. We crucified him and asked for the truth.

"What does it matter what I say?" he spat. "You'll believe anything."

My son held the Pombeiro child up to him.

"See this child? Like you it's pale, hanging half way between life and death."

"Don't touch it! It has royal blood!" he said.

"Give us the truth and it will live."

"It's the Queen's son. It's my son."

We demanded he tell us everything.

"What happened to your daughter you brought upon yourself," he said. "You killed the Queen of Ndongo's first born son. His brothers, two fools, talked and talked about what they wanted to do to your daughter but they only ever talked. It was me who planned it out. Me who pushed them to it but they were glad to have their mother's vengeance on you. You who killed their brother."

"What more?"

"What more? Name the crime and I am the villain. I set fire to granaries to watch innocent men punished. I killed cattle to set friend against friend. I sow seeds of mistrust and harvest the slaves. I've poisoned chickens to see men burn their wives as witches. I've dug up the dead and placed them at your doors to watch you dance. And I've done much much more. I'd do it all again. The devil is my master. How many times I've laughed in the dead of night! Just let me live again and I'll do it all again and again!"

"Only evil can come from you," I said. "Look at your son. Watch it wave its helpless hands while its father's hands are helpless. Listen to the babe scream. Its father hears and does nothing." I cut the sorcery out of its belly.

The next day we caught the Queen's two sons, Rape and Murder. In the evening I went to the King and Queen's feast with my youngest son and Lavinia.

"King and Queen, I've come to pay my respects," I said. "I hope you will accept this small contribution to your feast from my humble household."

"We remember the honour you brought to our kingdom," the King said.

Once they had eaten well I said, "King and Queen, I have come to ask for justice. I'm old and humble now, but you're as great as the Earth from which all wealth comes, on whose fruit we all depend. There is a witch in Mbanza Kongo."

What could they do with everyone watching but to promise justice? The doctor danced and the crowd followed his footsteps. His feet followed the fetish to the witch's house. Under her bed, for all to see, the doctor found the two heads of her children. Everyone saw a witch where once they saw a Queen. The Queen knew then that her sons were buried in her belly. "Queen, you are the Earth, whose fruits always return."

The Mwissikongo elected me King again. The smooth face of this carving isn't mine any more. No Kings have this face any more. They're all drunk.

Kongo is not Kongo.

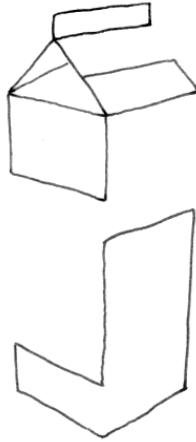


## Accelerator

Standing there down the alley in the fresh blue morning air outside the thumping techno Matt ground his teeth up to you and with his desperate paranoid I need a private conversation with a trusted friend now looks pulled you away from the sparkle huggy kids down from The Beat he'd introduced you to who were still trying to get you to sniff from their Vicks inhaler saying it was really just Vicks but it felt so good but you were still not sure though and though you didn't want to insult this cute little gang of ecky monsters by not trusting them, if it did turn out to be cleverly concealed amyl or something else you really didn't need any more shit in your system right now, you needed whatever presence of mind you could cling to and you didn't want to end up a casualty, because Matt explained to you that the cops were up the top of the alley with a sniffer dog stopping people and searching them as they came out and he had a whole sheet of purple ohms in his bag and there was no other way to exit the alley, and he couldn't just dump them because that was a lot of money, and you read in his anxiety that he owed it to someone, it was bad, bad timing because he was starting to come down, sensing unreal threats in every peripheral fleck and now here was a real threat, although his girlfriend wasn't yet, only 5 minutes ago, she came up and handed you an icecube and with her own icecube started rubbing it on your lips, saying, "Do this, it feels nice" so you did and it certainly did feel nice, too nice, and her lips slightly parted and she looked at the ice on your lips and her head tilted back slightly and it took every last ounce of your presence of mind to turn away and throw the ice on the concrete because that one moment could have ended so so badly for everyone, the whole idea of kissing your best friend's girlfriend while he was off having a psychotic episode somewhere, maybe even observing you, and your own lover, Molly, how could you even consider betraying her, and just a moment ago she'd already been asking you suspicious questions about that woman who'd spoken to you on the dance floor and she'd had to explain that the woman might have been trying to pick you up because she was over from the meatmarket and you'd asked why anyone would want to pick you up and the conversation hadn't gone too well, now Matt needed your help, though you lost sight of him now he'd wandered off and it looked like Charley needed help too, since he'd had a hard time all night on some bad speed, he'd been trying to talk but going so fast he couldn't actually get a word out though at one point you'd heard him manage to rant about protein kinase synthesis of sugar cane but mostly he'd ended up sitting down making strangled noises trying just to speak, but luckily though Emma, whose freak was cleanliness, whose clothes were always impeccably tasteful, in well coordinated, understated tones and always

spotlessly clean and she even always brought her toothbrush, and she sometimes brought an esky of fresh fruit for everyone in the morning too, where was Molly, and a girl you'd met earlier, where on earth was Molly, she'll be jealous again, that girl who'd explained that her mother was a prostitute and asked you what you did, and you'd said nothing, studying economics, and she'd asked if you thought that people end up doing whatever they were brought up to do, because it seemed to her that sooner or later eventually she'd also end up a prostitute like her mother, so you explained to her now, that Emma over there, her mother was a 50s housewife and wanted Emma to be a 50s housewife too but Emma was no 50s housewife, and that that guy over there, who was nicknamed Rat, because he was a Rat, and his friend with him A, poor A was shooting up now, the last time you'd seen him before this he'd been hanging out with Rat in the Westfield shopping town foodcourt hoping to run into a dealer and as much as you tried to talk about other things the only thing they could talk about was how good that batch of beige had been, and what a shame it had dried up because someone had got busted and the last they had of it, see look at the baggy, you could always tell this batch because it was this beige colour, it was so good, there was never any like it, had degraded to clear liquid and wasn't any good any more, which was all such a sad terrible shame because while Rat was a rat, A was a really sweet guy who just needed the stuff to prop up his sensitive personality and couldn't get by without it any more, he was a mouse, a mouse and a rat sitting side by side, strange bedfellows, and you worried not just for A but for yourself because you could see a little of A in yourself, you couldn't speak much without speed either which was a warning to you, you didn't want to be a slave to anything, you had to mind not to get addicted, on the other hand you could see a little of Rat in yourself too, a little of everyone was in everyone, Averroes, I and I, if all the flies were one fly, when it comes down to it and just as somewhere in the back of your mind sitting out the front of a forgotten petrol station is an old man in a rocking chair, and another down the road shouting at you that you're a worthless no good washed up waste of human life, while there is a hermit in a cave in the mountains, and a fucking genius and another saying, hang on let's not get carried away, and another, another some way up a skyscraper looking up from the screen, at the day out the window for a moment, now middle-aged, unable to quit because he's making too much money, always putting off what he always wanted to do when he was young, you can't give up that much money, the opportunity cost is too great to do anything but make money, and everyone would laugh like it was a mid-life crisis, economics is the religion of our theocracy, yet hardly anyone, beyond a select priesthood, gives a second thought to the

central tenets of this faith, to the almighty one and only law of supply and demand, to this blind faith in the free market, can anyone say, what is the marginal productivity of a whore to a pimp, how are you differentiated as a unit of labour in a monopolistically competitive market, what is the marginal utility of living one more day? a chiclet boy on the streets of Oaxaca understands the pragma of economies of scale better than any theory will ever teach you, Economics 101, Sally has a surplus of wheat and not enough fish, Jack has a surplus of fish and not enough wheat, if they trade, they both benefit, Economics 101, if Sally is hungry and Jack takes all the food she will do whatever the fuck Jack wants, you must quit economics as soon as possible so you will never have so much money you can't afford to lose it, never have too much money to do what you want, you must lose your mind and become unemployable, anyway, just as I contain multitudes, so each of us is one of those multitudes in the great hive mind of the city and they think that machines make them see further, go faster, live longer and fly, make them more powerful but they don't realise they are all just components of the great cybernetic control system sending them money and desire signals that automate the movements of their bodies to work and it's growing and growing stretching its road and electronic tentacles fusing itself with other towns and cities into a vast super-intelligent octopus being infesting cancerously across the planet, you weren't sure if you had said any of that out loud or just thought it, but you could see she was not listening, which was fair enough and you wanted to get away anyway to find Molly, so anyway those guys, Rat and A both of their fathers are salesmen but that doesn't mean that either of them have to be salesmen, so you don't have to be a prostitute, although on the other hand there is Jason whose father is a stockbroker, and the plan his father has for him is that when he's given up his wild youth there's a job worth loads of money waiting for him doing stockbroking in Sydney, so maybe you're right, but things don't have to be this way or that way, you can do what you like, what do you want to do anyway? anyway, I'd better go and help my friend Charley over there, bye, where on earth, so you went and spoke to Emma who'd had her hand on Charley's shoulder most of the night, to see how he was, and agreed that the best thing would probably be to get some milk



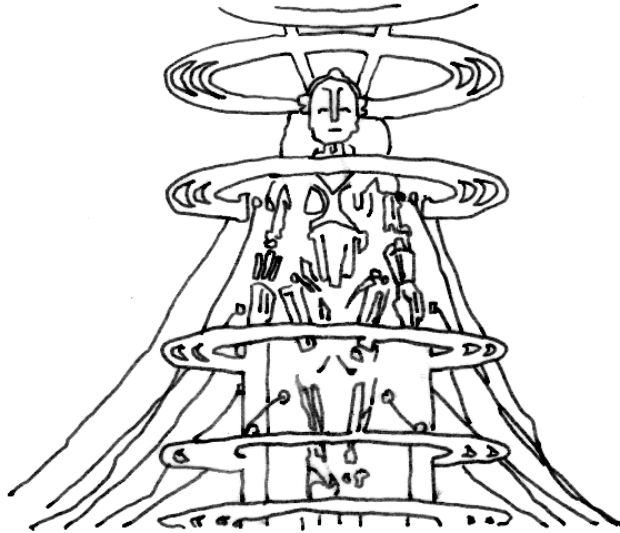
to help him detox, milk is always good, and there must be something open by now selling milk now that it was daybreak, and you ran into Matt again and he explained he was going to ask Emma to carry his bag with the sheet in it when they left to walk past the cops because the cops never search girls, so you said, "That's not really fair on Emma. I mean if the cops do search her it puts her in a difficult position of having to either get busted or to dob in her good friend. You should let her know that if she get's busted it's ok for her to dob you in. I mean you just can't put someone in that position, you see what I mean? Look I'll do it, give me the bag and I'll get it past the cops." "Oh, um, er, no." "Look it's alright, you're coming down. They'll search paranoid looking people, but I'm still going so I'll be fine. I'll just walk right by like nothing's wrong. Acid doesn't smell anyway. Those dogs are trained for speed and smack and coke and ecky but you haven't got any of that shit have you?" "No, no don't worry." "Look, I've got to go get Charley some milk from a corner shop or something, so I'll walk past them with nothing, and I'll get an idea of the scene, and see if they're searching everyone or just paranoid people ok?" "Ok." so you went up the alley and round the corner and sure enough there were 4 cops and a german shepherd, notorious phone bookers these cops were, once they got Charley up against a cyclone fence one night and one held a phone book to his belly while the other clubbed it with his torch, it doesn't leave a bruise that way you see so no evidence, they rummaged a little through one person's bag and let them go and they didn't stop you at all so out in the real world you crossed the road to avoid drunks throwing up in gutters like dogs shouting blithering shit and trying to fight unable to walk, trying to speak unable to think, this piss head mob is what you, if you are to be an ordinary bloke, are supposed to be, these are the majority

people populating the city stretching out miles around you throughout the whole country, it was no wonder Matt's girlfriend said once, like all the girls do, that they'd been worried when first invited thinking it would be a dangerous circumstance with everyone on drugs but everyone was really nice and it was much better than pubs and other clubs which are always full of assholes, oh god it was a horrible ugly, ugly world out here in the beautiful blue light of dawn, you were standing exposed in the unforgiving light of the 7-11, longing for the sanctuary of the ecky kids, afraid these swarms would smash your teeth in the pavement, afraid they'd grope your girlfriend's arse, forcing you to decide whether to kill them or, humiliated, nobly ignore them, afraid you will have to kill them, you need, need, the unreal world down the alley, the cool gentility of acid, ecstasy and amphetamines. But now even the kids were starting to crumble, getting gritty and craven as mephistophelian grip got on them. No wonder Emma was on her clean freak. You too, you too were getting gritty, gritty, your jaw hurt but you couldn't stop chewing nothing, gritty and itchy. Not just that but starting to enjoy being all fucked up and guttery. What after all was separating you from those fucked up scrag junkies moaning and whining and having domestics at the station cause they couldn't get on? Maybe a lot, maybe a fine line. Hungry ghosts, their bellies large and their necks narrow, insatiable, craving poison of mad torment, unable to distinguish pain and pleasure, visceral psychotic, craving ecstatic agony, lust and guilt, living dead, never alive unless dying, recognition too late, coming back to the point of no return, suffering desire, desiring suffering. You made it back to the top of the alley with the milk worried they might bust you because a normal person would be blind drunk and not have anything to do with milk, you couldn't be seen by the cops carrying milk, it would look very suspicious to be carrying milk at the end of the night, a proper drunk person wouldn't be anywhere near milk, damn it you hadn't thought of that on the way out, so you surreptitiously held it in your right hand behind your leg so they wouldn't see it and smuggled the milk past the cops ok again, you paused to ask the ecky kids from The Beat for a sniff of Vicks to make peace and trust with them, you went to give Emma the milk for Charley, but they weren't there, they were sitting at the bottom of the fire escape now so you went over and offered Charley some but he refused so you just sat there for a while, pretending to absent mindedly drink it casually so he would ultimately feel ok about it, since it's a common politeness when people are suspicious to taste of food before offering it to demonstrate it isn't poisonous, just as The Beat kids had done with the Vicks, and as you chatted Charley was saying nobody knows what these new drugs do, at least he could talk now, ecstasy for example was such a recent invention that no one had yet been alive



long enough for anyone to know the long-term effects, it could do anything all these people here could be vegetables by the time they're forty or it could make them permanently e-ing, or maybe in a permanent catatonic state like to be constantly in a nitrous oxide nirvana absence, but they're all so beautiful it would be a shame for that to happen and the best people too, imagine them like that can you imagine being like that it's terrible oh god the horror, and you suggested that maybe what he'd taken that night wasn't speed but PCP since that creates a dissociation between the hemispheres of the brain that makes you impulsive and your thoughts disconnected, just as he had described his experiences earlier on, in any case it was a bad batch and nobody should touch that shit again and Emma said that it was better when everyone used to be on acid, it was fun and the worst thing people got were stomach cramps, you agreed though the comedowns did get worse and worse until most of it was coming down and she said there were only so many times you could understand the meaning of life the universe and everything before you got bored of it, and you laughed and said to Charley you remember that time we had too many mushrooms and that you were worried about Matt because he seemed to like valium a little too much after a night out and it's addictive and people who like that would like heroin and the trouble with that is you don't realise you've had too much till it's too late, and Charley said nothing is ever the same as it was the first time, but look at all these people chasing that first time again and again and again, like a beat, like the sunrise sunset, every weekend, sometimes on Wednesdays too, like dogs vomiting because they eat more than they can eat and he finally took a sip of the milk you had strategically put in his hand in the midst of all this as if it was nothing and you were just all sharing it, and you gave Emma a nod and said you had to go find Molly, and ran into Matt instead who said he'd put his bag up on the fire escape and Emma was sat at the bottom of the fire escape to stop anyone going up, or at least keep an eye on if anyone came down with the bag, so she couldn't get busted with the bag but was helping him keep an eye on it, and you went back up the stairs to the club and once more into the burst of beats, a whirl of limbs, a mass of hands flailing, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the turmoil of strobes and colours. You grooved slowly along the edge of an ultraviolet haze, a laserlit, black incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric cyborg was cursing you, praying to you, welcoming you – who could tell? You were cut off from the comprehension of your surroundings; you glided past like a phantom, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first

ages, the blindness of last ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories, of ages never to come, with empty promises and no trace of hope. You foresee pasts that never were. You remember futures that will never be.



You couldn't count how many people in this room alone had spent the equivalent of someone's annual wage on their sneakers, rubber souls infused with gel and air for added bounce on the dance floor, or on their ephemeral dose of synthetic jubilation and instant epiphany and you were that man in Metropolis gallivanting in the exotic garden seeing for the first time what is happening among the machines hidden below. Looking down from a balcony overlooking the frenzied thumping laserlit electro-chemical meat machine mass, you couldn't get it out of your head that with the amount of people in the world that someone somewhere right now was looking down the barrel of a gun, and each moment there was a different person pulling a trigger and a different person shot, out of hatred, contempt, for fun, following orders, what was in the head of that person looking down the barrel and that person dying, and as much as you tried to put it out of your head and as much as you knew it was the psychosis starting again, and as much as it felt grotty and disgusting and you didn't like yourself in such a debased state without any style at all, you just couldn't stop the fear, the sensation that someone was just on the brink of whacking a machete into the back of your neck. It grew in intensity and the back of your neck bristled and sweated and the muscles tightened up but you knew it was your imagination so you didn't turn around, still you couldn't stop that feeling, but you knew if you spun around that you would then just feel like the person had dodged around and was still behind you

stifling a laugh about to swing that machete in the back of your neck and that as much as you turned around, like an obsessive compulsive you would never be able to be sure that there wasn't a machete on the very brink of being swung into the back of your neck, just millimetres away from the first moment of contact with your skin as it came hurtling in to sever your spine and roll your head on the floor but most of all you would look like an idiot ducking or turning around, round in circles like a dog chasing its tail, so you just stood there tense full loathing the world, loathing yourself, so you went down into the darkness and light, and holding on to the god's eye hexagon you'd learned to craft in primary school around your neck made of insulated wire woven around three crossed pieces of a coat hanger you tried to dance it out, and with each touch of your rubber sole on the floor another glow-in-the-dark plastic crucified Jesus rolled off of a factory conveyor belt in China and another Paraguayan child said their prayers to Jesus suffering the suffering of every single person in the history of the entire world and eating his flesh and drinking his blood every Sunday for thousands of years ever after, while these people all here, what do we worship, worship Hephaestos, the child of Aphrodite and Hephaestos sparking from his anvil sex-machines metamorphosing into an organobot iteratively designing and upgrading itself into unprecedented Babylon, Great Moloch devouring the manic, orgasmic innocent sacrifices ... the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed. Hug me till you drug me, honey, Kiss me till I'm in a coma, Hug me, honey, snugly bunny, Love's as good as soma.



and someone touched you on the shoulder, thank Jesus Christ and Holy Mary Mother of God it was Molly and she had in her hand a cup of liquid black, and she offered you the cup and you took the cup from her, and sipped it, looking at her as she looked at you and it was the carbon dioxide bubble infused cola nut flavoured, sweetened with the sugar of Proserpine, blood of sacrificial slaves, sweet decadent ambrosia, nectar of the Gods. The word went round that the cops had gone, everyone went in a taxi but you went on the back of Matt's Akira bike. He said he was worried because he'd been seeing purple all night, and wondered what would happen if all the traffic lights were purple, but that he'd figured out that green was the bottom light, so he'd go if the bottom light was on, he dropped you home and you went under the house to avoid people and saw the esky Emma used to use for fruit and opened it and saw that nobody had emptied it since last time and the fruit had fermented into yellow stinking liquid in which a few bloated inch long white worms floated so you went up stairs and became catatonic, unable to move with fear, fear someone was watching you and would laugh, fear that you would kill yourself, fear of your own hands, just pure fear and nothing else, remembering with disgust the stupid shit you said to everybody, dancing like an idiot, how agonisingly good everything felt, how much you loved them, loved them all, but couldn't bear to face them, to be near them, you had humiliated yourself and betrayed everyone, those beautiful people, that moment was gone, would never be again, they would all die, the match that burns twice as bright burns half as long, and all that was left was this craven horrible little slime creature yourself who could not be near any of those holy, holy people, that beautiful innocent naiveté in that moment as exquisite and fleet as that single flutter of a butterfly wing, your fingers were around her neck, squeezing more and more until you thought suddenly it was already too late and let go and she gasped for breath, alive in your hands, we keep coming back to this point of no return, afraid of your own hands, was that even a real memory, why didn't she leave, afraid of your own hands, there was a regular dripping outside, sounded like a creaky bed, and the traffic had its rhythms and so did the planets and the moon, the whole universe was made not of atoms but rhythms, the rhythm of a creaky bed, all sex, the universe was made of sex, all just to shame you, wanting everyone but entirely untouchable, you deserve everything you get, there's nobody to blame, betrayal, betrayal, finally realising that nobody really wanted you there, you spoiled everyone's good time with your cautiousness and inability to communicate, and they only ever had you along in the same way they would patronise a disabled person out of sympathy, you felt the suffering of everyone yet you were only one person so would need to multiply that sensation again infinitely, yet still

hadn't suffered properly, just a whinger, you brought it all on yourself and had nobody else to blame but yourself, what kind of idiot would keep taking something that made you feel like this, you lusting, vomiting dog, oh the agonising, ecstatic crash of innocence and experience, the passion of a dark-in-the-glow Jesus, the wealthy airs of bon vivants, the stupid faces of drunkards, the glistening cheeks of dancers, the dementia patients in closets, the abortions disposed of, the day forgets them, tries not to think of them, lying wide eyed far from success stories and still, the contented spring from their beds ... awake, dawn pierces me, I see that I am hideous ... and I see that what is not me is hideous I hide under the covers ... empty gifts in glass towers decorate glass towers of empty gifts ... whoever hasn't had enough, puts people in coffins ... we are their gambling chips, and they think us proud to have the most pips ... we endeavour far up the garden path, they point the finger at us, and save themselves ... divided we stay, misguided idealistic individuals with only dirges and contemplations ... I was an honest man ... an honest woman ... a donkey ... a judge that stayed out of court ... always nobody, forever nemo ... brightness you are harsher than hatred ... her thoughts are dry and indifferent, our legs are crossed ... I stay awake far from the others gathered to watch I see in the clear light of day all them in the world I am catatonic ... they dressed me when I awoke... now, paralysed, I know my place ... I know that it doesn't matter how things should be, they are ... quiet down here ... I am the ponderous moment ... it is old sun at midday ... I reveal scuttlebugs ... I hear rocks be still when I sit close ...



## Ash Child

Through thick foliage Luuk peered along his gun sight at the village, hoping a head would appear, an arm, some movement, some sign of life. Sweat ran down his forehead and formed a droplet hanging from his eyebrow. He was sure he'd only need a moment. He needed the inducting officer to see his marksmanship for himself. Without bragging, to casually pick off a spot in the distance. To hear his congratulatory, "Shot!" But the village was desolate. The inducting officer slapped him on the shoulder. "Never mind. They must have heard us coming. Some other day."

...

She never slept well. That was not unusual for the times. Still, she couldn't sleep well. Perhaps she missed her home. But others were also far from home and they didn't spend days staring at something far away so that their children had to bring them food and water. When people asked her about it afterwards, she didn't know what they were talking about. Everyone knew she was sick but doctors were in great demand and short supply. Times were so bad even doctors couldn't heal themselves and suffered the same fate as everyone else.

In those days, if someone came and went in a good mood, smiling and laughing like everyone's old friend it was only because they were afraid that all the malice going about the world would touch them. So when a doctor arrived with a grave and serious look, everyone knew he was no charlatan. Her children asked her to see him but she refused to go, saying that doctors were for sick people. When they asked her again, she said that doctors build their prestige by sowing seeds of sickness to harvest their dinner. It wasn't until she began to stare again, sweating, not leaving her hut, that the doctor came to her. It was not the work of a witch, he said, but of a child that did not want to come into the world.

No one but the doctor knows what was in the medicine he prepared in his horns out of town at the crossroads at night. After he had placed it in her mouth, he put charcoal in the fetish, sang, and with a single blow struck another nail into the fetish. She stood and walked alone into the forest. She walked through the bush for a long while, it might have been hours or days or a hundred years because each step was like the last, until she came to her home village. It was burned to the ground. She remembered the gold necklace she had

left in her house and went to those ashes that had been her house. She knew it was risky to stay there but she kept running her fingers through the ashes looking for that necklace. In the middle of the ashes a lump began growing. It swelled and swelled until it had the form of a small ashen child. Its hair, skin and eyes were all ash white. It said, "Take me with you."

Afraid, she tried to run away but it blinded her and said, "Take me with you." Still she tried to run away, but it choked her breath and said, "Take me with you." She returned. The child climbed up and clung to her back.

She didn't know how she knew, but she knew the ash child couldn't walk on its own. She wondered if it had ever been able to walk and it said, "I have been this way forever." Although it was a child it spoke as an adult would.

In moonlight she walked on for a long while and the child said, "Ah, here are the plantains," and soon enough she was among plantains. When they came into the fields, just as she began to wonder if she could let the child down to the ground and rest it asked, "Why? Am I heavy?"

"No," she replied, embarrassed that the child might think she wasn't strong enough.

It laughed and said, "Soon enough I'll be heavy."

She walked on and on through the night. "There should be a crossroads near here," the ash child said, and she came to a crossroads. She stopped.

"Go to the left," the child said, but in that direction the road led into a forest, darkened with more shadows than any other road and any of the forest she had so far come through.

"Don't worry," the child said. "You will be safe." But as she went down the road the child became heavier. Through the forest she came into open fields again, then to a village in daylight. But though it was mid-morning there were no signs of people. The village was desolate.

"Go on," the child said. "Just a little more." The child was heavier than stone. "It was a day like this." She staggered under its weight.

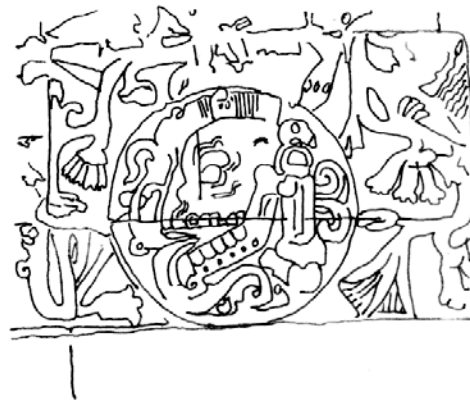
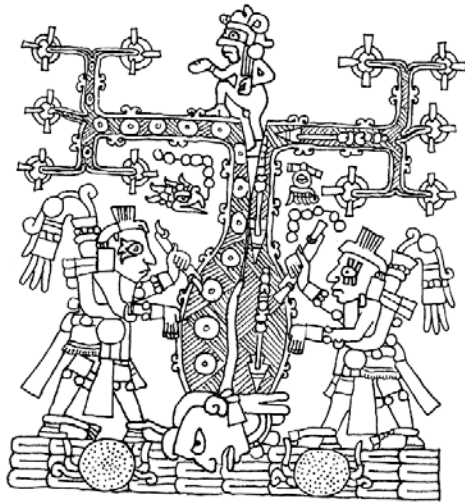
"What was?" she asked.

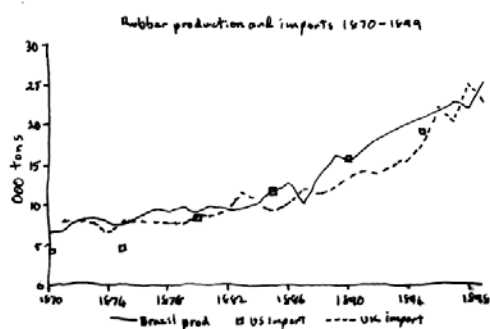
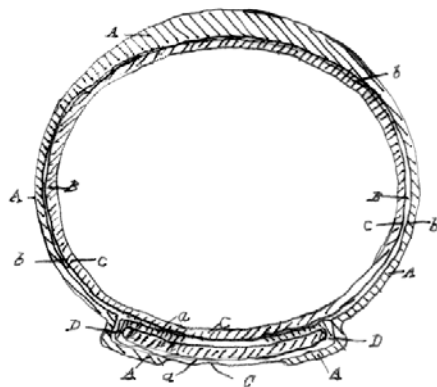
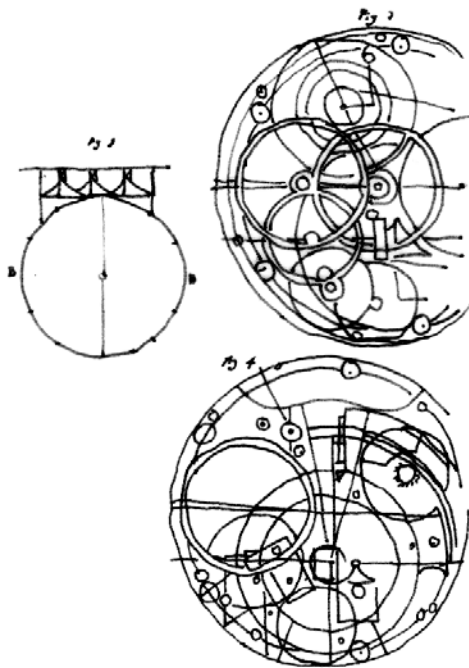
"You know. Keep going." So she struggled on, through the empty village, across the fields and into the forest once more. They were not far into it when the child said, "There it is. There, among the roots of the Bouma tree." She went over, between the roots. The weight was unbearable. "It was here wasn't it?"

"Yes," she answered. "All of you were here with me, hiding. Your brother and sisters kept silent but you were too young. You cried and cried. They would have killed us all." The weight of the child brought her shoulders to the ground.



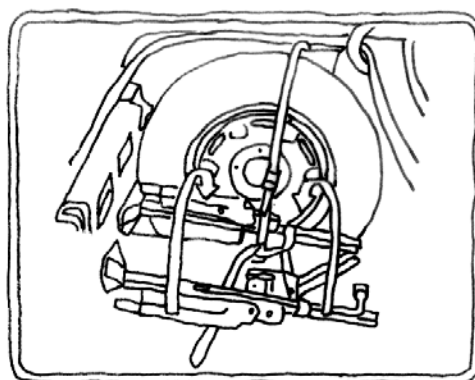
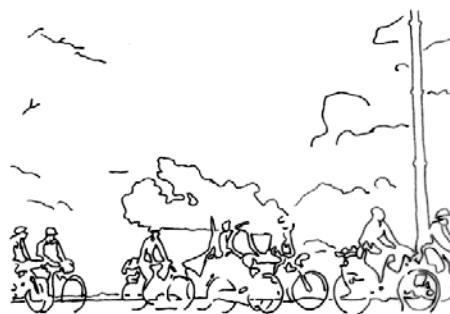
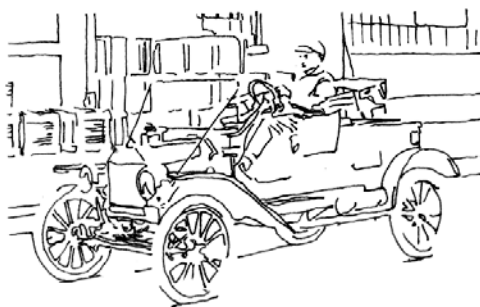
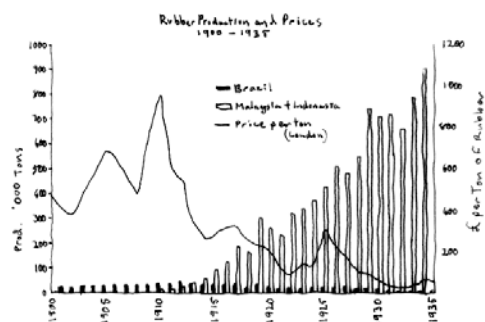
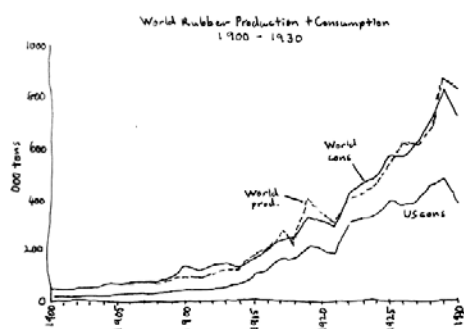
## A History of Rubber Tires











## Japanese Graphic Design



The red crepe paper and black pipe cleaner poppy is still planted in the air conditioner vent. Your daughter made it at school for Remembrance Day, lest we forget. The aged paper flakes away if you touch it and the sun has faded it pink.

With your cousins at your grandparent's place, you nailed old bits of wood together in the shed to make Tommy guns and play at killing Nazis.

He didn't speak much about the war. Late one night sitting by the kerosene burner in his dressing gown with a cup of tea, he said he watched his friend get shot off a bridge and fall into the river. He wasn't killed instantly by the shot. He was shot and drowning to death at the same time. Dying two deaths. One morning at the dining table he gave you a juicy fruit lolly and said, one night, he and the other commandos were way out in the middle of the jungle, in the mountains, far from anywhere. At night they could hear bicycles. Bicycles in the middle of the jungle, in the mountains, with no roads anywhere. They thought they were going mad. "Can you hear that? Is that bicycles? Can you hear bicycles?" It took them

a while to figure out the Japs had dug tunnels and were riding bikes around inside the mountains. There were 300 of them to 3000 Japanese and their job was to make them believe there were more. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. What they couldn't get over though, was how the locals used to play soccer with heads. Sometimes they sent just two or three men on a mission and you'd walk into a village and they'd be kicking around their enemies' heads. Mostly other locals, but sometimes Japs, and sometimes us too, because some of them worked for the Japs. They were such lovely people otherwise, except they'd kick people's heads around.

He was looking after you while your father did something or other. He took you to Westfield Shopping town to buy a model Vought Corsair and stopped and stood for a moment in the middle of it, looking around at the shops and people and said if you used a flamethrower in here, all the way up to the supermarket at the end, all these people, and he shook his head.

Even though they were much cheaper, his children couldn't convince him to buy a Japanese car. That's why you drive your kids to school in his old Holden Commodore.

In Japan they use paper cranes instead of poppies. School children make them and send them to Hiroshima. They've been doing this since Sadako Sasaki, dying of leukaemia from the radiation, tried to fold 1000 paper cranes. The school kids at Hiroshima were caught outside because they were working on clearing demolition sites when they dropped Little Boy. In the museum there is a letter written on the morning of that day by a girl, the same age as your daughter is now, about how she didn't like swimming lessons. As you walk through that museum it shows, step by step, from the epicentre outward, what remains of people: the outline of the shadow of a man burned into stone steps; a pair of glasses, a lunch box; the people trying to reach water with their burnt flesh falling away; the people running, so overwhelmed with thirst they drank the black rain even though they thought it was petrol; the woman whose kimono pattern was burned onto the skin of her back because dark absorbs heat more than light colours; the girl who died of leukaemia years later. When you were her age, a Japanese student was staying at your house. Your father had found her looking lost in the Valley as night was falling and showed her to a hostel. She ended up staying at your house for a while and taught you how to fold paper cranes.

Kentaro lived in the share house in Sydney with you for a while, when you were an Economics drop out, and he'd been out trying to flog his photographs by the side of Oxford St to make a few extra bucks, but someone had spat on them.

"Do you think it's racism?" he asked.

"I don't know," you said. "Those people would spit on anyone. They don't care who you are. Maybe racism, maybe not."

He said he planned not to go out on ANZAC day because his friend had told him he'd get beaten up. You wondered why your grandfather fought the war if there are Nazis running around all over the country. Kentaro talked about peace and who cares what they were fighting about, he's him and you are you. So you both stayed in on ANZAC day, had another smoke and listened to Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.

Later he got a job at a Japanese graphic design company a few blocks away. He didn't want to work in Japan or for a Japanese company. Too strict. Your whole life planned out. That's why he left Japan and came here but he was flat broke and had no choice. They got him in the end.

You went with him to his work one day, you can't remember why. The manager there, off the cuff, asked you if you wanted a job there. How cool would it be to work for a Japanese graphic design company? You could get work in any design place if they knew you had learned the Japanese way. And since every Graphic Design job required 3 years experience to apply, how else could you ever get to work in Graphic Design but through some freak of luck like this? It was a one and only chance. And if it's true about all that Japanese discipline you'd get some serious, proper skills to shut up any condescending bastard who thought you were some half-baked two-bit wannabe. Like those wood block prints, imagine if you could do those prints.

That print by Yoshitoshi, is that his name? From *New Forms of Thirty-Six Strange Things*. Some mornings, after you drop the kids off and do the next leg to work, you get lost thinking about it.

An autumn wind whispers.

Grass grows in Ono's eyes.



No more to say.

... says the poet, the ghost of the great poet Ono, capricious young lover, enlightened in old age, her skull in the field, completing the poem. The poet of the *Tales of Ise*. The poet in the Noh play, *Unrin-in*, where a young man on stage is the audience to the ghost, outside of time, reciting. The poet in the Ukiyo-e of Yoshitoshi. In the Meiji era, Yoshitoshi, the last master of Ukiyo-e, for a long time lived in poverty, his mistresses prostituting themselves to support him, dying in madness. Beautiful violence, sex, ghost stories and poetry. Vulgar and aesthetic.

It's hard to know where to start, you could say it this way or that way. Either way, it all ends up meaning everything else. And so everything ends up meaning everything else. And so means nothing. The poppy, the paper crane, the print. The air conditioner vent. No more to say.

When you first had the privilege of seeing *Unrin-in*, that final act where the manifestation of Ariwara no Narihira dances, it went on so long that some of the audience were nodding off. Even the flautist and the older drummer on stage were struggling to keep their heads up. As it went on, so slow, a single step, a long pause, a drum beat, a flute peal, you lost sense of time. You couldn't tell any more if it had been 10 minutes or more than an hour. At first it was funny that the play was so boring it put people to sleep but then you slipped into a daydream yourself. The dancer paused. The mask stared into you, unsettling and transfixing you amid the overall tranquillity. This play, *Unrin-in*, about the ancient poems, *Tales of Ise*, has been performed in this way, witnessed by audiences, for generations. In that liminal state you understood that without you, without the performer and the witness here and now, re-enacting this ritual, without you and him, it won't exist anymore. You are humble and important at the same time. Afterwards you read a translation and learned that this sensation was the intention of the dance. The embodied Ariwara no Narihira says, "Like the stories of the *Tales of Ise*, this dream dance transcends time."

The Japanese graphic design manager said, "Ok, you draw some meat. If you can draw meat, you can work here." He left you with a pencil and paper. Meat? What kind of meat? You tried a T-Bone. You never knew drawing meat with a pencil would be so hard. The damn thing was an embarrassment – it ended up looking more like a child's drawing of a penis than a piece of meat. When he came back he politely said not bad, but not good

enough. Finally a job you could have loved, not the telemarketing purgatory the DSS sent you to all the time, but you blew it.

Why didn't he ask you to draw a hand? You can draw hands and you can draw them because your art teacher in high school said they are hard to draw. Why the fuck didn't she say, "Drawing meat is hard." Why didn't someone say – "Hey, you know, in the industry, a good test of someone's natural skill is if they can draw meat." Then you would have been prepared. If anyone had said, "The day will come when your future will depend on your ability to draw meat" you would have practiced every damn day till you could draw a piece of meat so good you could serve it up for dinner. But no.

Still you can't complain. Really, if you really wanted to, you could have quit school and saved up money by chopping tomatoes and washing dishes to go to Japan like a proper person would have who got it in their head to put their mind to something. Maybe your dad was right. He always said you should wake up to reality, pointing at you with his middle finger, calling you James Dean, but you could never figure what he meant by 'the real world'. When you looked around all you could see was Gyprock. All you knew was you didn't like Rugby and you didn't want to sniff glue at Oxley station. There must be a third way, so after buying some hash from the skinhead who lived under a Queenslander around the corner, you went into a second-hand bookshop down the road and picked the bottommost book from a pile of sci fi paperbacks because it was the book least likely to ever be read, and it seemed like such a miserable waste of someone's effort if you didn't read it. It was *Ise Monogatari* and because you had no idea what that was you bought it.

## Hungry Ghost

**Pacman**



The little yellow dot shrivelled up and the machine beeped. The boy turned to the old woman looking over his shoulder, not sure what someone a hundred years old was doing in a video arcade. He figured she must be mad, but politely answered her questions.

"What is this yellow dot?"

"It's Pacman."

"Is that all it does? Eat?"

"Yes, but you also have to get away from the ghosts."

"What if the ghost catches you?"

"You die but you get 3 lives. If you eat a big dot then you can eat the ghosts."

"What if it eats all the dots?"

"You go to the next level, it's the same but the ghosts are faster."

"So it's always hungry?"

"Yes."

"Ahhh." She held out her bowl. He rolled his eyes and put a coin in.

**Words and Stone**

"Chiyo," Kentaro said.

Chiyo put her ear close to her dying husband's mouth. "Yes, Kentaro?"

"I always thought, when I was dying it would all become clear. I would know what I should have done. What I should do in the last moments."

"Yes." She stroked his thin grey hair.

"But I'm no wiser. What words are the most important?"

"Shh."

"I don't know what to say."

Chiyo wrapped her arm around his shoulder and, hugging him, rested her head on his chest.

"Chiyo," Kentaro said.

Chiyo moved so she could feel his shallow breath against her ear. "Yes, Kentaro?"

"I'm hungry."

Chiyo went into the kitchen and prepared a broth of Air, Land and Sea but when she brought it back he was gone.

She went out and walked without direction until she was exhausted. She sat on a stone. An earnest young monk passing by stopped and said, "Excuse me, but you're sitting on a stupa."

"It's a rock."

**Silkworm**

In front of the machine Chiyo stood, one in the line of factory girls, fingers raw from the pupae killing hot water troughs. Never pausing, they picked cocoons and teased off the

dross to find the single thread that bound the whole till the end, spooling each onto the ever spinning six sided reels. They chatted and sang to the rhythm of the machine:

Has anyone been outside? What season is it?

There's only clocks. This season is 4:00pm to 4:00am.

In this wicked world

I'm just a silk-reel girl,

Just a girl who wants to see

The ones who gave birth to me.

They sent me a letter,

said they're waiting for the year to end.

But are they waiting for me,

Or waiting for the money?

The supervisor walked by. The women fell silent but no sooner was he gone than they returned to filling the monotonous hours.

The overseer is a demon. The accountant the devil.

He looks like a frog that one.

Ah, remember hearing the frogs croaking on a quiet night ...

I wish I could go back home today and bring saki, and serve it to dad and mum. It's been so long, their tears would fill the cup.

Chiyo had heard it all before. The reels spun. The day passed. The same poems, the same songs, the same laments, varied a little each time, added to occasionally, the order rearranged. It was something familiar and warmer than the relentless reel, but she wondered if they would ever tire of saying the same things. Usually she remained silent, too

afraid to contribute to the repertoire. Today she was so bored she didn't care what they thought.

Every cocoon unravels like the last.

Every day unravels to the last.

How long will this last, our threads unravelling?

For a moment only the machines made a sound.

Chiyo reached into the hot water for another cocoon, "Ouch! My hands are raw."

They all chimed in at once:

Do you think my hands haven't been red all these years?

You won't keep up by complaining.

Don't worry, Chiyo, you'll get used to it.

Don't coddle her Kama, we all know why you get the high pay.

Yes, it's just because you're pretty.

So the floor manager thinks.

I wish he didn't.

Is this a factory or a brothel?

In Suwa geisha get thirty-five sen.

Common prostitutes get fifteen sen.

Silk reelers get one potato.

They all laughed until a workman came, dumped a fresh batch of cocoons in the water and took the dead grubs away. Again they were silent till the man had gone, and began in a whisper,

Don't fall in love with workmen.

You'll end up like tea dregs.

At parting you are a fan in autumn,

Discarded when a breeze is not needed.

The reels spun and they sang their songs again and again.

### **Pampas Reeds**



Kentaro stood still among the dead pampas reeds in the small plateau near the top of a forested hill. The end of winter lingered longer this year, with no sign of spring. The sun shone cold and low in the sky as the long afternoon shadows reached for the approaching evening.

He toed the ground and watched little black spiders scurry through the thick weave of dry grassy leaves the reed stalks had shed. It was a dry, brittle world. He picked up a spiked husk and scrutinized the nutshell inside. It was hollow with a small wormhole on the side, the worm long gone. He picked up another the same. He knew they'd each be empty, each with their own wormhole. At this season he'd seen them all that way every year, his whole life.

There was no fresh water. All the small ponds on the way up were green and stagnant and no streams flowed but he went on. He could bear a little thirst till he returned home. He followed a small track up the hill for no reason other than to be away from below. There was no trace of anybody on the barely suggested path, only wild pigs and deer. He stepped

over, around and through broken old branches on the brown pine needles until, away from the path, lying on its side, was the glass bottle. Tired of walking he went over and sat by it, leaning against a tree.

It was an old bottle and time had half buried it, half filling it with soil. Whoever had been up there, hunting or collecting firewood, drunk from their bottle and forgotten it, it must have been a long time ago. He idly crushed a green pine leaf and smelled it.

Inside the bottle was another world. Moss and other tiny plants grew like tiny trees, green slime and mould grew like grass. There were tiny hills and valleys in the accumulated soil. Moisture condensed on the ceiling like mist and clouds.



In the middle of it all, a caterpillar had made its way through the narrow opening at the neck of the bottle, now almost sealed with soil, and formed a glossy black pupa. When it hatched there would be nowhere for it to go. Its wings would be too large for it to escape through the bottle's neck. It would awaken, beat its wings against the glass and live and die sealed inside the ancient bottle.

A raven cawed in the distance and two woodpeckers made their way through the pines, stopping at one tree and the next, tapping at the bark. The wind souged in the pine leaves. Its soft whispering sounded far away and the more he listened the more it seemed to form into words, words he couldn't quite discern, compelling him to his feet to find their source. The closer he came to the pampas grass the clearer the words resolved and the more fascinated he became. He was sure it was a human voice, a woman reciting poetry.



He approached in secret, hoping to hear clearly the words of the poem before he was seen. At the edge of the pampas reeds he crouched low, peeking up above them, but could see no one. He listened intently but still could not make out the words. Drawn further and further in, he crept through the reeds, sure now that the speaker must be able to hear the crackling of the dead grass under foot and his body rustling the stalks. Suddenly, the sound stopped. He kept still, listening for something in the silence.

He heard nothing for a long time. He stood up from his hunched over position and said, "Excuse me. I mean no harm. I heard your poetry and came only to listen." Still there was no sound. Turning then he stubbed his toe and looking down saw something white and smooth. It was a skull, the pampas reeds growing through its eye sockets.

### **Mushroom and Sweet Potato**

The reeling women struck up their song again.

If a woman in an office is a willow,

A poetess a violet,

And a female teacher an orchid,

Then a factory woman is a calabash.

They toyed with Chiyo's contribution.

Each unravelling cocoon like the last,

each day like the last.

How long will we last?

They throw us out like unravelled worms.

How long till our thread is spent?

Each cocoon unravels on the reel,

Each day unravelled to the last.

The days to years unravel.

How long can we last?

Unravelling worms outcast.

Chiyo was happier than she had ever been at the mill. That night in the dorm room they lay exhausted, some talking quietly, some already sleeping. Kama said to Chiyo, "You'll get used to it."

The other dark lumps in the darkness chimed in, "What choice is there? Who can leave before the debt is paid? My mother would have starved without the advance."

"Just be careful not to get a fine or they'll carry your debt over till next year. There's no telling how long a girl could get stuck here."

"Listen to Kama, Chiyo – she knows how to get the performance bonus."

"There's no way out but to marry some man, and who can you meet stuck in here?"

"No-one wants a factory girl anyway, except those gangsters at the gate, and they'll only take the clothes off your back."

"Sssh, I'm tired."

"The longer you stay, the harder your hands, and with these meals you'll be a skeleton soon enough. If you're pretty you'll get paid more, but you earn it in a different way."

"Don't worry Chiyo. If you like mushrooms you won't mind it."

"More flavour than the slop they call dinner."

Kama ignored them, "If you're plain looking, you have to work hard to get more money ..."

"Don't work too hard Chiyo. We all want promotions too."

"... but it amounts to nothing if you get fines."

"Duty to the family, duty to the emperor."

"Shush all of you. Sleep. Work tomorrow."

### Unrin-In

Kentaro resolved to go to Unrin-In temple at Kyoto to understand the skull and those vague words among the pampas leaves. He explained his intention to his parents and, sensing he would leave anyway regardless of what they said, they reluctantly allowed him to take the bicycle.

Passing through Osaka, he rested under a plum blossom tree. Down from the mountains spring arrives earlier and the blossoms were just beginning to peek from their buds. Half asleep, he was stirred by a hand reaching up to break a sprig from the tree. The words came so immediately to mind he spoke them without thinking whether or not he should speak, "What scatters the blossoms? Do they fall from the breeze of a nightingale's wing?"

The girl stopped and, turning her face away behind her sleeve, apologised and replied, "They're a long way from scattering at the breeze of a bird's wing."

"Then what bird is this scattering them?"

"They will all fall eventually anyway."

"Let them fall in their own time."

"Must I only tell others of their beauty? I want the women locked in at the mill to see them."

"The mill?"

"Yes."

"What mill?"

"None of your business. Excuse me."

"Excuse me." He turned away from her, sorry to have embarrassed her. She took the sprig and left.

That afternoon reels spun and spun and he kept reappearing to her, his words echoing through the evening shift. As the workers all lay in their room talking a while before they slept, the others, seeing her distraction, guessed at her preoccupation.

She confessed she had met a young man while fetching the sprig for the girls locked in their quarters. They laughed and teased her, telling her to get married straight away. She could leave the mill. He could pay her family debts. The rates for favours to a husband were better than a sweet potato from the overseers. The next morning they kept up their teasing, reciting in mock melancholy:

Thinking about him

I slept, only to have him

Appear before me—

Had I known it was a dream,

I should never have awakened.

### **Tales of Ise**

Although it was cold, the weather was fine and Kentaro slept outside. In the morning he rode for 15 minutes before a flat tire stopped him. Seeing the road to the capital before him, he hesitated. There was something about that girl. Something small that he could not define – without intention she had idly plucked a string that still resonated.

He turned back and at midday was under the same plum blossom tree. Feeling a fool he glanced at every passerby, waiting for her return. He glanced up at the sky.

Every bud promises a bloom

and every bloom a Fall.

When he looked down again she was there, walking by the tree, not looking at him on purpose. He thought, each moment is gone in a moment and every moment changes everything. If she turned him away, he would be gone tomorrow.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?"

"Well ... Yesterday we met, and I was rude."

"Yes."

"You might not be able to reach the best sprig on the tree. May I fetch it for you?"

She smiled, "Leave them for everyone to enjoy."

"Oh. Sorry."

He looked at his feet and turned to leave, but she stopped him. She found nothing to say, so smiled and looked away.

"Once there was a man who picked some Wisteria flowers. He said,

Though I got wet,

I was determined to pluck them,

Mindful

That of this year

Few spring days remain."

"I'm Chiyo," she said.

"I'm Kentaro."

"You're not a city boy."

"No."

"Why are you here?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you."

"Don't tell me a lie and I'll believe you."

"The other day, I was walking in the mountains near our village and stopped to rest in a pine grove. It was near a small clearing high up, full of pampas reeds. A voice came drifting from the reeds so I went to see what it was. The closer I got the clearer it became. I couldn't hear the words but it sounded like poetry. Eventually, once I was in the middle of the field the sound suddenly stopped. I looked down and there was a skull. A human skull."

"What did you do?"

"I ran away."

"So would I."

"But when I rested I thought about it. The reeds were growing up through the eyes of this skull. It reminded me of Ise Monogatari. I have always loved Ise Monogatari. Do you know them?"

"Maybe some. Tell me."

"There's so many, let me remember ... Once there was a man who fell in love with an inaccessible lady. One night he crept into her room and ran off with her. As they passed a stream she caught a glimpse of a dew-drop on a leaf and asked what it was. She had never seen such a thing before, but the man hurried on. It was dark and a thunderstorm came, so he put the lady in a ramshackle storehouse and stood guard at the doorway. He didn't realise the storehouse was haunted by demons. They ate her up without a sound. At dawn he peered inside and saw she was gone. He said,

When my love asked,

'Is it a gem?'

I should have lived

no longer than the dew.

Since Chiyo looked interested, he went on. "They say the tales are from Ariwara no Narihira. There is a story about Ariwara no Narihira: once he rested for the night while travelling across a plain. In the middle of the night, as he sat, unable to sleep, he heard the first lines of a poem in the night saying 'Every evening, when autumn winds whisper, my

eyes cry in pain.' It was too dark to venture into the reeds, so he waited till morning. When he went into the pampas grass to see where the voice came from he found a skull so old the reeds had grown up through its eye sockets. It seemed strange so he told a local man about it, who explained that it was here that Ono no Komachi died. Ariwara completed the poem he heard in the night, 'It's not I, Ono. Only pampas reeds whispering.'

But you were not in the same plain. I think you were dreaming.

Perhaps. But it was so vivid and because I have always loved Ise Monogatari I knew I must go to the Unrin-In temple."

"So you won't be here long?"

"I don't know. It's hard to say. Where are you from?"

"It's hard to say."

"What do you mean?"

"I barely remember it, I was so young. Nothing was standing in my first home. Nothing was standing there but me and an old date tree."

"What about your family?"

"My old grandmother was there. My old grandmother, she was stooped and crooked. Her burdens trained her spine sideways like a manicured pine. Even my mother was always bent towards some work. My father worked but was never home, even at night. I don't remember much of him, except that we all must do as he says. My grandfather had gone to sea long ago and never returned. After the harvest was no good for too many years, because of the weather, and the government took my father away for work, there was no food. Then he didn't come back at all."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows."

"What did you do then?"

"I work at the silk mill now. For most girls their father takes a loan from the silk men, and they work in the mill to pay the debt. But since I have no father, my mother took on the loan."

"The mill? Is it true what they say about the mill?"

"I don't know what they say but if it's bad it's true. It's hard, but our families can eat. But there isn't much time before I go back. There's enough work at work, tell me more Tales of Ise."

So they sat beneath the tree and Kentaro told Chiyo more tales.

"The evening's dance transforms the time

time passes in the evening's dance ..."

There is no telling this tale to an end.

The needles of the pine tree

never become scattered and lost.

In the generations to come they will know this love

there will be evenings to tell

of the Tales of Ise,

of the past that leaves

its words like grasses cut

of a moment, and as tender.

The evening which brought forth

this tale is no longer.

Was it a dream from which I have awakened?



It is a dream from which I have awakened.

## Vending Machine

Whenever you see a vending machine you fall in love with her description and the city gives birth to your daughter.

Once, when you were unemployed in the recession, they sent you to work for a telemarketing company. At first they had you selling personal alarms. The script tried to scare people in the kindest possible way. It made your mouth say it was for charity, so if anyone didn't hang up, usually old women, you had to lay guilt and fear on them at the same time. You asked the manager how much of the money went to charity, in case anyone asked. It was 5%. It didn't seem like much but you doubted conscientious objection would be a valid excuse for the DSS since you were supposed to think yourself lucky. You were always free to quit but then you wouldn't have any money for food and rent, books, port and chocolate. It wasn't nice to waste your life in a job but, for now anyway, it seemed better than living on cheap food like carrots, and maybe Salvo dinners. You knew junkies who could make two hundred dollars a day by begging, and you figured if a person didn't spend that on drugs, they could really do something, but you didn't like begging. And although it was easy to find a place to sleep, and it was good to be free, to wake up without a friend to worry you, just the ants and sparrows, to look at the bits of concrete and the weeds in your own good time, to watch old newspapers blowing around in the vortex of a stairwell, listening to the pigeons cooing and the traffic, and just wander about wondering what particular problem each of these people was rushing to attend to, it was a bit tricky when it rained. People were more likely to seek out the same shelter, like that guy who offered you a drink and ended up cutting his hand on the bottle he broke and wiped some of his blood on your lip when he got you in a headlock, making as if to cut your throat, saying, "You've got beautiful lips." And if you didn't have money, it was difficult to walk past all the baklava in a bakery window without wishing you had money.

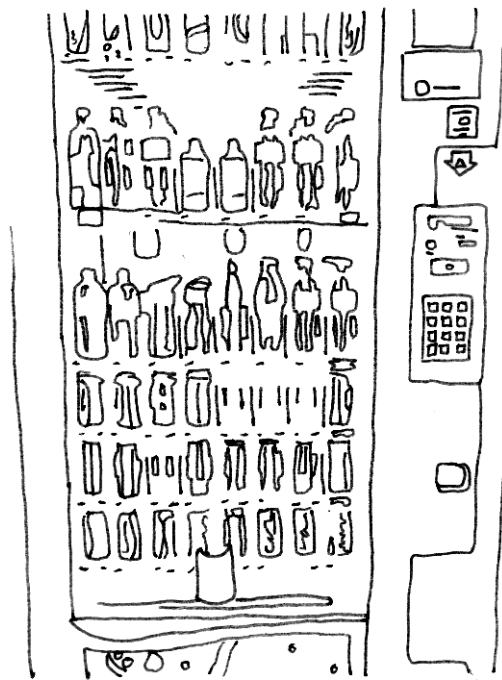
Each morning, as a break, you went to get yourself a Coke from the drink vending machine. You always chose Coke but it always took a long time to make your selection. Once, instead of reciting the script at your cubicle, you stood there remembering helping your friend's flatmate load his drums into his van. He was talking about this girl, "She works in publishing. She's got black hair in this cute bob. And her dark eyes give her face this unusual intelligence."

"You'd like her," your friend said.

"I'm already falling in love. What else?"

When you first met, she was that old riddle of beauty: a crow pierced by an arrow, a splash of blood on the snow. In her living room you agreed on your dislike of Dostoyevsky. You disagreed on Kerouac and Austen. You discovered a mutual quiet appreciation of Simon and Garfunkel. Her abrupt changes in temper woke you from your soporific disposition. She was a sudden electric storm breaking the listless torpor of summer afternoon. She was ...

What would a good looking, intelligent, accomplished, self-possessed, noble, eloquent woman such as this want with a bum like you? You resigned yourself to pining for a few weeks before relinquishing hopeless hopes.



One morning you stood in front of the soft drink vending machine forever.

The drink vending machine in the kitchenette had 8 rows and 10 columns of drinks. As each drink was purchased the queue moved forward from the back of the machine. The entirety of row 8 was Coca Cola. To purchase a drink, you inserted coins or notes and typed in the number under your selection. The robot then moved to retrieve that can and dropped it in the chute where you collected it. Any change was returned in a coin catcher.

You wanted a Coke but you had to select a number from 80 to 89 (row 8, columns 0-9). Not long ago, at your friend's place, where she also had a room, you argued. What was it got you started?

"I can't remember what it was," she was saying. "An old Catherine Deneuve movie, where she's talking to this guy who says that there's always something to make you choose. However much the same things are, like these columns all lined up, there would be something to make you favour one over the other, to sit under or whatever."

"... it's like that paradox, where ... they call it the 'thirsty donkey' ... where a thirsty donkey stands exactly in the middle of two buckets of water that are exactly the same. Since there is nothing to make it choose one over the other, it can't choose and dies of thirst."

"Yes, but this says that even if they are identical, one becomes your favourite anyway."

"Yes but no two things are ever exactly identical. One might have different scratches. At the least you have the column on the end, the fifth one along, the one on the left ..."

"Would you stop contradicting everything I say."

"I'm not contradicting you, I'm just saying."

"Yes and I'm just saying. I didn't say things can be the same, I'm just saying I saw it in a movie, because of what he said. It's called a conversation."

"Yeah, and I'm just saying something because of what you said. It's called a conversation."

"It's not a conversation. You're sniping all the time."

"But, it's not the case that anything is exactly ..."

"I'm just saying what was in the movie."

"Ok. I'm just saying it doesn't happen to be the case."

"You insufferably arrogant, pedantic ..."

You both had held your peace, not wanting to cause any more of a scene in front of the others. There was an awkward silence. Her opinion of you then was clear. What could be

more contemptible that a washed up loser with no prospects who nevertheless thinks he's somehow everyone's intellectual superior?

Now, confronted with 10 identical cans of cola, you continued your line of the debate to yourself. If you made two things occupy the same space and time, you would say there were one, or if you noticed it weighed twice as much, and so was not identical with one, you would say there were two occupying the same space, and if you can distinguish two they are not exactly the same. Like two lovers, each struggling to be so close they are in the same place at the same time. Everything ultimately is a euphemism for you know what. After all, the only reason anyone is even here to select drinks from vending machines is loneliness.

Not long after you first started you had to go into the IT department to get a security swipe card encoded so you wouldn't have to buzz in. On the way down the hall you briefly eavesdropped on two managers talking in the tea-room, picking up snatches about staff and four-wheel-drives and then, "They're like tires, wear them out and throw them away."

As you waited in the IT room for someone's attention you overheard some of them trying to find a solution to a system problem. "But if one of the girls goes out to get the morning milk, that'll register as her start time – we need to factor in the morning milk." You gathered they were integrating the security door electronic swipe card system with the timesheet system.

"You know the directors can access that from their mobile phones – they can just open it up and look in on everyone at work," one of the programmers said. He looked disgruntled. You look up at the black security camera dome and wondered if someone was looking back at you looking at the camera instead of working. "They say it's only for security, but you know different."

"Does it have audio?"

"Yes, but no. You can switch it on, but it's switched off."

The team leader around the corner of the windowless L shaped room put down the phone and announced, "Actually the whole thing's turned off at the moment. Shit, don't tell anyone I said that though. They'll muck up! Anyway, sorry guys but I'm going to have to

postpone the lunch at the pub today. We'll go at 1 instead and we can play Battlefield after." He went off to the server room.

"What do you think of working here so far then?"

"Those surveillance cameras are a bit much." Then you recognise this whole thing is a set up – the manager makes a point of loudly announcing the cameras aren't working and leaves. The underling asks probing, in-confidence, questions about your opinion of the place ... "It's pretty good though. The work is good. It's just different."

"Yeah, we're not happy about the cameras either," the programmer said.

The other explained, "They put them in after they redid this room. This used to be two rooms and there was a wall between this bit and that bit. It was the funniest thing – when they were going to remodel it, Alex made a bet with David that he couldn't punch a hole through the wall. So he did. His arm went through up to his shoulder and he punched the guy on the other side in the back of the head. They put the cameras in after that."

So instead of reading at lunch you wrote down what had happened to you that day. You wrote it all down in a work notepad with the work logo on it. Then, realising what you had done, you carefully tore out the page, afraid they might come across it and ask questions: firstly, why you were spending time writing at work; secondly, what it was about; and, if they read it, thirdly, they'd bust you for painting the company in a bad light. That was against the terms of employment you had signed. It was a spiral bound notebook and after you'd torn out the page and folded it and put it in your bag, you noticed the little strip of paper still left stuck in the spiral binding coil. You sat picking the little pieces of paper out of the spiral binding in case they noticed them and started speculating about why you might have torn a page out. Just take a look at yourself sitting there tearing little bits of paper out of the spiral binding coil.

While the survey and admin staff sat around the kitchenette bench chatting, you stood at that vending machine forever, died of thirst and decomposed, leaving only a pale skeleton for staff to step over and around on their way to flirt and/or gossip until the director identified your bones as an OH&S tripping hazard and brought in a cleaning consultant to remove it.

So you chose the Coke at number 84, after the year 1984. You wondered if there were others who did the same. If all the Cokes ran out in row 84 before the others, it would be the secret message you shared with the others that there was someone else out there who understood what was going on. You went back to the phone, computer and script. Somewhere in this world was a crow killed in snow you must forget.

Over the first few weeks they recorded and analysed your voice across a range of surveys and found its deeper, slower qualities more suited to longer surveys, so they put you on a government health questionnaire. Back on the phones, some people told you to fuck off. Some just hung up. Some begrudgingly gave you their time out of recognition of its importance to women's health. Some seemed happy to have someone to talk to for a change. It was extraordinary: the intimate confessions people would make once they knew it was anonymous.

- I worked for our son at our family business fifty hours a week to keep it afloat. Now we have a huge debt to the bank and my husband and I both work full time and we are 54 and 60. Sometimes I have anxiety attacks.
- I had a cancer removed and now use a colostomy bag.
- I not speak English good. My husband speak English. He write form.
- My husband is manic depressive so I gave up work some years ago to take care of him. I suffer from stress sometimes.
- I work an 80 hour week. I try to do the right thing. I wonder why. I just keep smiling.
- My father was abusive and manipulative. My ex abducted my son.
- I hate this town. I can't wait to leave.
- I have incontinence. I was raped 10 years ago. It was in the war. It was normal then for that sort of thing to happen. Every woman. Every girl.
- I had a nervous breakdown 3 years ago. It was very embarrassing. I spent hours on the phone to the bank arguing, then with my husband.
- I don't know what's happening. I can't get treatment. They tell me I have one thing, then they tell me I don't have it. They don't believe my symptoms.
- When they told me I had cancer it changed everything. It's funny but sometimes I think I was never really alive until I was dying. I got so anxious, sometimes, thinking about every second. You know you can't change anything once it's done, so you've got to always do the right thing. You get to thinking you absolutely must

do something worthwhile with every single moment. Because there's hardly any left. But what can you do? To make the most of them? And the more you think about it, the more moments you lost, and you've wasted all this time being anxious about them. It's a lot of pressure. The only thing you can change is the future. But you see it's not just me. Everyone is dying. They just don't know when. Why do people have to find out when to stop what they're doing?

...

She sat on the hospital bed, a monitoring device attached to a belt strapped around her waist, connected to a machine pipping regularly, displaying the graphs and numbers of the baby's vital signs. A doctor entered with a large screen on a trolley. She squeezed gel on her belly and moved the ultrasound handset around, watching the glimpses of feet, ribs, brains and fluttering heart on the screen. The doctor took the machine away again. She groaned more and more, sucking on the tube connected to the cylinder of pressurised nitrous oxide, saying it did no good. She sat in the shower for hours as the waves of agony increased in frequency and amplitude. You hoped you wouldn't need to push the red button at the bed to call the nurse in case of dire crisis. The nurses came in to check on progress and inserted a needle in her wrist, connected by tube to a bag of clear liquid on a stand. For another two hours every wave of pain seemed the most extreme pain anyone could possibly bear, yet each was worse than the last. They moved her and the machines to another room. The anaesthetist arrived and inserted a needle into her lower spine. She declared her love for the anaesthetist and listened to the nurse explain that now she could not feel the pain, she would need to pay attention to the monitor. When it picked up her contractions on the screen she must push. Another doctor with strong arms came in to the room, inserted large metal levers, cranked the baby into position and pulled. The blue child began life dead. They took it to a small table, inserted a tube, sucked its airways clear, pumped air into its lungs, clipped its umbilical cord, attached a monitor, strapped an identification label to its wrist and returned it, living, to its mother's breast.



## Chilli

### Xbalanque and Hunahpu

We have always lived in the mountains, as long as we can remember. We blowgun birds and take them down to Grandma's table. One day my brother says, "Why do Batz and Chouen live with mum and Grandma, when we live up here?" We make plans.

We make sure we have a bird for the table every day for a while so that when there are none, Grandma will ask, "Why aren't there any birds today?"

### Batz And Chouen

Lady Blood's sons, our brothers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, were born in our house. They screamed constantly. If they were not asleep or eating they were screaming, any time of the day or night. Nobody could sleep. Grandma said they must go up the mountains. We took them on a long walk up there and threw them on a thorn bush. That's where they grew up, in the mountains.

Each day we play our flutes and sing on the porch for Grandma, carving and writing, as our father asked of us. We do all that Grandma asks and we do it well. Hunahpu and Xbalanque take their blowgunned birds from time to time. They've been doing this every day, but for three days there's been no birds on the table. Grandma asks them, "Why aren't there any birds today?"

"We shoot the birds but they don't fall down from the trees. They're too tall. We can't climb that high." Next day my brother and I go up the rainy mountains with them to where the trees grow tallest. "In those canopies" they say, "are the birds we killed yesterday."

My brother and I start to climb but the higher we climb the further away grows the ground. "This tree grows faster than we can climb," we call. "We're too high to get down."

"Rope yourself down by your loin clothes." they say. Each tied to a branch, we lower ourselves slowly down. Before we reach the ground we are naked. I look at my brother. He is a monkey. Seeing how he looks at me, I see I too am a monkey. I see the fur on my hands and legs. I see my tail stretching up to the branch above.

Our brothers leave us there. We stay that night in the mountains, trying to understand our new joints, our long sharp teeth; learning to tail grip until we can move in the canopies better than we once moved on the ground; balancing on branches, dangling, leaping and swinging among the leaves; swallowing fruit whole, until we sleep among macaws and honeycreepers, to wake and howl in the clouds.

In the morning we hear fluting and singing from down below and remember our Grandma. We go down and see our brothers Hunahpu and Xbalanque where we once sat, singing and fluting. We dance down to the porch, joining in the singing and fluting. Grandma stands at her door, surprised. Then she laughs at us so much we have to go away. It happens four times like that, we hear the singing and fluting, we dance. We do everything well and every time she laughs.

### **The Rat In The Field**

Two of them come into the field carrying blowguns. They are in a good mood, talking and laughing and hitting each other on the shoulder. They put down their guns and start pulling out weeds. They haven't raised a sweat before they get bored and sit in the shade at the edge of the field. The turtle dove flies across the field, not knowing they are there, and perches near them. They speak to it and it flies down to the path. They take their blowguns into the forest, taking pot shots at birds. Their axes and hoes start moving on their own, chopping down trees and digging up weeds and roots with no-one holding them.

When the turtle dove calls they run back to the field, cover themselves in dirt and woodchips and pick up their axes and hoes and start clearing the field again. An old woman comes up the road and greets them. They stop, wiping their foreheads, unwrap their leaves to eat and the old woman leaves them.

The sun has set and in the twilight the two brothers are walking away down the path. The jaguar is beside me and the puma. Deer and Rabbit are here too. There's Peccary and Coati, and all the birds big and small crowd around. We all set to undoing the work they have done by day. We plant the weeds. We raise the trees up again.

In the morning from the forest, we watch them gesticulating and talking and scratching their heads and holding their chins. They must clear the same part of the field they cleared yesterday but they do the same as they did before. They don't work. The axes and hoes

work without them. They post the turtledove lookout again, while they go blowgunning birds. When the old woman comes, they make themselves dirty and pretend to be working.

Under the stars again we are raising the trees they felled, bringing the weeds back. The heart of night is reaching its zenith and suddenly they are here. First they see Jaguar and Puma and try to catch them. Jaguar and Puma are fast and fierce. They get away easily. They try for Deer and Rabbit but their tails break off. They scramble everywhere for everyone. I run. Glancing back I see the Fox and Coyote escape safely, Peccary and Coati are running past me. A firm grip clutches the skin at the back of my neck. I kick and writhe but can't get free. They almost strangle me holding me down while they make a small fire. They hold me over the fire and burn my tail. It hurts so much I would tell them anything. I know that no one can be blamed for anything they say or do when something like that is done to them. They burn my tail until it's naked. I think of something better than the truth to tell them. It's a truth that they want to hear. They say they will take out my eyes. I tell them, "You are not meant to farm here. That's why we did it. You are expert blow gunners. You aren't made for farming."

"What then? What are we supposed to do?"

"First, let go of me. The words are in my belly and I can't spit them out if you're choking me. Put a little food in my belly first, then you'll get the words out."

"Tell us first, then we'll feed you."

"You don't know your fathers. They are One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. They were great batey players. They played all day long with Batz and Chouen. They were so good they were able to challenge the Lords of Xibalba. But they died because of what they did. That's why your Grandmother doesn't tell you."

"You're lying. You're lying just to get away from us."

"If you don't believe me look in the rafters at the back of your kitchen. That's where your fathers' batey gear is hidden."

They give me more than I can eat, corn, squash seeds, chilli, beans, pataxte, cacao. "Gnaw on these," they say. "And if ever you find any of this in the dust and sweepings, you're free to take it."

**Xbalanque and Hunahpu**

I stare into the reflection in the red bowl of chilli sauce. The rat is in the rafters. Carefully I follow him in the reflection until he stops at the end of the kitchen. The rat silently heaves and pushes, until at the right angle I can see, hidden in the rafters, some yokes and feathers and the edge of a ball. I pass the bowl across to my brother and he moves it to his side, gets the angle right and sees it too.

"Grandma." he says, "This chilli mash is making me thirsty and we're out of water."



Grandma mutters something, takes the pitcher and goes down to the water. A mosquito lands on my arm. "Go put a hole in Grandma's pitcher," I tell it. It flies off. A leaky pitcher should keep her busy fetching water for a while. My bother is already trying to climb up the post to get to the rafters but he can't reach. I stand on a chair but also can't reach. He climbs on the chair. I cup my hands together, he puts his foot in them and I heave him up. He reaches the gear and throws it down. There isn't much time before Grandma gets back. We take it out and hide it in some long grass by the track. We go down and help Grandma patch the hole in the pitcher.

The sun is at its highest. We dig the rubber ball and the gear out of the long grass. There are heavy arm guards and hats with quetzal and macaw feathers flowing from them. It's beautiful. We put it on straight away and understand immediately that the open space up the path with walls on each side is the best place for it. We run along the path to the open court. We run and kick the ball for hours never thinking about what we are doing or how much noise we're making, just kicking the ball and running, learning the game.

### **Grandma**

Four owls appear at my door. I didn't hear them. I just turned around and they were there. The boys aren't inside. They're nowhere to be seen. I can't hear their voices outside. I don't know if it means they've already gone, or if they're working or blow-gunning somewhere far away.

One of the owls speaks, "The Lords of Xibalba challenge Xbalanque and Hunahpu to a game," it says.

"They're not here."

"Where are they?"

"They're out."

"Tell them they must come in seven days to play against the Lords of Xibalba," it says.

"Owls, they will go as summoned." What else can I say?

The owls fly away. I turn back into the house. My legs can't hold me anymore so I sit on the floor. I don't know how to tell them they have been summoned. Their father never came back. The more I think about it, the more madly my head itches. I scratch and scratch until I find a louse caught under my fingernail. "Louse," I say, "help me. I can't tell them they are summoned to Xibalba. You go tell them."

The boys are in the kitchen. They have the gaming gear from years ago and are organising it into packs to carry. I don't know how they found it. I don't know when they found it but it's all too late. It is all happening again.

"Don't cry Grandma. Look, we'll plant this ear of corn in the middle of the kitchen. While it stays alive you'll know we are alive."

They sling their gear and their blowguns on their backs. From the door I watch them disappear down the path. I've seen this same scene before. Ahead the owls are leading them on. What good is corn without people to feed?

## Hands

### Observing The Chicotte



Off the side of the muddy track, Luuk Baert tipped the helmet back from his forehead and scratched his sweaty scalp. Waiting with the inducting officer, he looked up at the wet sky for a moment, at the long grass and at the men hauling packs across the stream and around the broad leaves on the other side. With foresight, through the mud and blood, it was clear the tremendous difference the railway would make.

The Force Publique soldier had secured the man face down, his arms and legs tied to stakes in the ground. He raised the chicotte and looked to the inducting officer.

"What are those lumps, those raised lines on his skin?" Luuk asked.

"Ritual scars. It is sometimes possible, for the experienced, to read where a man comes from by these scars. It's part of the initiation to have those patterns carved into them. When they become a man. These patterns are passed from father to son."

The man on the ground turned his head and set his eyes on Luuk. The inducting officer nodded to the Force Publique soldier. The chicotte drew the first of sixty red lines across the man's back.

"Like a hazing?"

"I suppose so. Some of these fellows also have their teeth chipped into points. They say it gives them the gift of sweet speech. These are tough men. Tough men with dull brains. That's why they need these harsh punishments. Can you imagine the shop-keeper in your local patisserie? You'd only need show him that whip to have him. But nothing gets through these fellows' thick skin." The officer suddenly took a graver tone. "Now look here Luuk. There is a thin line between us and them. Look at how many they are compared to us. If they all got together they could murder you and me in a moment. What keeps them in check? What makes them think twice, eh? It's called 'prestige' and it's a line we draw with the chicotte. When there is trouble, a white man walks towards it when everyone runs away. They all know that. They see it and they remember. That's 'prestige'. Luuk, so long as you are here you must make an impression. Our nation depends on it. Look at us, surrounded – Holland, Germany, France and England. All great empires and us in the middle. Well, we'll give this fellow some scars to add to his collection. We'll wipe out his ancestors. He'll be calling us his father when we are done."

The man's back was slick with blood. Flies swarmed and dust clung to it as it clotted. Luuk felt something crawling on the back of his neck, a fly or caterpillar – his hand flinched up, carefully felt for it, found only another trickle of sweat. He asked, "How can he flog one of his own?"

His colleague laughed, "Does an Englishman call a Frenchman one of his own?"

Luuk bit his lip. He would not ask any more stupid questions.

Welcome death.

Make war.

My wife in chains.

My brother without hands.

Make war.

My life is not mine.

Everyone born will die.

Everyone dead is born.

Make war.

I was born but cannot live.

Welcome death.

Make war.



Don't let me be born.

Welcome death.

The man had begun chanting but soon stopped. Luuk's shirt and trousers clung to him. If a man could live through that, he could surely manage to stand still without being driven to distraction by the sticking sweat. The chicotte continued cutting through the mass of clotted dust and flies. The smell of it made its way into the rotten fruit air, something fresh, like spring rain on a dusty mown meadow.

Luuk remembered the hard wooden bench, the scratched desk, the slate, the ink-pot and cane. All those days, all the same, had by now fused into one memory of a day like that. His teacher droned while he looked out the window and daydreamed of Africa. Out of the usual blank drizzling sky came visions of lions, elephants and savages, stampeding down from the sky, smashing through the window, clawing and sinking fangs into everyone, splashing the walls with their warm blood, the elephant sweeping the desks aside with its great tusk, the teacher impaled on the savage's spear, amidst the chaos he'd be dodging death, finally free, and then the cane again, the cane, again and again, until it just didn't hurt any more and he didn't care what the teacher said or if he got the cane for what he did, this teacher who knew nothing beyond his books and his cane. It's nothing like in the books.

The inducting officer and the other Force Publique soldiers looked bored. Even the workers continued on with their routine. Luuk looked forward to the day he could be as nonchalant. This place would make a man of him.

Once the flogging was done, two Force Publique men untied the man and helped him stand.

"Now he must salute."

The man did not salute but chanted in his own language. He returned to before he was born.

### **Bath Of Sand**

In the hottest part of the day, seated against the base of a broken column a slave said, "What's this pattern on this stone?" He gestured at the circle crossed with three lines, dividing it into 6 parts.

"I think it's the wheel of Babylon."

"But carts can't cross this land. It looks to me like a star and the sun. It's night and day."

"It could be for teaching mathematics. The circle is naturally segmented in 6 equal parts. It could be for counting goods and prices."

"There was a game we used to play as kids. We could play with this and a few seeds or pebbles. Who they were who made this? Why did they make this mark?"

"Whatever they wanted for us to know, we can only guess. There was once a city here. Long, long ago. Full of green gardens and fountains. The goods of all the world were traded in its markets. These lines are all the roads of the world that lead to Babylon. The richest city of the world. And the most wicked."

"How could green gardens grow here? It's all sand and dust. For days we've been walking and nothing but rocks and sand and dust. And how far is there to go?"

"It's another 9 days away. But that is what they say. There was once a city here. Babylon. There were gardens upon gardens, flowing with fresh water."

"Like the baths in Zanzibar."

"A thousand times the baths in Zanzibar. All turned to sand."

"I wish I was in the bath in Zanzibar. Clove picking is hard, but there was always the bath at the end of the day."

"Now we wash our hands with sand. Wash our faces with sand. This sand gets everywhere."

"I'm wet with sand. If I could be anywhere now, I'd be in the bath at Zanzibar."

"Everyone has their bath in Zanzibar. I remember once, on the way to Ceylon we stopped at a small island. On it lived only one man, his wife and children. There were fish, bananas, coconuts and a small boat. There were no land birds except for two crows. Why were those crows there? Maybe one was waiting for the man, the other for his wife."

"My master said, 'I envy that man. I wish that island were mine.'

"'Master,' I said, 'you could pick any one of your wives and make such an island your own with her. Why don't you give up your wealth?'

"He said, 'And what would happen to my slaves, my wives, my family and all the others who live on my profit? Your mouths would be empty'."

"'Don't worry about us.' I said, 'I'll take care of the trade and the slaves and the wives.' He laughed and that was all. He didn't find an island for himself. Here we are, still between islands, still between oases."

They fell silent. There was a distant sound of steady thumping. He could hear across days and months and years, the steady thumping of a mortar and pestle. The mortar and pestle of his mother making food. The moon and stars had come. The sound must have only been the footsteps of the camels moving, or maybe the beating of his own blood, resonating in his dream. The memory of something so far away he had forgotten it for years. There was a town where the streets were paved with skulls. That was all. He was only a small child then. Then the memories of the baths began. He took his place and said, "Each night we depart again. Every next step the same as the last. Footprints washed away in a breathe of wind. Bismillah."

### **Talking**

In the shade under the copper sunlight-edged fronds of the shelter's roof they drank a little palm wine, talking, the drummer visiting his friend the sculptor.

The drummer watched the chips accumulate at their feet. "How do you do that? There's just enough work in it to make it a mother and child. You haven't even finished and look at the mother's cool forehead. If I carved wood, it would still just be wood."

"Every shape is in the wood already. You just need to take away the other parts. And never cut away too much. You can't put it back." The sculptor moved on from the adze to the chisel.

"No sooner is my wife pregnant than she wants another wife," said the drummer. "She says we'll never be rich without another wife."

"Another wife is a good thing isn't it? My wife wants to be the only one."

"But I can't afford it. All that work, work, work, just to save enough for another wife. I do all the work I can, already, and being pregnant my first wife can't work too hard."

"That's how you get to be a somebody. Some inherit it, some work for it."

"But I'm not somebody. I make the drum talk better than anyone. It's something and that's enough. And a drinker. She knew that when she married me. The toto-nti made a flute. I planted this tree here to get the most reverb for my drum."

"A crab without claws is defenceless."

"The other morning she brought my breakfast pot, and she used her lid that shows the woman sitting in front of three stones."

The sculptor chuckled and said, "In the morning, I stretch my legs because you give me nothing to cook.' But she's the one who thinks she has too much work to do. Why do you think she wants another wife?"

"She is right, though. I'm lazy. Do you think I could sit here with you if I had any more work to do? A cut-off ear cannot reply."

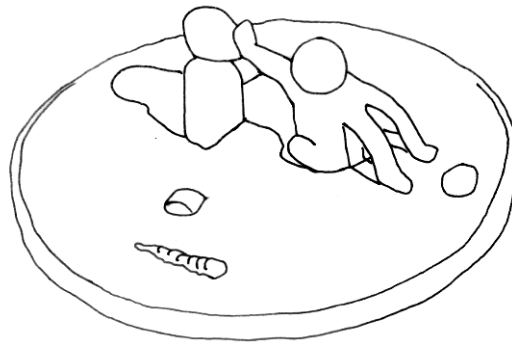
"Be careful, one day she might say, 'I, the bird, may have been caught in a trap but you only got the feathers of my tail.'"

"Yes. Everyone steps on the uprooted palm tree!"

"The cat fish is happy because its home is nearby."

"But wealth only invites the envy of witches."

The sculptor put his chisel and mallet down and turned the mother and child carefully in his hands. He took up his chisel and mallet again and shaved a few more chips from one of the arms. He looked it over one last time and passed it to the drummer. The drummer turned it over in his hands.



### **The Bridge**

She sat on the old shore with her son and basket, watching the bridge building below, waiting, listening to the others talking about how it had happened to them, who lost who, who must be dead, whether it was better to be dead or a slave, how soon they would come, whether it would be finished in time, the right order of the families.

When the last of the mats had been strung out from shore to shore across the wide river no time was wasted. First the Mambuli, then the Balasa family crossed. Everyone carried as much as they could: food, jars of banana beer and children. As they crossed more refugees arrived, and more, waiting on the shore to walk across the floating bridge. But as the great eaters found only empty villages they moved swiftly and soon, as night fell, arrived at the crossing. She was still on the old shore.

The Azande killed without hesitation. She dropped her things and held her son, struggling among the crowd in the darkness. The frantic crowd pressed upon the bridge, straining the ropes until they snapped and the mats came apart from each other. As she fell, her son clutched another mat. The current pulled it away. She tried to keep hold of his hand but everything was pulled from his grip.

Looking back, on the other bank was death and slavery. She clung to a drifting mat and saw on the far shore, in the moonlight, people grasping roots to drag themselves out of the mud, up the bank and vanish into the forest. In the river somewhere, her son was drowning.

### **Bath Of Gold**

"When they first came South they thought the moon shone with heat instead of cold."

Reflected sunlight rippled on the ceiling. Listening to the water, they fell silent. There was a distant sound of steady thumping. She could hear across days and months and years, the steady thumping of a mortar and pestle. The mortar and pestle of her mother making food. The sound must have only been the beating of carpets outside, or maybe the beating of her own blood, resonating in her dream. The memory of something so far away she had forgotten it for years. There was a town where the streets were paved with skulls. There was the King standing before them, once blue, now red, a hundred spears behind him, with people around him, without ears, noses, lips. There was the sound of the gun, 'tipputip'. That was all. She was only a small child then.

The water from the pitcher ran over her shoulder. "They say they never bathe, the people are filthy and starving, their towns full of smoke, and the streets with filth."

She stepped out of the bath taking the silks from her hand. "My father provides for us all, for his wives, his sons and daughters, and for his slaves as if they were his own sons and daughters. And for all their sons and daughters. What's wrong with that?"

She took the gold anklets from her hand and put them on her ankle. "Isn't a slave trained in trades? And if a slave is good, don't we send him to Oman? When he returns, isn't he valued more than any other?"

She took the gold bracelets from her hand and put them on her arms. "My father gave me this gold, but do you think it's mine? No. The harvest isn't always good. The trade isn't always good. But my father is wise. When trade is rich, he gives us things we enjoy but which never perish. When trade is poor, we gladly give our gifts back to him and he sells them for our needs. Has this household ever been hungry? This gold is yours as well as mine, yet it belongs to none of us. We might all eat this gold one day."

She placed a drop of musk in her hair. "They say there must be no more slaves, but who will feed you? Where will you sleep? Who will harvest the cloves? How can we sell cloves to feed the slaves, if no one is left to harvest the cloves?"

She placed a drop of rosewater in her hair. "In that country it's so cold they say for half the year the rivers turn to stone."

She placed a drop of amber in her hair. "They said the Southern moon shines with heat. It's the Northern sun that shines with cold."

She took the chain of coins from her hand and put them over her head. "Bismillah."

### **Canned Beef**



Three Force Publique officers each threw the hands they'd collected onto the pile.

"What do they want all these hands for anyway?" the new recruit asked.

One of the others elbowed his comrade, "You know those cans of meat they have? They take these hands to Belgium and fill up the cans and send them back to eat."

"But those tins have pictures of cows. It's beef."

"That's just to trick the people in Belgium. Why else would they need so many hands?"

## Site Inspection

It was written into your contract that during the busy period approaching that time of year when everyone's tax returns need to be done, you may be required to conduct site inspections. So for one week you spent 10 to 12 hour days driving around Sydney, from the far west where the bush at the foot of the Blue mountains was a few blocks away, through Penrith and Parramatta to the beach at Bronte, north to Dee Why and south to Sutherland Shire.

They kept you on a tight schedule. Sometimes it took more than an hour to get from one place to another, speeding over the limit of 110, and you missed the appointment anyway. By the time you had scanned your forms and uploaded them with the photos to the central server for the producers to process there was only time to get some food and go to sleep. They put you up in an apartment in the City, which you shared with another guy who said he'd been doing it for 6 years, one week on one week off.

A green haired woman with a nose ring opens the door.

"Hi, I'm Bill from the Taxable Asset Assessment Agency. I have an appointment."

"You came last week," she says, rubbing her eyes.

"This is my first day ... Is this 26A?"

"A is round the back."

"Oh I'm sorry."

Around the back a thin old couple live in a small prefabricated shack with a toilet, a small kitchen-dining and bedroom. The woman's arm is in a sling and the man says nothing the whole time, looking anxious. "I got in a fight with some Islanders last week, now my arm's in a sling," she says, as you point your laser across the kitchen-dining and write the measurement on your form, 2.5 \* 3.2. The man anxiously watches your every movement so she says to him, "Don't worry Darl, I'll put your dexies up here."

"Don't mind the washing up. I told you we shoulda washed up," she goes on.

"Don't mind me. Where's the hot water system?"



"Round the back. I had to wait 10 days for them to put this in. Lucky my daughter lives down the road. She got sick of me going down for showers."

In Bronte: "I'm from the tax assessors. Sorry, I'm late."

"Come in, come in. Could I ask you to take your shoes off? We just had the carpets redone."

You go through all 4 floors. Not many places have ducted air conditioning. Mostly it's one or two split systems. You only manage to eavesdrop on a small snatch of his phone conversation: " ... I don't know what they're doing. Maybe some kind of regional pilot. It doesn't make sense though. It's bad for business ..."

In a new office block three levels are empty. On the top floor a small group of people sit at computers at desks huddled at one end of the room. The agent chats with the young boss about iPods. She explains they are a business making games for iPods and are moving into the Android market.

In the evening you inspect a woman's flat. Her son and daughter are there. It's her daughter's birthday. Soon her sister arrives with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend gives you the evil eye, as if to say, "Who the fuck are you and what the fuck are you doing here?" They all hug and wish happy birthdays as you take photos of the oven and rangehood.

Two estate agents meet you outside saying they had tried to ring the tenants and had sent a letter to the tenants but received no reply. They knock and wait and knock and wait until one says, "We've waited long enough, let's go in." They unlock the door and enter. There's no dead body or psycho killer. It's empty. "Yes! They've moved out already." As you measure the blinds you overhear them pass the time chatting, "My dad's all like, 'You just do well and be happy', but my mum's the typical, 'Study hard, get a good job, get an arranged marriage.'"

You pick up the keys from the agent. The place is empty and quiet, plasterboard mostly, linoleum kitchen dining, carpets in the living room and bedrooms, two toilets, two exhaust fans. At the back there is a main road and diggers preparing to build something across the road.

It doesn't take long to go through 1 bedroom with two beds, another with a double bed, the small dining and kitchenette. There is nothing much except a picture of the Madonna and child with writing in Arabic around it. You are about to leave when she says, "Drink? Coke?"

"Oh ... yes please."

"What? Why?"

"Um ... Tax ... The landlord ..."

"Lanlor?"

"The owner."

"Lanlor. Ona?"

"Um ..."

"You write. My son read."

She gives you a pen and paper and you write a brief account of tax depreciation.

"Where are you from?"

"Iraq."

"Oh? Do you like Australia?"

"2 month in Australia. 50 days. 5 years in Syria. Iraq. 5 Years in Syria. 50 days in Australia."

"Does your husband have a job?"

"No. Doctor. At doctor. I at school. 3 home. 3 o'clock home. 1pm to 5pm. 3 o'clock home."

"Sorry?"

"You not ... School 1pm to 5pm. 5 days. Today. Teacher, 3pm, home."

"What are you studying?"

"English."

"Is your husband studying?"

"No."

"Does he speak English already?"

"Yes. No. ABC 123."

"Thank you for the drink. I must go. Thank you."

"Ok."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The keys are in a Hungry Jack's cup in the garage under the house.

Buddha is on the wall. Playschool is on TV but the two children watch you instead.

Plastic carpet protectors. Gold earrings. "Can you take your shoes off? We like to keep our carpets clean."

With the satnav you can forget where you're going. You don't need to know how to get there. You just need to type in the address and go left when it says left and right when it says right. It's easy to drift into a trance as the street-lights and your headlights reflected in the cats eyes slowly speed by. Trailing the swarm of red tail-lights, you become a passenger in your own body.

A young woman in her pajamas watching a daytime TV show about the Spice Girls and working on a Mac. She just had an operation and holds her stomach when she gets up, walking awkwardly. You say you need to see the carport and she offers to take you down because it's complicated. You insist she not go to the effort. She draws you a map.

A woman goes over the bills and says to the eldest child to put something on that the toddler likes to keep him quiet. It's the Wiggles. She changes the nappy on the baby and hands it to the eldest to hold while she goes back to the bills.

As you drive it's boring. There is nothing happening now, it's all automatic. There's only memories, daydreams and premonitions. Things that might have been if things had been different, or if you were somebody else. Then you arrive places and wonder, 'How did I get here?' and in the morning you drag yourself out of bed and into the car and wonder, 'How did I get here?'

The tenant isn't home. You ring the number and she says she is 10 minutes away. You are already late and will miss the next one, so you get in touch with head office to reschedule it.

It's because of these roads, this engine, these tires. Then there's your mortgage. There are your ancestors. It goes all the way back to Babylon.

At the flat the agent isn't there to meet you so you go to the agent's office which is only a block away. They are frantically looking for keys. The agent leaves, ignoring you and you make your enquiries. You go back to the flat and meet the agent. He says, "I'm sorry, I thought you were the IT guy because we'd called someone in." He lets you in. The two tenants are out. He leaves you there to finish it alone because he's busy. You haven't had a chance to use the toilet all morning because the tight schedule doesn't leave time to divert to a shopping centre. You use their toilet, hoping the tenants don't pick that moment to come home and find a strange man in their bathroom.

It's a good thing there is a drink holder in the car because if you need to use your lunch break to fill up on petrol, you can get drive through and eat in the car as you drive to the next inspection. The other guy back at the unit in town where you're staying said they offered him more money to trial the in-car toilet. They were concerned there was a health risk if inspectors didn't regularly go to the toilet when they needed to. They are researching ways to enable sleeping in the car so that rental accommodation won't need to be provided. The intention is to have the car idle slowly around quiet suburban streets overnight, since petrol is more cost effective than real estate.

A new development. All houses are similar with a stylised modern look. The estate is designed so that the family homes all overlook a central park area with a skate bowl in the

middle, so that the mothers can watch over the skinned knees of their children. The agent had thought the meeting was on a different day but arrives in a few minutes to let you in anyway. She notices a puddle in the basement and says that it doesn't bode well. It will have to be looked at. She wears a white quilted jacket, matching the clean Scandinavian engineered community aesthetic of the development.

Sometimes something catches your attention by the side of the road, something you hadn't seen but is just at that point where if you swerved a little carelessly, or if it were a dog or a child running onto the road you would crash into it. It turns out to be nothing – a post, a piece of rubbish blown by the wind. In that instant though, once it has passed, after you have made the split second decision as to where to steer, there is always a recognition that there was a choice, a choice whether to avoid it or crash right into it. There is always that temptation to impulsively crash full speed into something. After ten years of doing this job, driving, once they'd advanced so much you slept and ate and went to the toilet in the car, one day you will give in to that impulse, you will try to crash into the steel pole of a street light but the sat nav, with the address of your next appointment downloaded to it from head office, will know this is not the correct course and will steer you away from it. You will be saved for another appointment.

You disturbed the little girl's nap-time. The mother tucked her back in. They have a dog out back. You pat its head and avoid stepping in its shit.

It seems that the most important thing is being overlooked as you shoot your measuring laser across the carpets and photograph the kitchen appliances. At every place you visit, you write a few lines on the back of the asset inspection form. Funny how you can sum a person up in just a few lines. How would someone describe you if they came into your house for 10 minutes? You find that if you don't write down your impressions of people immediately after the inspection it only takes a few hours to forget them.

"He locked these doors. He doesn't normally lock the doors. He's taken the keys. He doesn't normally take the keys." A small child inflates a balloon with a pump and lets it deflate again, constantly smiling, following you everywhere, watching you, smiling. He comes home just as you are taking a parting photo from outside. He is a tall and strong man in high visibility work gear.

The daughter is sick in her bedroom but her mother gets her up anyway. The girl says,  
"What's that?"

"It's a laser, see?"

"Cool. What do you need a laser for?"

"It measures distance."

"Oh." She went back to bed.

You are late and knock three times. A young man answers the door, rubbing his eyes.

"What do you need the photos for?"

"Assets ... I'll just do the ceilings if you like." He seems worried about his mess of things.

"Yeah, good. I'll go around the rooms with you."

He has guitars and a bird in a cage.

"The washing room smells because washing smells doesn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You know the worst thing about this place is no privacy. All the windows look onto someone, so, seriously, all of them and those people on that side are housing commission, and my kids run around naked. I've been here since I got divorced but I don't like it. You know, every Christmas someone comes around and breaks in to all the car-ports. That's why mine has big locks on it. Other people just leave it open to say, 'Nothing to steal, don't break in.' Even at Easter too sometimes."

In the flat adjoining the doctor's surgery. "I just need to take some photos too."

"What?"

"Of light fittings, smoke alarms, and so on."

"Oh not of me. Ok."

The white-haired man works at his computer while you photograph and measure his bathroom and bedroom. He has a bed and a rack with shirts and jackets hanging from it. He has a fire extinguisher and a small bookshelf with *On The Road*, *The Soft Machine*, *Howl Remembered*, *Spandau* by Albert Speer, *Paul Frolich*, *When the Wind Changed - The Life And Death Of Tony Hancock*. You imagined that on his computer in the living room he was writing what he thought of the asset inspector, a little character sketch, inventing some life for the inspector, what happens to him driving around to all these houses, counting and measuring ordinary things.

At the Estate Agents' office the receptionist asks you to wait. You sit in one of the three chairs in the small waiting area. The chairs face an office, walled in glass on all sides. An older woman, the boss maybe, sits across the table with a younger woman who's very upset and talking on the phone. It's impossible not to look directly at them due to the position of the waiting area seat. As the conversation progresses the young woman breaks down. You try to sit sideways but however you turn, you can't face discretely away. The phone call ends and the boss leaves the glass office. The young woman is alone in the glass box crying.

Although it was exhausting work, doing the late hours, sitting in the car non-stop, they are always looking for people to do it so you took on more work, one week on one week off. It was good for the mortgage.

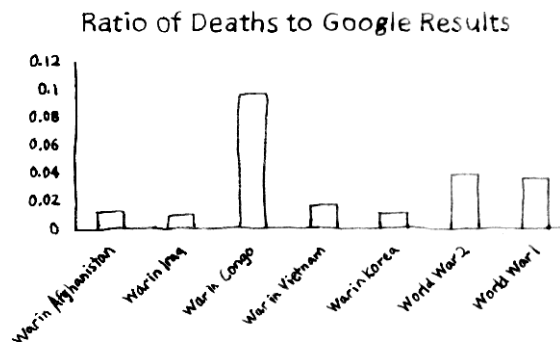
Once you met a man who said he was from the Democratic Republic of Congo. You asked him why he was here and he said he was a school teacher and that when the soldiers came to his school he locked the children inside and refused to let the soldiers in. They said they would be back the following day and if he did not let them in they would kill him and anyone else who got in their way. He left that night.

"If you go there they will kill you because if they don't know you they will think you must be selling guns to their enemy. The young people are turning to old technology now. The new technology doesn't work for them. The old technology can protect against bullets. You can have one man who knows this technology, and anyone who is touching him, or someone touching someone, all joined together, no bullets can touch them. I know you won't believe me. You don't believe this do you?"

You knew he'd see through a polite lie. "No, but it's interesting ... Why does this keep happening?"

"It is a very rich country but very poor. It has many natural resources, the best minerals in the world, fertile soil, but the rest of the world knows that if we can use it we will become a strong country. They don't want a strong country in Africa. All we need is a strong leader who can stop the fighting."

Once, driving around Sydney, you heard on the radio that somewhere in Africa, the police receive constant complaints about the theft of penises. They investigate these complaints and sometimes the penis is recovered. In other news a soccer team refused to play because they were certain the other side had used witchcraft to curse them. Funnily enough, two weeks later the next story you heard from Africa was that lightning had struck during a game of soccer, killing one team while leaving the other unscathed. That was all the news from Africa – there was no high profile famine at that time, though sometimes Somali pirates cropped up.



You don't hear it on the radio, or see it on the television, or on the internet news, or read in the paper, the 5 million people dead in the war in the Congo. That's the population of Sydney.

Just think of Sydney as you drive through it, from its edge to its centre, every single one of those people in the cars driving past, every single man, woman and child in every single one of those houses you pass by, block upon block from Bondi to the Blue mountains, all of them dying one by one over 10 years.

5 million in 10 years, dead due to the war, makes 500,000 every year.



41666 a month.

9615 a week.

1370 every day.

152 per hour.

2.5 per minute.

... till everyone in every house, in every car, is dead. Consider your own memory, every single thing you remember. Multiply by 5 million.

How strange it's not in the news. If you go looking you can find it on the internet, but still, why hadn't you already heard of King Leopold II when you had heard of Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot? Why does anyone you ask if they heard of it say "Who? Where? That's somewhere in Africa isn't it? I think I heard of some trouble there." Why doesn't anyone know about the worst war since World War Two, this event of historic proportions, happening right now?

11:31:12 Going over bills, changing nappies, toddler watching TV.

11:31:34 Indifferent mother. Photo display of best friends multiplied mirrors of each other.

11:31:50 White-haired man in a shack by a surgery. A few beatnik books and clothes.

11:32:21 People are outside the window on every side. My children are naked.

11:32:48 Holding her stomach after the operation she draws you a map to the basement. The Spice Girls helped a generation of women feel empowered.

11:33:05 If you are a landlord let me live in your place. Thieves come every Christmas. We don't bother with locks any more.

11:33:27 There is another one of these printers not here. The carpets were redone before this refurbishment. These crossed out assets all exist. All under this business entity, not the other.

11:33:52 Take off your shoes please. We keep our carpets clean.

11:34:17 Mothers surround the skatepark watching over skinned knees.

11:34:46 Happy child, inflating a balloon.

11:35:11 In a white quilted jacket she sells homes around children playing in safe danger.

11:35:30 Take off your shoes please. The carpets are new. It looks bad for business What's their strategy?

11:35:53 In the engineered community, safe and humane, they will want blood.

11:36:19 It's not much but it's all you need. They didn't put on the hot water for ten days. Don't worry love, I'll put your dexies here.

11:36:49 A story about the white hair man. A story about the inspector. A story about the white hair man.

11:37:01 From Iraq in Syria 5 years. In Australia 5 months. What is 'lanlor'? You write why. Write you why.

11:37:26 In the high visibility vest he looks up from the ditch and says, "What makes you better than anyone else?"

11:37:58 We keep our carpets clean. Are you taking a photo in there? I wasn't expecting you to look in there. It's full of things.

11:38:15 A girl crying in a glass box.

11:38:41 Under so many rooves, only the refugee offered a drink and a seat.

At every place you go to there is always, in the back of your mind, the thought that maybe behind this door will be the lonely woman who tries to seduce you, the nutcase who kills you, or the dead body. It usually turns out to be perfectly ordinary but at one house, an ordinary brick veneer circa 1985, you smelt a foul smell. It reminded you of a smell coming from the garage one hot summer day when you were a kid. It was so rank everyone spent a full hour looking for the source of it before giving up. The next day it was you who found it, opening the cupboard and glancing up, there was a skink, flattened, dried silver skin and blood, squashed up there from when someone had closed the door on it.

You could just turn and walk away. It could be someone else's problem. You could call in and say no one answered the door. But it might not be what you think. You knocked a few times more before going around the side, passing by the hot water system without photographing it. You peeked in under some two by one metre blinds and saw a pair of white sneakers, motionless a few inches above the linoleum. You rang the ambulance. They said they would not proceed with the call unless you gave your name and agreed to pay for the call out. You told them the address and hung up. Let it be on their head to let them rot or not. They might trace your call and catch up with you for the money later but right now you could not acknowledge financial transactions. You drove away. It left you with a little extra time before the next appointment to get some food.

One person, unarmed, can lock school children in a classroom and tell the soldiers they can't come in and so be forced to flee with his family that same night. Another person, in a country where everyone can get food, a comfortable place to live, education and health care, kills themselves. Yet another person drives from place to place counting air conditioners and light fittings. Looking at all these people driving hither and thither you wonder why they don't all just stop and demand an answer. But it's not fair on them to assume they haven't asked themselves the same questions. Maybe they're all driving around wondering why they don't all just stop. You're hungry and nauseous at the same time. You don't have much time so you get drive through.

## Ukiyo

### Fordlandia

Rounding the bend in the river, smokestacks rose from the jungle.

The birds and insects were joined by the sound of people rising from slumber, grinding manioc, talking, dropping something by accident. An occasional whistle sounded from the canoes paddling in through the river mist. The second work bell sounded. Kentaro punched his card in the clock.

The foreman gave instructions to chop down all the rubber trees with leaf blight on the plantation.

The Yankee women gave Chiyo instructions on the laundry.

Kentaro put windows in the new houses. As each was finished he wondered why, in this heat, they wanted people to live in hotter houses.

Chiyo planted potatoes, wondering why they had banned chickens and goats and must plant flowers, when they could live well from their own gardens.

Kentaro swept the carpenter's sawdust out of the new shoe shop wondering if he shouldn't just go fishing instead, and maybe pick some fruit from the jungle. There were others who'd breached their contract. They didn't seem to try to catch them if they'd gotten well enough away.

Chiyo wanted new shoes from the shoe shop.

Kentaro wanted a haircut at the new barbershop.

In the common hall they watched a film showing cars coming off the Ford production line and another about lions and mountains in the Congo.

Kentaro helped dig the car out of the muddy road he'd helped build.

Chiyo did the laundry.

Kentaro cut down the rubber trees with leaf blight.

Chiyo and Kentaro learnt to dance at the compulsory community dance.

Chiyo and Kentaro were bored so they went down to the rum boats.

When Chiyo got home from work Kentaro wasn't there. When he came in he was drunk. He said he lost more money than he had and passed out.

When Kentaro got home from work Chiyo wasn't there. He went down to the rum boats. "You owe us," Paulo said. They showed him the berth where Chiyo lay asleep. He dragged her home, promising to pay in two days time on pay-day. Chiyo took some jewelry from her mistress and once Kentaro had his pay they went into the jungle, heading upriver for two days before they hailed a boat. It took them as far as Iquitos.

### **Kitchen**

"¿Cuánto cuesta la princesa japonesa?"

"No habla Espanol," Chiyo replied to the men drinking and shoulder slapping on their veranda over the channel. They soon went back to their drinks as she paddled on to her own veranda and unloaded the groceries.

Kentaro was inside, lying on the mat, cooling himself with the fan she'd made from an old flour bag. "It's so hot," Kentaro said. "Come sit here and I'll cool you down." Chiyo put the hessian shopping bag, full of fruit, in the corner and sat on the mat near him. He kissed a bead of sweat off her forehead and began fanning her.

"It's strange," Kentaro said, "to be here. I want to be here but I don't want to be here. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes. I miss Japan, but I am glad we left. Things were so hard."

"Things are hard here too, but it's different. No rules and regulations for once."

"That can be bad sometimes too."

"Everything is good and bad. Like this heat. Sometimes it is beautiful. The smell of ripe fruit on a warm breeze when the sun goes down."

"The stench of rotten fish at midday."

"The lapping of the water at night when the streets flood."

"Vultures fighting dogs in the rubbish when the streets are dust."

"It's better than the Fordlandia plantation too."

"It was the best thing we ever did to run away. From Fordlandia, from Brazil, from Japan."

"Despite the stench of fish and the dust?"

"Falling asleep with the sound of birds whose names we don't know in the distance, we will drift into our dreams tonight."

"Only a frayed rope to anchor us."

"Sometimes just to breathe makes me sweat and I wish it were winter. But I know if it were winter I'd wish I was here, so I imagine it's winter and I'm dreaming I'm here."

"After everything, sometimes I'm just glad we're not dead, whatever the weather."

"Do you remember that first time, in the kitchen in that house your mother worked in?"

"How lucky she was out that day. My friend at the mill, Kama, she always said it tasted like mushroom."

"Really? Does it?"

"Yes, fried mushroom."

"You know what you taste like?"

"Seafood?"

"I don't know how you thought of the egg."

"You know. It was there."

For a while there was only the sound of birds across the water and the occasional shout of a child in the still heat and their memories were both there, standing in the kitchen of the family her mother cooked and cleaned and washed for. Her mother had cried when she

saw Chiyo return from the mill, and both of them were soon full of confusion. Her mother couldn't pay the debt, yet she didn't want to send Chiyo back, yet she must send Chiyo back. Chiyo could not shame her mother, yet she could not go back to the shame at the mill, knowing she could never pay her fines. Neither of them knew what to do, so they agreed Chiyo should conceal herself in the kitchen while her mother accompanied the household away.

Chiyo didn't tell her mother about Kentaro but once they were gone, he moved in. One afternoon, as the day drew near for them to return, Chiyo began boiling a pot of broth. Kentaro picked up an egg and tossed it in the air.

"Kentaro, no!"

"What's wrong?"

"You've been cooped up in here too long. Haven't you heard there's a famine?"

"The master won't miss it."

"They might be rich but what good is money when there's no food to buy?"

"You and your mother cook it all. Will they really know if there's one egg less in the Tomago?"

Kentaro saw Chiyo was crying.

"Alright, I'll put the egg down."

"It's not the egg, you fool."

"Chiyo, tell me what's wrong. You can tell me anything."

"They say that when a customer falls in love with a prostitute ... and he can't afford to buy her and they cannot bear their troubles any more ... they sometimes commit suicide together."

"I suppose for some people it seems like the only way."

"Do you think that will happen to us?"

"You're not a prostitute."

"I'm worried that's what will happen to me. I can't think of any way out of this situation. I've been away from work so long, if I go back, I'll be there the rest of my life paying off the fines, or I'll be arrested. Whatever happens, the rest of my life will be worse, and it's all my fault."

"No, it was because of me. I shouldn't have spoken to you so long that day."

They held each other for a long time. "Speak to me again," Chiyo said.

"There was once a girl who fell in love with a traveller. She said

Better it were

To be a silkworm,

Though its life soon ends,

Than to be tortured to death

By a rash love."

"How did they know about us so long ago?"

"and she says

When daylight comes

I shall kill him

The rooster

crowling too soon

sending my lover away.

But her lover replies

If the Pine of Kurihara no Ancha



Were a long-awaited love

I'd say

Come with me as a souvenir to the capital."

"But that also means, 'I don't love you. You're hardly even human. Of course I won't take you.'"

"That's not what I mean."

"It was my fault. I wanted to stay too long that afternoon. I couldn't stand that factory any more. Maybe it was because that one afternoon seemed enough for one life, and I didn't mind losing a life spent in that factory. I only feel sorry for my mother. I've made things difficult for her. Kentaro, don't leave me."

"Chiyo, I don't know what we'll do either, but I won't leave."

She turned and with his arms still around her, carefully separated the yolk from the white, pouring it from one shell into the other over a ceramic bowl. When the yolk was done she turned around and smiled at him. He smiled back. She held up the egg shell between their lips and opened her mouth. He mirrored her. She tipped the whole yolk into his mouth. Gently he held it there without breaking it. He took the shell from her, crushed it and cast it aside before slowly moving his mouth to hers. The soft yolk slid from his tongue into her open mouth, and she in turn held it there, gently, without breaking it. He moved down to his knees and lifted her clothes, kissing his way up her thighs until the yolk broke open in her mouth. They kissed in the taste of egg and brine. The big steel pot boiled on the gas burner, turning the broth cloudy as a train rattled by outside.

The following day Kentaro's mind was empty. He could not think of anything in the kitchen, so he went outside, wandering the city, looking for something, when he saw a poster. It was a man holding a hoe and pointing to a map of South America, to Brazil. In the crook of the arm holding the hoe he supported a miniature family, a wife and child.



Kentaro admired a caterpillar crawling on his trouser leg. "You know, why don't we just throw those things into a bowl of ramen or rice – mushroom, egg and seaweed."

"We'll put it on the menu."

**Ukiyo**

"Buenas Dias, Señor," Kentaro said. "Chiyo, bring Señor the special." He poured Señor Guzman a glass of anisette.

"Gracias, Kentaro. I am forever in your debt. Come, come sit."

Kentaro joined him. The man spoke closely to him, grinning, "I thank you again and again. And so does my wife!" he slapped Kentaro on the shoulder. "You must tell me this time. What's the secret?"

"No secret, Señor. Just simple Japanese cooking."

"Come on, there must be more to it than egg, mushroom and yuyo. I still don't know what witch stole it, I still don't know who paid them for it, but I tried" (he counted them off on his fingers) "porpoise oil, chuchuhuasi, cocobolo, clabohuasca, huacapuruna, ipururo and

viborachado. I tried shaman. I tried doctors. I have been at the crossroads in the middle of the night with Ogum," he shuddered. "But it wasn't until I ate your soup that I got my mojo back. Whatever you do is good magic my friend."

It was almost a year ago now that Señor Guzman, after an evening drinking at the cafe behind Pantoja's Billiard Hall, had wandered drunk down an alleyway towards Belen. Only the devil and Señor Guzman know what he was doing in that district and it is probably better not to ask – for one thing he can't remember, and for another, it's never safe to ask what men with money do in the poor part of town. After one turn and another, he wound up in a dark and quiet laneway, full of mud and stinking of shit and rotten food.

Approaching a T junction where his lane met another, he heard a strange high-pitched 'Aiee! Aiee!' At first he thought it must be a sick pig or a rabid dog and prepared to scare it off if it attacked, but the closer he came to it the stranger it sounded. It was no pig, no dog, chicken or any bird he had yet heard in Iquitos. He saw a human shape – an old woman, caked in mud and the filth of the street. She must have been demented, he thought. Her breasts were so saggy she had slung them over her shoulder, but as he looked in disgust, she pointed at him and let out a scream, 'Aiee!' that chilled the marrow in his bones. Fear took hold of his legs and sent him back the way he had come.

From that evening he had lost his libido. This was of no consequence to his wife, who he had already turned to her own amusements, but to his mistress it was a disaster. Before long he had lost her, and with her the desire to get out of bed in the morning. He spent his evenings alone in his study with only Oviedo for company.

He suspected everyone. His promotion at the rubber firm had been an awkward reward – he had more money, but his colleagues now despised him. He was sure that one of them, out of envy, had placed a curse on him, causing that old witch or spirit, or whatever the devil it was, to steal his libido. Over five months he had at first fretted, then sought help from scientific doctors and shaman, even the Chinese herbalists. None of them worked. Finally, one day in the dry season, attending to some business in Belen, he had been walking along and, suddenly noticing his hunger and thirst, stopped at the first restaurant he saw. It was Kentaro and Chiyo's cane and tin hut.

After first quenching his thirst, he was curious and comfortable enough to lunch there, despite the humble nature of the place. Following an impulse to try something he had never tried before, he ignored the usual Iquitos fare they offered and ordered the house

special. Kinmutsu passed the order to Chiyo and Chiyo cooked the mushroom, seaweed and egg on rice. Señor Guzman found the taste a little unusual, but otherwise agreeable.

That night however, consoling himself in his study with works of fiction, trying not to dwell on his lost mistress, he finally struck his hand on his desk, said, "Damn her to hell!" and, seized with an irresistible passion, sought out his estranged wife, took her in his arms and kissed her.

"What are you doing?" she said. "You've been gone for years. It's too late for this." He declared he would murder any rivals and kissed her again. "Where have you been for so long?" she said. Their affections resumed.

The following morning, over the morning coffee and chocolate, congratulating himself on having the wisdom to marry the woman across the table, he wondered what it was that had done it. The only thing that he had never done before, that was in any way new or different, was the Japanese meal. He returned. "What is the name of this restaurant?" he asked.

"Kentaro and Chiyo."

"Hmm? What does that mean?"

"That is our name."

"Hmm ... pardon me, but nobody will understand. You won't get customers that way. I think you need a better name."

"Si, Si Señor." Kentaro called out in Japanese: "Chiyo, the customer thinks we need a better name."

"What is wrong with our names?"

"He means a better name for the restaurant. What shall we tell him?"

"Ah ... Ukiyo!"

"Yes, yes of course! Señor, nombre restaurante es 'La Tierra ...', 'La Tierra ...'" replied Kentaro in his poor Spanish. He gestured with his hands for a while, pointed at the river

and the houses outside, but it wasn't until he resorted to getting a glass of water from the kitchen and floating a cork in it that they were both sure they understood each other – "Ah! Flotante!"

"Flotante?"

"Si, flotante. 'La Tierra Flotante.'"

"In Spanish it's 'La Tierra Flotante!'" Kentaro called out to Chiyo.

"La Tierra Flotante!" she called back.

"Bello," Señor Guzman said. "And the name of this dish?"

"Chiyo!" Kentaro called. "What will we call the egg, mushroom and seaweed?"

"Air, land and sea!"

"Nombre es ... 'Tierra, cielo, mar'."

"Perfecta!"

Chiyo served the air, land and sea then as she did every time Señor Guzman came, and as she did now.

The man took a quieter tone. "But I am serious, too serious this time old friend. I need to know what you put in it because we may never meet again."

"What is, 'serious'?"

"Bad news, Kentaro, I've come to tell you, there is bad news. War is everywhere in the world. Trouble is brewing. I know that you know many Peruvians don't like the Chinese and Japanese here, just as in Brazil. I know that with things getting worse, things won't be looking good for you and Chiyo."

"What? Why?"

"Don't forget I work in a government office. Someone in your position, if they knew what I knew, would be getting on a boat. Between you and me, you understand."

"When soon? Today? One year?"

"Soon. I can't say. It depends on when things will happen. You must know Japan has big plans. You may know better than I do what they are and when they will happen. Peru knows something will happen. When it does, Peru will have a problem with Japanese."

"I don't know anything."

"I have heard from people who know people. Japan will bomb the United States Navy. We know this because of the rubber."

"Rubber?"

"To make war machines – tires, electrics, aeroplanes. You can't make an empire without it. So soldiers will die for it. Malaysia has rubber. Peru has rubber. Japan needs rubber, Britain needs rubber, United States needs rubber. Malaysia is a big British rubber plantation. It is difficult to sell rubber from Peru now. But all this is good for business, that's why we know. Japan will have Malaysia so Peru will sell rubber to the United States."

"So, bad news for Japanese in Peru."

"It's good news for me, but not for you. Look at the newspapers now. People are saying they want Peruvian blood to be European. They say your people stick to yourselves and are a foreign colony on our land. If you stay here you'll find yourself dead or in jail. The only place safe for you is back in Japan. I'm warning you because I like you. You are a friend. All I ask in return is the secret of this dish before you go."

"I am ignorant. I know this not. This is bad news. Thank you tell us. But there is no ..."

Kentaro stopped. He could see that Señor Guzman was serious, that he would not believe there was nothing special in the soup beyond mushroom, egg and seaweed. "Excuse me, one moment." He stood and went behind the curtain and spoke with Chiyo in Japanese.

"Did you hear what he said?"

"Yes, we have to leave."

"I don't want to lie to Señor Guzman but I don't want to disappoint him. He'll be offended if we don't tell him something about the soup. He really believes there is more in it than mushroom, egg and seaweed."

"Don't worry. It won't hurt him. Tell him this. Get a piece of paper, write a spell on it, fold it up like a prayer and put it in the cooking pot."

"Hmmm. Ok."

"I'll show him." Chiyo took some paper, brush and ink to him. She showed him how to write an offering to hungry ghosts and to fold the paper into a knot. She spoke to Kentaro, who translated into Spanish, "She say, 'You keep. Make soup, make this. Same. Write this. Fold this. Burn this. Put ash in food.' Hungry ghost eat this, not eat mojo."

Señor Guzman thanked them and put the paper safely in the little bag he kept tied around his neck under his shirt.

"Thank you, Señor. So, we leave Peru because Japan fight British for rubber in Malaysia."

"It is a crazy world."

They all shook each other's hands and said farewell.

"I don't know how we'll find the money," said Kentaro. "I don't know what we'll do when we get there."

"We can start like we did here. Buy food, cook it, sell it. We can start a food cart."

"Things are different back there. Here we are poor and it's dangerous but there you are nothing more than what you must be. I don't want to go home."

"It will be good to see my mother. I hope she's still alive."

### **Sweet Potato**

Chiyo looked in on Kentaro. The room stank of solder. He had fallen asleep, lying back on the floor, his white shirt untucked from his creased slacks, barefoot, a dribble of saliva sliding from the corner of his mouth, among the tangle of multicoloured insulated wire and dismembered carcasses of salvaged electronic goods. His project had grown up the walls –

wires and components mounted on garden trellises he'd brought in. A few tendrils crossed over the ceiling and the gloomy winter sun shone through a chaotic crisscross of wires over the window. The Bakelite casing of an old radio was his pillow and an electronics periodical his blanket.

She had carefully made ebi nigiri sushi for him, but since he was asleep she picked her way through the debris and laid them on a bare patch of floor near his head. As the dish tapped on floorboards, he sat up suddenly, wiping the drool from his mouth, surprised he'd been asleep. Chiyo sat with him and they ate.

"I read in the paper," she said, "that they think the seafood from the water around Hiroshima may still be contaminated. They say there may be mutations and cancer."

"Oh well," said Kentaro, "we have to eat."

"Yes. They also say it may cause infertility."

"Oh well, after all this time, we must be infertile anyway. So eat."

They were quiet for a while.

"Kentaro, I don't know what you are thinking any more. Since the war, you have been at work all day, and after work, all this." She looked around at the wires and components, all assembled with a hasty order.

"I don't know if it will come to anything, but if it does, it will be important."

"But why? You never explain. I want to know what you are thinking again, like it was in Iquitos."

"I don't want to bore you with the technical details. You wouldn't understand. You don't want to."

"Maybe I do."

"You want to know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking I am a sweet potato vine, so I need to grow these sweet potato vines. I'm thinking I need to adjust the frequency modulation in the feedback filtering for amplification control and it's going to be a lot of work, because it



affects everything on that whole wall. I'm thinking that we are all bundles of electro-magnetism. That like the universal governor on Watt's steam engine, we are a system of self-controlling electromagnetic mechanisms. This is all about signals. You know I learnt some electronics in the war. Now I'm going to do something with it. What else do I have? I worked the radio. I fixed the radio because I had to. I figured it out because I would have been killed if I didn't and never would have seen you again. I didn't know I was smart enough to do that but I had to so I did. I am an Imozuru! We are all Imozuru! What is in the brain? Nothing more than microscopic wires all connected to each other. And somehow we can think. Everything, pleasure and pain, is electric – electric motor control signals. And here, here I am figuring out how it all works, how we work. That's why it's important. And if anyone can figure it out I can, because I've figured things out before, because I had to. Understand?"

He rummaged among his equipment and brought out two insulated wires, one red, one black, connected to a large battery. He gave Chiyo the two wires, one to each hand. "Here, connect the ends to each side of my face." She touched the wires to his cheeks. His face instantly contorted into something that was both smile and grimace.

"Here we are eating. Hunger is electric. It's an electric signal that tells our muscles to move to get food to eat. In the war we invented control systems. There are feedback loops, positive and negative. These happen in the brain too, and it's how we learn and think and act – because of the electrical signals connecting neurons. In the war we found how to understand code and transmit information in ways that people never imagined before. The Americans have invented this thing called a transistor, and well, it's all possible now. I know it is. Look at how the West has beaten everyone. The Western way of doing things is the best in the whole world. And see how all these signals are flying everywhere now, on the radio, in the newspaper and telephone. In this way the West has made itself into one huge brain. It is smarter than us, and like we did before we have to be better than them. Smarter, faster, more advanced. What you see here is as big as quantum physics, if it works. It is an electronic mind. I have figured it all out, the first tests work, but I need to go through and remodel things to make it more powerful. I need a way to make feedback signal adjustment more flexible. It might be hard to understand but it is even more difficult to believe. It won't be very powerful, but if this works, it will actually be a thinking machine, and maybe, one day, because it is all electro-magnetic, we will be able to connect ourselves to it, to fuse our own neurons to these wires, to control machines with thoughts,

or to connect our cognition directly into cities' communication systems. I know that other people in Europe and America are working on this already. Wiener, Turing. It's here, written in these journals. They've been thinking about it a long time. If they can, why can't I? If it works, I will be the one who made it."

"You were right. I don't understand. I don't understand why you think it must be you who does all this. But it's not healthy to work all day and all night. How long can you go on like this?"

"I'm tired of moving papers from one box to another. I don't like it. I'm not good at it. I'm tired of being a grasshopper. You can't get promoted unless you pretend to like it. To do it faster. But I'm no good at pretending. If I can invent this, the company will have to promote me to a position where I can do useful research work, and then I ... well I know I sound crazy, but it really is possible and if it is possible ..."

"Kentaro, I have experienced bad things too, but I just go on living. You don't have to do this."

He was silent for a while, "I'm sorry Chiyo. I am a weak man." The energy his ranting had stirred up suddenly dissipated. He slumped with his head in his hands. She tried to comfort him, but he said, "No, leave me alone. I don't deserve your kindness. I hardly speak to you. I can't find a good job. I have dreams I can't fulfil. I think I'm smart but I'm stupid. I'm a useless, weak man. I have never loved my country. I should be happy I have a job when so many others are hungry. I can't even pull myself together for you now. I am no better than the people I despise. Shomohin. Yuhei. Maybe one day I'll be better. Pi chosen-jin. Go to a piya. Call me Jjokbari. I don't blame you if you leave."

"I will say it now. Honestly, it is difficult to love you sometimes, Kentaro. But I love you so I'm not leaving."

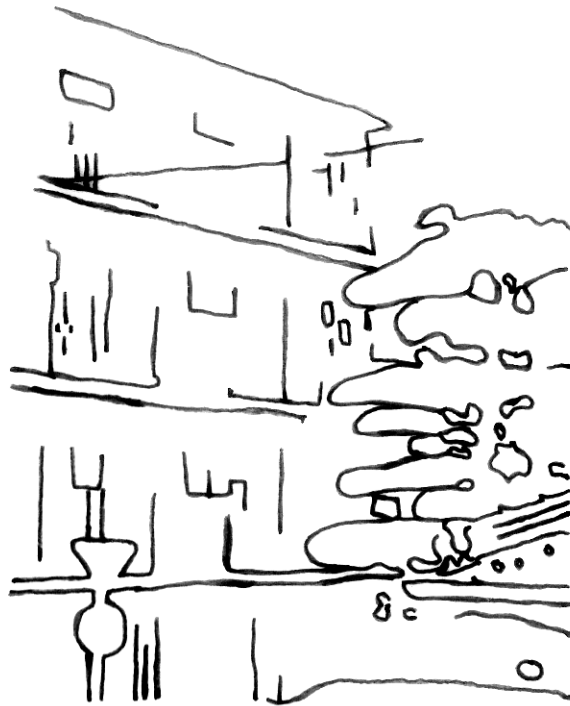
Chiyo collected the plates and washed them in the sink.

## **In Wood**

After three months work washing clothes at an orphanage near Hiroshima, Chiyo returned to visit Kentaro. Taking her seat on the train she found a book someone long gone had lost. It was Soseki's *Ten Nights Of Dream* and as the train travelled, she read about a man

who went to see the 13th century master wood carver Unkei at work carving guardian gods at Gokoku temple. He remarked to a bystander how amazing it was that with a few unceremonious strokes of mallet and chisel, Unkei could create a perfect nose and eyebrow from a formless piece of wood. The bystander explained that he was not creating the god from shapeless wood, but was excavating the form of the god already hidden in the wood. With this insight the man went home and tried to carve his own guardian gods from logs of firewood in his backyard. After working through the whole pile he still could not find the god in the wood of today and finally understood why the ancient Unkei was still alive.

Once home Chiyo tore a strip from one of Kinmitu's electronics periodicals and bookmarked this story with it. When she left for the orphanage again she left the book on Kentaro's pillow.



## Master's Will

Three days ago before dawn I woke up and couldn't sleep. I could see the day wasn't far away so I took a crust of bread from my pocket and chewed. That was all I had. I was living by the grace of God. From down near the Portada Barbones, a woman came with a bundle on her back. As she passed I asked her, "Excuse me. Can you spare a coin?" She said, "No." So I asked, "Please, all I have is this crust of bread. One macuquina?" She walked a few steps and changed her mind. "I'm in a hurry," she said. "You carry this for me. We'll be walking all day. You can have a Real."

"Thank you. My name is Recuerdo." She didn't say her name.

All morning she said nothing, walking at a fast and steady pace towards the sunrise. When we met other travellers on the road she covered her head and left it to me to make the passing greetings. A Real is good eating for a day or two. I know when not to ask questions. When it was too hot to walk we moved off the road for a way to rest. She had tamale in her pack and we ate one each. She looked tired. That afternoon she spoke like someone dying.

"It's hot," she said. "I can't walk all day like I used to. I never expected I'd grow this old." A light wind nudged the leaves and flowers a little and cooled our sweat. She adjusted her skirts and sighed. "There was a time once, when I was young, I walked all day and all night for three days. I didn't stop. I didn't sleep. I need to walk like that again now but I can't. I can see you're wondering why, but you're too polite to ask. Recuerdo, the way things look I may as well confess to you. At least you will know the truth. The inquisitors will be looking for me soon, looking for the truth, but they'll only get lies. Even the truth they want would be a lie. Even you'll lie to them. You'll tell them you didn't know anything, you were just a porter for an old woman."

"Yes."

"But I'll give you another Real if ... there is someone, if ever you meet him, a slave called Simon, in Lima. I kept him for too long. Tell him what I tell you."

"Early one morning last year, around Calles Mariquitas, I was going to the market. A man, coming from Portada del Callao stopped me. He said, 'The sun rises in Guinea.' I knew he was running away, trying to go home. It seemed a hopeless journey but I showed him the

way to Portada Barbones. Maybe he would find a palenque and settle down. 'This is the road,' he said, and walked towards the sunrise. We're going the same way as that man. It's been a long time since I saw Matamba. Maybe things are different now."

"What was it like there?"

"I was a naughty girl. I climbed up into palm trees without singing to watch what our neighbours were doing. Most of all I liked to watch the doctor. He could do many amazing things and I wanted to do them too. I tried to remember the songs and sayings and dances, but when I went into the forest to practice them they didn't work. He was always killing chickens. He could put a nail through their head to kill them and then resurrect them. Once, at night, I snuck into his yard to check those chickens and see for myself. I saw that in every chicken the nail went through the head in the same place, near the front behind the beak. It looks like it goes right through the head but it misses the brain. I practiced on one of my father's chickens and it worked. My father found his chicken wounded like that and nobody knew why. I said nothing. He spent a lot of time worrying about witches then. He gave the doctor a lot of his precious wine to get protection from that witch. He didn't know it was me. I guess that's where all this started, why I'm sitting here telling you this now."

"But it wasn't all like that. It was a bad time in Matamba. Some of it's too hard to remember. Before I was born my father was well known as the best palm tapper. That's how he made his living. I only remember him when he was drunk, too drunk to make a living, or teach a child right from wrong. I didn't have a mother. I was too young to remember what happened but my father told me. He spoke about it only once. You'll understand why. One day when my mother was getting wood in the forest three soldiers came and did what soldiers do. After that day my father couldn't look at her anymore so he sent her away to her mother's house. After that day he always drank more than he tapped for others. My brothers looked after me, but there was nothing but boredom, debt and poverty in my father's house, so one by one they went away to fight. I did too."

"I was sitting in the church. It was a wedding and everyone was still waiting for the bride. Is it yesterday or a hundred years ago? I sat with my friends and thought they were ridiculous. I was listening to them talking. They were saying things like,

'It will be you next time.'

'I just wish I knew with which man.'

'You're so late. Where have you been?'

'Look at my hair. You dumped me yesterday.'

'What?'

'You dumped me. I spent all afternoon and couldn't finish my hair. In the end I had to go with whatever was best.'

'I had things to do. I helped you first. I also have hair, my sister has hair.'

'You dumped me!'

"...and so on and on they went. I was thinking they were so silly when there was a lot of noise outside. I could hear my father was drunk and arguing with some men. I was embarrassed. But it wasn't just my father drunk outside. The Imbangala came. They came to the church where everybody was and blocked up the doors. The men in the church had no weapons. They stood in front of the Imbangala but were too afraid to fight them. A tall Imbangala man said, 'Who'll join us?' We were all afraid they'd kill everyone. These Imbangala have no children of their own. Any baby born with them they kill. So how do they make more Imbangala soldiers? They go from village to village killing everyone and taking their children. No one can stop them."



"I thought a lot of things all at once. I wanted to do everything my father said I shouldn't do. I wanted to be like my brothers. I thought about my mother and how she couldn't defend herself. I thought about these girls who want a husband but what good was my mother's husband to her? In those days everyone said the Queen's brother was weak and Queen Nzinga was the only one strong enough. Once the Imbangala had fought with the Portuguese against Nzinga. Now they were fighting for her. I was hungry. The Imbangala had everything they wanted. They might kill me anyway, so I decided things might go better for me if I joined them."

"It might have been better to die that day. I won't say what I saw and what I did. Only people who haven't been to war can think war is a good thing."

"It was the law that if any woman had a baby it must be buried so that we could move quickly, so that we'd have nothing to care about, so that we'd fear nothing. After my first child I learned to fight better so no one could do just what they wanted to me, so that I wouldn't have to bury another. When one day we were attacking a village I came to be alone with those two men who were the father of my child. I killed them both. I ran and ran and kept running and running and didn't go back. I walked for three days and three nights without stopping. I was starving and hungry when I came to a fire someone had made. It looked like they were burning palm leaves to make salt. No one was there, so I slept near the fire. I was so exhausted that when they came back they captured me. They fed me so at first I was just happy to be alive, happy I was their slave because I could eat. Like you are happy carrying my things for this Real. They sold me and here I am today."

"I came here on the boat and stayed a slave in this town for a long time. Mostly just domestic work every day, cleaning and cooking and washing, until María de Huancavelica, an Asante woman, lent me enough money to purchase myself back again. So I had my deed of manumission but I also had a big debt to pay to María. I didn't know any work that wasn't slave work and who'll pay for work a slave will do? If I couldn't pay my debt I would go to prison. María let me do her domestic work to pay my debt to her. She didn't pay me enough for me to buy what I needed and to pay off my debt. It was just as if I was her slave. I needed more money."

I remembered the girls I knew when I was young. I remembered what I learned from watching the doctor in my village. That was how I started making love potions and other things for people in this town. María always said, 'Don't do that. Pray to the Holy Virgin.'

So I said, 'You don't want me to make money so I can never pay you back.' So I made my money.

"If someone came and said, 'I don't believe it. This is fake medicine,' I killed a chicken and brought it back to life again. Over the years everyone in town took my medicine. I knew all their business. They are all guilty. That's why all their fingers point at me. The Inquisitors would take them all if they knew what I knew."

"I paid my debt to María with money to spare. I started a business selling bread. But those who are rich get more than nice furniture and fancy clothes. They also get the envy. I know because, more than potions for lonely and jealous lovers, I made charms against malice for shopkeepers, bankers, brewers, money-lenders. One way or another, I've sent them all to the crossroads with rum and tobacco. But no charm could make Simon love me."

"My charms couldn't protect me from envy either. I kissed a baby once. I was happy to see him, as everyone was. That was a mistake. Now they say I killed a baby once. I was at the Baratillo near Notre Dame de las Cavezas and Maria Estrada, the mistress of Isobella called me into her house saying that Isobella was crying because her baby couldn't feed. I checked the baby and saw it had a swollen belly, so I ground a poultice of lavender in the mortar. I tied it to the baby's belly and kissed it. Now they say that first I kissed this baby's belly and then a swelling arose there and that it was witchcraft. That baby died. Soon everyone was afraid and everyone remembered their own reason to call me a witch. When I kicked my toe and said, 'To the devil' they said I was making offerings. Someone even saw me digging for bones in the graveyard. Now every sick child is my victim. But it's only because they see me in the good clothes I can afford. So the wheel turns. I'll keep going towards Matamba. Maybe I will find a palenque. Recuerdo, please take this to Simon and his wife, Jacinta, and tell him I'm sorry I kept him so long. Of all the things I had, he was all I ever wanted."

"That's what she said, Señor Simon. She gave me this copy of her Will."

In the name of god, amen, in whose beginning all things have their just, praiseworthy and fortunate end: Know those who read this last will and testament, that I, Agustina de Palmiera, a free black woman of the Congo nation, native of Ethiopia, resident of the City of Kings in Peru, daughter of Juan de Palmiera, being close, by the will of Our Lord God, as I believe in the mystery of the most Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one true God, and in all the rest that the Holy Mother



Roman Catholic Church believes, confesses, and teaches, under whose faith and belief I have lived and I profess to live and die as a Catholic Christian, and fearful of death, which is consubstantial to all human creatures, I hereby make and declare my last will and testament in the following way and form:

First of all I entrust my soul to Our Lord God, who created it and redeemed it with the infinite price of his blood, and my body shall return to the dust from which it was formed.

And fearing death, which is a natural thing for all living creatures and so that this death may not take me until I have arranged matters for the sake of my conscience, I make and order this my last will and testament.

I beg you then please, by the power,

Item. A mirror that is worth about two pesos: two pesos

Item. A new copper frying pan that is worth about: three pesos

Item. A wheat-coloured shawl that is worth about ten pesos: ten pesos

Item. And a worn, iridescent skirt that is worth about: four pesos

Item. I declare I have a shawl of black flannel that belongs to Rafaela Zapata. This should be returned to her.

Item. Two small double-handled bowls of silver.

Item. A box from Panama and a trunk.

Item. A length of lace underskirting that amounts to: twenty reales

Item. Also a small piece of false gold jewellery mounted with stones of amethyst, ruby, and diamonds of alchemy that is worth about four reales with another four stones of alchemy, that is worth about another four reales, and the two together amount to: one peso

Item. Also a bedstead that is worth twenty-five pesos: twenty-five pesos

Item. A round whetstone and its mechanism.

Item. An ordinary wooden bedframe.

Item. A wooden stand from in front of the bed.

Item. A used wall cushion.

Item. Four ordinary, new mats.

Item. One table and a screen, and two benches and two large ordinary chairs.

Item. A large mortar and a skillet, and a new pot, and another used one, two grills, a large shallow pan for watering, and three brass candlesticks.

Item. Also a canopy that is worth fourteen pesos: fourteen pesos

Item. A small statue of the Most Pure Virgin with its little silver crown, that is mine, that is worth three pesos: three pesos

Item. A piece of the True Cross adorned in Prince's metal with its glass cover that is worth about: eight pesos

Item. I declare that Veronica of the Congo nation is indebted to me in a certain amount of pesos. I order that only 210 pesos of eight reales be collected from her and paid to Jacinta Folupa, and I forgive her the rest on the condition that she pray for me to God.

Item. I declare that Jacinta Folupa owes me 50 pesos of the 800 pesos that I lent her for her manumission and that debt shall be paid from the 210 pesos from Veronica of the Congo nation.

Item. A Simon Folupa, on payment of 160 pesos, he be given the deed of manumission and should not be sold for more.

I hereby revoke all former wills and testamentary dispositions of every nature and kind heretofore made by me in word or in writing or in any other way and I do not want them to be valid nor can they be used in or outside court, except for this one that I now declare as my testament, and I want it to be carried out and executed as my last will in the way that best follows the law. And I testify that this testament is done in the City of Kings of Peru, the sixth day of the month of January of the year 1666. And the testator, whom, I, the

notary, certify that I know, seemed to be in complete possession of her judgement and natural memory, judging from her answer to the questions that I asked her, and this is what she ordered, and she did not sign it because she said that she did not know how to write, and at her request a witness signed it.

## Depreciation

Everyone gets in kitted out for the beach. Towels, sunscreen on, thongs, togs. You come down the driveway into the street and approach the T-junction slowly.

"Which way?"

"Whichever you want."

"I'm inclined to just go the way I don't have to think ... but the other way might be better. What do you think?"

"Either way, you choose."

You indicate.

"I wouldn't go that way."

You argued.

\*\*\*

The plane stopped in China in the early morning. They took your passport for checking and, with all the other non-nationals on connecting flights, directed you to wait in a corner of the airport at the foot of a stationary escalator. While you waited for an hour, wondering if they would give your passport back in time to make your connecting flight, you exchanged glances with the young, smart, hip guy next to you until it was awkward not to make conversation.

Where are you going?

To Japan.

I'm just coming from there, going home to the States.

What were you doing over there?

Web development.

How come you're going home?

I want to finish my PhD. I've been there for years. I can't really progress without my PhD ... and it would be good to go back home for a while.

Is it hard to get work there with the language?

Not really, they encourage everyone to speak English where I worked anyway.

Did you learn Japanese?

Some, I tried, but it's kind of hard to study with all the distractions.

What distractions?

Japanese girls.

Oh! (You smile and politely give him a knowing nod.) But doesn't that make it easier – having someone to talk to in Japanese?

Not really, you need to study.

\*\*\*

Past the people sleeping in boxes, coming up the escalators from the Umeda underground city, you paused by the buses and hung your head. An old woman in rags came to you and put out her hand. You thought it was to ask for money but this time you didn't hurry on by. You looked her in the eye. Her eyes were grey and glazed and you saw she wasn't angry or miserable but smiling. There was something far away about her eyes, serene and holy. She must be mad or on drugs. Finally, you saw she wasn't making a cup of her palm. Instead she presented a coin to you. You accepted it, her rough fingers pressing it into your hand, and she moved on. The beggar gives the business man the money.

Not completely sure of the routine you browsed the pictures of variations on noodles, rice, chicken, pork and beef. The one roughly translating to \$4 looked good so you pushed the button. You could eat cheap in Japan if you wanted to. This trip wouldn't impact too much on your mortgage after all. The machine provided no user feedback. After some hesitation you inserted coins. A small LED reassured you. You pushed the button and the machine

ejected a small ticket. You sat on the red vinyl seated stool at the U-shaped bar and put your ticket on the counter. Soon a chef came and took the ticket back to the kitchen. You tried not to stare across the bar at the three tired men in business shirts and loose ties. The youngest heaped pickled ginger onto his noodles. The middle read a paper. The eldest still wore his suit jacket and simply ate. They were arranged as a comic strip titled, "Lifecycle of the Salaryman". It was a magic mirror reflecting you in time instead of space. You waited, inspecting the faint scratches of your empty red and black plastic miso bowl.

Only a few Japanese words still stuck in your mind from when you read up about Japan before making the trip. Shachiku – corporate livestock. Kaishu no inu – corporate dog. Datsusara – escaping the corporate lifestyle to pursue a dream of personal independence, such as starting a restaurant or self-sufficiency farm, or becoming a traditional artisan or web design contractor, running tour boats or teaching sky-diving.

At Shibuya intersection you stopped to watch two young jazz musicians. The bebop drummer was the best, fizzing with intricate, infectious variations. The sax was not so hot but made up for it with pizzazz, sky-larking and passing out the promo pamphlets. This is it. The only time in your entire life you'll be in Japan. The only time you'll be standing here now, listening to these kids blasting. You have finally worked yourself into a position where they have rewarded you with an international business trip. The paper is tomorrow. You better get back to the capsule hotel. You better know your stuff. Be well rested. On company money, there's no time for anything other than what they send you for. You better get a good night's rest. You better go over it. You better know your stuff:

*Advances in information technology today place us in an unprecedented position to increase efficiencies in taxation, benefiting both government and taxpayers. As capital goods depreciate over time, for everyone from home owners to businesses, billions of dollars are lost annually in potential reduced taxable income and to the government in administrative overhead. Utilising already existing APIs, my employer, CyberTax and Associates, has developed middleware solutions that will usher in a new era of real time, on-demand efficiency. [next slide]*

*By registering every purchase made by citizens and businesses at the point of sale with the taxation department through CyberTax Ltd. software, a permanent record of the decreasing value of those assets, from toothbrushes to cars, can then be used to calculate the total loss for tax returns each year. The information goes directly from the checkout to the tax department, leveraging existing online transaction security and identity validation infrastructure. The adoption of these technological reforms may even become*

*an election issue for governments as the hip pocket is directly affected. As these projections for an average income householder indicate ... [next slide]*

You looked up at the tower of neon, waiting for the traffic to stop. At the top the promise of more new levels were gift-wrapped in green-screened scaffolding. You'd seen all you'll ever see of Japan. You better know your stuff. Be well-rested. They were paying for this privilege. They weren't paying you to fuck it up.

Missing home, you closed your eyes for a moment and pictured the details of the scene when you returned, coming in through the back door into the kitchen:

- Stainless steel toaster
- Deco melamine biscuit container
- Marble mortar and pestle
- Laminex benchtops
- Olive oil dispenser
- Stainless steel breadbin
- Stainless steel oven
- Wall mounted magnetic knife holder with knives and scissors
- Hermetically sealed pasta jars
- Stainless steel dishwashing machine
- Dish rack
- Breadboards
- Coffee percolator
- Coffee plunger
- Stainless steel kettle
- Casserole dish
- Refrigerator
- Sunscreen
- Red 70s fondue set
- Black Vietnamese teapot
- 4 cans of catfood
- Cookbooks
- Souvenir Ukiyo-e ceramic trivet
- 2 Children

- Woman
- Man

Your phone rang. It was your wife. It was a bad line and you couldn't hear well but you could hear she was unhappy. She put your eldest daughter on and she said something but you had to ask her to repeat it three times and you still couldn't understand and she started crying. Jesus fucking Christ is everything ok? You ask your wife, "Is everything ok? Is anyone dead?"

"What?"

"Is everyone fine? Is anyone hurt?"

"No!" She shouted. "We're fine now thank you!" and hung up.

"Thanks a fucking lot," you said, turning off the phone. The people around understood your tone and ignored you. So much for absence makes the heart grow fonder. Prolonged proximity doesn't apparently work either. What the fuck am I supposed to do? She probably thinks I'm over here laughing it up fucking Japanese girls. What? That crooked toothed old prostitute propositioning me last night? Those backlit panels of glossy girl selections like so much plastic sushi? Couldn't afford it anyway. And why the hell would a cute Harajuka record bar girl want to sleep with a boring old shit computer programming taxation accountant for anyway? After all these years how could she not know me enough to know? Ridiculous. That can't be what's eating her. Why won't she just say?

Some things people you knew when you were young had done:

- Run a small graphic and web design business.
- Raise a family in the Byron Bay hinterland, buy a tinnie for the river and take up hang-gliding.
- Play bass in Wolfmother, saying, "We tried a lot of things until finally we realised people just want to rock out."
- Make big money in the mines.
- Live in Thailand selling screenprinted shirts on eBay and teaching English.
- Live in a highrise flat in Melbourne working from home as an IT contractor on museum and arts software development.



- Become a prostitute at the Cross, roller blade in the park dressed as a Goth on the weekend and die of a heroin overdose.
- Do catering for the film industry.
- Get divorced and become an alcoholic caught up in legal disputes over income and custody, hoping to one day be financially independent.
- Become independently wealthy by building up a logistics company.
- Run a small gallery in Sydney, fighting the council to avoid being taken over by developers.
- Appear on YouTube making avant garde noise by biting broken glass wired to sound systems at festivals and doing online interviews articulating the theory of Danger Music.
- Partially pay off a mortgage by writing software to help rich people save money on their tax return.

No wonder she was bored of you. You hated living with you too.

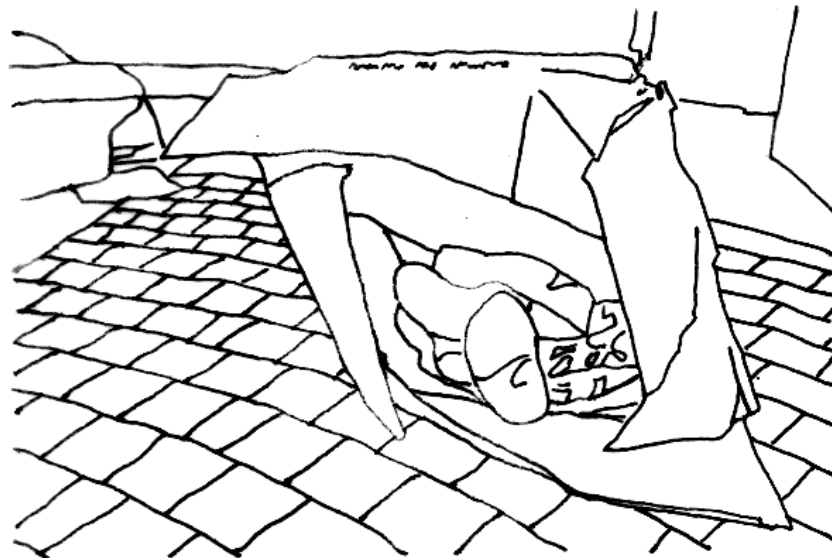
The night was cold so you went into a book store. The bottom floor was the biggest book store you'd ever seen, all in a language you couldn't read. You went up the escalators and there was another level of illegible books as large as the lower one. You went up again. You went up another level and another. Here was an unending expanse of information, the thoughts of countless people, on every subject, from all over the world, from every period of history. You had lost count of the levels and there were still more. All in a language you didn't know. You were suddenly illiterate. Why did you bother? You took the opportunity to use the bookstore toilet and left.

At the end of the day, all you had to do to be able to live with yourself, or anything, is not die. On the other hand everyone you cared more than two cents about would probably be better off without you anyway. It would be much more pleasant for them all not to have a boring old bastard moping around the house all day, dragging everyone into the yellow wallpaper.

Maybe the only reason she tolerated you, after all, was that she couldn't afford to live without you, which, as miserable as that must be for her, also meant you were nothing more than a mortgage paying apparatus. The longer you dragged it out the more everyone lost in years wasted putting up with you when they could have been furthering their happiness. They would get a payout from your superannuation that would cover the

mortgage, so they'd be free. Free of you, free of debt. Free. You were the price of their freedom. All things considered, the cost benefit analysis showed a significant profit from your death. Losses would rapidly decrease over time as everyone forgot about you. And anyway, you no longer wanted anything to do with yourself either. Death was clearly the only rational option.

You walked until you were so far away there was no chance you could make it back for your presentation. By then it was day so you slept in a suburban park under a cherry blossom tree. A security guard woke you at dusk. It was cold still so you went into the subway. You were the only one without a box. Yes, that was the solution for a salaryman at the end, to renounce all worldly possessions and live in a box. You wouldn't have to die, yet you would be assumed dead.



You spent the day seeking ideal boxes. Most were too small, but eventually, next to a pole in a suburban alley, you found a washing machine box relatively clean and undamaged. You walked around with it over your head, looking through a slit cut in the front. Inside the box no one could tell you weren't Japanese. No one troubled you at all.

You spent weeks walking. You walked out of cities, across the country and into cities. You ate from rubbish bins behind restaurants. You were training your mind to desire nothing, your thoughts to have no contents.

You had no friends, no possessions, no family. You congratulated yourself: "I don't have a salary to tempt me. There is no friend to reproach me for my laziness, to get me back on my feet when I only want to sit and sleep. There is no desire to sit and sleep when I am hungry or want to move. I move and find food. Why depend on others' strength and energy – whether they are servants or superiors – why make others depend on you?"

You don't remember much of that time. You were eliminating the distinctions between yourself and the landscapes in the cracks in the pavement, of roads, carparks, shop windows, bottle tops, a blade of grass, the torii pedestal of an overpass under construction, rust blotches on the side of a barge, a piece of dry mud, pampas grass growing from a drain, the abandoned spider web between an aluminium window frame and a ceramic pot, the bolt at the foot of a coffee vending machine, the joint in the leg of a toy spaceman.

Since nothing was useful to you any more you saw things you had never seen before. You would see the bus stop and the willow tree beside it. The number on the bus was no more important than the black smudge in the shape of a hat on its fender, the price of something no more or less significant than the dent in the stainless steel rail beside the conveyor belt.

You saw things, beautiful things: a rubber glove with a missing finger, cement that had gotten wet and hardened in the bag, an umbrella with holes in it, a folded piece of aluminium siding.

The washing-up glove was difficult to ignore. It reminded you of your daughter. She wanted an iPod but didn't have enough money for it. You took the opportunity to teach her about earning rewards and lent her the extra money. She promised to pay it off by washing-up. She washed-up every night until her debt was gone, then stopped. There was no other way to make her wash-up each night.

What are things that are not useful? Things that are not a means to an end are the reason we do other things: beauty, happiness, pleasure. Things without purpose. What are all useful things ultimately for? Things that are not useful. You are a flat tire.

You floated along the footpath beside the river to the mouth of Hiroshima harbour. Islands lay flat and grey in the distance. Grey sky-filtered sunshine glinted on the girdered bridge. Steel ships stacked with multicoloured containers coasted across the mercury sea. Reaching the end of the promontory at the mouth of the harbour where the rivers merged,

four sublime walls of featureless steel shining in the diffuse daylight towered over you. Two men jogged by as you wondered what could possibly be inside this vast box. You sat on the concrete fencing by the breakwater to admire the mystery. All boxes reveal that something is hidden. Smug enigmas, they are all asking you to beg for their secret to be told. To be outside a box is to desire.



You were inside a box and outside a box. You enjoyed being a box and so to be in a box was a desire, a lingering desire you had not yet annulled. You had not succeeded in becoming the box, because you desired to become the box. The ascetic life is gluttony. You must learn to be outside the box and inside it so that nothing matters either way. If everything means nothing, nothing means everything. Then there's no difference. Then you are a box.

Yet there are differences. There are caterpillars, bottletops, salarymen, hunger, food, angst, envy, folly. Things are similar to each other. So what?

A woman walked up a small flight of steps and down a wheelchair ramp again and again at the edge of the lawn in front of the great box. A man lay on his back in the sun with his arms flung wide.

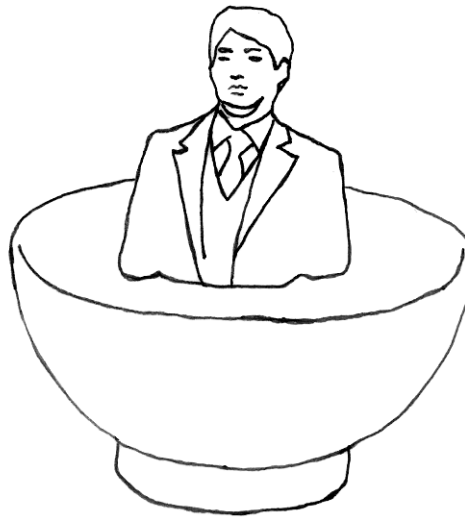
Hungry, you dug into the bin behind a diner. Under greasy paper and plastic wrappers, you happened upon a cracked black and red miso bowl. It had been used and washed until its inside was misted with countless scratches.

The infinite mist of fine scratches in the perfect contours of a cracked impervious plastic black and red miso bowl is countless salaryman meals.

In infinite sequence the salaryman meals mist the perfect impervious contours of a cracked red and black miso bowl with countless scratches.

Scratched contoured infinite miso bowled plastic red and black countless mist eating salarymen.

Infinitely scratching contoured mist countless salarymen eat their meals in a cracked red and black plastic impervious miso bowl.



Once upon a time there was a salaryman who lived in a bowl of miso soup. He spent his days making lists of things in people's houses. Carefully he wrote down what each thing was worth each year until it was not worth anything anymore. There were toasters and air conditioners, fire alarms and garbage disposal units. There were automatic garage door motors and sandwich presses, curtains and washing machines, towel racks and rugs. When the things were worthless, the people threw them away, and the salaryman took them all back to his miso bowl. When his hand wore out he replaced it with a sewing machine. When his feet wore out he replaced them with air conditioners. When his legs and arms

wore out he replaced them with remote controls, blenders, sandwich makers, television parts and towel racks. When his stomach wore out he replaced it with a microwave oven. When his head wore out he replaced it with a cash register. When his heart wore out he replaced it with a vacuum cleaner.

You lived for a hundred years in that bowl. One day you woke to find someone had dropped coins in it. The last time anyone had touched you was the crazy old woman who gave you the coin at the crossroads near the train station. You looked for a place to spend the coin, thinking someone might touch your hand as you gave it to them. The first place you found was a noodle diner where you put coins into a machine and push a button to place your order. You took the coins home, apologised for your ridiculous folly and gave the coins to your wife and children as souvenirs.

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"We want you to come back to work."

"Are you kidding? After I left you in the lurch? Why?"

"You are a valuable employee. There aren't many people in the world with your knowledge of the industry, and of our business in particular. It's hard to keep people in this line of work. It is tax depreciation after all. Most software developers run off to London after a while. To make a long story short, we are prepared to offer you more money. When you left we realised how seriously we had undervalued your commitment, and we appreciate you must be under a lot of stress. We don't want to lose you again. How does a 10% pay rise sound?"

After work you told bed-time stories to your daughters.

Once upon a time there was a man who lived in a miso bowl. He collected worthless things that nobody wanted anymore and built palaces and cities out of them inside his bowl. One day there was a washing-up glove going for a walk when it saw some torn curtains. This glove loved torn curtains more than anything, but these curtains were hanging high up on a bent towel rack on top of a great, huge, massive, towering pile of other things. The glove jumped as high as it could but it couldn't reach them. Other things began to watch and the glove got all embarrassed, so it said, "I don't want torn curtains in my house anyway."

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Everyone gets in kitted out for the beach. Towels, sunscreen on, thongs, togs. You come down the driveway into the street, and approach the T-junction slowly.

"Which way?"

"Whichever you want."

"I'm inclined to just go the way I don't have to think, but the other way might be better. What do you think?"

"Either way, you choose."

You indicate.

"I wouldn't go that way."

You laughed.

## Two Pines

### Burning Mansion

On Saturdays Kentaro went riding. They would always end up at the little food bar near the water at Minamiuozaki where he would insert coins into the vending machine, collect the tickets and they would sit at the counter, side by side. The man would collect their tickets and they would wait for their tonkotsu ramen. While they waited they didn't talk much so he would glance at the boy now and then, each comfortable in their silence. He would remember things about the war and wonder if the boy remembered anything of Hiroshima or if he had been too young to remember a thing.

They would sit near the wall and he would sit in such a way as to screen the bad side of the boy's face from others but every so often someone would catch sight of his missing cheek and lips. They'd flinch automatically at the row of bared teeth that would normally only be seen on a snarling dog or skull. And both he and the child would notice that flinch and sometimes look at each other. Although they didn't talk much, both knowing what had happened in that moment, neither was alone.

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out, and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, gazing at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle, remembering sitting on the mat with Chiyo wondering if it would be the last time he ever saw her, if he would die a year away at the far frontier of the empire. He held her in his arms and she held him. He had it in his mind that it would be like that first time again – that thinking they might never see each other again, with death so close, their love would be perfectly unconstrained and complete. That they would hold nothing back and discover every pleasure in each other that there was to discover, each revealing to the other things they could not alone have imagined feeling. But Chiyo was withdrawn. "Chiyo," he said, "what is the matter? This might be the last time we ever see each other again. All the love we have left, for the rest of our lives is here and now."

"It's nothing, I'm sorry." She tried to kiss him.



"Don't hide anything. Tell me every thought you have."

"I don't like it. This is like that cliché moment, when the soldier is leaving and demands what is due to him from a young woman. Every woman must do her duty. I love you. I love you and I don't want to take anything away from you. But my love for you has never been a duty. Now they are making it my duty. I don't know why, I shouldn't be like this but I don't like it. I'm sorry I'm spoiling this moment."

They held each other all night. Eventually they made love but it wasn't like in the kitchen. It wasn't like those floating days in Iquitos. Kentaro wondered if the boy was born of a love like that first time with Chiyo, or some other kind of love. There were as many kinds of love as there were copulations, and there were children of work and of rape. Was this a child of love or duty?

Saturday, 6:30 pm

Chiyo looked across the dinner table at Kentaro and the boy eating and filled her own mouth. When the supervisor had said to Chiyo, "You have leave to visit your mother." Chiyo knew it could mean only one thing. She left immediately without even saying goodbye to Kama. When she arrived at the kitchen of her mother's master's house the maid's silence told her that her mother was already dead. There was a commotion upstairs and the maid went up to check. Chiyo stayed and looked around the kitchen. She had not heard from Kentaro in months. The maid returned and said the radio said a new type of bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, causing extensive damage, that her master had tried to contact his connections in Hiroshima but could not get through and that must mean it was totally destroyed so it was lucky for Chiyo that she had been called away.

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle, remembering.

Kentaro didn't wipe the sweat from his face. There would only be more. Behind the cycle in front, in front of the cycle behind, he peddled up the road till the white arches and verandas of the plantation mansion were in view. The corporal signalled the dismount. They hitched their bikes on their shoulders and concealed them among the rubber trees.

They advanced under cover until the mansion was encircled. The area around the mansion was mostly clear, but at the rear, where Kentaro stationed himself, the trees came close to the building and there was an open door to a servants' entrance. His gun was cocked, ready for the first British soldier to come into view, but there were none.

He was glad of the rest from cycling and, keeping a close eye on the house, stretched his legs a little and drank from his canteen. Looking in all the windows he saw nothing. He ran his finger across the coarse rows of diagonal scars on the rubber tree he squatted behind. Surprised by a noise he pointed his rifle to the house but saw no one, but there were now two bowls of water in the doorway. A high-pitched singing voice came quietly through the open back door. He looked from window to window, until, close by, he saw, above the sill, a head bobbing as it came towards the door. He aimed where the person would appear, but when they emerged and he found his aim had been too high he smiled. It was a small child, engrossed in a game. The child's song moved back and forth from the doorway into the house, as the child laid bowls at the door and filled them with water. He glanced at each window again, and behind himself, then back at the house. It was a very young child, not old enough to understand anything beyond its game.

Smoke appeared above the roof of the house. Since no one had emerged, the corporal had ordered fire to force them out. Kentaro squatted and aimed his gun at the rear door, ready again, glancing from window to window. He waited and the child played. No one came through the servants' door. There were no shots from other quarters. There was only the black smoke thickening above the white house and the quiet song of the playing child.

He waited still. The fire spread across the roof. The child sang from the rear room, deeper into the house and back again. No one came out the door. No one appeared at the windows. No shots were fired. The house was burning. Kentaro reached into his top pocket and took out the emergency ration. He unwrapped it and took out the boiled lolly, wrapped the sesame bar back up and returned it to his pocket. Flames had spread all over the roof and a wide column of black smoke soared above by the time the child came to the door again. Kentaro shouldered his rifle, clapped his hands and whistled enough for the child to hear. Oblivious to the burning above, the child looked over and saw him smiling from around the rubber tree. It stopped singing and stared. He held out the boiled lolly and beckoned with his other hand. He smiled at the child and pulled a face. The child hesitated. Kentaro reached into his pocket and held up the rest of the ration. The child smiled, left its

game and walked over to him. He turned the child towards the house and when the child saw the fire and smoke it was frightened and held Kentaro's arm. He wiped its nose on his sleeve. The child ate the boiled lolly and together they watched the mansion burn. Nobody else emerged.

The child followed him back to the bicycles. The men laughed and joked at the child as they put their feet back on their pedals to rejoin the regiment. The child held its hand out to Kentaro for another sweet treat but Kentaro had no more. He asked the man next to him, "Do you still have that British chocolate?" but the corporal was already ordering them to mount and depart, shouting, "... the houses of Singapore aren't empty!" Cycling away, he looked back and saw the child still holding out its hand, crying.

Saturday, 6:30 pm

Chiyo looked across the dinner table at Kentaro and the boy eating and filled her own mouth. She wanted to say, "Kentaro, I didn't know much about you when we first met, all I knew was that I must get married and you were my only hope, and you seemed like a good person. I was lucky it was you, Kentaro."

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle, remembering looking through holes in a thick green leaf as big as his torso at a rope bridge suspended across a jungle gorge one misty morning. He sat quietly, looking, expecting nothing, but vigilant because, however unlikely it was, if the enemy came it could be death for him and his company. Then there he was, a movement of leaves across the rope bridge, a floppy hat and glistening face and rifle. He stepped out onto the bridge. Kentaro aimed his rifle, unsure at first whether to let him pass or to shoot. How many more of them? If one or a few came, when should he start shooting? If any made it across they would be captured. Kentaro had seen them tortured. It would be better for him to kill him now. The enemy had no chance of winning. Those unlucky enough to be on the island would be killed in fighting or tortured. The island had already been won. Killing this person would not change defeat into victory, nor would sparing him turn victory into defeat.

Kentaro took careful aim and shot. It was a good shot but once the man had fallen into the river, Kentaro saw that he was still alive, but not strong enough to swim. The opposite bank was silent. Kentaro watched the man die a double death, shot and drowning.

Kentaro wondered if the boy remembered Hiroshima.

Saturday, 6:30 pm

Chiyo looked across the dinner table at Kentaro and the boy eating and filled her own mouth. "Kentaro, last night I dreamt you were here. If I had known it was illusion, I would never have woken."

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle. They came and swept the flamethrower through the whole noodle bar. The customers opposite screamed, arching their backs, running and rolling and writhing, and that group of three students in the booth over there too, the busboy, the cooks in the kitchen. The whole place flooded in flame and stinking black smoke. The laminex melting to the floor, the chopsticks in the container gone like matchsticks. That's how it would be if they let one of those things off in here. The whole place gone in a moment. Kentaro had heard that at Hiroshima when the people were running, after the first flames, it started to rain black rain and they thought it was fuel for another incendiary attack, but some of them, the burnt ones, overwhelmed with insatiable thirst could not keep from drinking the black water from puddles anyway. Kentaro wondered if the boy remembered Hiroshima.

Saturday, 6:30 pm

Chiyo looked across the dinner table at Kentaro and the boy eating and filled her own mouth.

The Weaver and the Herdboy in the sky

Meet once on the seventh day of the seventh moon,

However hard it is to cross the Milky Way,

And never miss this yearly encounter.

But since he left me, left me alone,

What magic water separates him from me

And what makes him silent across the water?

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle, remembering when there was only him and Hiroyuki in the jungle on reconnaissance. They had been waiting out a thunderstorm, huddled in a sheltered spot beside a banyan root. Once the rain stopped they were able to take the back off the broken transceiver without its parts getting wet.

"If we can't fix it, we can't go back. We'll starve out here."

"I'm starving already."

"I don't want to die of hunger out here."

"Well you can go back and die, or go to the Brits and die."

"You better fix it."

"It's complicated. Do you want to try?"

"I don't know how those things work."

"Nor do I."

They both looked into the radio parts.

"If it worked, I wish I could radio my wife."

"You have a wife?"

"I have a beloved wife

Familiar as the skirt

Of a well-worn robe,

And so this distant journeying

Fills my heart with grief."

"You have a good memory for the words but your tone is not good. I didn't know you recite."

"Hmmm. Look at all this white stuff on this wire. What do you think?"

"Yes, should we clean it?"

"I'll unscrew it and clean it. Maybe it's a bad connection."

"I can recite. I worked for a Noh company in Kyoto."

"Bullshit. They wouldn't send an actor here."

"Not as an actor, but I heard enough. Listen to this. This is a chorus part:

"Plants and trees, soil and sand,

wind sounds and water noises:

in each one the spirit harbours all things.

Springtime woods swaying to east winds,

fall insects crying in northern dews –

are not both song and poetry?

The pine among them towers, lordly,

green through a thousand falls,

and shows no hue of new or old ..."

"No, that hasn't done it."

"Tomonari says:

'Astonishing! Old people, I see

that you are a couple, together here,

though Takasago and far Sumiyoshi,

by shore and mountain a province apart

are, so you say, your homes.

What can you mean?"

"Ah! Maybe this one, it's loose ..."

"And the Old woman says," he held his rifle by the barrel and put the butt over his shoulder, "... and this can be her broom ..."

'Sir, you ask us a foolish question.

Though a myriad leagues of hill and stream

divide them, hearts truly in touch

do not find the way to each other long.'

The radio crackled. Hiroyuki slapped Kentaro on the shoulder and said, "You are a brilliant man, sweet potato!"

"Ha! We may survive the war after all."

They tuned it until they found something and sat listening to a slow song from enemy radio.

"Listen it's sad, but listen to that Latin rhythm. This band is good. It brings back memories."

"I miss my mum's tamago."

"I miss lying on the pillow and smelling Chiyo, even when she's out."

"I miss saki."

"Or seeing our shoes side by side at the door."

"I miss Gion."

"I miss my wife."

"Yes, I miss the comfort women too!"

Kentaro wondered if the boy missed his mother or even remembered her. Had he seen what had happened to his mother?

Saturday, 6:30 pm

Chiyo looked across the dinner table at Kentaro and the boy eating and filled her own mouth.

Not even in my dreams

Can I meet him any more –

My glass each morning

Reveals a face so wasted

I turn away in shame.

Saturday, 10:30 am

They didn't speak much. The boy would eat in his sideways way, so the food and soup wouldn't slip out and Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle remembering Chiyo, after the



war, when she'd been down at a village outside Hiroshima doing menial work for an orphanage, washing clothes and so on.

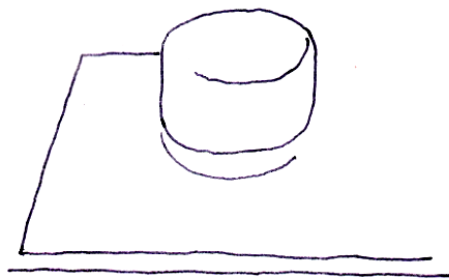
"Kentaro, in all these years I've never become pregnant. You know what it means."

"I know."

"Well, I had an old friend, someone I knew at the old mill. Her name was Kama. She was good to me. The best friend I had in that prison. She was at Hiroshima. She is dead. Long dead. But her son is alive. He's been living for a long time in orphanages. Just recently he was transferred to the one I work in. I've recognised him, despite ... Well it's a stroke of luck that we should meet. You have a stable job now. We have our apartment. We could look after him. He could be our own son."

### **Tokyo National Museum**

Not long after they found out that the boy had Leukaemia and would soon die they took him, on a sunny spring day, to the Tokyo National Museum.

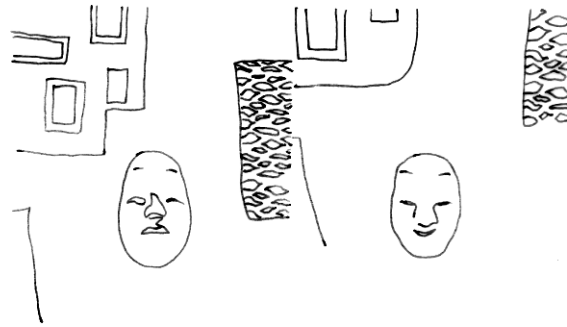


- Sixteenth century tea bowls in black raku style, one known as 'Amadera'.
- Katana, tashi and kodachi swords.
- Calligraphic quotations from Chomei:

"Even the pride and dignity of a Samurai must give way before such pain as this."

"Every disaster could be measured on a personal scale."

- 100 famous places of Edo: Sanyabori, Matsuchiyama Night, wood grain swirling in the night sky.
- Nebuke, Nineteenth Century, 110 ghosts marching in the night design.
- Shojo human-like animal designs.
- Noh masks for young woman character.



- Yasui Sotaro, portrait of Fukai Eiyo (Japanese modern painting influenced by the European post-impressionist style influenced by the Ukiyo style).
- A bell from the Yayoi period still in a cabinet. ("How long since anyone heard it ring?" Chiyo said. "When will it be heard again?" Kentaro said. The boy didn't say anything.)
- Famous Places in Kyoto: Cherry blossoms in full bloom at Arashiyama; Two punt a skiff with a fire burning in the middle of it.
- Hina dolls, Satsuma-bina type, Edo, 19th century, man and woman farmer, she with broom, he with rake, faces wearing Noh masks. (Kentaro squeezed Chiyo's hand a little.)
- Screen with birds of all seasons, pigeon, pheasant, slate backed flycatcher with white flashes in its wings.
- 17th century green and black glaze bowl, the green so deep, the phoenix design is formless wings and feathers.
- Heian to Muromachi period waka calligraphy.
- Scrolls of Heiji Monogatari Emaki.
- Scroll of Hungry Ghosts.



They looked through the glass at the Scroll of Hungry Ghosts. People sat in their chambers, unaware of the ghosts around them as they plucked the strings of their instruments. A woman gave birth, unaware of the attendant ghost. Outside, the ghosts hovered around people pissing and shitting. Further on they picked over the bones of the dead, and at the end of the scroll, were cursed with flames. Their bellies were large and their throats narrow. The boy banged his fists and head on the glass. "Keichi! Keichi!" Kentaro said. "What are you doing, Keichi? Stop!" said Chiyo but he ignored them. When they held his arms to stop him, he began to scream, his eyes rolled back and his body convulsed. They tried to hug him to stop his uncontrolled movements but he fought against them. The security guards were coming, so they dragged him through the echoing halls outside. They went through the park and kept going, trying to get away from everyone who saw them, but the park was crowded on this sunny day. Everyone was shocked and stunned by this agonised convulsion staggering through the budding trees, the bright clothes and happy faces. They kept going, until Keichi was exhausted and couldn't scream or struggle any more. They were near the moat and the great black stone walls of the imperial palace beneath a plum blossom with a cawing crow perched in its branches and cranes hovering over tall buildings in the distance. Not knowing what to do Kentaro broke off a long sprig of the plum tree and, as a jack-hammer started up nearby, Keichi sat in the dirt and mindlessly beat brown dust with it. Kentaro and Chiyo knew Keichi remembered.

### Quitting Smoking

"Did you smoke a cigarette today?"

"No."

"Are you sure? I can smell something."

"There were a lot of smokers on the train. Everyone smokes. Everyone but me."

"You know what the doctor said."

"Yes, yes, yes. If you keep up like this I'll need a smoke just to stop losing my temper at all these questions."

"Ok. Ok. I just worry."

"I'm a grown man. I can look after myself."

"That's why you've been at the doctor ..."

"Alright, alright, I'm too tired for another fight. We've had this fight before anyway."

"So now we can't even fight together."

"All I'm saying is we've been through this before. Both of us know what we're going to say, and how it will all turn out, so let's just imagine we said it all already and made up."

"Well if it's that boring, why don't you say something interesting?"

"Ok fine ... Here's something then. I haven't been able to find the right time to say it ... It's a difficult subject, but I guess now is the time to say it, since it's come up ... You know where I work down town – you know after dark there is not much open?"

"I don't go downtown often."

"Well there's not much open except here and there are one or two brothels."

"Brothels?"

"Yes."

"You're going to brothels?"

"No, no, no. Listen to the whole story. Now the reason those brothels are there is that it's people downtown who have enough money to afford that sort of thing, after work, so that's where they are. Now every so often I overhear at the office or at work drinks someone talking about going there, or laughing about having been there. Once someone even asked me if I was going. I said no of course."

"Don't let me get in your way."

"Well, that's not what I mean, don't take everything that way ... I've never been interested in that sort of thing anyway. I don't think I could ... anyway, that's where all the real deals happen. Everything else is paperwork and ticking boxes and looking right. It's when those guys run into each other at the brothel that they make friends, they do each other favours, they set up games and tricks and schemes, then the work they do in the day is making it all look legit. Well, Chiyo, I'm sick and tired of being a yuhei. I'm sick of being a naive little child and shoved to the side. I'm telling you all this because I don't want you to think I'm sneaking around behind your back. I'm going to go to those brothels but I'm not going to have sex with anyone. I'm just going there to play the game, get a promotion and make us some proper money for a change."

"Fine!" Chiyo went to wash-up.

"You don't believe me," Kentaro called after her, "but it's true. I'm doing this for me and you. We'll have a better house. Don't you want a better life?"

She didn't answer but he did it anyway – he stood at the foot of the stairs in the brothel, a laughing colleague farewelling him up the stairs with the chosen prostitute. Up he went, her short skirt waving in front of his nose, to the room. He went in and went to stand by the window but there was none. He awkwardly stood on the other side of the bed. The girl smiled mock coyly at him, putting her hands together in front of herself, letting one knee give way a little, and looking at the floor. When that didn't entice him she went over and touched his arm. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have a wife."

"A lot of men have a wife."

"Well yes, but I love mine."

"But aren't there things you need she can't give you? Maybe things you can't ask her for, because she is too precious?"

"We can just sit, or talk."

"Is that really all you're here for?"

"To be honest, it's because I'm going for a promotion."

"Ah, I see."

"So what would you like to talk about? You can say anything to me."

Kentaro put down his briefcase, took off his jacket, sat and said, "There's not much to say."



An hour later, he was crying, confessing, "... and when I let the pig escape, my mother took my book and threw it in the fire. She tied me to a post and beat me. And my father did nothing about it. Nothing. He never did anything about my mother. I wanted to be civilized. He wouldn't do anything until she started on at him enough that he snapped, as if she wanted him to get angry, she must have or she would have stopped. That doesn't make sense, to want to fight like that. But I hated it. I wanted to be civilized. I wanted to be a gentlemen, all the time I tried to read but all I could hear was them fighting or fucking. So much for filial piety. If anyone wants respect, they should be respectable. Not that it

amounted to anything, since now I'm nothing. I read 'Tales of Ise over and over again.  
Look I can still recite it off by heart.

'Though I got wet,

I was determined to pluck them,

Mindful

'That of this year

But few spring days remain.'

No wonder I wandered away as much as I could. I loved to go up in the mountains. No wonder I loved the ancient beauty of Ise Monogatari. No wonder it was easy for me to set out for Unrin In. 'That's how I met ..."

"I'm sorry, sir, you must stop. 'Time is up."

"Oh already?"

"Yes, unless you want to pay more."

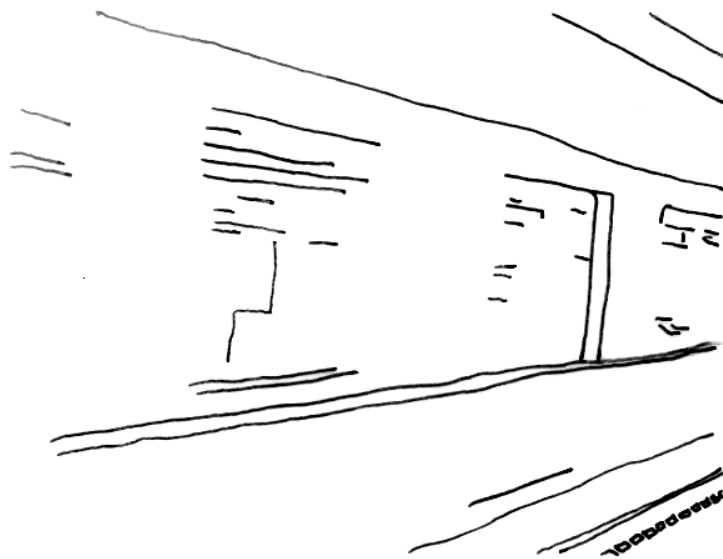
"Oh, no thank you." He stood, stubbed out his last cigarette and picked up his briefcase and jacket. "That should be enough. Sorry to talk so much."

"That's ok, you pay, you do what you like."

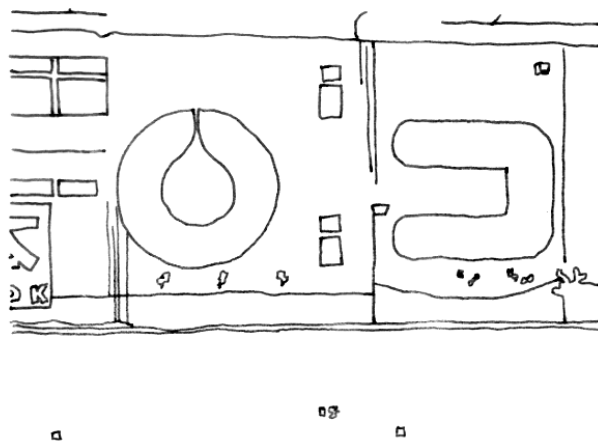
## Surfaces

Chiyo saw through layers:

1. An advertisement with a proud, smiling woman holding a fish in one hand and a frying pan in the other, stuck on,
2. the glass window in the train door, and beyond it on the platform,



3. plastic electrical ducting, attached to,
4. grey paint on,
5. a steel girder,
6. a line of people standing on the platform,
7. an open space between two concrete walls,
8. the symbols of a large company



9. the render and glass windows of the building behind them.
10. the parking tower topped with the blue Latin letter P beyond.

The flowers withered,



Their colour faded away,

While meaninglessly

I spent my days in the world

And the long rains were falling.

She had looked in his suitcase and found the cigarettes. If he lied about that, she guessed, he lied about what he did at the brothel. There was also another smutty comic. She had known he had them for a while now. If he were that bored of her ... had she grown that old and ugly? She couldn't help recognise that some of the girls in the pictures he had looked like her, but younger. He must have been in love, not with her, but an idea of her. He loved the woman in his memory more than the woman in his bed.

This body grown fragile, floating,

a reed cut from its roots

If a stream would ask me

to follow, I would go.

1. An advertisement with a proud, smiling woman holding a fish in one hand and a frying pan in the other, stuck on,
2. the glass window in the train door, and beyond it on the platform,
3. plastic electrical ducting, attached to,
4. grey paint on,
5. a steel girder,
6. a line of people standing on the platform,
7. an open space between two concrete walls,
8. the symbols of a large company,
9. the render and glass windows of the building behind them.
10. the parking tower topped with the blue Latin letter P beyond.



Her mother was dead. Kama was dead. Keichi was dead. Kentaro was gone. Now there were only acquaintances, colleagues and people she regularly greeted. She turned away from the glass towards the inside of the carriage. Sitting on the seats near the door with her mother was a little girl in a red and white dress with white stockings, black shoes and a little red and white polka-dotted bow in her hair, cut into a bob, looking at Chiyo. She sucked on her finger and was so astonishingly cute that Chiyo couldn't help but be charmed. As the girl was staring at her she smiled and pulled a little face at the girl but the girl hauled her feet up onto the chair and hid in her mother's armpit. Peeking back out at Chiyo she looked like she would cry. "Horrible old woman – the days of pleasing anyone are over," thought Chiyo, so she turned and stared back out the glass again and there, silhouetted between the company logos was Kentaro.

He looked bad. She hadn't noticed him before because he looked like a tramp. He was unshaven, his clothes were dirty and rumpled and he carried some plastic bags. She got off the train, ran down the stairs, up the other stairs and along the platform. His beard was thickly lined with grey. Dirt was in the lines on his forehead. His hair was long. He smelled bad.

"Chiyo," he said.

"Kentaro, you look terrible. What happened?"

"Nothing. I didn't need a job after you left, so I just ..."

"I didn't want to leave. You already left me long before I left you."

"I didn't mean to, Chiyo. I understand. I was a weak man. I was only working for you and Keichi. And Keichi was gone. Now it's all gone."

"I couldn't talk to you any more. You wouldn't talk to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Look at us. All our good days are done. Do you remember me, Kentaro?"

"There's only memories."

"Remember Air, Land and Sea?"

"Unkei. Sweet Potato."

"Tierra Flotante."

"The kitchen."

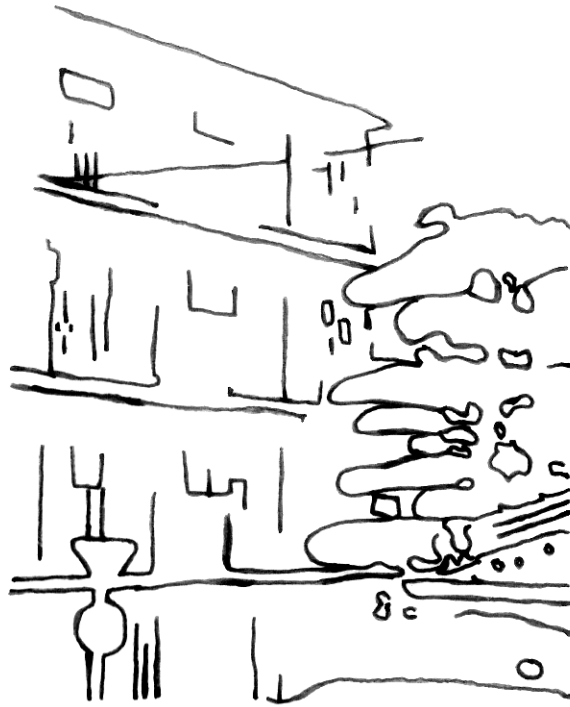
"You're the only one left who I could say something to and not have to explain."

"You don't have to say anything. We can lie beside each other remembering and dreaming."

"This winter has been long."

"Few spring days remain."

"Come on Kentaro, you stink like a Belen back alley before the rain. Come home and get cleaned up."



### **Authentic Peruvian Cuisine**

In the Umeda underground city, in a small counter restaurant, a customer read the placard pinned on the wall behind the bottles on the shelf.

Is not the moon the same?

The spring

The spring of old?

Only this body of mine

Is the same body ...

"I've been coming here off and on for 6 years now," the customer said, "and some of these things on the menu change but this one has been here all along."

UKIYO PERUJIN

Ceviche

Sweet Potato Picarones

Tacacho con Cecina

Juane

Air, Land and Sea

"Oh, really?" Kentaro said. "Which one?"

"Air, land and sea."

"Oh yes, that one. Do you like it?"

"Yes, one of my favourites, but why has that one always stayed when others have gone? It seems more Japanese than Peruvian. What's the story?"

"Chiyo! What's the story of Air, Land and Sea?"

"Ah – that is an ancient Indian recipe, from long before the Conquistadors. They say it has magical properties."

"Magic? What does it do?"

"Nobody is really sure any more, the real secret is lost in the mists of time, but one Peruvian we knew swore it would give you back your 'mojo'."

"Mojo? I'll have that."

### **A Bamboo Grove Near A Hamlet In The Mountains Near Kome, Okayama**

With neither destination nor ticket, Chiyo was asked by a ticket inspector to get off the train at Okayama station. She changed platforms and got on a little two carriage train going west on the Tsukagawa line. It was afternoon and on the long bench three high school boys sat apart, sleeping. Opposite, three high school girls sat together talking. The city disappeared. A bamboo stand hung over the blue river. Plastic bottles gathered around a tin shed. In late winter there were only shallots and cabbage in the garden beds. Once the train seemed far away, not wanting to arrive anywhere, she got off at the next stop. 'Kome', the sign said. She walked around some coffee vending machines and through a motionless

village. She followed a winding road up a mountain. A school boy walking behind her, knowing a shortcut, overtook her and disappeared into a country house.

Blue flowers no bigger than a little fingernail. A slate backed flycatcher with a brown breast and white flashes on its wing. Dusty fields still winter fallow. Impenetrable young bamboo thickets. The road winds up. Weary, she wants to rest, but whenever it seems the next rise will be the peak, there is always another just a little further on. Her bones and muscles ache but when finally the road is over the mountain and the way is easier, the unknown view beyond the bamboo or pine at the next corner draws her on. When will she stop? Perhaps on top of this slate cutting, but the young bamboo is too thick to find a comfortable sitting spot. Around another bend is a large pond with a stupa, she is thirsty but the water in the pond is green. Above it a pine grove. There, in that grove, the trees are mature and there's no bamboo so the way is clear. She climbs into it and finally sits. It is quiet. A bird whistles. Sometimes a raven. Sometimes the wordless poetry of the wind in the pine leaves. No other person passes for an hour or more. A small caterpillar inches along her leg. The afternoon is almost gone. It seems too hard to make it back to the station, it doesn't look like rain, and there is nowhere she wants to go. Woodpeckers flit from bark to bark.

With no one to hinder her whims, no friends to warn or reproach her, she sits as long as she likes and stands only when the whispering leaves move her and looks for a place to sleep and a water source. She follows a faint path etched through dead pine needles, the only tracks on it her own and the small hooves of deer. Among the pines she finds a glass bottle sunk into the ground with time. She lifts it out of the soil so she can fill it with water if she finds any, and sees inside, among the dirt and moss, a slick black pupa.



Higher up, a small flat reed bed, still stalks dead. Among the dry dead grass leaves tiny black spiders crawl. At the edge under a tree encased in spiked husks are nuts, each hollow with its own wormhole. She walks into the small dead reed bed. A scent of stagnation in the still air. Gnats floating in winter light. Across the reeds distant mountains float in a haze. She sits among the reeds and remembers Kentaro's voice. She calls back his name, "Kentaro, Kentaro ..."



The sun edging to the horizon, she leaves the dead pampas grass, thirsty.

Just beyond the reeds a mature bamboo grove looks a better place to sleep and the pond the bamboo grove wraps around is still but clear. It smells clean but is slightly turbid. She tips the pupa out of the bottle, laying it among the bamboo leaves, washes out the bottle as best she can and fills it with the bamboo grove water. The water is the clearest around but she is still unsure of it. She returns to the pines, gathers fresh leaves and brings them back to the bamboo grove. She crushes some of the pine leaves in her palm and puts some in the water. The taste is pure so she drinks deeply.

Dark comes. Bamboo creaks. She pisses in a spot outside the grove on the other side of an embankment and goes back inside her walls of creaking bamboo, beneath the ceiling of rustling leaves and lays on the carpet of fallen leaves watching the stars serendipitously glimmering between the slightly swaying leaves. For some time in the dark there is only soughing leaves, a frog, a fluttering bird, creaking bamboo. But it is too cold. She shivers and stuffs her clothes with bamboo leaves. She admits that she had come here hoping to die of cold but now, so cold, she only wants warmth. She wants neither life nor death. She sleeps fitfully thinking only of a warm train carriage.

A swaying glistening green canopy filtering golden sunlight. Two birds answering each other. Her aching body creaks upwards. She takes her bottle and climbs out of the bamboo into the open. She faces the sun and spreads her arms. The warmth melts the sap in her limbs and as it flows the aching eases away. She goes back to the pond, washes her feet, refills the bottle, crushes pine leaves into it and returns the way she came.

At the station the sun is warm. Ivy covers an old shack across the tracks. The crossing bell rings. A train comes in the wrong direction. A worker in orange gets off and waits by the road. The crossing bell rings for a train in the right direction but it's an express. An ant crawls over a white line on the bitumen platform. The crossing bell rings but it is an express in the wrong direction. A man in a suit comes. A worker in a truck picks up his waiting mate. A young man comes and waits. A grandmother, mother and baby in a sling come. The grandmother takes a photo by the station sign, Kome. The train arrives.

Aeon shopping mall rises from the rice fields. When she gets off the train she will go into the first warm building she finds. A book shop. A department store. A video arcade. Her fingernails are dirty with different colours: black, yellow, clotted blood. In the industry of Osaka she is thirsty again. She drinks pine leaf water.



Chorus:

Oh lake in Omi with your dancing waters,

all the sands will vanish from your shore

all the sands will vanish from your shore,

still poets' words have no end.

Green willow fronds grow on and on,

not all pine needles fall and die.

Remember, your pathos is the seed.

Times change and all things pass,

preserve these perennial songs

in the pattern of bird prints

etched again on the vanishing shore.

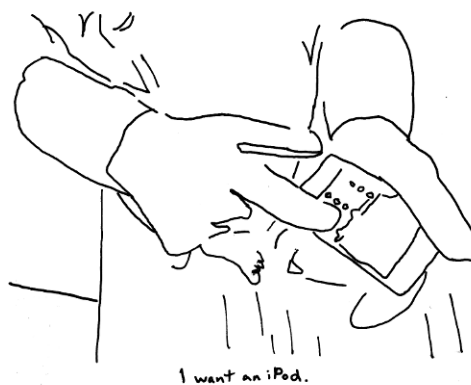
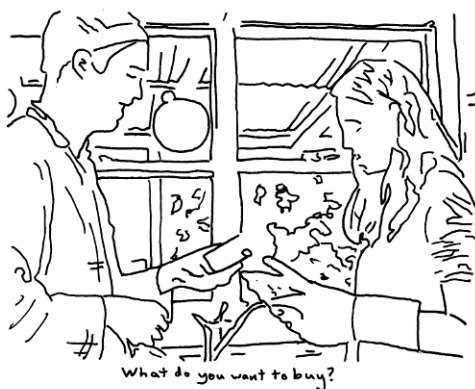
## How To Survive The Modern World

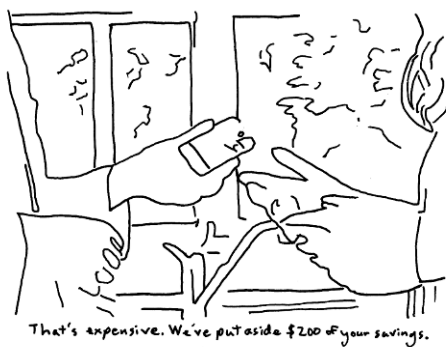
### Missionary and Asmat People in New Guinea



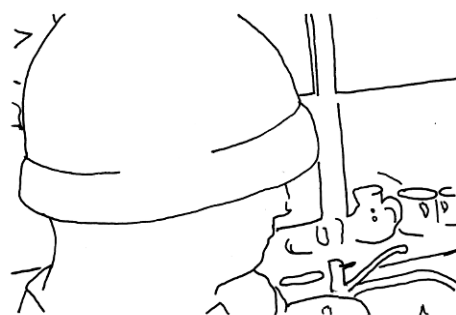


### Father and Daughter in Australia

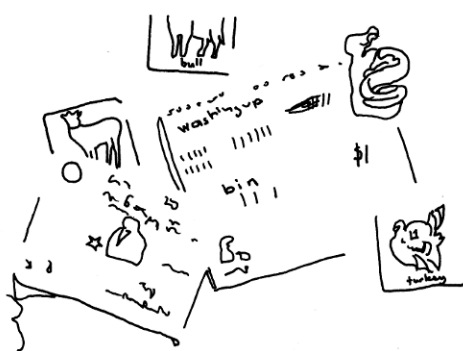




That's expensive. We've put aside \$200 of your savings.



You'll have to pay us back the rest.



\$1 - That's your salary.



Do you want to wash up?



Yes.



## **Traditional Barbeque**

Your father's old school friend has gone down near the road to talk on his mobile to his son from his first marriage, trying to arrange to meet him tomorrow. Your father flips the steak on the barbeque and says his old school friend worries about his son, he almost lost him to the drugs. You nod and swig your beer. Onions smell good on a balmy Queensland summer evening. You can smell a mango somewhere. You always can on a balmy Queensland summer evening.

You swig your beer. It's in a foam cooler. You always get offered a cooler in Queensland. It has some rugby team logo on it. Your wife is sitting over at the table with the salads talking with the old school friend's new wife from Kyrgyzstan and her daughter about learning English. They're telling your wife she's lucky English is her first language and she doesn't have to learn it. Your wife says how embarrassing it is to know only one language, especially working with refugees. They are lucky they know more than one, three even, with Russian, Kyrgyz and now English.

Your father says his friend is working in Africa now, you should ask him about it, interesting stuff. You remember last time, you've only met him twice, and maybe once as a kid, you can't remember, last time you met him he was an employment agent shipping workers from Kyrgyzstan to Dubai for construction. You wondered if that meant he was like some sort of latter day de facto blackbirdner – 'Human Resources'. He'd said they're so poor in Kyrgyzstan, they're keen to get the work, that they were treated like shit, and when he'd said that you remembered when you were in Baghdad, in the Sheraton because between the two wars it was as cheap as any youth hostel anywhere else in the world. You were 15 by then and you were coming up in the lift on your own and a man asked you to read a letter for him, from his girlfriend in Germany, written in English, because they both spoke a little English. In his room, with three other men, he showed you a folded photograph of a woman and the letter, in German so you couldn't read it, and one of the other guys had put a video on the player, about a schoolgirl being chased by a big hairy blonde haired man into some warehouses where he started raping her. The man explained to you that if they were caught with this, in Iraq, because they were Egyptian labourers and Egyptian labourers are nothing, they are shit, the Iraqi police would just kill them right there. He put his hand on your leg. Without a word you stood up and went out the door and back to your hotel room and, deciding that you didn't want them killed, you just wanted to read a book and think about the way that swallows fly in long arcs in the open

spaces between buildings, and how the roast chicken in Baghdad is the best in all the world, and how drinking all that softdrink because the water was bad made your piss smell strange, and to draw the designs you'd seen on the mosque that day, when your dad asked where you'd been you just said 'nowhere'. That was always a good story to tell people at dinner parties. People like stories of danger and adventure in foreign places.

Your wife always says you ramble on, can't stick to the point to tell a story, so you grin to yourself and get back to the memory at hand, to the people at hand. Your dad's friend had said, the last time you met him, that the King had decreed the labourers must set up unions. All the industry was against it, but what the King says goes. The great and good King. He knew things wouldn't get better for these labourers without it. "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, A stately pleasure-dome decree," your father quipped. They made kids memorise poems when he was at school. "The boy stood on the burning deck, picking his nose like mad. He rolled them into cannonballs and threw them at his dad," was one of his favourites. He knew all about the siege of Quebec and the Charge of the Light Brigade. You remember your father talking, last time they were here, about his friend's daughter, "A uni type, you'd like her," your father had said. "She's studying in Moscow now. Very expensive over there though. He has to pay for a lot of it. Her mother knows which side her bread is buttered too I suppose, though it's not all like that, no it's not like that. He's a cash cow for his kids. I guess he feels guilty because he's away all the time. Anyway, she couldn't take the mall, his daughter. She was disgusted by how rich it is and all the waste. Couldn't handle it. If you go out for dinner in Kyrgyzstan, you just get a small bowl of, say, peas, just beans. So you can imagine what the Coast Mall looks like."

He's come back and says he's sorted out his son, that his son always wanted to be a fighter pilot but missed out and won't get his act together and do something realistic; that his girlfriend is on his back about it. "When they have kids he'll sort himself out," you say. "You don't say much do you?" the old school friend says. "A lot of people say that," you reply. The silence lasts longer than two swigs of beer so you ask him about Africa. He's not quiet.

"There's three things stopping Africa: tribalism, corruption and religion. It's hard to get anything done. Some of these projects they say they'll get done in six months. I say no fucking way it'll get done in six months. But it's all political, so it gets approved anyway for six months. Six months later nothing's fucking happened. Not even a pipe in the ground. I

come in, I work on it. I make progress, but still it's not finished after 12 months. I'm always fair to everyone. Some blokes I'd trust with my life. I had one bloke come in with plans, I showed them to this other engineer, a bloody good engineer, from Ghana, and he shakes his head. Just as I thought. Bullshit. There's no fucking way this will get done in six months. Some try to play the racism card. Not many but some. He says, 'Oh, he doesn't respect my culture. He's racist.' He makes a complaint, so I get called up and I say, 'It's not about the fucking culture. It's about the man. And he's fucking hopeless.'

"It's worse in Nigeria. It's a basket case. I was speaking to one bloke working there, his job was to, once a week, take two suitcases full of money, hop on a helicopter with an armed guard, the government, and fly out, and when he lands, they hand over to another armed guard, the other guys and, seriously, they have three shipping containers set up there. One for Dollars, one for Euros and one for Yuan."

Your father's new partner brings out more salads and, finally able to sit down, they talk about her cafe job. You figure you ought to get better at having conversations at barbeques, and your father said to ask about Africa, so you quiz him more, like it's an interview.

Q: What do you mean by tribalism, exactly?

A: Well, let's say, I'm a Smith and you're a Jones. I hate you. If you get the contract and you're a Jones and there's a perfectly good contractor over here but he's a Smith, you won't give him the job. It's like in Bishkek. There's tribalism there too. If someone got elected in and he's from one tribe, everyone in the post office for example gets the sack and all the jobs go to someone from his tribe. They move one lot out and the other lot comes in. It doesn't matter that they don't know what the fuck they're doing. You have to tell them how to do their job. Education doesn't help. It's like they say, you take a bunch of goat herders and educate them and you end up with a bunch of well-educated goat herders.

Q: There's corruption here too. I guess it's a matter of degree.

A: Yes, but here if you get caught you get punished.

His wife calls out from the table, "Come get some salad. It's good." They all talk to each other about the relative merits of the two kinds of chutney and the mustard pickle. The mustard pickle is always there because your Dad's mother used to make it. You remember,

one of the first things you remember, sitting in the school yard, the taste of mustard pickle and margarine on white bread, a bit warm from baking in your plastic lunch box, running through the sandpit with Chris and Matthew, playing Star Wars. You never got to be Han Solo because you didn't look like him. You'd be Chewbacca. Nobody looks like Chewbacca. The swarms of swallows wheeling around the embankments. The paperbark trees across the oval. The strange secret symbols some older kids had written that you could see if, when the teacher wasn't looking, you crawled through the dirt under the office block up into the back corner that they said were magical spells from the dark ages. Someone once found a stone axe head there, so you sharpened sticks into swords and yourselves into Celts looking for Romans to kill.

Q: What sort of religion?

A: Well not the sort of religion like the old religions, Catholics, Islam, Methodists whatever, but it's these new ones that anyone starts up. Someone will start carrying on, "Fire! Hallelujah!" and they get a congregation and take everyone's money. It's against the law but the government doesn't stop them, and nobody's game enough to do anything. There was one, near where I lived, one too many times, at two in the morning he'd start up, "Fire! Hallelujah! Fire! Hallelujah!" I was sick of it. I went round and said, "If you don't shut up I'll have you arrested." He says, "You can't arrest God!" I said, "I'm not talking about God mate. I'm talking about you." and everyone around there was happy I called him out on it. They were sick of him too. A friend of mine says, "If I could do it over again, I'd find a good looking young man and start up one of these churches." The good looking preacher attracts in all the young women. They want to marry him. And of course, all the good looking women bring in the men.

Q: Do the Chinese have much political interest there anymore?

A: No they just want the commodities. The contracts are open for anyone to go for. We don't like it if the Chinese get it, but sometimes they do. They do everything on the cheap. That's how they get the contract, but they always cut corners. And they'll give you the resume of one bloke, but then on the day a different one turns up. He's been replaced. So then you have to get the resume of the new bloke. They always use cheap Chinese labourers too. They're not really paid. They do a deal with prisoners. They say, we'll cut five years off your sentence if you go and work in Africa for a bit.



His wife calls again, "There's salad here. It's good." Your wife calls to you, "You should try this chutney, it's delicious."

Q: If it's an American organisation, why do they let Chinese get the contracts?

A: Well it's not American. It's international. It's meant to be open competition. Though there is one organisation where Chinese can't bid for contracts.

"What are they doing over there?"

Q: Why do they need irrigation?

A: Well it's all rain based and they only get a few good months of rainfall a year. The rest of the time there's no farming.

"Solving all the world's problems again."

Q: But they have been ok up until now, or maybe they haven't – why do these farmers, who have been ok with rain based farming till now, need irrigation? Is it population increase?

"What's wrong with our pickles?"

A: Yes, population increase. They are given land concessions, they don't own the land but they can work it and derive all the profit from it. They work the land like any normal Australian farmer.

You try the salad and apologise. The chutney is delicious. You can't decide which tastes better. You call the children and they all sit at the little table. You tell the oldest to get the plates and you bring the platter of meat your father has cooked. Everyone enjoys a good barbeque.

## Kinshasa



You must let your fingernails grow for a fortnight, that is the only way, he said, and feel them cut into flesh, the stench of morning light, putrid, look at these street hawkers, bananas, yams, little bundles of soap powder, what skerricks we survive on, they should sell bangi, everyone should sell bangi and then they'd all be rich, who can she be texting, who can care what she has to say, everyone has phones like they're rich, any moment now all these rich poor could be panicking if the Kuluna block the intersection and take their things, they could all be screaming, look at these guys in this beat up old car, keeping junk running, we had better wheels than that out east, those were some days, so many people dead, better to have a gun than a pick, better, no fuckers can point their gun at me and make me dig up that shit for these fucking mobile phones, fucking mobile phones, and I learned to drive with him, a good friend, crazy, we drove like mad, and I have grown my fingernails a fortnight, I haven't slept for, must be two days, it's a long way walking, I'm not hitching, I hate everyone today, today the whole world is staring at me, accusing me, what have I done, I know what I have done, and it is evil, I have done everything wrong, I shouldn't have been born, when I die I will be one of those babies who won't come into the world again, I know what this world is, I don't want any part of it and it's worse off with me in it, and yet there is someone who stays with me, if she loves me she shouldn't, if I could only dissolve into this concrete and dust, and be forgotten and be ignored the way everyone forgets the ground they walk on, the ancestors they walk on, look across the river, another city over there, Kinshasa Brazzaville, the river cut straight through the middle, two countries, this is a country without borders, this is a country with borders everywhere, cutting straight through the middle of everything, of everyone, like a machete, we are we, you are you and they are they and I am I, no I and I nowhere, wicked, wicked Babylon, the sun shines on the night, all those people dancing all night, showing their arses off to each

other, dancing like the world was made of love, like the only reason anyone is in this world, at the end of the day, is because of love, love of man and woman, how many of our ancestors are children of rape, you ask me how can they all be so happy, you ask me, I tell you the only way people can be that happy is if they have been just that miserable that it's the only thing they can do, the only thing that is left for them is happiness, there is nothing they can do so they dance and dance all night, forgetting the unforgettable, all this rot, smiling and suffering, making your peace with wars to make peace upon wars to make peace, protect from attack, attack to protect, these men with guns and machetes are weak, a strong man has a smooth forehead, everyone then was a leopard in a corner, the mud is thick here, I wish I was already part of it, the millions of years of millions of people all together in this mud, nobody notices the ground they walk on, until it turns to mud, sucking at their heels, ten million dead reaching up to pull them back into our eternal family, suck me in and leave me there, don't let me be born again, there'll be no mud over in the shiny new city, what a joke, oh but they take it all so seriously, big little rich men, old Kinshasa, new Kinshasa, poor Kinshasa, rich Kinshasa, in the new city it will all be paved in concrete with gardens and skyscrapers, look at the beautiful plan, look at the beautiful billboard, that is the plan but nothing planned ever comes out as planned, corruption, half measures, they will have this old city, and they will have a new city, an imaginary city built on a dream island, a city of glass, floating away from the putrid rot, with busy people on mobile phones, enjoying the trees and the river, half built, never finished, always a dream until they give up on the dream, a broken dream, always rotting dreams, they will build only a skeleton city,



and then more people will move in there, and clothe it with corrugated iron and anyway, beautiful nightmare, we measure our wealth in people, what if they did finish it, what do they think will happen, the Kuluna will turn their eyes to the island of concrete and gold and take a piece, then the island city will call everyone savages and call the police and the army and the bulldozers to wipe out the old city, and exterminate all the cockroaches, then the Kuluna will go from gangster to freedom fighter to revolutionary army and it will be another war made from the shining new island city of peace, they will make what they want to escape, they say it will make jobs, I'm so hungry maybe I could get a job over there, how hungry do you have to be, that's if they don't just bring over Chinese prisoners to do the work, they don't want us to work because they say we are lazy, who wants to turn up on time to haul bricks anyway, lucky is the man with his own farm, he makes his own food, when he needs something he sells it at the market, I might need the work, I'm so hungry, better bangi than working anyway, who wants to be a slave for the billboard makers, sellers of promises, of putrid dreams, who wants to sell himself, to be a whore, who wants someone telling them when to wake up, lift those bricks, put them there, eat now, sleep now, wake up now, move those bricks, all of them, I hate those empty plains of dirt where they have flattened everything, and all there is is a plan that will already fail before it begins, maybe I could start up one of those Africell shops, but it's too late, they are everywhere, I missed the opportunity, but these thoughts can't be eaten, I'm so hungry, eating only keeps hunger alive, these words can't come out of my mouth, every breath could have a word on it, a word that started something, or ended it, a word that changed everything, a single breath and the right word can change the world, and when we have nothing left, not even food, that is all we have left, one breath, but what is the right word, what are we doing, finding food, and when you have eaten, sleep, and hunger again the next day, look at this man, raving and stinking of shit and garbage and putrid flesh, saying anything that anyone thinks is better left unsaid, some people pretend to be mad to get away with things, to steal a little food, to be left alone by the police, it's the only thing a sane man can do to save himself in this world, so many people here, so many, each with their own secret cares, each wanting what they want, each with so many million memories, as many as my own right now, but all different, and each could be snuffed out in just a moment, just like that, a machete in the back of the neck, a bullet from anywhere, there could be someone aiming at me right now, some men coming up the next street with their machetes, you get used to that, when you have to sleep you have to sleep even knowing you might never wake up, look at this man, talking on a mobile phone, like a rich person, but everyone has one now,

all the poor people are rich now, I don't even have a phone, does he know where that comes from, it comes from Kivu, made in China, sold by America and Europe, mined in Kivu and Katanga, with all these minerals we are the richest nation in the world and we are the poorest, look at all this mud, look at this fine Sapuer floating over the mud and concrete, what a well cut suit, red, and black shirt, with matching hat, red with a black band, and tall cowboy boots, a flower blooming in mud, such elegant manners. He said that it was by dressing as a Sapuer that he began, that he grew his fingernails for a fortnight, and in the market she saw him, she had never seen anyone so fine looking before, and when he knew she would follow him he strolled away from the market, pretending he didn't see her following him, and he walked for a way for a while and came to the house where he returned the hat he had rented, and on again and returned to a house the jacket he had rented, and so on and on with his tie, his vest, shirt, trousers shoes and watch, until finally at the edge of the city where the fields begin he returned his skin and by this time, although she tried, she could not turn away but must follow her feet, her feet that were no longer her own, and she followed him into a cracked concrete building with no door or window, and down some damp stairs into cold, into darkness and stood and she felt fingernails digging into her flesh and he said that there is nothing in this world that tastes as good as warm blood, but he didn't end the story there, he kept her there for as many days as it took for her to give up hope and when she had no hope left he came and made sounds as if he was startled by something, as if he were running away, fleeing, only to change his shoes and come back with the sound of different footsteps, different footsteps as if he were another person, chasing away the sorcerer, coming to find her and rescue her and he released her, asking her about her ordeal, promising to make sure no-one would do this to her ever again, and she cried, thanking him for rescuing her, loving him, then she was his. Sorcerers, there are no sorcerers, all this country is mad, there are sorcerers and doctors and priests everywhere, all of them are charlatans, giving hope when there is none, offering salvation when there is only contempt, lying when they speak the truth, every one, except, except one or two, a few, some places, sometimes, there are some, and when their power is on you, they are so skilled, you don't even know it, so how can anyone know there are sorcerers when they know how to conceal themselves, they know how to arrange others to be blamed for what they do, all these sorcerers they find and kill are innocent, and all the people don't even think to wonder if the guilty ones are guilty, they don't even notice them, everyone everywhere is a charlatan, everyone makes lies truth and truth lies, so everywhere there is sorcery, look at all these people smiling in their misery, looking rich with their

clothes and phones when they are poor, in this, the richest country in the world and the poorest, in debt to the world but to who the world owes everything, after what it has taken, I was no innocent child, I killed with hatred, hatred, I remember it clearly, everyone hates me, so they should, I was no innocent child, can I become an innocent man, it is me who is filled with the black sorcerer's bile, it's a stone in my gut and all these people don't know it in their minds but they know it in their guts and they hate, and all that hate seeps into this bile in my guts, when everyone smiles I frown, an evil eye is an honest eye, these people aren't smiling at me, they're laughing, and the spirit in the wood, in the mud, in the concrete, the sun and the moon, the wind and rain, all laughing at me, I know they are plotting something but I don't know what it is, and they laugh all the more, because I can't figure it out, idiot, I haven't slept for two days, but I know the difference, I know, I know what is the bangi and what is sorcery, my friend, you didn't, my friend, you would have been, you could have been a great warrior in other times, but now everyone hates soldiers, but you didn't know the difference between the bangi and the sorcery, you couldn't read, at least I can read, if you can read you can see your thoughts, when you write you can put what you think there on the paper and look at it and decide if it's right or wrong and eat it or throw it away, but you couldn't control your thinking, it took control of you, you suspected everyone, you accused everyone, you thought Rat was poisoning you, that was the end of Rat, then everyone must have remembered how you had accused them of something sometime too, when you were suspicious, they must have thought you would come after them for revenge against something they didn't do, in time, and they were all getting suspicious too, with more and more bangi and everything else, it was only a matter of time before someone killed you, you conjured up all that sorcery against yourself, you were gone from the beginning, always, dead, ah, now, here is the graveyard, home of the homeless, where the prostitutes live, the graveyard, where people live and fuck in the middle of death. Making more people to die, to fill the earth, for us to walk on. Here is our stone, here are her hands on my face, here is her kiss, how can she stay, what can she get from someone with nothing, less than nothing, what kind of living can come from these bloody hands, hands that washing won't clean, alone and in love, she is stronger than me, strong enough to contain spirits, she can give the world another death, another ancestor to walk upon the world and for the world to walk upon, my fingernails in her throat, she can't speak, but she does nothing, why doesn't she struggle, why doesn't she kick and scratch and try to run, easy and hard to kill, easy and hard to die, she can't speak and I can't

understand, is she already dead, did she die long ago, we will keep dying, always living dying.

## **Machete**

You buckle your child into her safety seat, get in the front seat and quickly choose a CD. There's no time to dilly dally. You're already running a little late because she couldn't find a hair-tie. Today it's Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5.

"I forgot my homework."

"We're late enough as it is." You drive around the block, down your street and up your driveway, go back inside, get her homework book and depart again. You notice the petrol gauge. You could run out before reaching school.

At a charity function in some wealthy person's living room, since the inclement weather prevented the planned performance from taking place in the natural amphitheatre of the grounds overlooking the ocean, you, your wife and your daughter, being young relative to the retirement age of the majority of the audience, and there being a shortage of chairs, had the privilege of sitting on cushions directly at the feet of a live string chamber orchestra playing from the Brandenburg Concerto. In the tune up, two violas made a musical joke with the bass. The pretty second violinist returned the glances of the handsome cellist. The conductor introduced the pieces with wit and charm.

Sitting in the midst of the performers, you were transported from the violas at the right, over to the cellist, and along the row of violinists as each took their turn, and dancing again around the depth and breadth of human experience. How ingenious Bach was to not merely write beautiful music but to incorporate pragmatic humane generosity, ensuring that each person in the orchestra got their chance to come to the fore. Even the third violinist had a little trill here and there while the other instruments withdrew. Your daughter rested her head on your arm, watching the violinists' intricate fingers blur.

You stole a glance past your left shoulder to your wife's moonlit pond eyes, watching the musicians, unaware you were looking. What a piece of work. How noble in reason. How infinite in faculty. In form and moving how express and admirable. In action how like an angel. In apprehension how like a god. The beauty of the World. To see a single twitch of the lip and know that inarticulable volumes were mutually understood in a moment ... and here now, resting her head on your shoulder, this other creature that a delirious welcome had brought into the world, this foil to prophets and diviners, paused on the brink of the



world, hearing for the first time this same music, just as you had once done, as so many others had done and would do. Here, now, everything was resting her head on your shoulder.

You stop the car, get out, put the petrol pump into the tank and squeeze. You don't look at the price, it's been going up lately but you can't do anything about it, you have to have the petrol now so you'll pay whatever it is. You look up at the big sign. It says CALTEX. You wonder if that is the company that was allegedly complicit in killing Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian soap opera star and author who started protesting about pollution and destruction of civilisations in the Niger River Delta – or is CALTEX the one allegedly complicit in killing Buddhist monks in Burma? You can't quite remember. You know it was Exxon behind some big spill, because they called it the Exxon Disaster, and British Petroleum was the big spill in the Gulf of Mexico. You could try to boycott companies that do bad, but you do need to get your kids to school and to go to work to put a roof over their head and for that you need petrol so you can't boycott them all.

There's still a smell of smoke in the air from the bushfires days ago. Who lights them? The defence department on a training exercise, funnily enough. Some eight year-old kids were caught trying to start one. Teenagers started one setting off a homemade bomb in a vacant lot. They tried to put it out though and rang the fire department. A man and a woman went round waking everyone up at three am telling them they had to evacuate because a bush fire was coming. There was no fire, they were just on amphetamines and got fined for misleading the public. A fire fighter started one a while back. He wanted to be a hero and for everyone to feel the camaraderie of adversity again. How lonely can you be?

There is a guy who pulled up over at another pump at just about the same time you did. He also has a kid in his back seat. You wonder if he knows he is also pouring the blood of Ken Saro Wiwa in his tank, or is that the blood of Buddhist monks? He'd probably punch you out for being a bleeding heart if you brought it up. You are running late so as soon as the pump clicks off you walk as quick as you can into the shop to pay.

As you wait for the person in front of you to pay, the person behind you says, "Fuckwit". It must be the other guy with the kid in the back who's just come in behind you. You can't figure out why he might be calling you a fuckwit and you really don't want to get into anything, you just want to get your daughter to school without getting your head kicked in,

so you choose to assume he must be talking on his phone to someone about some fuckwit and it's none of your business so you keep looking straight ahead at the person in front.

But he doesn't keep talking as he would if he were on the phone and the hair on the back of your neck stands on end. It feels just like that time when you were young, at a dance party and you'd all been going out speeding too many times and, looking down from a balcony overlooking the frenzied thumping laserlit human mass, you couldn't get it out of your head that with the amount of people in the world that someone somewhere right now was looking down the barrel of a gun, and each moment there was a different person pulling a trigger and a different person shot, out of hatred, contempt, for fun, following orders, what was in the head of that person looking down the barrel and that person dying ... And as much as you tried to put it out of your head and as much as you knew it was psychosis, you just couldn't stop the fear and it went from that to having the sensation that someone was just on the brink of whacking a machete into the back of your neck. Those memories that surprise you with a sudden shock of loathing, memories scratched into the evolutionarily most ancient parts of the brain, reptilian, insect, moluscular memories in the amygdala and hypothalamus, below the control of the cerebellum, autonomic Saturnine fear, afraid of the numb tingling that now starts in your fingertips like accelerated gangrene, creeping from your fingertips up your hand making you think you might need to cut off your hands to stop it before it reaches your heart, afraid of your own hands, Madre de Dios!

Come to think of it there really were some nut jobs in this neighbourhood. Like that guy on the bus that time talking to his son about his present. There you were, sitting behind this guy who had swastikas and shit tattooed all up his neck, and you watched the touching father son scene as they discussed the model of a Nazi battleship he'd just given the boy as a present, explaining how great swastikas are because people only have to see them and they're frightened. Sitting behind him, on the seat that's a little higher up because it's over the wheel, you were so full of hate you imagined garrotting the father with piano wire.

What's more, it just so happened it had been in the news lately that there'd been a lot of amphetamines around lately so it was quite plausible that there was now a man undergoing amphetamine-induced psychosis right behind you calling you a fuckwit. You'd read in the paper only last year, that in the car park of that pub across the road and down one block on the corner someone had been murdered by a man with a machete. And there was that

other case, not in the papers but you heard it from a friend where someone they knew woke up one night to find two people on their front porch going at each other with machetes. The police came and rounded them up but left this poor woman with blood all over her front porch she had to clean off on her own.

Is that what people do these days? Carry machetes around in their cars in case they meet up with someone else with amphetamine psychosis and need to have it out? Holy fucking shit. By the time you are entering in your credit card pin number your hands are shaking and you grin a very nervous polite thank you to the checkout person.

On the way out he's not far behind you. He must have paid cash. As you walk across the concrete to your car he's calling out, "Fuckwit. Oh, ignore me. Fuckwit! Now don't you get in your car and yell at me when it's safe to drive off. Fuckwit!" You don't want your daughter to have to watch you die. What's to stop this psycho killing your daughter too while you lie there dead. No motherfucker's going to do that! What about his daughter? She'd probably be better off without a fuckwit like that for a dad. Everyone thinks Australia is a peaceful place but genocide is always around the corner. It's happened here before. It happens all over the world and we're not immune. How can he tell you deserve to die just by looking at you? Maybe that neo-Nazi is right and the only government is fear. We are all reptiles. There were plenty of innocent people dying all the time, all over the world, right now, so this shit for brains asshole would be no loss to the world by comparison.

You get in your car and lock your door. The back passenger door isn't locked and your car isn't new enough to have the central control system. The man is beating his fists on your bonnet saying, "Oh that's right fuckwit, just drive off then. Who the fucking hell do you think you are? You fucking cunt!" Your daughter looks too scared to say anything.

"I just want to take my kid to school," you try to say loudly and nudge the accelerator. He keeps bashing the bonnet. You can't stop yourself anymore. "Ich mochte auf Bach gehoren, Shizerkopf!" you say in your bad high school German and drive over him. "I am a man of Peace!"

Bach has reached the harpsichord solo. Its first performance was a virtuoso improvisation, probably Bach himself, which was then transcribed to be played the same way thereafter. If

the violin lessons worked out, maybe your daughter would play it one day. You turn up the volume and merge into the traffic.

"Why did you kill that man?" your daughter asks.

"Did I kill him? He wanted to kill us, honey, so I had to stop him. Just remember you shouldn't kill people. Don't kill anyone at school, ok?"

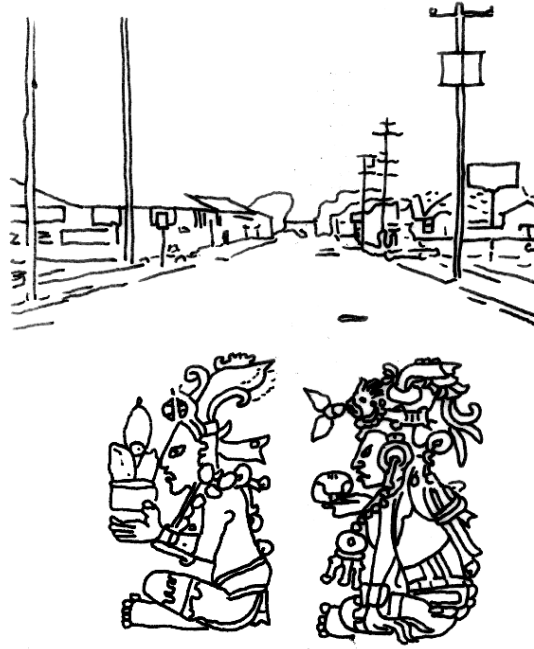
"Ok. Why did he want to kill us?"

"I don't know, honey." But now you realise he must have thought you were racing to get ahead of him at the cash register, because he'd come up almost straight behind you. Then you pissed him off by paying by credit card which takes longer. "Never mind, let's just listen to the music."

You checked your watch. "Dammit, now we're late for school."

## Fruit

### Xbalanque and Hunahpu



We have come a long way across the Rivers of Blood, of Pus and Scorpions. We stand in the middle of the cross roads, not sure which way to go. There's a white road, a black road, a red road and a yellow road. We haven't seen the owls for a long time. A voice comes from down the black road, saying, "This is the way."

"We haven't seen these Lords of Xibalba before," I say as we go down the black road. "We don't even know their names."

My brother summons the mosquito. "Mosquito," he says, "go ahead and, just when we arrive, sting each of the Lords of Xibalba in turn."

We arrive sweating, exhausted in darkness. We lower our packs and stretch our shoulders. All around us, one by one we hear complaints about a mosquito, each asking the other what is wrong, calling out each other's names. As they move and speak we see their faces appearing in the darkness.

My brother nudges my ribs with his elbow. "Greetings, Lords of Xibalba," he says.

One of the Lords steps forward. He has no flesh, just skin stretched over bones like a drum. He suggests we greet the wooden carvings.

"Why would we pay our respects to statues?" I ask.

My brother addresses the scratching Lords, "Good morning, One Death, Seven Death, Flying Scab, Gathered Blood, Demon Pus, Demon Jaundice, Bone Staff, Skull Staff, Morning Wing, Packstrap, Bloody Teeth, Bloody Claws."

"Good morning," One Death replies. "You are our guests. Please sit down."

"Not on that," I say "That's not a bench. That's just a hot stone."

"Then rest in the house of darkness. You must be tired from the long journey."

We follow the servants to the house of darkness. They leave us there waiting for a while. It's so dark I can't see my brother but I can hear his breathing. We don't say anything. A messenger brings torches and cigars. The faces are flickering shadows and orange flame. The servant says, "These must not be used up before dawn." We put out the torches and instead wave yellow and red macaw feathers that shine with their own light. We put out our cigars and set fireflies on the end of them.

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We are standing in a wide walled court. The Lords of Xibalba say, "We'll use our ball." Even from a distance we can see it isn't a ball.

"That's not a ball that's a skull," my brother objects.

"Don't worry," the Lords say, "It's only painted to look like a skull." They throw it. It strikes my brother's yoke, splits in two and the bone white dagger clatters on the floor.

"We came to play batey, not to be murdered." my brother is already shouting. And we both prepare to leave.

"Stay, stay! We'll use your ball. You can name the prize."

"Whatever you like."

"Bowls of flowers."

"What kind?"

"One bowl each of Red, White, Yellow and Great flowers."

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The noise of bats starts far away. First one, then a few more and as the noise of those awake wakes the others, soon there's the shriek of the whole flock. They come so fast there's no time to think. There's nowhere to hide but our blow guns. So we crawl inside them. The bats can't reach us but we sleep fitfully, waking to the constant din of their flying and shrieking.

"Is it dawn yet?" I ask. I hear Hunahpu stir and go to the end of the blowgun. I wait and hear nothing. "What are you doing, Hunahpu?" Still nothing. "Is it dawn?" I crawl along the blowgun to my brother and shake his motionless body. I understand that, putting his head out to check, a bat has cut it clean away.

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I stand before the Lords of Xibalba in Crushing Court. "Each day we have played. We have won some games and lost others. We sent ants to creep past the guards when we lost the first game, to fill bowls with flower petals to pay you your prize. In the house of blades we explained they were made for animals, not for us. In the shivering house we stayed warm. In the house of jaguars we gave them bones. You couldn't roast us in the house of fire. Now you have Hunahpu's head." They hoist it high up the wall so it hangs there over the whole court.

The Lords are singing and dancing over their victory. I speak to the animals I have summoned, "Each of you must bring something that you eat." They bring me leaves, stones and rotting things. Animals of all kinds, small and large. Last of all the coati came, rolling a large chilacayote squash. I thank the coati and take the squash. I carve it. Everything you might carve is already there. The trick is to keep carving until you find the spirit of what you are carving and then, sometimes, it is hard not to try to make it better

but you must take away no more. I attach the sculpted head to Hunahpu's body. I've carved it so well it says my name.

"Who are you?" I ask it.

"I am Hunahpu."



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We go straight to One Death and Seven Death. "What are you doing?" they ask. "We already destroyed you."

Hunahpu challenges them, "Just try to hit the head you hung up yesterday."

They try and miss. I kick the rubber ball hard so that it goes over the wall and bounces into the forest. While they run to search for it, I switch the heads. The carved squash is on top of the court. Hunahpu's head is back on his body. When they return the Lords of Xibalba's aim is good. The ball strikes the head, scattering squash seeds across the court.



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We sit with two seers. "The Xibalbans will not be satisfied. We have survived the Rivers of Scorpions, Pus and Blood. We have survived their houses and traps and returned to play batey each day. They will now be wondering how to kill us. They have invited us to dinner. They will come to ask your advice. Tell them if they scatter our bones in the canyon they will see our faces again. When they ask if they should scatter our bones in the river, tell them 'yes'. They must grind our bones as fine as flour and sprinkle us into the river in the mountains."

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After the banquet the Lords sit satisfied in the glow of the ground oven. One Death says, "Let's play another game." Seven Death stands, adds more wood to the pit and stirs the coals into flame. "See if you can jump over the pit four times."

We are ready. "You can't kill us," my brother says, and we both leap into the pit.

**Lady Blood**

Grandmother is in her kitchen weeping. The unripe cornstalk grows brown and dry.

**A Fisherman Of Xibalba**

It was down at the weir I first saw them. It was hot so it was good to be at the water. I wanted to dive in but I was there for fish. I walked out along the weir stones silently with my spear, looking to see if dinner was caught in there. There was a ripple in the water, just as there is for any other fish in shallow water, big fish, near the mouth of the weir. I walked along closer to it, slow. As I got close I saw through the reflections and ripples there were two fish. I startled them. Just as they were swimming back through the mouth of the weir I thought I saw a face. Those were smart fish. Fish don't usually get back out once they've come in. I saw them again the next day, bigger, and this time I saw clearly they had faces. The day after that, I watched from the forest as they crawled from the water onto the river bank. They looked like two orphans without a mother or father to put clothes on their back. I followed them. As they went they danced like weasels and then armadillos and centipedes.

The first house they saw they burned to the ground. Nobody knew who they were or why they were burning the house. I explained to the people there what I had seen and they were

too afraid to stop them. Once the house had become a pile of smoking ash these orphans put it together again, just as it had been before. Nobody could explain it. I came to tell the Lords. Waiting on their doorstep I see the owls fly out from their window.

### **A Dog of Xibalba**

Nobody has seen the two orphans before. They stand before the Lords of Xibalba, wrapped in rags, too ashamed of their poverty to show their faces.

"Who are your father and mother?" One Death asks them.

"We have never seen their faces."

"We heard you burned down a house and recreated it again, as if nothing had happened. Show us what you can do. What is your price?"

"We ask no price. We stand before you in fear and awe. We will do all you ask."

"Don't be afraid. Show us your dances and resurrections."

They began to spin and writhe, dancing like weasels, whippoorwills and armadillos. It's difficult to see past the legs of all the Xibalbans crowding around.

"Sacrifice my dog and resurrect it."

They both set their eyes on me. I try to look elsewhere but they come for me. I try to run but there's too many people blocking the way. One of the orphans ties my legs together. The other draws his knife. They take out my heart. Though I'm not there anymore, I know it has happened. I hear them shouting "Arise!" and I must stand. My heart is beating in my chest. Every smell is new again. I lick my lips and can't stop wagging my tail.

"Burn my house," the Lord commands. The orphans burn the house there for all to see, and bring it back.

The Lords, like the crowd, are fascinated. "Kill and resurrect someone here." The crowd shifts nervously as they come toward it in just such a way as to expose one person, caught on the wrong foot. They take his arm and lead him before the Lords. One ties his arms behind him, ties his ankles together and ties his wrists to his heels. The other draws his

knife cuts out his heart and resurrects him. The Lords of Xibalba are drunk with amazement. They can't stay in their seats. "Kill us! Kill us and resurrect us!" One Death and Seven Death are both shouting.

"We are your servants," one orphan says, "and only want to do what pleases you."

"You are death," the other orphan says, "so you must live again."



One of them binds their arms behind their back to their ankles. They tear One Death and Seven Death to pieces. They crush them. When they don't resurrect them the other Lords understand what is happening and all begin begging the orphans for their lives, "Let our faces still be seen," they cry. Everyone is afraid, running from the orphans, crying. They drive us all into the canyon like ants.

"You killed our fathers!" they are shouting. "We will spare no-one. We'll kill you all!"

Everyone, all the Xibalbans begged them for mercy and when they understand who their father is they say, "We'll show you where your father is. He's buried at Crushing Court."

"You Xibalbans must humble yourselves. You will get sap for blood. You will get no offerings but grass from wastelands, you will get old grills and worn out pots, broken things."

"Everyone in Xibalba hides their faces in shame."

### **Batz and Chouen**

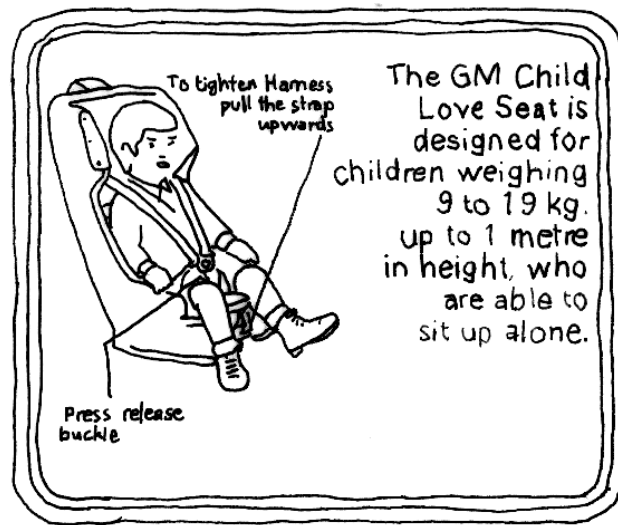
In the beginning is the stories' root. From it grow many fruits. Too many to tell.

In the tree in Xibalba flesh half forms on our father's skull again until half his face is restored. "Your name will be remembered," Xbalanque and Hunahpu say to it. "Hunahpu Seven, people will call upon you."

Grandmother is in her kitchen weeping. The cornstalk grows green again.

Our father replies, "Hunahpu and Xbalanque, your story will be told again and again. In these words the dead live ...

## Anticlockwise



The smell of fresh tar and the sunscreen leaking in the glove box, the rattle of the dried mandarin, oyster shell, matches and blown fuses in the ashtray, a torn corner of the pink child seat in the crooked rear vision mirror.

As you drove away from the petrol station, you lost control. Your feet and hands were driving, not you. It crept up from your fingertips and toes, the numbness, through your hands and feet, up your arms and legs. For a moment you were afraid it would stop your heart, but it didn't. It took control of every twitch of your eyes, so you could only see where they looked. But you were still there, unable to act, but still there. The pedal pushed you. The engine drove you. The signals blinkered you. The wheel turned you.

Your leg twitched with its own life, pulsing up through that half of your body. It turned you away, but it could only turn left, around the block, again and again.

"Daddy why are we going in circles?"

# Exegesis

## Introduction

The premise of *Ordinary Things* is to read meaning in ordinary things that we are dependent on but to which we seldom pay attention. Rubber tires serve as the main example, though not the only example, of an 'ordinary thing' in my novel. The framing narrative elaborates the ways in which an individual in a modern society is dependent on tires. The 'meaning' of tires in *Ordinary Things* includes their meaning in the 'modern' cultural context of the character within the framing narrative. He requires them to go to work, to get food, and so on. Tires acquire a personal meaning to him through his life experiences. Their meaning is not limited to this but involves tracing the history of rubber tires, connecting the framing narrative with stories from these sources. Tracing the sources of rubber tires leads us across great historical, geographical and cultural distances, and restores meanings that have been erased.

*Ordinary Things* uses Victor Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* ('making strange' or 'de-automating'), wherein poetry functions through unfamiliar language use by compelling the reader or listener to labour over it, to pause and contemplate, and so become aware of its aesthetic values in contrast to our 'automatic' use of everyday language.<sup>1</sup> Adopting an attitude of *ostranenie* towards everyday objects, to bring their potential meanings forth from the background, is the overall project of *Ordinary Things*. Rather than only state that stories *could* be read in tires, *Ordinary Things* is a sustained and extensive digression into their manifold meanings, personal, local, global and historical. This is not to provide a complete and comprehensive account of all possible meanings or types of meaning but to continually open up further potential paths of inquiry and association. *Ordinary Things* is an exercise in *ostranenie* for myself and for others, an exercise in reading an ordinary thing, to imbue that thing with meanings, meanings which are not merely said to be possible but which are also demonstrated. Using rubber tires as an example of reading an 'ordinary thing' implies a potential richness of meaning in any 'ordinary thing'.

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<sup>1</sup> V Shklovsky. "Art As Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. Lemon, Lee T. and Reis, Marion J. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965: 3-25.



## Structure

Many structures and techniques are used in *Ordinary Things* to reflect its content and purpose: polyvocality, sampling, digression, referencing, fragmentation, re-use, association, mixing, adapting, multimedia, intertextuality, and translation. The overall structure of *Ordinary Things*, of a framing narrative that follows a modern individual who is dependent on rubber tires, reflected in framed narratives related to the history of rubber tires, allows for both the personal meanings and broader historical and social meanings of an ordinary thing to be elaborated and interconnected. Specifically, the main historic regions referenced in the framed narratives are pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, as this is where rubber was first recorded as a culturally significant material; the Congo region, due to the infamous exploitation by King Leopold II during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rubber boom, as well as the Amazon region during the rubber boom; and Japan, due to the importance of rubber plantations and bicycles in the Japanese invasion of Malaysia on the eve of World War II.

In *Ordinary Things* rubber tires function as a point of departure and return rather than an exclusive organising principle. Multiple connections are established in many directions. Since the history of rubber is connected to the exploitation of resources in the Congo, for example, *Ordinary Things* involves the history of slavery. It is then important to recognise the various forms that slavery has taken to try to avoid a simplistic and narrowly focused view of something that is multifaceted. King Leopold II's enslavement of the region is referenced in the framed stories 'Ash Child' and 'Hands'. The transatlantic slave trade is referenced in 'Master's Will'. The slave trade to the east through Zanzibar is referenced in 'Hands'. Traditions of enslavement through warfare among African peoples is referenced in 'Hands' and 'Kongo Is Not Kongo'. Contemporary labour exploitation is referenced in the framing narrative in 'Site Inspection', 'Kinshasa' and 'Traditional Barbeque'. The histories and cultures, particularly the literary traditions, of these regions are sourced more broadly to provide context, further informing 'meaning' and to draw associations that inform the situation of the modernised individual of the framing narrative. The framed and framing narratives relate to each other and to the history of rubber tires in a variety of ways with a variety of themes and techniques being developed in parallel with each other, building up layers and networks of meaning as the novel progresses rather than focusing on a single central narrative.

The structure of *Ordinary Things* is allusory and digressive, with many reflecting layers having a 'resonating' effect on meaning. In music, harmonic resonance occurs when sound waves of a matching frequency interact with an amplifying effect. For example, if a string is plucked, the wave bounces off a sound board and returns to the string. Because the reflected sound wave is the same wave-length it amplifies the sound, rather than interfering with it and dampening it with 'noise'. The plucked string, still vibrating, receives an extra 'push' from its echo. The 'signal' is clearer and more distinct. Musical instruments are specifically designed to take advantage of this physical phenomenon. By analogy, the repetition or reflection in various ways (thematic, episodic, structural, symbolic) across layers and among connections in *Ordinary Things* amplifies and modifies meaning. These resonant structures are prominent features of the literary traditions that inform *Ordinary Things*.

The structure, themes and influences of *Ordinary Things* are all inseparably entwined, making it difficult to discuss each of these analytically, in sequence, one at a time. It is worth considering, then, examples of how they are synthesised. Most of the themes of *Ordinary Things* are set in motion in the first chapter, 'Travelling Home'. The title of this chapter already heralds the themes of connection, ambiguity, decentring and transition. The main character is first abducted by his divorced mother, then by his divorced father, who takes him to the United States where they live in a car, always travelling. The main character's childhood home becomes the 'road' and, as a child in this chapter, he recognises the paradox of his home: usually a fixed and stable place, his is constantly displaced. In the back of the car, he thinks, "Yet it was a place because you could live there, the road. 'A Place Called Nowhere' sounded like the title of something. The story of your life when you had grown up and done something interesting." This state of being in-between, of being in transit rather than being anywhere specific, is echoed again and again in *Ordinary Things*. In later chapters this character experiences a period of homelessness and has difficulty reconciling himself to a stable domestic situation, longing to feel at 'home' in 'homelessness' again. In the chapter 'Master's Will' the former slave tells her story while pausing on the roadside. It is a story of leaving her home in Matamba, fleeing a roaming army and being transported from Africa to Peru. In 'Hands' there is a vignette describing the collapse of a bridge under the weight of fleeing refugees. These are just a few examples of being in between, of connection and transition rather than location.

This physical 'being in-between' and 'connection between points' of living on the road becomes a metaphor in several ways. It is a metaphor for unfixed, indeterminate or mixed identity; for the connections between places of globalisation and colonisation; the connections between people and objects (and between people through objects); and a metaphor for connections across time through memory and history. At first glance in the opening chapter, all these themes may not be readily apparent, but through their later development, they become retrospectively clear. Subsequent chapters hark back, developing themes that at first might seem only mentioned in passing, adding layers of meaning to those initial events.

The lifelong dependence of the central character on tires (or more generally cars in this instance) commences here. In the first chapter the car is his home, where he lives, and also what almost kills him. In subsequent chapters this dependence is elaborated, inheriting his grandfather's car from his father, joyriding as a juvenile delinquent, working to support his young family in a job that requires driving around Sydney, and driving his child to school. In this first chapter the main character, as a child, has a near death encounter on the road, almost crushed beneath the tires of a truck. This prompts the child to reflect on mortality:

In the hours that followed, knowing that you had been only one instant from being crushed to death under the wheels of that truck, knowing that there hadn't even been time to decide whether you should mention the truck to the people in front, you knew that when you died, there would be nothing you could do about it, and that because there was nothing you could do about it, you had better accept it.

"Travelling Home"

Mortality is a preoccupation throughout the book and is intimately tied to the automobile. The character of the framing narrative lives with the guilt of having killed his friend in a car accident. He inherits a car from his father who inherited it from his deceased grandfather, and his own child sits in its back seat, as if the car were the most important cultural artefact to be transmitted across the generations. This point is intimately tied with history, given that the grandfather had refused to buy a Japanese car because he fought against Japanese soldiers in World War II, and that a major motivation for the Japanese invasion of Malaysia was to secure rubber supplies essential to war machines. It is in the car that the main character is annoyed that the transmission of musical appreciation across the generations to

his daughter is interrupted and contemplates murder in defence of his and his daughter's life.

In 'Travelling Home', just prior to this close brush with death, the main character as a child is daydreaming:

You were daydreaming about what you'd read, kids in the dust kicking a rubber ball, four owls perch on a wall, monkeys play flutes, lost at the crossroads, the black road saying, 'this way', laughing demons, cigars in the darkness, father decapitated, words falling from a skull into the hands of Lady Blood [...].

The episode is followed by an image showing the truck wheels with a figure nestled within it that is clearly, with its skull-like face and skeletal spine, associated with death. This figure is from the Mayan *Dresden Codex*,<sup>2</sup> and what the child has been daydreaming are episodes from the *Popul Vuh*.<sup>3</sup> The following chapter, 'Corn', narrates the first part of a story from the *Popul Vuh*, in the first person. The second chapter can be read as being what the child was imagining in that moment near death. This is the first of many dilations of time in *Ordinary Things*. These time dilations connect moments in the narrative to memory, history, and culture, providing background that explains how and why a moment or thing is important. They are an explicit performance of *ostranenie*, a pausing to elaborate meaning that might otherwise be passed over. These digressions are a means of articulating the rich meaning that may radiate from a single moment or a single thing.

In the case of the *Popul Vuh* reference in 'Travelling Home', all the three chapters relating scenes from the *Popul Vuh*, 'Corn', 'Chilli' and 'Fruit' are embedded in this passing 'daydream' moment in the first chapter. The image of one of the Mayan death gods within the wheel reflects the child's confrontation with death in the wheel. It also suggests that ancient Mayan mythology, in which the rubber ball game plays a significant role, is 'in' the tire. The sections of the *Popul Vuh* re-presented in *Ordinary Things* are those that narrate the journey of two sets of hero twins to the underworld where they play the game of batey with a rubber ball against the Gods of Death. We see already another parallel between the child's encounter with death and the children's' journey to the underworld. Many other parallels are drawn – the repetition of the father in the son, the theme of decapitation and so on. These parallels extend across subsequent chapters: the indolent artists Batz and

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<sup>2</sup> Yucatecan Maya. *Dresden Codex*. Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. Accessed September 9 2010. <http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices/dresden.html>.

<sup>3</sup> A J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*. University Of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2007.

Chouen are reflected in the indolence of the young unemployed main character and his flatmate. There are too many examples of these associations to list, as this is the organising principle of *Ordinary Things*, and at any given point a similar chain of polysemy could be elaborated. This is one example of how 'time dilations' relate and contribute meaning to moments and things by association with literary traditions within the history of rubber tires, in this case the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican epic, the *Popul Vuh*.

Brushes with death and other memento mori play an important role in *Ordinary Things*. It is when close to death that 'life' itself is 'de-automated' or 'made strange'. An encounter with death reminds us we are alive. Through an encounter with death we feel more alive, and contemplate more seriously what is important in life: we contemplate our accumulated experiences, accomplishments and aspirations, wondering what to value most, wondering whether we could die satisfied that we have lived well, what we want to do with what remains of life, how we wish to be remembered, what it is that we will pass on in the network of genealogical connections, of lives iterating and reflecting across centuries.

Iteration or repetition across generations resonates across *Ordinary Things*. It is a theme common across the literary traditions influencing the framed narratives and is reflected in the framing narrative. It is crucial to the *Popul Vuh* that the twin brothers repeat the journey of their father and uncle to the underworld and resurrect their father, promising him that his name will be remembered and his story retold. The history of the manuscript of the *Popul Vuh* itself is one of retelling the story and recording it at great risk in order to preserve it across generations. Similarly, many proverbs of the Congo region relate to being remembered after death. Luba literature focuses on recording and reading history and mythology on lukasa boards by initiated 'memory men'.<sup>4</sup> The chapter 'Kongo Is Not Kongo' draws on these traditions. In 'Japanese Graphic Design' the main character recognises the value of such generational transmission, while remembering attending the Noh play, Unrin-in,

This play, Unrin-in, about the ancient poems, Tales of Ise, has been performed in this way, witnessed by audiences, for generations. In that liminal state you understood that without you, without the performer and the witness here and now, re-enacting this ritual, without you and him, it won't exist anymore. You are humble and important at the same time.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts. *Memory, Luba Art and the Making of History*. The Museum for African Art, NY, 1996.

## 'Japanese Graphic Design'

Texts, arts and rituals repeated across generations become a means to share experience across time. The principle of layering meaning is also utilised in *Ordinary Things* to articulate the way 'things' can accumulate not only historical or cultural meaning but also idiosyncratic, nuanced personal meanings. In the framed narratives of Chiyo and Kentaro their relationship hinges on shared memories. The story 'Kitchen', for example, begins in Iquitos and digresses into Kentaro's memory of their first erotic encounter and how they came to leave for South America. Running restaurants, Chiyo and Kentaro invent a dish based on that experience in the kitchen, which, in their old age in Japan, becomes a signature dish of their food stall – a dish which for them has come to mean both that first meeting, their experiences in South America, and ultimately their love for each other. It is the last thing Kentaro asks for from Chiyo in their old age. Within the shared experience of long relationships, a single phrase, gesture or signature dish, may 'speak volumes'. For the reader, as well as for Chiyo and Kentaro, the meanings of 'Air, Land and Sea' will be many. With Kentaro asking Chiyo for this dish on his deathbed it comes to mean their whole lives together. Things develop profound personal meanings between people, part of a language unique to them with their shared experience and understanding, signifiers in ethical, intersubjective interactions.

In another example, from 'Vending Machine', while the choice of the can of coke from row 8 column 4 of the drink dispensing machine may take a few moments, the reason the person lingers there staring and remembering, the reason they select that number, the meaning of that number, requires a long explanation. The character's memories explaining the choice of can 84 are elaborated – an elaboration that requires a digression of much greater length to articulate than it takes the character to experience in a few moments standing in front of a vending machine. One way of describing *Ordinary Things* is that it is one long digression that imbues rubber tires with profound meanings that, once the book is read, may be understood momentarily. After reading *Ordinary Things*, the next time you get in your car you will be likely to think about the rubber tires you drive on, and that thought, while it may only take a moment, will reference hundreds of years of history and millions of people. As one reader of *Ordinary Things* said, "I'll never look at a tire the same way again."

## Cybernetics

When we go about our daily activity we are in a cybernetic relation with things around us. Things enable us to do various activities, for example, to drive, to go further faster, to go to work, to get food at the supermarket, and so on. Things we interact with also constrain what it is *possible* to do. We become dependent on things as they become necessary to get to work, to get food, and so on. This means not only do we manipulate and control them, but we become part of larger control systems, controlled to a greater or lesser degree by them. We are connected to the sources of things through long chains of causes and effects. Being dependant on things, we become dependent also on the broader, economic, technological and political systems, and the history, that produces them. While we may usually only be aware of relatively local causes and effects, investigation can reveal how what we do is caused by and affects people at a great distance. Investigating the sources of ordinary things gives us a greater understanding of the systems that control us. Given a better understanding of distant causes and effects, we can make better-informed decisions, acting tactically or strategically to change our situation, to maximise our own agency, to change what effect we are having and how we are affected.

To elucidate this, one of the central themes of *Ordinary Things* is that of individuals struggling to maximise their agency within systems larger than themselves. Throughout the framing narrative and through parallels and contrasts with the framed narratives, *Ordinary Things* explores the theme of cybernetics and the processes of modernisation associated with rubber tires. The literary technique of *ostranenie*, or 'de-automating', is particularly pertinent here, since this dependence on things can be characterised as 'automation' and it is an automation that applies not only to our ability to use things, but which can also reduce us to useful objects. De-automation is a technique for drawing attention to these 'passed-over' interactions. De-automation has an opposing function to cybernetics, where the intention is to expedite and ease, to automate, human-object interactions.

The history of rubber is bound up with the history of colonisation. Contact between cultures brings into relief their differences. The features of culture exposed in this contact can also be understood as a form of *ostranenie*: what was assumed is brought to light and called into question and de-automated. In general terms, such meetings illustrate that the way we live, our daily routines and social systems, are contingent rather than necessary, and can thereby be changed – for both sides of the contact, for better or for worse. Through contrasting scenarios, *Ordinary Things* draws parallels across cultures in this history and between history and today, focussing on violence around the exploitation of commodities and the move towards debt rather than slavery as means of social control.

There is a vast body of theory on our interactions with ordinary things and technology, on systems of control in everyday life and on debt, colonialism and cybernetics, such that a full discussion of any of these is beyond the scope of this exegesis. The broad scope and highly intertextual technique of *Ordinary Things*, constantly referring to history and a variety of cultural traditions and critical theory, also makes it difficult to cover everything. The following discussion will focus on elucidating these themes with reference to several thinkers whose ideas have been particularly influential and pertinent to *Ordinary Things*: Claude Shannon, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Michel de Certeau, and Martin Heidegger.

### **Embodiment: Connecting Flesh and Things**

Discussions of cybernetics typically make reference to Shannon's seminal thesis on information theory, "Mathematical Theory of Communication".<sup>5</sup> In Shannon's thesis information occurs at the moment of disambiguation when each new sign (such as the letter) in a 'language set' (such as the alphabet) arrives. Information and its opposite, 'entropy', is a measure of the probability of each sign occurring. As signs arrive, through experience, by recording how frequently they occur, we can assign each a probability and so can measure entropy. While Shannon's theory is explicitly limited to finite sets of symbols being transmitted in a series, it is nevertheless analogous to how we learn. The nervous system learns through positive and negative feedback loops that reinforce behaviour through repetition. We interact with the environment, receiving information from it, and as we do so, some things become predictable, less 'entropic', and so automated

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<sup>5</sup> C.E Shannon. "A Mathematical Theory of Communication" *Reprinted with corrections from The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (1948): 379–423, 623–656. Accessed 2014. <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf>.



– such as when I move my foot thus, the car accelerates. If the actions are repeated enough I need only will to go and the car goes where I will. Like Turing's theory of a computing machine and formulation of the 'Turing Test' for artificial intelligence, Shannon's thesis implies that 'thinking' is a matter of information processing or computation. This has the further implication that machines may be like humans, that humans may be like machines, or that humans are machines, and that the ability to think is immaterial, and so might be transferred from one to the other. While automatons existed previously and anxieties over machines versus humans were common from the industrial revolution onwards, it was the development of computation and information technology in the twentieth century, along with the culmination of hundreds of years of industrialisation, scientific and technical innovation, that lead to the prevalence of the concept of the cyborg – an entity that is not a replacement of human by machine, but the fusion of them, for good or ill.

The theme of the cyborg recurs throughout *Ordinary Things* but is unequivocally announced in the chapter 'Accelerator'. This chapter is set at a late twentieth century rave, a hedonistic celebration of futurity, technology and the cyborg ethos. Within this chapter references are made to the development of the cyborg, from quotations from Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto'<sup>6</sup> to images of the robotic woman from *Metropolis*<sup>7</sup> and the movie *Akira*<sup>8</sup> – in which the fusion of flesh and information technology leads to a visceral and visual catastrophic climax. Allusion and reference are prominent techniques used throughout *Ordinary Things* for several reasons. Here, in 'Accelerator', these techniques reflect the setting in so far as the aesthetics of rave culture, particularly its music, have a focus on sampling – reuse and repetition of already existing material. This also works in sympathy with the cyborg aesthetic where different parts are sutured together into a new functional whole.

*Ordinary Things* explores cybernetics in various forms, from small-scale local bodily interactions to a history of the development of global systems within which individuals are a (mal)functioning part. Cybernetics, the interaction between humans and things, is most typically viewed at the localised level of a human body or mind where it directly connects with some particular thing (such as a graphical user interface or a prosthetic leg) and concentrates on control systems (small signals that cause large effects, such as electrical

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<sup>6</sup> F.T. Marinetti. "Futurist Manifesto." *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Ed. Umbro Apollonio. New York: Viking Press, 1973: 19-24. Accessed <http://www.italianfuturism.org/manifestos/foundingmanifesto/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Metropolis*, Dir. Fritz Lang [1927]. New York: Kino on Video, 2002. DVD.

<sup>8</sup> *Akira* Dir. Katsuhiro Otomo. 1988: Tokyo: Tokyo Movie Shinsha. DVD.

switches moving a leg, bringing light into the room from a power station or using software modelling to manage coal exports). Cyborgs (an organism connected cybernetically to some non-organic thing) are usually understood as having either enhanced abilities, such as seeing in the dark, the ability to communicate further, travel faster, and so on, or as having some bodily function replaced by a machine, such as prosthetic limbs, cochlear implants, and so on. This familiar localised level, where human bodies connect directly with things, is introduced early in *Ordinary Things* in the chapter 'Flat Tire' and is developed in different directions in later chapters.

In 'Flat Tire' an analogy is made between the malfunctioning electronics of the car and the malfunctioning of the character's leg. The portrayal of cyborgs in *Ordinary Things* is influenced by the views of Haraway and Hayles. Hayles critiques humanist and post-humanist disembodiment, both of which understand human subjectivity as independent and detachable from bodies, whether that be as 'mind' in humanism or 'software' or 'information' in the post human paradigm.<sup>9</sup> Hayles argues that subjects are always embodied and this embodiment conditions subjectivity. The dependency on embodiment works in two ways. Firstly, the physical structure of the human brain and computers are fundamentally different – materially, structurally and operationally – such that information and processing simply cannot be copied from the brain as if there were a one-to-one mapping into a digital system. Secondly, what we are able to do with our bodies and the inputs we are able to receive from them in the world conditions what we learn and what we think. While *Ordinary Things* plays with some familiar cyborg tropes it maintains a focus on embodiment. The malfunctioning of the leg in 'Flat Tire' draws attention to the leg as an electronic system that we normally 'automatically' control. The main character describes learning to drive a car and, with attention drawn to the child seat in the back of the car, an analogy is made with learning to walk. The leg is an electro-mechanical system we learn to use like a car and, like a leg, the car is an extension of our body that enables us to move from place to place 'automatically', without thinking, after a learning process. Haraway and Hayles both focus on this blurring of distinction and boundaries between body and machine. Hayles says, "the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born."<sup>10</sup> Haraway argues, "Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference

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<sup>9</sup> N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3.

between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed and many other distinctions that apply to organisms and machines."<sup>11</sup> These points, recurring themes in *Ordinary Things*, are made explicit in 'Flat Tire':

After a while you didn't need to think about what to do, you just needed to think about where to go and the car would go there. It was like your kids learning to walk. Your synapses were properly wired up to your arms and legs and levers, pedals and wheels. You, the car and the road all fused into one fully automatic bio-electro-mechanical-bituminous system. It's gone even further than that.

You've done the trip so many times you don't even think about where you're going at all. Your mind just wanders like when you're lying in bed staring at the ceiling or standing in the shower and then you notice you've stopped because you've arrived where you are supposed to be. Then as you walk from the car to work and even as you do your job, sometimes you can become so automatic your mind wanders so far it's like you're not even there.

'Flat Tire'

For Hayles, although our bodies may be seen as an 'original prosthesis,' it does not follow that 'mind' or the 'information' that constitutes subjectivity can be separated from embodiment or easily copied from one body to another. In *Ordinary Things* individuals are always embodied, and it is often the case that control over what that body must do is the point of conflict, dissatisfaction and resistance (whether they must work in telemarketing, drive a car all day, be enslaved in Peru, or leave Peru due to the threat of racial persecution, and so on). Nonetheless, 'automation' also makes possible a distancing from the body. In the above excerpt from 'Flat Tire', although the body is tied to the car, because it has learned to function independently, the mind is free to drift into a trance, making associations and connections that fuse memories, history, fiction, prophecies and hopes. These digressive trances are another means by which connections are forged in *Ordinary Things*. The *Popul Vuh* is imagined by a child in the back of a car ('Corn', 'Chilli' and 'Fruit'). The story of Kentaro and Chiyo in a kitchen in Japan is told as it is remembered by Kentaro reposing on a hot afternoon in Iquitos ('Ukiyo'). These digressive trances of daydream, memory and allusion, the framing of stories and connections within the text and

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<sup>11</sup> D Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004: 10-11.

outside the text decentre the entire narrative structure since, as a corollary of regular instances of such trances, any part of it could be the daydream, the memory or imagined future of anyone else at any other point. In this sense *Ordinary Things* is a performance, in form and content, of Haraway's cyborg's pleasure in connections and blurred distinctions.

As in Hayles' description of the posthuman, in *Ordinary Things* subjects are always embodied at a local and immediate level in flesh and machine such that control of bodies, their (mal)functioning and (de)automation, is a site of conflict and resistance. However, the automation of bodies also enables a temporary detachment of the subject in 'daydreams'. As will be seen in the following, if circumstances oblige us to automate our bodies in the service of a larger system, such detachment is sometimes the only way to reclaim our selves.

### **From Local And Mundane To Global And Historic**

The above excerpt from 'Flat Tire' draws a further analogy between the localised automation of learning to drive to the 'super-cybernetics' of automation within a larger system, in this case driving to work and working itself. Importantly, in this chapter the character narrates his activity as a juvenile delinquent, driving in a stolen car. This delinquency is a subversion of authority and of the automations that are expected of him. Analogous to the malfunctioning leg which will not obey, and to which he thereby attributes a 'mind of its own,' the delinquent youth does not simply obey. Again there is a parallel with Haraway's insight that, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."<sup>12</sup> The youth's secret transgressions are also a reaction against following the expected course of suburban life (Haraway's 'patriarchal capitalism'): in the stolen car they attempt to escape the suburbs. In *Ordinary Things* however, there is no victory, only a constant struggle:

The suburbs went on for an hour at least. "Where are we?" you said.

"I don't know."

"You know if you get stuck in a labyrinth, you can always get out by just keeping turning left. It always works."

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 10.

"It always works?"

"Yep."

"Keep turning left? But we'd just keep going round the fucking block."

'A Flat Tire'

This brief metaphor of an inescapable labyrinth, paradoxically mundane and confusing, exemplifies the theme of characters unable to escape situations beyond their control. This thematic thread of being lost in labyrinthine circumstances culminates in the irrational inability to escape and faulty cybernetics of going in circles, always turning left, in the closing chapter of *Ordinary Things*. As layers of associations and connections are built up it will be seen that this is a circularity of repetition of stories and of genealogy reproducing culture. It is the circularity of the play between power and resistance. It is the circularity of the feedback loops of cybernetics. It is the circularity of a tension between individual and supersystem that never ends but is productive of our 'story' – the mundane and extraordinary events of individual lives.

Haraway's main themes are the ironic enjoyment of blurred boundaries and of working with existing systems and technologies to subvert them and maximise our own agency, rather than adopting an essentialist or 'natural' identity set up as the opposite of cybernetics or technology. There are many ironies in *Ordinary Things*: here in 'Flat Tire', for example, the delinquent subverts authority, yet riding in stolen cars is a traditional masculine rite of passage. He and his friend recognise that wars iterate across generations when they compare hereditary diseases their ancestors caught from war. The main character ultimately cannot escape the roles he wished to avoid as a delinquent, remaining in the inescapable metaphorical labyrinth of the suburbs with his own children, a job, a mortgage and so on. Perhaps not so traditionally masculine is this character's penchant for Japanese poetry – yet a fascination for Japanese 'strangeness' is characteristic of Western taste. *Ordinary Things* enacts this ironic non-essentialising play by presenting multiple points of view and layers of interpretative contexts.

The theme of cyborgs is also developed in 'Kongo Is Not Kongo'. Here we see that cybernetics is not simply about futuristic high-tech digital devices. Set in the seventeenth century, loosely based on King Garcia II and the Kingdom of Kongo, we see an Africa that

is not essentialised with the familiar old clichés of people living in harmony with nature, innocent victims of colonial invaders, noble savages or savages, and so on. The Kongo is depicted as a powerful kingdom with its King embroiled in global economics, religious change, factional politics, wars with neighbouring kingdoms, and attempts to play colonising powers against each other. The King of Kongo and Queen Nzinga of neighbouring Ndongo are as much violent warlords and slavers, equally as violent as Europeans, as they are proud defenders of their nations against invasion. In narrating his story to a memory man the King begins, "I can see 30 days in all direction. I have a hundred thousand hands. A hundred thousand hands give to me. From my hand a hundred thousand receive. When I go to war I hold a hundred thousand spears." The cybernetic connection here is that of a Leviathan – a King whose commands (small control signals with great affect) transform his subjects into an extension of his own body. This cybernetic connection is broken when he is deposed through political faction fighting. Prosthetics emerge as his daughter, Lavinia's hands (symbolic of agency) are replaced with knives and other utensils. With her tongue cut out, in the African tradition of instruments 'talking' through the similarity of pitch and rhythm to tonal languages, she learns to speak through a musical instrument. On the morning when the King recognises his daughter Lavinia's 'speech' in her music he holds an empty bowl and listens to a story about 'Princess Calabash'. A calabash is an ordinary thing, a common food bowl. It is also a tool, a cybernetic enhancement of two cupped hands. We have long been in automatic cybernetic interactions with ordinary things, often so mundane, as mundane as a food bowl, that we do not recognise them. With this nested story of Princess Calabash we see how an ordinary thing, a common bowl, can become richer in meaning through stories relevant to it:

One morning, after breakfast, I sat in the courtyard looking into my empty calabash. Calabash, two hands forever cupped, receiving food, giving food. Better for holding things than these two hands. The sun edged over my feet and up my shins. Through a window across the courtyard I could hear my youngest son. The one who had said I dishonoured Marriage, who knew her best because he was too young to come to war. I remembered, when she was small, Lavinia had heard the story of Princess Calabash from a slave from the east. She must have told it to her brother when he was small. Now, he repeated it to her.

'Kongo Is Not Kongo'

Having heard the Princess Calabash story, when encountering a bowl we are likely to think of the story, rather than merely use the bowl, just as the deposed 'King Of Kongo' associates the calabash in his hands with the story. Having stories about ordinary things is itself a means of de-automating, prompting us to pay attention to what we would otherwise have passed over, and it is one of the central intentions behind *Ordinary Things* to enrich ordinary things with meaning, by presenting stories and references about them.

Our most mundane interactions with things are 'cybernetic'. Hands are a recurring motif in *Ordinary Things* that represent human agency. If dexterity is a distinctively human characteristic, our ability to hold, manipulate and use things, being 'cybernetic' is also distinctively human. The severing of hands in 'Kongo Is Not Kongo' and 'Hands' is a clear metaphor for loss of agency. When the King loses his power, the hands of his people are severed from him. When the hands of his daughter are severed he finds his own hands to be useless because they were unable to prevent that. Lavinia works against the denial of her agency by becoming a cyborg, attaching utensils to her arms and speaking through a musical instrument. Loss of agency is most obvious in cases of slavery. The atrocity of severing hands in the chapter 'Hands' becomes a metaphor for the long history of enslavement and exploitation in the region. *Ordinary Things* draws connections from the most mundane and local cybernetic interactions to global historical events, connections which imbue those mundane interactions with the significance of those events. Just as a bowl may tell the story of Calabash, so recalling the erased stories of tires can reconnect the act of driving with history.

## **Systems And Tactics**

When the distinction between the human body and the automobile dissolves, this does not result in an isolated and distinct autonomous human-car entity; instead, as we follow connections, we find the human-car is itself part of larger systems. Tracing connections from a localised level we find ourselves in a sprawling network extending far beyond here and now, connecting us to people far away and long ago, people also caught up in this web. Cybernetics does not merely involve using things in a way that maximises our agency, but also involves being made use of as components in a larger system – being objectified as 'ordinary things'. The closing epiphany of *Ordinary Things* is that the car is driving 'you', "The pedal pushed you. The engine drove you. The signals blinkered you. The wheel

turned you." With slavery as an extreme case, the various ways in which individuals struggle for agency within larger systems and how these systems have developed are explored further.

If we are to have the best chance of maximising personal agency within a larger system we must firstly be aware of the systems within which we operate; secondly, understand how these systems work; and thirdly, how these systems might be manipulated. In *Ordinary Things* parallels are drawn between the already modernised salaryman in the framing narrative, for whom a mortgage is inescapable, and the framed narratives of slavery and processes of modernisation. In 'Vending Machine' the central character, now a young man, ends a period of unemployment but finds the tedium and mundanity of a relatively meaningless job, the only kind he is able to get, unfulfilling:

It wasn't nice to waste your life in a job but, for now anyway, it seemed better than living on cheap food like carrots, and maybe Salvo dinners. You knew junkies who could make two hundred dollars a day by begging, and you figured if a person didn't spend that on drugs, they could really do something, but you didn't like begging. And although it was easy to find a place to sleep, and it was good to be free, to wake up without a friend to worry you, just the ants and sparrows, to look at the bits of concrete and the weeds in your own good time, to watch old newspapers blowing around in the vortex of a stairwell, listening to the pigeons cooing and the traffic, and just wander about wondering what particular problem each of these people was rushing to attend to, it was a bit tricky when it rained. People were more likely to seek out the same shelter, like that guy who offered you a drink and ended up cutting his hand on the bottle he broke and wiped some of his blood on your lip when he got you in a headlock, making as if to cut your throat, saying, "You've got beautiful lips." And if you didn't have money, it was difficult to walk past all the baklava in a bakery window without wishing you had money.

'Vending Machine'

This passage from 'Vending Machine' is comparable to a youth contemplating employment in 'Kinshasa':

I'm so hungry maybe I could get a job over there, how hungry do you have to be, that's if they don't just bring over Chinese prisoners to do the work, they don't want



us to work because they say we are lazy, who wants to turn up on time to haul bricks anyway, lucky is the man with his own farm, he makes his own food, when he needs something he sells it at the market, I might need the work, I'm so hungry, better bangi than working anyway, who wants to be a slave for the billboard makers, sellers of maggoty dreams, view of city and island development with river between, who wants to sell them self, to be a whore, who wants someone telling them when to wake up, lift those bricks, put them there, eat now, sleep now, wake up now, move those bricks, all of them, I hate those empty plains of dirt where they have flattened everything, and all there is is a plan that will already fail before it begins, maybe I could start up one of those Africell shops, but it's too late, they are everywhere, I missed the opportunity, but these thoughts can't be eaten, I'm so hungry, eating only keeps hunger alive [...].

'Kinshasa'

Despite differences in degrees of material wealth and risk of physical harm both of these characters experience risk and locally relative poverty. The delinquent in the framing narrative of the 'developed' world and the delinquent in Kinshasa both prefer, at least for a time, the relative liberty of homelessness. As each character is faced only with valueless or futile work, both passages question the assumption that work is intrinsically good, desirable, and restores dignity to the unemployed. In *Ordinary Things* I have attempted to avoid overly simplistic articulations of 'freedom' and 'oppression', to recognise the complexity of lived experience. For neither of these characters is it a matter of removing poverty through jobs as a pathway to freedom. It is more a matter of exchanging freedom for food and shelter. It is a matter of weighing options where any choice is both a gain and a loss.

The central point made by this and many other 'compare and contrast' situations set up in *Ordinary Things*, between the framing and framed narratives, and among framed narratives, is that while there are real material differences all the characters remain situated, struggling to make tactical decisions that maximise their personal agency in a larger socio-economic situation that is beyond their control yet exerts significant control over them. While there are real material differences between 'developed' and 'developing' nations, in *Ordinary Things* I avoid articulating this as a discrete binary where people in developed nations have freedom, wealth, and power while everyone in developing nations is poor, oppressed

victims. The character of the framing narrative has a child. The overarching situation compels him to 'freely choose' to obtain a mortgage, which coerces him to continue working in mundane and valueless jobs, aiming always only to make more money, becoming increasingly invested in this 'system' of working to pay off debt and being dependent on globally produced consumer items, despite becoming aware of the violence of their distant effects. Once committed to working, the young salaryman in the framing narrative must spend his days not only saying things he does not want to say but smiling when he says them, and the only means of resistance he has is lingering for longer than is necessary at the drink vending machine to have a chance to think his own thoughts – a clear case of what de Certeau calls *la perruque*. Michel de Certeau explains 'la perruque' in *The Practice Of Everyday Life* where he provides an account of strategy and tactics in everyday life.<sup>13</sup> He describes strategy as the overarching system of 'proper' behaviour that those who have power attempt to apply. Tactics occur at a local level – actions within this overarching system where an individual attempts to make the most of their situation. de Certeau provides 'perruque' as an example, where an employee, obliged to work for a company, one way or another meets their own ends instead of their employer's: "*La perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer [...] *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room."<sup>14</sup>

In 'Kinshasa' the youth also questions the 'liberty' afforded by paid work. Reluctant to spend all day moving brick after brick, he contrasts this with the 'blessed' person who has their own land to farm. He is reasonably doubtful that the new 'development' will bring any benefit at all. 'Kinshasa' riffs on the technique of doubling – this character, once a soldier, now a drug dealer, is both a victim and a murderer, and is both independent and compromised in his hunger. In the context of de Certeau's *la perruque*, he makes the most of a situation he has little power to change. He diverts anything to his own ends where possible, contemplating what he might do even if all he has left is one breath:

eating only keeps hunger alive, these words can't come out of my mouth, every breath could have a word on it, a word that started something, or ended it, a word that changed everything, a single breath and the right word can change the world,

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<sup>13</sup> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 25.

and when we have nothing left, not even food, that is all we have left, one breath, but what is the right word [...].

'Kinshasa'

In his stream of consciousness we see him in a desperate situation, unable to find food, lamenting missed opportunities, living in a graveyard: "here is the graveyard, home of the homeless, where the prostitutes live, the graveyard, where people live and fuck in the middle of death." He is hungry but would rather continue to deal 'bangi' than work on the new development which he sees as already a doomed and futile project. He has no wish to work moving bricks for a futile dream. These are all cases of *la perruque* – of diverting or repurposing parts of a larger system we are unable to change to our own ends.

The character in 'Kinshasa' sees the large-scale duplicity of living in a nation deeply in debt, yet paradoxically rich in resources and people, a nation which has had so much taken from it that the world should be in debt to it:

look at all these people smiling in their misery, looking rich with their clothes and phones when they are poor, in this, the richest country in the world and the poorest, in debt to the world but to who the world owes everything, after what it has taken, I was no innocent child, I killed with hatred, hatred, I remember it clearly, everyone hates me, so they should, I was no innocent child, can I become an innocent man [...].

'Kinshasa'

While we might think of him as a victim of poverty and war it is also gradually revealed that he was a killer in the war and is currently contemplating killing his lover. He recognises he is guilty, and although in some sense a victim of circumstance, he invites others' condemnation of him, feeding his self-loathing. 'Evil' becomes his identity, and yet, in the end, he is unable to kill his lover in the graveyard because she does not respond as the frightened, struggling victim he expected. Having prevented her speaking, his curiosity about what she would say if she could speak stops him. He wonders if he cannot kill her because she is already dead, living dead. He recognises that living, the constant struggle to survive, is also a slow process of dying: "easy and hard to kill, easy and hard to die, she

can't speak and I can't understand, is she already dead, did she die long ago, we will keep dying, always living dying."

This technique of multilayered repeated doubling, at personal, political, economic and philosophical levels, dismantles distinctions and prevents the reader from too easily taking moralistic sides, compelling the reader to acknowledge the complexity of every personal situation, to acknowledge the individuality of the individual, to acknowledge that an individual is neither absolutely 'good' or 'bad'. In 'Kinshasa' we see that the distinctions between the actions of the individual, and the systems of economics, politics and moral judgement he lives within are not clear and distinct.

de Certeau acknowledges that in real life the distinction between acting 'tactically' (where an individual subverts a system imposed upon them) and 'strategy' (the imposition of the system) is not clear cut: "Even if the methods practiced by the everyday art of war never present themselves in such a clear form, it nevertheless remains the case that the two ways of acting can be distinguished."<sup>15</sup> The distinction is nonetheless a useful one for analysing situations. In any situation we can consider to what degree and in what capacity it is 'strategic' and 'tactical' and formulate a plan of action. In everyday life, situations are complex and we deploy a mixture of strategy and tactics, depending on the circumstance. In 'Vending Machine', for example, it is acknowledged that despite the de-humanising aspects of monotonous and valueless work, being 'part of the machine' has benefits. The chapter ends with the birth of a child. The birth involves extensive use of technology – both the mother and child are connected to a range of monitoring devices and drugs, with centuries of medical science in the large institution of the hospital brought to bear on the delivery. This makes it clear that even at this most significant life event, from the very beginning of life, we are connected to and dependant on 'the machine' – a 'cyborg' that is not a simple augmentation of our physical abilities, but a system of knowledge, technology and infrastructure much greater than ourselves. Importantly, it also shows, in some circumstances, that this is not necessarily a bad thing: the child is still-born and the only reason it survives is the application of this technology. The point here is not to set up a luddite polarisation of people versus machine, nor to dismiss a critique of 'the system' as nonsense, but to suggest that we should at least be aware of the systems within which we operate, how they work and how they might be manipulated, if we are to have the best chance of tactically and/or strategically operating within them. One can tactically work

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 39.

towards independence from mundane and valueless work, but still tactically call upon technological institutions to save one's child. Depending on the circumstances, our aims may be almost impossible or more or less achievable, they may fail or succeed, but without seeking to understand 'the way things work' we cannot begin to conceive any tactical position.

### **Broken Things**

The framing narrative of *Ordinary Things* follows the automation, *la perruque*, and ultimately the 'breaking' of its main character. As a youth in 'Accelerator' this character has a hallucinogenic vision of his future self:

some way up a skyscraper looking up from the screen, at the day out the window for a moment, now middle aged, unable to quit because he's making too much money, always putting off what he always wanted to do when he was young, you can't give up that much money, the opportunity cost is too great to do anything but make money, and everyone would laugh like it was a mid-life crisis, economics is the religion of our theocracy, yet hardly anyone, beyond a select priesthood, gives a second thought to the central tenets of this faith, to the almighty one and only law of supply and demand, to this blind faith in the free market, can anyone say, what is the marginal productivity of a whore to a pimp, how are you differentiated as a unit of labour in a monopolistically competitive market, what is the marginal utility of living one more day? A chiclet boy on the streets of Oaxaca understands the pragma of economies of scale better than any theory will ever teach you, Economics 101, Sally has a surplus of wheat and not enough fish, Jack has a surplus of fish and not enough wheat, if they trade, they both benefit, Economics 101, if Sally is hungry and Jack takes all the food she will do whatever the fuck Jack wants, you must quit economics as soon as possible so you will never have so much money you can't afford to lose it, never have too much money to do what you want, you must lose your mind and become unemployable [...].

'Accelerator'

He is unable to avoid fulfilling this prophecy. Social expectations and emotional obligations find him struggling up through one meaningless higher paying job after another – from telemarketing to promoting taxation software at international conferences. His sense of emotional obligation to his wife and family place him in a situation where the only 'choices' he can make are to spend as much time as possible making as much money as possible, to serve the mortgage that provides their home, irrespective of the inherent value of the work. This leaves little time and energy to spend on valued activities, including spending time with his family. All these conflicting and compromised positions taint his familial relationships. Tensions between his love and commitment to them and the lack of value in the employment that consumes the majority of his life lead to a spiral of depression. He becomes an emotional burden on the people he hopes to support and recognises he is part of the 'system' limiting their agency, even though he would wish to have the opposite effect. In 'Depreciation' he contemplates leaving his family and suicide as the only 'tactic' that might end it:

Maybe the only reason she tolerated you, after all, was that she couldn't afford to live without you, which, as miserable as that must be for her, also meant you were nothing more than a mortgage-paying apparatus. The longer you dragged it out the more everyone lost in years wasted putting up with you when they could have been furthering their happiness. They would get a payout from your superannuation that would cover the mortgage, so they'd be free. Free of you, free of debt. Free. You were the price of their freedom. All things considered, the cost benefit analysis showed a significant profit from your death. Losses would rapidly decrease over time as everyone forgot about you. And anyway, you no longer wanted anything to do with yourself either. Death was clearly the only rational option.

'Depreciation'

This cost-benefit analysis of life and death places this character of the framing narrative in a 'checkmate' situation where the problem is not merely that something bad has happened or will happen, but of being faced with a choice where the outcome of any option is bad. To leave or stay with his family, to live or to die, are all unacceptable choices. The outcome of this impasse is the main character's experience of himself as a Heideggerian object. In *Being and Time* Heidegger gives an account of our experience of being in the world as involving a 'background' of objects we are always unconsciously using:

Tools turn out to be damaged, their material unsuitable [...]. When we discover its unusability, the thing becomes conspicuous [...]. Useful things become 'things' in the sense of what one would like to throw away [...]. Similarly, when something at hand is missing whose everyday presence was so much a matter of course that we never even paid attention to it, this constitutes a *breach* in the context of references discovered in our circumspection. Circumspection comes up with emptiness and now sees for the first time what the missing thing was at hand *for* and at hand *with*.<sup>16</sup>

We do not think of the floor we stand on until it falls out from under us. We do not think about the air we breath unless it becomes difficult to breath. We do not think of the tires we drive on until they go flat. At that moment, when the tire goes flat, for a while the object comes to our attention, we become aware of it as an object, beyond its function.

Heidegger goes on to discuss 'signs', which are useful to ourselves and others in their capacity to also bring 'things' forth from the background.<sup>17</sup> Heidegger's account relates closely to Shklovsky's account of *ostranenie*, wherein poetry functions through unfamiliar language use by forcing the reader or listener to labour over language and so become aware of its aesthetic values in contrast to our 'automatic' use of everyday language.<sup>18</sup> In 'Depreciation', this former tax depreciation assessor recognises that his own use value has declined to zero. He metaphorically becomes equivalent to the 'depreciated' assets he had formerly assessed in his job, a broken, discarded, no longer useful 'thing' ready to be discarded and replaced:

When the things were worthless, the people threw them away, and the salaryman took them all back to his miso bowl. When his hand wore out he replaced it with a sewing machine. When his feet wore out he replaced them with air conditioners. When his legs and arms wore out he replaced them with remote controls, blenders, sandwich makers, television parts and towel racks. When his stomach wore out he replaced it with a microwave oven. When his head wore out he replaced it with a cash register. When his heart wore out he replaced it with a vacuum cleaner.

He comes to experience himself and the things in the world around him not as something merely useful to some other end. In appreciating ordinary things as things, rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. New York: State University Of New York Press, 1996. 68-70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 71-83.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Shklovsky, op. cit.

simply using them, he also regains his own 'being', valuable as himself rather than being a 'thing' valuable only in so far as he is useful to some other purpose. Again, this is not a one sided story. He remembers that the last time he was touched by a human hand was when somebody gave him a coin. The economic systems within which he had been merely useful are also, as an exchange, a form of connection between people. He goes to buy food only to find that the noodle bar orders are placed through a coin-operated machine. He misses his children and returns to his family.

The tendency of cybernetic interactions is the reverse of Heidegger's movement from 'background' to 'circumspection'. For Heidegger, we exist in the world already using things we are unaware of, only noticing them when they break. Rather than already assumed and already in use objects moving into our awareness when they become problematic, such as by breaking, in cybernetic interactions a technology is introduced that is at first unfamiliar but which, as we learn it, becomes assumed, fading from our 'circumspection' into the 'background'. The more predictable, through learning, these interactions become, the greater the extent to which they are automated and embodied (with our flesh body, Hayles' 'original prosthesis', typically being the most automated of all). Once some interaction becomes predictable and automated our attention can move on to new interactive problems, problems which may be both encountered and solved because of our new automatic capabilities. Supersystems work in the same way upon us, making our behaviour predictable, automated, objectified – hence the need for de-automation, *ostranenie*, critical reading, *la perruque*, and Heidegger's 'breaking' if we wish to be more than merely assumed objects, useful only to someone or something else's ends; if we wish to regain control of what choices are available; if we wish to re-assert our subjectivity and agency.



## Reading and Writing Others

Reading ordinary things involves following connections and associations, and tracing sources. The connections *Ordinary Things* attempts to read are not limited to cybernetic connections of person to thing. There are also connections between people, through things. Writing about the meaning of rubber tires requires writing about people at a great distance to myself, geographically, historically and culturally. It requires writing about people I can only ever have a rudimentary, partial understanding of; people who it is difficult or impossible for me to communicate with directly and whose culture is very different to mine. There is a responsibility, then, to research well, to attempt to avoid misrepresentation, misappropriation, and presumption. The process of reading and writing about things puts us in an ethical relation. Investigating, reading and writing about rubber tires has forced me to encounter many ethical issues and problems and to develop techniques of writing which attempt to 'subjectify' rather than 'objectify' Others.

## Violence, Writing and Silence

All fiction involving characters involves writing about other people. While each of us is different to each other, *Ordinary Things* has involved writing about people who are *very*, in degree but not in kind, different to me. Even if I were able to travel more and meet many more people in many parts of the world there inevitably remains the great difference between growing up a certain way in a certain place and visiting and studying from the 'outside'. Regardless of how familiar one becomes, a significant difference in experience and identity must remain. Also, none of us can travel to the past. Someone in the twenty-first century can know little about what it was like to be slave from Matamba in seventeenth century Peru. We can only guess from what we can research, infer from our own experience, and imagine. This would be the case, and the challenge, for anyone attempting such a project, since no one could claim authentic access to all the regions and epochs peculiar to this vast story.

*Ordinary Things* draws parallels and contrasts among the histories that lead to the 'salaryman' condition as a commonplace of modern life and among the circumstances of people involved in that history. The history of rubber tires involves some of the most violent episodes in the history of colonisation – a history with continuing repercussions. The racial and political debates around these topics, the high tempers, acute sensitivity and insensitivity, risk of offence – all the nuances and complexity involved – at times make it seem easier to avoid the subject altogether. These difficulties are understandable since, in this history misrepresentation, poor understanding and purposeful misuse of language has factored in atrocities of mass murder, extortion, systematic rape, genocide and economic exploitation. But to avoid the difficulties of writing about distant people due to the risks involved would be to ignore an important reality. It would ignore the reality of globalisation, a reality which permeates my life and so cannot be ignored, even if I wanted only to write what is 'familiar' to me. When I use rubber tires, and so many other ordinary things that make possible my daily life, I can only do so because of people at a great distance. To write about rubber tires I cannot ignore the *Popul Vuh*, or people in the Congo region, or Japan. Since I am dependant on rubber tires in my daily life and throughout my life, the people and stories of those places and times are part of the history of my own daily life. If I am to read rubber tires and write about rubber tires responsibly and honestly, I must write about people and historical events in places far away.

It would be a greater violence, a violence of silence, to ignore the existence of people crucial to our lives, simply because they are far away and there is risk of somehow getting it wrong. It is this violence of distance and its associated ignorance that *Ordinary Things* attempts to address. Given that one of the central themes of *Ordinary Things* is the connections between distant people through ordinary objects that we depend on in daily life, and that these dependencies affect the daily life and the entire lives of the people involved, the more I learned while researching *Ordinary Things* the more important it became to find a way to write ethically.

Because the word 'ethics' in the context of the subject matter of *Ordinary Things* could easily be misunderstood to imply things like charity, a set of moral prescriptions or evaluation criteria, political correctness or advocacy of 'fair trade' products, I will clarify what I mean by 'ethical' and 'subjectifying' writing and demonstrate the importance of this ethical stance when reading and writing about the sources of ordinary things. As my understanding of ethics is informed primarily by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas I will briefly discuss

what is meant by 'ethical writing' in relation to his philosophy. I will highlight some of the main problems in writing about 'Others' with reference to Roland Barthes, Gayatri Spivak, Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing and demonstrate some techniques used in *Ordinary Things* intended to 'subjectify' rather than 'objectify' as a means of writing ethically. These techniques include fragmentation, polyvocality, sampling, referencing, reusing, mixing, adapting and transposing source, form, and content. This is not a set of moral prescriptions for doing the right thing. These are not criteria for condemning non-conformant texts. Anything may be written and this is what makes writing one of the most powerful human and ethical freedoms of all. Writing ethically is not limiting or restricting but, on the contrary, can help avoid the limitations of mediocrity, irrelevance, familiarity, and safety, adding interest and value to texts.

### Violence and Distance

The inherent risk in writing about others can be articulated well through the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who discusses the ethics of 'Same' and 'Other' in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>19</sup> For Levinas, unlike stones for example, or other *objects* in the world, the 'Other', another subjectivity, like me, thinks, but I can never be absolutely sure what they are thinking. I never know completely what another person thinks of me and, as a consequence, of how I interact in the world. I am open to the Other's judgement. When encountering the 'Face' of the 'Other' I am no longer at liberty to do as I please. I recognise they can accept or reject my opinion and have their own. They can answer and question me in ways that an object cannot. "To welcome the Other is to put my freedom into question," writes Levinas.<sup>20</sup> It is important to recognise that, in the thought of Levinas, 'judgement' is not necessarily negative. "The 'resistance' of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical."<sup>21</sup> We learn from an Other's judgements, which are not merely negative criticism but could also be suggestions, lessons, praise, admiration, friendship, agreement, love. The Other teaches us. At the same time, Levinas reminds us, it is possible to act 'violently' to 'Others', to treat 'Others' *as if* they were objects, as might be the case in chattel slavery, genocide, or crimes committed for amusement.

For Levinas, things in the world are bound up in discourse and economics in ethical interactions. According to his philosophy, it is in the presence of the 'Face' that I recognise

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 197.

the Otherness of the Other, that they are infinitely beyond the possibility of absolute knowing. Distance – where we are only aware of others indirectly, referred to through their works, texts, or whatever mark they have left on the world – leads to objectification because the Other is not present face-to-face to dispute any opinion we might have. Particularly pertinent to *Ordinary Things* is Levinas' explanation of the objectification of the distance of history where others are signified through things:

History, in which the interiority of each will manifests itself only in plastic form – in the muteness of products – is an economic history. In history the will is congealed into a personage interpreted on the basis of his work, in which the essential of the will productive of things, dependent on things, but struggling against the dependence which delivers it to the Other is obscured. As long as the will, in a being who speaks, takes up again and defends his work against a foreign will, history lacks the distance it lives from [ . . . ].

The work has a meaning for other wills; it can serve another and eventually turn against its author. [ . . . ]. The historical distance which makes this historiography, this violence, this subjection possible is proportionate to the time necessary for the will to lose its work completely. Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery.<sup>22</sup>

How then, could anyone write ethically? Can we recount enslavement and *remember* the life that struggles against slavery? Without that presence of a face-to-face interaction it is all too easy for assumptions, decisions, and interpretations to go uncriticised. Our opinions on what another thought or did become like knowledge about objects, rather than the recognition of another person who can offer their own account. In these quotes, Levinas describes the potential for distance to result in a violence of objectification, or in his terminology, 'Totality'. This objectification is the treatment of someone as understood with finality, who can be known or manipulated according to our will, as if they were a resource, tool or encumbrance, rather than as 'infinite', only ever understood partially and without certainty, and to whom we must always defer in trying to gain an understanding of them, and with whom we negotiate meaning and judgements.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 228

When reading about historical events, at a safe distance, it is easy to read them as exciting adventures, to idly imagine how one might have lived through those times. Our eyes pass easily over death tolls of wars thousands of years ago. This same objectifying effect, the more distant we are from the 'presence' of the 'Face', also occurs over geographical, linguistic, technological, and cultural distances. We learn *about*, rather than converse *with* people far away. In the absence of an Other's will to judge, critique, and teach us, we can make any judgement without contest and with impunity. It is easy to simply use objects without thinking of who made them if they are at a great distance and can have little direct personal effect on us. Levinas' historical distance is the violence of distance in general, where it is possible to 'forget the life' of Others.

When reading statements such as '10 million people died as a consequence of King Leopold II's Congo Free State' or '5 million died in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congo War,' or 'whole villages were massacred' it is easy to pass over these figures without contemplating the individuals involved. In contrast to non-fiction texts on these regions such as anthropology and news reports, fiction can be more ethical simply because non-fiction aims to be 'objective' while fiction is expected to be subjective, whether it be a story following a particular individual or an account of their inner monologue or emotional journey. When researching for *Ordinary Things*—for instance investigating the situations in the Congo region—I sought, where possible, individual stories in history and contemporary events. Without going into the details of these personal stories, it became important to me not to focus only on physical violence. The use of extreme violence for shock value is common in contemporary arts and media, and can easily be passed over either through de-sensitisation or titillating sensationalism. Again, these are forms of objectification that, while drawing attention to violence, can still easily fail to consider the effects of violence on an individual subject. I was struck by accounts of the long-persisting after effects of violence. For every one of so many millions of people killed there are at least as many more survivors affected by those deaths.

Considering the personal anecdotes of refugees presented another problem: that it is not my place to publish another person's personal and traumatic experience. Again, fiction, because it can be honest without necessarily being factual, is suited to dealing with this problem in a way that a news item or fact-based account of the history of rubber is not. For these reasons the fragments, vignettes, and short stories related to the Congo region focus on individuals. In particular, 'Ash Child' is adapted from stories of post-traumatic

stress related to recent wars but reset in King Leopold II's Congo Free State. It is not a retelling of an actual story, but is a fiction. It deals with an atrocity but without graphic depictions of physical violence. By focusing on the elaborate detail of the woman's psyche it highlights, by contrast, the arrogance and ignorance of extreme violence and the objectification implicit in the officers' attempt to make sport of shooting people. Rather than simply depict a scene of callous shooting, full of blood and screams, 'Ash Child' is a contemplation of at whom the gun is aimed and the devastating effect that can have even if a shot is not fired. I have also attempted to avoid overly simplistic objectifying portrayals of 'villains'. Those who objectify are also subjects. Based on anecdotes and accounts of the Belgian colonial experience, the vignettes 'Observing the Chicotte' and 'Canned Beef' in the chapter 'Hands' allude to how and why a person may be indoctrinated into cultures of systematic and extreme violence through the emotional distancing of machismo, 'prestige', rites of passage, hazing, humour, and spurious justifications of strategy and 'the greater good'.

While this violence of distance regularly occurs, whether it is through stereotyping and specious reasoning about Others, or in our automated response to familiar things that leaves us passing over them uncritically, this is not the only way of reading. Levinas articulates the problem well but his account can be qualified to show how it is possible, depending on our attitude, for reading and writing to retain or restore ethics across distance. One of the ways we appreciate texts from long ago or far away is the sense of being spoken to across this distance by an Other, whose subjectivity we acknowledge despite limited information and despite their absence removing any possibility of deferring to their clarification. Even while we compare our circumstances, contemplate what it would be like to have lived in their time and place, marvel at how similar or strange and different some details are, this need not necessarily mean we believe our assumptions about them to be true, complete, or final. They remain always incomplete possibilities. Distance need not necessarily objectify. It is possible to read or write in a way that recognises subjectivity. At the same time, even in the 'presence' of the 'Face', this 'Face' and the utterances and judgements of the Other remain things that we 'read' and interpret, about which we form our own understanding, an understanding that the Other cannot scrutinise directly. A 'Face' is a text and a text is a 'Face'. There is always some distance and it is a matter of proximity rather than presence. A greater distance makes noticeable, revealing or de-automating what is the case for all interactions with Others near and far.

While this distance is typically less with physical proximity, it can also be greater for people close by than people far away. In so far as distant texts appear strange and difficult to understand, in some cases I might, for example, acknowledge the subjectivity of the scribe of the Dresden Codex<sup>23</sup> more than the supermarket checkout person to whom I automatically say "hello" and "thank you" and nothing more. In one case, the difficulty of interpreting the text makes me wonder who the scribe was, what their life was like, and what they thought, knowing that I can never know; while in the other, I just want my groceries so that the person is merely something I 'use' as part of the trolley, conveyer belt, bag, and credit card swipe system. In the chapter 'Site Inspection', the main character is trying to come to grips with the death toll in the war in the distant Congo. He tries to imagine the scale by imagining the dead as individuals. He calculates the time interval at which each will die: "2.5 per minute". He compares it to something familiar – the city of Sydney in which he drives from house to house for work and which has a population about the same as the amount of people who died in the war. He considers their uniqueness by comparing them to the people in the houses he has visited. These visits have also involved a struggle to recognise the subjectivity of the inhabitants of flats and houses as he performs work that obliges him to focus on counting assets while ignoring people. Despite trying to acknowledge the people in the sites he visits to record assets, he has difficulty acknowledging a suicide he encounters, ultimately getting fast food takeaway and rushing to his next appointment. While his automation makes it difficult for him to confront subjectivity, at the same time these confrontations with subjectivity make it difficult to remain automated, to continue doing his job effectively, making every appointment. They de-automate him. In 'Vending Machine' he speaks on the phone to people, but only to sell them things or, in the case of the medical survey, only to collect data regardless of the pathos of their life stories. The health surveys nonetheless function as a memento mori for him, and from the concluding paragraph on the birth of a child the reader can infer that he has declared his love for someone he thought he had no chance with and ultimately had children as a consequence. Characters struggle to maintain ethical interactions, to remain subjects themselves as well as recognise the subjectivity of others, within automated situations. It is through recognising the history of things and dependence on distant people that things become meaningful again, locally and at a distance. In *Ordinary Things* separated worlds are brought together: the automations of modernity that reduce subjective interactions to interactions between objects and erase connections to sources are de-

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<sup>23</sup> Yucatecan Maya, op. cit.



automated, for example, by reading Mesoamerican pictoglyphs back into rubber tires in a way that re-subjectifies both.

De-automation, then, is a technique for subjectifying, for writing ethically. This applies to ordinary things as texts, and to *Ordinary Things*, which, as a reading of ordinary things, attempts to de-familiarise. *Ordinary Things* attempts not merely to understand but to maintain strangeness, to avoid closure of understanding. Rather than 'mere' history, which would objectify people in statistics and tallies, and which would relate anecdotes of people as an attempt to typify the people of a time, *Ordinary Things* situates individuals in relation to historical circumstances, focusing on their subjective situation rather than as a typical instance of a multitude. In *Ordinary Things* history is used and broken.

### **The Ghost of The Author And Polyvocality**

One way of describing *Ordinary Things* is as a reading of rubber tires. Much of what I have written, rather than simply being my own 'creation', is a retelling of stories. To understand rubber tires has required extensive research on a potentially endless branching path. Each point on this path has required further contextualisation to be understood better and to better inform my writing and portrayal of various scenes and characters. For example, historically rubber was first used in ancient Mesoamerica. To understand its significance required research into the civilisations of that region. To understand those civilisations required research into their history and what remains of their cultural production. Since *Ordinary Things* is a literary undertaking, my research then led to Mesoamerican writing systems and codices and inevitably to the *Popul Vuh*, in which rubber features prominently in the Mayan creation myth. To understand the significance of the *Popul Vuh* required research into its history as a text and its place in Guatemalan literature. In one way or another all this research has filtered into *Ordinary Things*, from a retelling of sections of the *Popul Vuh* to stylistic influences of contemporary Guatemalan author Rodrigo Rey Rosa. Although I have visited archaeological sites and travelled in Mexico none of this amounts to an 'authentic' experience of the region. However profoundly Mesoamerica has affected me since the formative age of 13, it can only ever be my research about it, and my experience of it from the outside, which raises a question as to how 'authentic' or valid my writing about the region and its history can be.



Nobel prize-winning Guatemalan author Miguel Asturias appropriated the *Popul Vuh* and Mayan culture in general in his writing. His heritage was mixed and he is celebrated for creating a hybrid Mayan, Hispanic and modernist literary style. He hoped, through his writing, to raise awareness and appreciation of Mayan culture throughout the world. Recently, in 2003, the K'iche' Mayan poet Humberto Ak'Abal rejected the Miguel Ángel Asturias National Prize in Literature because it is named after an author he considered racist.<sup>24</sup> This is an example of why it is important to be aware of the contemporary and historical literary context of source material, rather than simply, for example, take parts of the *Popul Vuh* and put them in my book. As with Asturias, there is always the potential to cause offence to the heirs of a literary heritage I intended to celebrate. To not include the *Popul Vuh* in a book on rubber tires would be a violence of omission, but what right do I have to speak of the Mayan people and retell their mythology? Surely it would be better to hear from a Mayan person. Does it matter who is writing?

In his famous essay, 'The Death of the Author' Roland Barthes suggests that the focus on the author, or the author's genius, as the legitimate source of meaning in a text is a relatively recent and distinctively Western approach to texts.<sup>25</sup> Barthes' essay has been greatly influential on Western thought, particularly literary criticism, and is often cited as a seminal work in Post Structuralism, the dominant stream of critical theory since the middle of the twentieth century. Post Structuralism is far too large a field to discuss in depth here, so I will limit this discussion to some points made in Barthes' essay that illuminate problems of meaning and authorship. Barthes suggests that the meaning of texts is located in the multitude of readings they invoke rather than the author's intention. For Barthes, this focus on reading and unlimited interpretation is a form of resistance against, by analogy with authors, Western institutions of 'authority'.

Barthes aligns himself with traditional non-Western cultures against this valorisation of the author's genius as the final word on the meaning of a text:

Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable; in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose 'performance' may be admired (that is, his mastery of the narrative

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<sup>24</sup> Rita M. Palacios. *Indigeness and the Reconstruction of the Other in Guatemalan Indigenous Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes. "The Death Of The Author." Trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen: The Minimalism Issue* no. 5+6 New York: Roaring Fork Press, Fall-Winter 1967. Accessed 2014.  
<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>.

code), but not his 'genius'. The author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society.<sup>26</sup>

Writing, as I am, from Australia, it is difficult to accept this perspective uncritically. Barthes seems to be correct in arguing that in many cases, outside of modern or Western culture, the 'author' is someone who relates a text that does not belong to them, who does not 'create' but 'passes on' a vessel of culture. This does not mean it does not matter who is speaking, nor that the reader has the full and only claim to the meaning of a text. In Australia it is seen as insensitive and unjust to re-use traditional Indigenous art and literature without regard to its source, to use traditional graphemes on cheap tourist trinkets for example. Under Western systems of individual authorship and ownership, traditional and collective owners of the 'intellectual property' may not receive remuneration, and display of traditional symbols may violate traditional laws. This is another manifestation of the violence and theft of colonisation. It does matter who is speaking or writing. In agreement with Barthes, some of these controversies revolve around the incommensurability of Western assumptions of single authorship, originality, and copyright legislation in contrast to collective authorship and ritual transmission. Yet denial of the author's intention and the importance of authorship can be just as 'authoritarian', arbitrarily conferring all claims on meaning to the reader or re-transmitter, while denying the source's claims to anything. Clearly it matters who the author is since misuse of texts by others can cause such great offence.

This is not to disregard or misunderstand the central point made by Barthes that meaning is not fixed in the text or in the author, but is generated by the reader in the act of reading, and that the 'author' of a text is constructed as an idea by the reader, almost as much a fiction as any character in the text. The author is absent from the text and can only be signified by it. The 'author' is as much an interpreted entity as anything else. A reader 'writes' their own version of the text, and is their own 'author' of it. It does not follow that the 'author' is an arbitrary fantasy and that readers are indifferent to the reality of the author or their intentions. To accept that would be to ignore the ethical relation inherent in texts, a relation between people significant to each other and signifying to each other – that relation which language presupposes. When a reader imagines an author it is a construction that aims at the truth, at the real existence of another person. It does not follow from this that the 'real' or 'true' intention can ever be arrived at. On the contrary, it

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

is the inability to achieve finality that distinguishes an ethical relation among subjects from an objectifying relationship.

Consider Barthes' other point that the author is not the creative origin of a text, but that a text is 'authored' by a multiplicity:

In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader.<sup>27</sup>

Yet among this multiplicity is the reader's interest in the individual person who has shaped these sources into the text we read. Reader and writer both participate in a partially shared, partially differing background of 'multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation'. There is not 'one place' where this multiplicity is 'united' but many shared places. Without some mutual reader/writer experience of this multiplicity texts would be completely unintelligible. Again there is a relationship between reader, writer, and their background sources.

In *Ordinary Things* I have attempted to acknowledge this polyvocal background by bringing it to the foreground. *Ordinary Things* relates many different stories from many different sources using the voices of many different people, alluding to many different literary traditions, as well as using a variety of voices in terms of narrative style – first, second and third person, stream of consciousness, autobiography, irony, and so on. This is particularly pertinent to narratives related to the Congo which is a highly diverse region, including hundreds of languages and cultural traditions. There is nothing that can be said that is typical of the Congo as a whole. For the Congo region the only 'typical' representation that can be made is to demonstrate its multiplicity. *Ordinary Things* includes references from historic documents and letters relating to slaves in Latin America, the ancient kingdoms of Kongo, Matamba and Ndongo, anthropological texts, traditional histories of the Luba and Kanyok regions, stories and proverbs from Mangbetu and Woyo cultures, Songye sculpture, anecdotes from the Belgian colonial era, and present-day Kinshasa and Kivu. Needless to say, this only scratches the surface of Congolese diversity. The point is,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

though, that by presenting many examples, it becomes clear that there are many more. This technique of representing the 'infinite' in a limited space by giving a few examples that imply endlessly more is an ethical writing technique because it avoids the illusion of complete, satiated understanding. This polyvocality acknowledges the interplay of reader, writer, and sources rather than privileging one over the other.

'Kongo Is Not Kongo' combines elements of Shakespeare's historical play, *Titus Andronicus*<sup>28</sup> (following Césaire's negritude movement's adaptations of Shakespeare to African and Caribbean situations) and transcriptions of oral Luba histories<sup>29</sup> with more current academic histories of the period such as Hilton's *The Kingdom Of The Kongo*.<sup>30</sup> As an extended application of polyvocality, multiple modes as well as sources of literature, story telling and history, performance, academic, oral, sculptural, pictographic and so on factor in the writing of *Ordinary Things*. Adapting sources from a variety of regions disrupts the illusion of a pure and discrete culture shattered by outside interference, reflecting instead the reality that the Kingdom of Kongo from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries was an ever changing, politically and economically aware part of an already globalising world. In 'Ash Child' stories from Amos Tutuola and Soseki Natsume are adapted to a scene set during King Leopold II's exploitation of the Congo. Many smaller scenes and influences are adapted across regions and history and from the framed to the framing narrative. This works against any notion of discrete, 'essential' cultures as something to be comprehended as an object of knowledge – instead cultures are presented as interacting with and influenced by each other.

Another application of the technique of polyvocality is in presenting one point of view and foiling it with another. In *Ordinary Things*, many voices speak on a similar topic or theme. A voice in the framing narrative speaks of drugs, dancing and various of acts of juvenile delinquency in a Western context. Another voice articulates these themes in 'Kinshasa', which is again contrasted with the opinions of a project manager of international development projects in Africa in 'Traditional BBQ'. 'Japanese Graphic Design' plays on the irony of an unemployed Japanese and Australian youth each valorising each other's culture, one seeking the freedom from social expectations promised by the West, the other longing for the aesthetic discipline of Japan. Characters regularly form positions and

<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Inabanza Kataba. "The Luba Genesis Myth" *The Rainbow And The Kings*. Thomas Q Reefe. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. 23-31

<sup>30</sup> Anne Hilton. *The Kingdom of the Kongo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

opinions that act as foils to the expectations of their situation or culture. These foils prevent any final opinion being formed. In *Ordinary Things* any final truth that applies to many is always avoided in favour of demonstrating there are many opinions, possessed by many unique subjects, each with a more or less shared and more or less unique background.

In *Ordinary Things* I self-consciously draw on the literary histories, "multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other",<sup>31</sup> associated with rubber. I need to do so in order to properly acknowledge those sources. In doing so, I risk misappropriation – retelling stories I shouldn't. It does matter who people are. Being conscious of this risk, and to avoid a retelling that has already been done or would be more appropriately or authentically done by someone else, it is simply by being honest about my relationship to the text that I have found the most comfortable ground. Chapters of *Ordinary Things* do not attempt to claim to *be*, authoritatively, the *Popul Vuh*, rather, a child is depicted imagining scenes from the *Popul Vuh*. Stories are not presented as if they are accurate or authoritative portrayals typical of some culture. *Ordinary Things* is self-evidently drawn from and alludes to sources. This indirect stance applies to texts referenced throughout *Ordinary Things*: the story of Calabash from the Kanyok and Luba regions; the historical sketch of the King of the Kongo; the Mangbetu tale of crossing the river; and so on. This is in addition to literary influences such as Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Kenzaburo Oe, Zeami, Mabanckou, and many others, as well as movies, images, sculpture, blogs and so on. Even though not every reference or influence can be made explicit, it is clear that allusions are constantly made beyond the text. This is a means of acknowledging sources of literature, of referential retelling rather than by appropriation.

Hopefully, this incites curiosity beyond the text I present, drawing readers to the original sources – for example, to other more authoritative versions, to the manuscript history of the *Popul Vuh*, to the writing systems of Mesoamerica, to contemporary Guatemalan and K'Iche' authors, to history, to the circumstances of K'Iche' Maya people then and now. By avoiding finality, or the closure of claimed authority, by pointing to much more beyond the immediate text, this brings about an ethical intersubjectivity between readers, writers, and sources across historic, geographical, and cultural distances not only when reading *Ordinary Things*, but when interacting with ordinary things in our daily lives.

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, op. cit.

## Theory and Resurrection

Barthes wrote his essay "The Death of the Author" in Europe, hoping to use non-European cultures as examples for his literary criticism.<sup>32</sup> I am also writing from a European context, albeit on the opposite side of the world. My occidental education, having occurred at a certain time and place, makes it difficult to resist the impulse to embark on lengthy critiques of Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault. There is limited space here and little I can contribute to an already vast area of critique. Given that *Ordinary Things* intends to take the sources of rubber tires seriously, it is more important to consider, instead, Mayan literary theory and how it has influenced *Ordinary Things*.

What is the literary theory of the authors of the *Popul Vuh*? It begins as follows:<sup>33</sup>

ARE' U XE' OJER 'TZIJ,	THIS ITS ROOT ANCIENT WORD,
Waral K'iche' u b'i'.	Here K'Iche' its name.
WARAL xchiqatz'ib'aj wi,	HERE we shall write,
Xchiqatikib'a' wi ojer tzij,	We shall plant ancient word,
U tikarib'al,	Its planting,
U xe'nab'al puch,	Its root-beginning as well,

The writer of this transliteration, Allen J Christenson, tells us that K'Iche' poetic conventions include 'doubling' or 'parallelism' in many forms (synonyms, antonyms, catechresis, double meanings, and so on).<sup>34</sup> From the very beginning there is a play of double meanings. The 'Word' is a root or seed, and writing is planting. From here the stories proliferate, and they are the stories of all things in the cosmos, including the genealogy of humans that have grown from seed or root. The story is itself a metaphor for the unfolding of the cosmos. We and our works are among the fruits emanating from this seed. In the Preface to his translation Christenson relates his experience of reading the *Popul Vuh* to K'Iche' Maya people who, at that time, were mostly illiterate. An old K'Iche' man asks, "Do you know what you have done for them? [ . . . ] You make them live again

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: Literal Translation*. Mesoweb Publications 1. Accessed 26 Oct 2010 <http://www.mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PV-Literal.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Allen J Christenson. "The Poetic Nature Of The Popul Vuh." *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*. Norman: University Of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 42-52.

by speaking their words." Christenson clarifies, "The word he used was k'astajisaj, meaning 'to cause to have life,' or 'to resurrect'."<sup>35</sup>

Resurrection is of great importance to Mayan literature and literary theory. The resolution of one of the central stories in the *Popul Vuh*, the story related in *Ordinary Things*, is the resurrection of Hunahpu's skull. It is from the mouth of this skull that an emanation, ambiguously 'spit', 'semen' and 'word', impregnates Lady Blood, the mother of the twins who ultimately resurrect half the face on the skull of their father. When they resurrect their father he speaks to them and they assure him that he will be called upon and his name will not be forgotten.<sup>36</sup> Genealogy and resurrection are identified not only with physical parent/child relationships, but with words – the stories, teachings and memories that are passed on. This is how we 'escape' death or may be 'resurrected' through retelling. We live on in children not only materially but in the 'culture' (or polyvocal background) we pass down to them and that was bequeathed to us.

Under the influence of the *Popul Vuh*, this theme permeates *Ordinary Things*. It is reflected in the mention of the Noh play in 'Japanese Graphic Design', for example:

This play, *Unrin-in*, about the ancient poems, *Tales of Ise*, has been performed in this way, witnessed by audiences, for generations. In that liminal state you understood that without you, without the performer and the witness here and now, re-enacting this ritual, without you and him, it won't exist anymore. You are humble and important at the same time. Afterwards you read a translation and learned that this sensation was the intention of the dance. The embodied Ariwara no Narihira says, "Like the stories of the *Tales of Ise*, this dream dance transcends time."

'Japanese Graphic Design'

Many allusions are made to the events in the Noh play *Unrin In* and to *Tales of Ise* in the framed narratives of Chiyo and Kentaro. They quote poetry to each other, their lives re-enact scenes from traditional literature in modern contexts – retellings and allusions echoing back and forth. Their narrative has a circular, and so never-ending and iterative structure, with Chiyo in old age calling out to the deceased Kentaro, to be heard by Kentaro as a young man, inducing him to make the journey to the city where they first met. In this way *Ordinary Things* refers to Japanese literary traditions, as well as the practice of making intertextual allusions within that tradition. The Mayan focus on retelling is echoed

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<sup>35</sup> Allen J Christenson, *Popul Vuh, The Sacred Book Of The Maya* op. cit. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Allen J Christenson, *Popul Vuh: Literal Translation*, op. cit., 166.

in Japanese literary traditions, as it is in various traditions and proverbs from the Congo. It is also echoed in the framing narrative from the first chapter 'Travelling Home' where, like the father, the child must travel his own way and encounter death (paralleling the *Popul Vuh*) to the concluding scenes in the car where 'you' imagines his daughter playing Bach, experiencing and passing on the experience to the audience, the same notes generations have performed for centuries.

### Incommensurability

In *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft* Hallen and Sodipo discuss the problem of indeterminacy in translation while critiquing Western understandings of African beliefs. 'Indeterminacy' means that there is no direct mapping from word to word and concept to concept across languages. The connotations and context of a word in one language are not the same in another. Hallen and Sodipo point out problems in the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's understanding of 'magic' in Zande: "Because 'magic' is associated with such terms as 'magician', 'good magic', 'bad magic or sorcery', 'spells', 'omens', and 'evil' in that language, Evans-Pritchard must struggle to identify Zande noises (or behaviour) that serve as their equivalents."<sup>37</sup> While there may be some events which Evans-Pritchard calls 'magic' and which he witnesses people calling 'ngua', the pattern of thoughts and associations in the Englishman Evans-Pritchard's mind do not match exactly those of the Azande speaker. This is a fundamental problem for translation and it brings to the foreground a problem with all understandings we have of other people. The problems that arise when reading and writing across such great distances have a de-automating effect. Nobody has exactly the same psyche. The problem of incommensurability applies to everyone and to all language. Encountering what is ordinary for others, but strange to one's self, exposes our assumptions, prompts us to reconsider them.

During an interview in the course of this research, a Congolese refugee explained to me that due to the failure of modernisation to deliver on its promises in the east of DR Congo, where war continues, many young people were turning to old technology. His choice of the word 'technology' for a secular Western listener seemed strategic. It seemed he wanted to avoid the quick dismissal that would be associated with the derogatory terms 'witchcraft' or 'sorcery' and wanted to highlight that it is more a matter of 'knowing how' than a set of cosmological beliefs, and that it is, in fact, effective. He cited various instances of 'old

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<sup>37</sup> Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. 28.



technology' (immunity from bullets, success in escaping across the border) and challenged me, "You don't believe it, do you?" I was caught between not wanting to belittle his beliefs and the fact that I did indeed find it hard to believe. "No, but I'm very curious," was all I could say and the conversation continued. When we speak with an individual, cultural differences, interpretative contexts and disagreement do not necessarily mean we cannot have a conversation and get along.

While incommensurability can easily lead to misunderstanding and violent reading it is also the cause of our interest in another person and the reason we can learn from others. Everyone has different experiences and different conclusions about the world. It is the source of the Otherness of Others. Incommensurability is at the heart of language. It is through language translation that we become aware that we are always translating others and dealing with incommensurability because translation presents a difficult case of what has been automated in everyday, local, familiar language. If we were all the same or if we couldn't understand each other there would hardly be any need to talk. That my multilingual interviewee can strategically use the word 'technology' in English demonstrates he has a good understanding of my assumptions and the patterns of thought of 'the English world-view'. Nonetheless, in our interactions with others we habitually understand by drawing correlations with our own experiences, by mapping words and stories into our own framework of understanding, and noting differences. We have nothing but our own understanding to go on. As we live and interact with others our experiences and understandings expand and change. We are not fixed immutable instantiations of our own discrete and inviolable cultures. Our understanding is always adjusted through interactions with Others.

In their essay on post-colonising collaboration and appropriation Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing describe (with reference to Aileen Moreton-Robinson and others) how the incommensurability of distant cultures means that collaboration and interaction will always be problematic. They cite D.B. Rose: "Plurality is an ethical direction but by no means is it a paradox-free or conflict-free zone" and elaborate Moreton-Robinson's articulation of post-colonising as an ongoing situation.<sup>38</sup> For Huijser and Collins-Gearing an awareness of the ongoing nature of inter-cultural problems is desirable in order to avoid a false sense of having resolved a problem that has not been resolved, particularly if it is merely to comfort

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<sup>38</sup> Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing. "Representing Indigenous Stories in the Cinema: Between Collaboration and Appropriation." *The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations* 7.3 (2007): 3.

or assuage the guilt of those in a position of power. They warn against erasing differences: "Moreover, it [the term 'post-colonising'] actually allows us to see difference as part of an ongoing, dynamic, and potentially productive field of power relations, rather than something that signifies a lack and therefore needs to be erased."<sup>39</sup> They add that we should also avoid seeing the problems of post-colonising processes as merely a path of progress to a finally resolved state. They highlight the point that ethical relations are between people who are different to each other and will thereby maintain differing opinions. This means ethical relations are necessarily difficult, problematic and uncomfortable. To think that the ethics of writing about Others is a problem that will ultimately have a solution which makes everyone happy is misguided. Without the constant risk of problems, ethical relationships acknowledging Others will be erased or automated into 'knowledge' and 'sameness'. No one can expect a final idyllic utopian state of perfect cooperation and mutual understanding, nor does this mean a failure to understand is absolute.

Rather than see risk as something to avoid we can see it as indicating that we are in a genuine ethical relation. This at least confers some importance on whatever it is we are writing or writing a reading of. It means we are not simply writing something for automatic consumption. In saying this I do not mean to treat risk lightly or as a vicarious pleasure; rather, to regard it as a sign that we are dealing with something serious and important, requiring care. This risk suggests we recognise we are answerable to an Other, submitting ourselves to their judgement, and so, in Levinas' terminology, recognising the Face of the Other. Again, this need not be in an attitude of accusation and condemnation but of learning or simply conversing. This risk means acknowledging the Otherness of the Other.

While I have maintained a style that I hope will be appreciated by the intended audience, loosely understood as readers of contemporary international literary fiction in English, I have also self-consciously retained allusions to source literatures which are purposefully difficult to understand or recognise. The use of images that can be read is one example, discussed below in the section 'American Remembrance', as is the adaption of Mayan literary theory discussed above. It can be difficult to find texts on Congolese literature that are not anthropological or that do not simply select and adapt texts into the familiar 'folktale' format. This is not to suggest that there aren't folk tales, only that much else seems excluded so that it is often unclear whether a story in an anthropological text or

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 3.

folktale style retelling was, in its original context, told as entertainment, as a serious spiritual belief, as a joke, or otherwise. In some cases where folktales and anthropology are the only sources accessible I have modified their form. The short scene 'The Bridge' in 'Hands' is adapted from such a folktale from Mangbetu history.<sup>40</sup> In this case, in the absence of any other material, I attempted to subjectify it by narrating it in the first person from the point of view of an individual, whereas in the 'original' text I was able to access only a crowd is described as crossing the river. In OT, this episode is narrated as a fragment, suggesting there is much more to the story beyond what is presented.

Rather than exclusively seeking stories that fit into familiar forms and idioms I have purposefully retained forms and content that are incommensurable with the Western-dominated idiom of the novel. In the section 'Talking' in the chapter 'Hands' I arranged proverbs from Woyo proverb lids into a conversation as a means of 'writing' (arranging units of meaning to create new meaning) with this traditional writing system. While some of these proverbs can be readily understood – such as "A crab without claws is defenceless" and "I, the bird, may have been caught in a trap but you only got the feathers of my tail" – the meaning of others is not clear without background knowledge or an explanation: for instance, "The toto-nti made a flute," and "I planted this tree here to get the most reverb for my drum." No explanation is offered. No translation is given for Kentaro in the section 'Sweet Potato' in the chapter 'Ukiyo' when he says, "I am no better than the people I despise. Shomohin. Yuhei. Maybe one day I'll be better. Pi chosen-jin. Go to a piya. Call me Jjokbari. I don't blame you if you leave," and when he calls himself a 'sweet potato' it is not explained that this is a slang term for someone who works in telecommunications due to the resemblance of phone line networks to sweet potato vines. Japanese or Woyo readers might appreciate these references. These are straightforward examples of where incommensurability would require an extended explanation in translation, perhaps in a footnote, for the meaning to be preserved. Leaving the term without explanation has a de-automating affect, leaving the reader wondering, prompting curiosity, and referring to a world-view beyond the text.

More subtly, stories are retold which make sense but the details of which imply further significance in another culture. In 'Ukiyo' for example is the following episode:

Approaching a T-junction where his lane met another, he heard a strange high

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<sup>40</sup> *Myths and legends of the Congo*. Ed. Jan Knappert. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971.

pitched 'Aiee! Aiee!' At first he thought it must be a sick pig or a rabid dog and prepared to scare it off if it attacked, but the closer he came to it the stranger it sounded. It was no pig, no dog, chicken or any bird he had yet heard in Iquitos. He saw a human shape – an old woman, caked in mud and the filth of the street. She must have been demented, he thought. Her breasts were so saggy she had slung them over her shoulder, but as he looked in disgust, she pointed at him and let out a scream, 'Aiee!' that chilled the marrow in his bones.

The details of this passage are from the traditions of the region. The T-junction is a place of female power in the African-American syncretic religion Quimbanda.<sup>41</sup> The description of the woman matches 'Turu Mama', a spirit encountered by the client of a Shaman at a yage ceremony recounted in Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*.<sup>42</sup> It also alludes to pre-Columbian fears of travelling alone due to spirits who prey on lonely travellers,<sup>43</sup> and the Death Lord 'Packstrap' or 'Death on the Road' who features in the *Popul Vuh*. It is important both that these explanations are not given and that the explanations are there in the sources alluded to. Not providing the explanation has the de-automating, subjectifying effect of the unfamiliar, of incomplete knowledge, and reference to 'Others' beyond the present text. That the accounts have a genuine foundation in sources avoids the meaninglessness of arbitrary de-automation. Randomly arranging words, or arbitrarily setting up strange, surreal scenarios for example, serve only to make us conscious of the fact of automation. Making reference to actual sources makes the de-automation more meaningful in so far as it refers to people, placing us in ethical, rather than only fanciful, relation with texts.

### In Relation To Essential Identity

Recognising the Otherness of the Other also means avoiding essentialisation where a subject is reduced or limited to an instance of a type. The poet Umberto Ak'Abal has a more 'authentic' access to Mayan culture than I do. This does not mean Ak'Abal is reducible to being K'Iche' Maya. He is, of course, also a unique individual. He has his own peculiar experience of being in the world, of being brought up in certain ways, with his own opinions and reactions to what might be described as typical of a K'Iche' Mayan

<sup>41</sup> David J. Hess. "Umbanda and Quimbanda Magic." *Brazil: Rethinking Aspects of Bastide's Work in Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 37e Année, No. 79 (EHESS, Jul. - Sep., 1992), 141. Accessed 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30128587>

<sup>42</sup> Michael Taussig. *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 356-7.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Taylor. *Languages of the West Indies*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

upbringing. In recognising his authenticity as K'Iche' Maya I risk objectifying, essentialising or exoticising him. Huijser and Collins-Gearing note that one way to resist the limitations of an artist being labelled, or feeling compelled to situate themselves in relation to a rhetoric of identity politics or post-colonialism (that is, to take on the objectification of essentialisation) is simply to ignore it and go on making art. They reference S. Spears:

The point is not to strive for a single definition of our work simply because we "happen to be Native." Our lived experience will inform our work, whether we're making horror films, erotic poetry, intellectual/theoretical works, love songs, broken-heart songs, romantic comedy, stand-up comedy or searing social commentaries.<sup>44</sup>

While Ak'Abal rejected the Asturias' poetry prize because it was named after someone he considered racist, his poetry is far from being a political polemic railing against oppression and racism in defence of some kind of pure K'Iche' identity. In the same way, I hold Australian citizenship and have spent most of my life here but have made no effort to portray or critique distinctively Australian idioms or issues. Perhaps the only exception is that in not doing so I have consciously reacted against a pervasive nationalism, trying to focus instead on the realities of global interdependence and the homogeneity of 'modernised' culture. The approach not taken in *Ordinary Things* is as important as what is in the text. Inevitably, some Australian characteristics may emerge in the character of the framing narrative, the setting, and in the author's style and pre-occupations. A passing reference is made to bushfires for example. Perhaps those that will be most manifest to readers are those of which I am unaware as they remain 'automatic'. While some Australian qualities become evident, these are not the focus of conflict and consideration. The focus is on the long history of modernisation throughout the world. Ak'Abal's poetry is simply his poetry, yet as a K'Iche' man, with K'Iche' experiences, it is effortlessly, distinctively K'Iche'. Nigel Leask notes that, "Like Ak'abal's poetry, the *Popul Vuh* was itself written as an act of resistance, under the proscription of a foreign language and religion."<sup>45</sup> Ak'abal is both proudly K'Iche' and not essentialist. From his writing and what is written of him I read him as a man of good sense and integrity, with a sensibility for multiple languages: "Yet just as Ak'abal is willing to write in Spanish as well as Mayak'iche', he also acknowledges the importance of his readings in 'universal literature'; this is a modern, transcultural poetry of

<sup>44</sup> S Spears. "Re-constructing the Colonizer: Self-representation by First Nations Artists." *Atlantis* 29.2 (2005): 2.

<sup>45</sup> Nigel Leask. "Introduction." *Drum of Stone*. Humberto Ak'abal. Kettillonia: Newstyle, 2010. 4.

confluence, albeit one steeped in deep cultural traditions."<sup>46</sup> To write ethically it is important, while acknowledging the Otherness and incommensurability of distant cultures, to also acknowledge the subjectivity of individuals.

Reading and writing ethically about rubber tires involves a circular process: we consider individuals involved in the history of rubber tires, and in trying to understand these individuals, we need to consider their own individual histories. These understandings can never be complete. To read and write ethically does not mean we must not speak of what we do not understand completely – rather it means recognising we can never understand another subjectivity, an Other, completely, but must always defer to the Other, and this must be enacted in our reading and writing. A text, like the 'Face' in Levinas' discourse reveals there is something not understood, that incites curiosity, and which we remain open to the judgement of: we learn from texts. We are never sure if we have fully understood a text, or if what we have understood corresponds exactly to the author's intention.

With this in mind, the narratives in *Ordinary Things* attempt to disrupt an overly simplistic, polarised understanding of their subject matter. In 'Kongo Is Not Kongo' we see that early European contact was not a simple matter of two discrete and absolutely different cultures in conflict, of civilised vs. savage, aggressor vs. victim, and so on. Rather, it highlights similarities between the Congo region and Europe at the time, as well as the differences, and illustrates the complexities of politics and cultural interaction. In later stories we see a slave become a slave owner; a homeless youth who is a drug dealer and murderer and does not want a job, preferring to go hungry and deal drugs – in contrast to the charitable view of victims of poverty being the grateful recipients of work or food. 'Kongo is not Kongo' is loosely based on King Garcia II and Queen Nzinga of Ndongo. In history and in *Ordinary Things* they can be read both as bloodthirsty warlords and as noble defenders of Indigenous lands against ruthless colonisation. This establishes the characters, however briefly, as 'subjects' rather than 'objects', because they are not understood with any sense of finality; because there are no easy answers.

In *Ordinary Things*, characters are not mere metonyms for places or times, or cultures, politics and historical events. Quotidian scenes are not merely emblematic of history or of place. People 'define' themselves in relation to culture, to history, to places, to types rather than 'being' them. These relations are always changeable. Specifically a subject is that which

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 4.

defines, conceptualises, practices, rather than an 'object', that which is defined. While they are partly representations of cultures and epochs, Chiyo and Kentaro, for example, are Japanese though they are not *merely* so. They live through historical events, but do not typify those events. When writing ethically, in order to acknowledge characters' subjectivity, the characters must be capable of defining themselves against and in relation to cultural identity types and their epoch. In *Ordinary Things* this is a tension and duality, rather than a thesis or antithesis. Subjects, if not merely emblematic of a type, are neither merely emblematic of an anti-type.

In the story of Chiyo and Kentaro, it is clear that they are a means of telling a story of Japanese modernisation and of wartime and post war society. Chiyo, a poor factory girl, narrowly escapes the bombing of Hiroshima. Kentaro experiences shame and depression after the war. These are clichés of 'the Japanese experience' of the Second World War. While being representative of Japanese history, these characters also respond in relation to it. Chiyo and Kentaro cannot make love before he leaves to go to war precisely because it is a cliché and those are the duties defined for them by the state. They do not want to remain stuck in their roles as farm boy and factory girl or starve to death and so they emigrate to South America. They do not want to become model American employees in Fordlandia. They are happy when they start their own cantina. Their marriage disintegrates when they become the typical salaryman and housewife. They are happy running a typical subway food stall, but it sells Peruvian cuisine, not ramen. This ongoing negotiation with roles expected of and imposed on them is reflected in the framing text through the story of 'your' Japanese flatmate seeking liberation in the West from the strictures of Japanese society that would tie 'you' to the struggle of a lifetime of work for a corporation. He is finally compelled to work for a Japanese graphic design company. It is mirrored in 'your' wish that you had been able to work for the company he'd hoped to avoid, to start 'your' own career, rather than work in the call centre jobs the government welfare agency sent you to. We are in part a product of history and the roles that emerge from it, but we are not reducible to it.

### Translation

While I have read the *Popul Vuh* in translation, in transliteration, and gained some understanding of pre-Columbian writing systems, I am not the best authority on it, and can never have the 'authentic' claim to it that a K'iche' Maya person would (it does matter who is speaking). I have nonetheless been greatly influenced by the *Popul Vuh* as a part of



'universal literature'. Gayatri Spivak writes in her translator's introduction to Aimé Césaire's *A Season In The Congo*, "But I have said again and again that translation is also the most intimate act of reading. And to read is to pray to be haunted. Césaire haunted me, as he was in turn haunted by Lumumba."<sup>47</sup> This highlights the ethical relation of transmission, of recognising the subjectivity of the author, or the 'spirit' which might haunt us. Spivak concludes, "Let my translation lead you to the French."<sup>48</sup> Her work intends to reference, to direct the reader to something else beyond her text, to pass this haunting, or appreciation of a text and its sources, on to others. Spivak includes this translator's introduction in her essay, 'Translation as Culture' where she adds:

To ignore the narrative of action or text as ethical instantiation is to forget the task of translation upon which being-human is predicated. Translation is to transfer from one to the other. [ . . . ]. This relating to the other as the source of one's utterance *is* the ethical as being-for.<sup>49</sup>

Translation, for Spivak, becomes a metaphor for language, and language, signifying to each other as Other rather than 'objects', becomes part of what it is to be ethical and to be human. It is because of centuries of K'Iche' Maya people, whose names are unavailable, preserving their oral history and, at great risk to themselves, concealing texts that were at great risk of being burnt; and because of Ximenez' translation; and because of its preservation in various libraries and collections; that the *Popul Vuh* survives today. Christenson tells us that K'Iche' Maya people he met were greatly appreciative of his work.<sup>50</sup> I was only able to access it through his work. I cannot do anything so significant as Ximenez, Christenson and those anonymous K'Iche' Maya people, but I nonetheless wish to pass on an appreciation of the *Popul Vuh* in the manner Spivak suggests – having been 'haunted' by the writing of ancient Mesoamerica, contemporary Guatemala and Mexico, as well as Japanese and Congolese literature. I hope *Ordinary Things* 'leads people to it'.

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47 Guyatri Chakravorty Spivak. "From The Translator." *A Season In The Congo*. Aimé Césaire. London: Seagull, 2010. vii.

48 Ibid, viii.

49 Guyatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Translation As Culture." *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012. 252.

50 Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book Of The Maya* op. cit. 16.



## Distant Influences

'Reading' ordinary things involves tracing their sources to restore their meaning. As a literary work and with the intention of taking a 'subjectifying' approach, *Ordinary Things* has required researching literature associated with the history of rubber tires. As well as non-fiction histories, in *Ordinary Things* I have drawn on literary histories – the stories told about and, more importantly, *by*, the people of these histories.

The regions and cultures of these histories do not exist in isolation. In many cases these are histories involving global trade, conflicts and cultural influences. The Congo region has seen invasions and migrations among tribes; Portuguese, Dutch and Belgian colonisation; and Arab, European, American and Brazilian slave trading. The Amazon region has seen immigration from all parts of the world, including the Congo and Japan. In its history, Japan, despite long periods of being closed to foreigners, has been profoundly influenced by China and by European models of modernisation. Encounters between cultures have a de-automating effect. People from each culture notice what their own assumptions and characteristics are by contrast with strangers. Eighteenth-century Japanese poet and critic Motoori Norinaga, for example, sought what was characteristically Japanese by contrasting it with centuries of Chinese influence.<sup>51</sup> Later, twentieth century writer and critic, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, defined Japanese aesthetics by contrast with Western aesthetics.<sup>52</sup> Reading and writing about ordinary things can have a similar de-automating effect, where we not only appreciate the meaning of the thing, but question ourselves in relation to the distant sources to which we are connected through the thing.

In her introduction to Asturias' *Legends of Guatemala*, translator Kelly Washbourne noted that she had not merely translated but had translated a translation. She translated into English Asturias' translation of Mayan culture into Spanish modernism. For Washbourne this highlighted the importance of avoiding an oversimplified 'mistranslation' into a world-

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<sup>51</sup> Motoori Norinaga. *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey*. Ed. Michael F. Marra. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Jun'ichiro Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows*. Stoney Creek: Leete's Island Books, 1977.

view familiar to the English reader: "*Legends* resists consumability. Guiding the translator's hand was the idea of a negotiation between cultures, rather than a substitution of one for another."<sup>53</sup> She hoped to retain a strangeness that alludes to the 'otherness' of the source and that acknowledges a translation can never be completely accurate. In *Ordinary Things* I have attempted to adopt a similar attitude of trying to recognise and acknowledge sources, rather than assume responsibility for the telling of these stories, or to give the false impression of a true or authentic text. The following chapters on literary sources describe some of the ways in which *Ordinary Things* has been influenced by, and refers to, literary sources related to the history of rubber tires. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *way* this reading is re-presented is important, with ethical and theoretical concerns affecting content, style and form.

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<sup>53</sup> Kelly Washbourne. "Translator's Introduction." *Legends of Guatemala*. Miguel Asturias. Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2011. 34.

## American Remembrance

As the history of rubber tires includes Mesoamerica and the Amazon, *Ordinary Things* draws on the literary traditions of those regions. More specifically, because the earliest significant use of rubber was in the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican, I have focused on this region and drawn on the surviving pre-Columbian corpus. In particular, since rubber plays a central role in episodes of the K'Iche' Maya myth, the *Popul Vuh*, this myth plays a central role in *Ordinary Things*, with parts of it being retold in the chapters 'Corn', 'Chilli', and 'Fruit'.<sup>54</sup>

In his essay 'The Baroque and the Marvellous Real', Alejo Carpentier coined the term 'lo real marevillosa' which was later broadened to refer to the well-known 'Magic Realism' movement in Latin America Literature, and beyond.<sup>55</sup> While 'Magic Realism' could later refer to a treatment of real and 'magical' events as equally real – magic events as real; real as imaginary, or some other combination – what Carpentier meant by the term was to write about a reality that is itself marvellous. For Carpentier this particularly applies to the Baroque history of the Caribbean region, exemplified in his novel on the Haitian slave revolt, *The Kingdom of this World*.<sup>56</sup> This 'marvelous reality' is also the case with the history of rubber tires. As already mentioned in the 'Incommensurability' section in the 'Reading and Writing Others' chapter of this exegesis, the reality of sources adds an ethical dimension to meaning. This reflects Carpentier's observation that the 'marvellous real' is all the more marvellous because it is real. In one of his examples he notes that the Aztec capital at the time it was first seen by conquistadors was ten times larger than any city in Europe. We marvel at that fantastic moment, at how these conquistadors must have felt looking upon the city, and how strange the conquistadors must have seemed in armour and on horses, more than any pure fantasy precisely because it is real. In the same way there are many marvellous and real stories relating to real people that can be read in ordinary things such

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<sup>54</sup> Christenson, Allen J *Popul Vuh: Literal Translation*, op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> Alejo Carpentier. "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real [1975]." *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community* Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>56</sup> Alejo Carpentier. *The Kingdom of this World*. London: Penguin, 1975.

as rubber tires. These stories are not necessarily enjoyable in the way fantasy might be. Some are shocking and profoundly disturbing but none should be ignored.

In her essay on Japanese magic realism Susan Napier describes how the fantastic aspects of Magic Realism have a de-automating and political function:

One of the most important is also the most general: the fact that the use of the fantastic implies, at some level, the rejection of the real, or at least the rejection of the discourse of realism as the only way of depicting the world [...]. "<sup>57</sup>

The fantastic, then, helps us view our current reality as potentially different and so changeable, particularly when allied with the fantastic realities of history, since history demonstrates that the way things are is contingent rather than necessary. Consequently, magic realism, real or unreal, encourages us to see present circumstances as changeable, opening the possibility of taking action to make those changes. Magic realism can enable us to recognise our assumptions as myths, making the familiar 'strange'.

There are then, resonances between magic realism and other themes of *Ordinary Things* – de-automation, cybernetics, ethics, and the literary history of regions of Central America and the Amazon. Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*,<sup>58</sup> set in the rubber boom town of Iquitos, has informed the sections of *Ordinary Things* relating to Japanese immigrants there. Mexican authors Carlos Fuentes<sup>59</sup> and Juan Rulfo<sup>60</sup>, and Guatemalan authors Miguel Asturias<sup>61</sup> and Rodrigo Rey Rosa<sup>62</sup>, have been particularly important stylistic influences, especially for the chapters related to the *Popul Vuh*.

How to include the *Popul Vuh* in *Ordinary Things* presented many difficulties. At first, unaware of Christenson's English translation, I wrote an English translation of the two hero twin episodes (Xbalanque and Hunahpu and Hunahpu 1 and Hunahpu 7) based on Christenson's literal transcription. I attempted to retain the poetic techniques of the original, while writing in accessible English. Unfortunately, all readers of early drafts said

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<sup>57</sup> Susan J. Napier. *The Magic of Identity: magic realism in modern Japanese fiction. Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 1995.

<sup>58</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa. *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*. New York: Noonday Books, 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Carlos Fuentes. *Aura*. London: André Deutsche Limited, 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Juan Rulfo. *Pedro Páramo*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> Miguel Asturias. *Legends of Guatemala*. Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2011;

Miguel Asturias. *Men of Maize*. Pittsburgh: University Of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.

<sup>62</sup> Rodrigo Rey Rosa. *The Beggars Knife*. London: Peter Owen, 1988;

Rodrigo Rey Rosa. *Dust On Her Tongue*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1992;

Rodrigo Rey Rosa. *The Pelcari Project*. London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1991.

that this was the most boring part of the whole novel. As discussed in the chapter 'Reading and Writing Others', I also had misgivings about presenting a text of the K'Iche' Maya which, if it were to be presented in 'authoritative' form, would be more appropriately presented by someone who is K'Iche' Maya. At the same time I learned that Christenson had already published a close English translation. Christenson claims a good working relationship with K'Iche' Maya people that seems to validate the authenticity of his translation.<sup>63</sup> There was little value in my own version, yet the *Popul Vuh* was an essential aspect that could not be removed. The works of early magic realist author, Miguel Asturias and contemporary writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa offered a stylistic solution to this problem.

Asturias was a prominent scholar of Mayan culture and deeply concerned with the circumstances of indigenous people in Guatemala. Contemporary K'Iche' poet Umberto Ak'Abal has publically criticised him by rejecting Guatemala's Miguel Angel Asturias Prize "because it was inextricably linked to Asturias' academic and literary work, which he felt was racist."<sup>64</sup> Those in favour of Asturias note that racist attitudes are found only in his early university work and naively reflect the attitudes of the time. They celebrate his commitment to bringing international attention to K'Iche' Maya culture. In particular, Nobel prize winning K'Iche' activist Rigoberta Menchú refers to Asturias favourably.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the most important thing about this debate is not whether Asturias was racist or not but that in the debate there is a deference to Mayan people. In this deference we quickly recognise that there is no 'Mayan view', but individual Mayan people who have their own views of what the 'Mayan view' is. The deference and the disagreement re-subjectifies rather than objectifies. Asturias viewed himself as a child of both Latin and Mayan culture, as it was a Mayan servant who raised him most of the time, instilling in him her own traditions.<sup>66</sup> Many of his works draw heavily on his research and relationship with Mayan culture without simply collecting, translating and retelling myths and folk tales. His novel *Men of Maize* was influenced by Modernism as much as Mayan culture.<sup>67</sup> Asturias overtly attempted to forge a Guatemalan national identity that includes indigenous consciousness. With Baroque lyrical prose poetry, Asturias portrayed a Mayan mythic consciousness in

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<sup>63</sup> Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: Literal Translation*. Op. cit.

In his introduction to his literal translation Christenson describes a scene in which some Mayan men thank him for bringing their ancestor's voice to life again.

<sup>64</sup> Rita M Palacios. *Indigenusness and the Reconstruction of the Other in Guatemalan Indigenous Literature*. Op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Arturo Arias. *Constructing Ethnic Bodies and Identities in Miguel Angel Asturias and Rigoberta Menchú*. Redlands: University of Redlands, 2006.

<sup>66</sup> Gerald Martin. "Introduction." *Men of Maize*. Miguel Asturias. Pittsburgh: University Of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.

<sup>67</sup> Miguel Asturias *Men of Maize*. Op. cit.

colonial conflict – from the very beginning of the novel we follow the consciousness of a deceased Mayan freedom fighter:

Gaspar stretched himself out, curled himself in, and again shook his head from side to side to grind the accusation of the land, bound in sleep and in death by the snake of six hundred thousand coils of muc, moon, forests, rainstorms, mountains, lakes, birds, and echoes that pounded his bones until they turned to a black frijol paste dripping from the depths of the night.<sup>68</sup>

Asturias is not attempting to write an authentic version of Mayan classic literature or to canonise folk tales of the Mayan people. He is as much influenced by European traditions as by Mayan. When the character Gaspar thinks, "Sown to be eaten it [maize] is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize," it is as much a statement of Marxist alienation as it is of the Mayan predicament.<sup>69</sup> It is no surprise that Valéry gave Asturias' retelling of Mayan stories, *Leyendas de Guatemala*, his enthusiastic endorsement, as it often reads like symbolist poetry.<sup>70</sup> In these works Asturias is writing an original modernist work, replete with modernist conventions of stream of consciousness and non-linear time but it is one that is influenced by both European and Mayan literature, rather than accepting only European culture as valid.

By writing a modern work influenced by and referencing Mayan literature, rather than presenting his work as 'authentic', Asturias illustrated how I might also retell the *Popul Vuh* not as if it were an authoritative version but in a way that alludes to it. This leaves 'authentic' versions for others to tell and implies to the reader that there is more beyond the text I present, in particular Mayan people and texts, rather than create the illusion of complete and coherent understanding. In *Ordinary Things* I do not presume to represent the consciousness of a Mayan freedom fighter as Asturias' did in *Men of Maize*. A more honest approach for me, in *Ordinary Things*, presents the *Popul Vuh* as it is imagined by a boy in the back of a car:

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<sup>68</sup> Miguel Asturias *Men of Maize*. Op. cit.

It's worth noting here the multiplicative value of broad reading – a reader with foreknowledge of pre-Columbian literature will recognise that Asturias is drawing on its literary conventions. In pre-Columbian idiom there is a predilection for describing death and defeat as an utter annihilation in which even one's bones are ground into a powder and one becomes no more than 'floor sweepings'. Ability to recognise the allusions and conventions of a tradition increases appreciation for a text and makes reading more rewarding.

<sup>69</sup> Asturias, Miguel *Men of Maize*. Op. cit.

<sup>70</sup> Asturias, Miguel. *Legends of Guatemala*. Op. cit. 21-22. (This edition includes Valéry's endorsement.)

It wasn't till Alaska that you really made proper friends with death. It was when his knee scratcher was driving and he was dozing in the passenger seat and you were looking out your side window. You were daydreaming about what you'd read, kids in the dust kicking a rubber ball, four owls perch on a wall, monkeys play flutes, lost at the crossroads, the black road saying, 'this way', laughing demons, cigars in the darkness, father decapitated, words falling from a skull into the hands of Lady Blood... You were coasting along beside a big semi-trailer. Its wheels were so big that the bottom of the trailer was at about your eye level. The car started drifting over towards it. It wasn't unusual for a car to drift that much in its lane but normally the driver would set it straight. This time she didn't.

"Travelling Home"

Here episodes from the *Popul Vuh* are mentioned so that when the reader encounters these stories in later chapters, in the first person, it is clear that they are 'as they are imagined' by the main character, 'you'. It is when the main character is close to death that the stories of the hero twins' encounters with the Lords of Death in the underworld of Xibalba are at the fore. The overall relationship of children to their parents in the *Popul Vuh* is also reflected in the main narrative: 'you' and 'your' father both have close encounters with death, and survive. 'Your' father's traits live on in 'you' just as children continue the life of their parents in the *Popul Vuh*. This becomes a central theme of *Ordinary Things* – in the concluding chapters 'you' have reservations about what culture is being passed on to your children. These juxtapositions and parallels between the *Popul Vuh* and *Ordinary Things* perform a magic realist function, infusing the mundane 'reality' of modern life with meaning from a 'fantastic' reality, calling into question background assumptions, such as the meaning and source of rubber tires, how and why the main character lives as he does, and what is learned and will be taught across generations.

Like Asturias, Rodrigo Rey Rosa also writes with historic and mythic allusions mixed with contemporary situations. (Interestingly, the year after Ak'Abal rejected the Miquel Angel Asturias Prize in 2003, Rey Rosa accepted it and used the proceeds to establish the B'atz' Prize for Maya, Xinca, and Garifuna writers, presumably named after the monkey scribe

B'atz' who features in the *Popul Vuh*).<sup>71</sup> Rey Rosa's style is simpler and darker than Asturias', more readily likened to that of *Aura*<sup>72</sup> and *Pedro Páramo*<sup>73</sup> in the use of direct ('real') tangible language to portray vague, foreboding, unreal, mystical (magic) things. His blunt language – bereft of hyperbole, short on adverbs and adjectives, relying on the presentation of things, often in the first person – gives a heightened sense of immanence to events that would seem distant to most readers. The reader is transferred from detached analytical reading towards an immersed, experiential, aesthetic reading experience:

Far away in a village the old men without beards were drinking. With half-shut eyes (the liquor) they were remembering: a small cross and the candlesticks, the boar's fast blood as it was cut into pieces, its heart buried beneath the round pool at the center of the temple, the four piles of flesh in the four corners, midnight, the mist, and the head opposite the hermitage.<sup>74</sup>

So I climbed up to the peak of the temple where I stood between two men. They laid the boy on a coverlet of white petals. My hand struck with force. The black edge of the stone slashed the skin, and blood stained the white petals. I took his heart, still beating, and placed it inside the mouth of the stone face. Then I kicked the small body, which rolled down the steps until it hit the ground.<sup>75</sup>

With his simplicity and directness, Rey Rosa's style exhibits Motori Norinaga's ideal of *mono no aware*,<sup>76</sup> of invoking pathos through representation of concrete things in text, rather than explaining, moralising or stating what the emotive and aesthetic response is or should be. Scenes, things and events are presented which cause an aesthetic and emotional response. Emulating Rey Rosa's style provided a means to re-style the *Popul Vuh* for a contemporary literary audience, while remaining in keeping with other aims of *Ordinary Things*, such as the application of Japanese aesthetic theory as well as solving the problem of how to present the *Popul Vuh* ethically. By re-situating the myth as something daydreamed in the back of a car by the central character of the framing narrative, I was able to tell it in the first person,

<sup>71</sup> Rita M Palacios. "Luis De León's 'El tiempo principia en Xibalbá' and the Foundation of a Contemporary Indigenous Literature in Guatemala." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 35.3: 577-595. Accessed 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41636559>.

<sup>72</sup> Fuentes, Carlos. *Aura*. Op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> Juan Rulfo. *Pedro Páramo*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2000.

<sup>74</sup> Rodrigo Rey Rosa. "Reports From Cahabon." *The Beggars Knife*. London: Peter Owen, 1988.

<sup>75</sup> Rodrigo Rey Rosa "The Rain And Other Children." *The Beggars Knife*. London: Peter Owen, 1988.

<sup>76</sup> 'mono no aware' is a concept similar to T.S. Eliot's 'objective correlative' or, broadly speaking, 'mimesis'. It will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on Japanese sources.



present tense with economical language focusing on the tangible. With Asturias' and Rey Rosa's influence, the retelling of the myth became stylised, literary, *mono no aware* and integrated into the novella rather than 'just another boring relating of an ancient myth' as one reader put it.

Thus, my initial rendering into English prose:

In the beginning is the stories' root. From it grow many fruits. The deeds of Hunahpu and Xbalanque are too many to tell. Here is the fruit of their birth.

Two brothers bounced a rubber ball against two brothers, their father and uncle. The two children, Batz and Chouen, were highly skilled at flute and singing, writing and carving, jade and precious metal working. They didn't do much but play dice and ball with Hunahpu 1 and Hunahpu 7 all day. One day as they played on the ball court called 'Honour and Respect', their jumping and stomping and the bouncing of the ball on the ceiling of the underworld disturbed the Lords of Xibalba below. These Lords were named 1 Death, 7 Death, Demon Pus, Demon Jaundice, Staff Bone, Staff Skull, Flying Scab, Gathered Blood, Demon Sweepings, Demon Stabbings, Wing and Packstrap.

ultimately became:

People laugh because I'm naked. Next to my brother, I write the best glyphs this side of the mountains, turquoise, blood red, corn yellow, bone white and ash black. I play flute. I work jade, gold and silver. I climb trees and sleep on people's patios. Let them laugh.

A long time ago we were tired of idle work. So we got up and played bately against our father and uncle. With a life of its own the ball bounced from foot to foot, brother to brother, two brothers against two brothers. We didn't notice the owls until they were already perched on top of the stone walls. We stopped to look at them settling their feathers. One of them spoke.

As well as modern and contemporary influences, the ancient literatures of Mesoamerica, such as the *Popul Vuh* and pre-Columbian codexes, have influenced *Ordinary Things*. The

above passage, for example, demonstrates the poetic convention of doubling or parallelism that recurs throughout the *Popul Vuh*.<sup>77</sup> In 'The Poetic Nature Of The Popul Vuh' section of his 'Introduction' Christenson notes that "Quiché [K'Iche'] poetry is not based on rhyme or metrical rhythms, but rather the arrangement of concepts into innovative and even ornate parallel structures."<sup>78</sup> He goes on to identify 15 different kinds of phonetic, semantic and structural parallelism. This doubling occurs regularly, but comes in many forms – simple repetition, opposites, inversions, the same description applied to two different things, things that go together as pairs, and so on. While Christenson admits to losing these poetics through removing redundancy in his prose translation, some feeling for them can be gained by reading his literal transcription.<sup>79</sup> I have been able to retain that poetic principle in many parts of the re-telling of the *Popul Vuh*, and have applied it in other parts of *Ordinary Things* as well. It is a technique applied at many levels. It matches well with the overall forms of parallel and juxtaposition between the framing and framed narratives, since that is itself an instance of doubling. On a smaller scale it is applied in too many cases to mention all of them here. For example, the passage, "It's easy to drift into a trance as the street lights and your headlights reflected in the cats eyes slowly speed by. Trailing the swarm of red tail lights, you become a passenger in your own body" doubles slow/speed and 'your' body and the car. The chapter 'Employment' begins and ends with the same passage with only the last line modified. In the chapter 'Machete' you assert you are a man of peace while committing murder. In 'Japanese Graphic Design' you are an Australian wanting to work for a Japanese company, friends with a Japanese person wanting to escape working for the same company. In 'Master's Will' the 'will' has the double meaning of the master's intention and of bequeathing, and the slave becomes a master. 'Kinshasa' is full of doubling – the nation is the richest and the poorest in the world, the attempt to create an artificial island of peace will result in war, ancestry is as much a consequence of rape as of love, the only sane reaction is madness. Through constant use of this technique associations are drawn on large and small scales establishing a rich mesh of associated meanings, such that each 'image' or moment in the text comes to mean a great deal more than it initially denotes.

*Ordinary Things* also responds to pre-Columbian writing systems. Of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican manuscripts, only about 20 codices remain, some of them only as copies of

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<sup>77</sup> Allen J Christenson. "The Poetic Nature Of The Popul Vuh." *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*. University Of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2007. 42-52.

<sup>78</sup> Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book Of The Maya* . Op. cit., 42.

<sup>79</sup> Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: Literal Translation*. Op. cit.

originals. Most of the writing in the codices, in architecture and on artefacts, is pictoglyphic. Only the Mayans possessed hieroglyphs with which any word that could be said, could be written.<sup>80</sup> Most pre-Columbian writing is non-phonetic, blurring the distinction between writing and illustration. These codices present a series of pictures of gods, people, things, events and places, which possess multiple meanings.



This Mixtec glyph copied from the *Codex Vindobensis Mexicanus*<sup>81</sup>, for example, is highly complex. It does not denote a single thing or concept but is comprised of many interrelated elements. On the left is 7 Eagle and on the right is 7 Rain, as indicated by the numeric and calendar glyphs above their heads. Other readable elements are the feathers of Quetzalpapalotl, the plumed serpent that forms the floor of the underworld. The yokes the two figures wear show that they are players of the ball game bately. The arrows on the right side of the tree represent conquest or vanquishing. The decapitated head is typically related to rebirth in pre-Columbian mythology, and from the tree that grows from it, a being is born of ambiguous gender.<sup>82</sup> Other forms of significance are the colours yellow and red,

<sup>80</sup> Allen J Christenson. *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*. Op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> Mixtec. *Codex Vindobensis Mexicanus*. Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.. Accessed September 9 2010. [http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/vindobonensis/thumbs\\_0.html](http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/vindobonensis/thumbs_0.html).

<sup>82</sup> Being red and emerging from a tree in the underworld, accompanied by a decapitated head and two bately players, it is difficult not to read this figure as 'Lady Blood' from the Mayan *Popul Vuh*. It is equally difficult to be sure this is a correct reading. Some features of the glyph do not correspond to the *Popul Vuh* and we need to be wary of simply interpreting everything into what is already known. This is a Mixtec glyph not Mayan.

which indicate the living matter of blood and flesh, and black and white for the ashes and bones of death. While the semantic components of this glyph are presented non-linearly, this glyph is situated in the codex as part of a clear linear sequence. Because the glyph is pictographic it is easy to get a vague idea of what it is about, but because there is not a clear one-to-one correspondence between symbol and concept, we cannot decode or decipher it to obtain a complete and precise reading. To read it clearly, a prior knowledge of the myth represented would be necessary, with the glyph having a mnemonic function. Without neatly fitting into categories of writing types, this glyph complicates our understanding of what writing is.

Glyphs have been adapted to the novel *Ordinary Things* in several ways. In some cases glyphs have been traced with photographs of contemporary scenes to connect these myths to the present day, and to mirror the way in which the myths are reflected in the contemporary framing narrative. One chapter presents the history of rubber tires as a series of line drawings. As the reader proceeds through the book they become aware that they are 'reading' the images as glyphs. Just as prior knowledge of the story represented is necessary to read the Mixtec glyph, the 'History of Rubber Tires' chapter will most likely be only partially intelligible until the reader has read the entire book and/or gained their own knowledge of the history of tires. This reflects the experience of reading ancient Mesoamerican codices. Having interpreted the things and scenes in these images, the reader will recognise that they can, more generally, read any ordinary thing.

In the graphic below for example, the ritual binding and decapitation of a sacrificial victim from the *Dresden Codex* occurs outside the Hamilton RSL.<sup>83</sup> It illustrates an episode in the *Popul Vuh* in which the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, despite having lost the rubber ball game, trick the Lords of Xibalba, One Death and Seven Death, into allowing themselves to be sacrificed. Its depiction outside the Hamilton RSL alludes to the human sacrifices made to ensure rubber supply lines for the war machine in World War II. In this way the influences on 'form' in *Ordinary Things* extends to what writing is itself, de-automating 'reading' and 'writing'. The concept of 'writing' is broadened to include images that can be read, through the influence of non-phonetic and pictographic writing systems.

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Trying to decide if it is or is not the *Popul Vuh* written in Mixtec is not necessarily the best interpretive strategy. Pre-columbian civilisations were not isolated from each other, either in time or space, so there is a fair chance that even if it is a different story, it bears some relation to the *Popul Vuh*, or each are variations of the same story, or contain similar elements, just as stories always have their historical and geographical variants.

<sup>83</sup> Yucatecan Maya. *Dresden Codex*. Op. cit.



The earliest significant use of rubber was in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The literary traditions of this region, from pre-Columbian myth and writing systems and the technique of parallelism to magic realism and contemporary writers, have influenced *Ordinary Things* in ways that resonate with the themes of cybernetics, ethics and de-automation. This reconnects readers, through rubber tires, to individuals, places, times and stories enabling readers to appreciate the rich layers of meaning in rubber tires. By example, this foregrounds the potential rich meaning of any ordinary thing, if it is read.

## Congolesse Fragments

There are numerous difficulties in attempting to research and gain an understanding of Congolesse literature. These include the tremendous diversity of the region, the region's long and ongoing history of violence, and the limited and mediated accessibility of texts, and the overlap of 'literature' and other arts – oral history, mnemonic texts, sculpture, dance, decoration, scarification and so on. The first difficulty is in distinguishing what could be included in the term 'Congolesse'. Historically, the ancient Kingdom of Kongo, from which the region takes its name, covers a relatively small area in the west of present day DR Congo and Republic of Congo, northern Angola and southern Gabon. As one of the first places encountered by Portuguese ships venturing south in the fifteenth century, its history is intimately tied to the history of European exploration and globalisation. Geographically 'the Congo' denotes a vast area of West and Central Africa around the Congo River. At present there are two nations bearing the name: The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the smaller Republic of Congo. There are around 200 ethnic groups in this region with unique arts, religions and traditions and between 60 and 150 languages.<sup>84</sup> Many of these peoples, such as Mangbetu, Azande, Hutu, Tutsi, Luba, Lunda and Woyo, occupy regions overlapping national boundaries. If we consider broader cultural similarities, such as language groups and generalised spiritual practices, many extend across other nations of Central and West Africa. Political boundaries remain relatively the same as those arbitrarily chosen during Europe's partition of Africa, based on Europe's balance of power and the exploitation of natural resources. More recently, the region has been through eras of colonialism, post-colonialism, political and economic influence and interference from Western and Soviet powers and neighbouring nations, and has experienced liberations, coups, dictatorships, tribal conflict and complex civil wars. These factors mean that there is little that could be called representative of the Congo as a whole. In examining Congolesse literature a diversity of oral and written, modern, pre-

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<sup>84</sup> "Africa: Congo, Democratic Republic of the." *The World Factbook*. United States: Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed 2012. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cg.html>.

modern, historical and anthropological sources from people from a wide variety of cultures, in a variety of political, religious and economic circumstances must be taken into account. To recognise this diversity I have sampled stories from a wide variety of sources, without attempting to force them into a coherent or conclusive narrative whole.

These texts inform and give meaning to each other and to the framing narrative through their differences. These contrasts help prevent readers being lulled into a false sense of having understood Congolese culture from the text I present. The texts point to the possibility of many interpretations, misinterpretations, points of view and representations. By presenting stories styled in a variety of ways, and particularly by presenting them as snapshots and small samples, often apparently from a larger narrative, they are honest about the necessary incompleteness of my own reading and understanding of the Congo region. As self-evidently samples and reworkings of source material, they acknowledge and point readers to those sources.

Consider the brief story 'Hands' for example:

Three Force Publique officers each threw the hands they'd collected onto the pile.

"What do they want all these hands for anyway?" the new recruit asked.

One of the others elbowed his comrade, "You know those cans of meat they have? They take these hands to Belgium and fill up the cans and send them back to eat."

"But those tins have pictures of cows. It's beef."

"That's just to trick the people in Belgium. Why else would they need so many hands?"

'Hands'

A relatively well-known story about King Leopold II's 'Congo Free State' is that people's hands were routinely cut off as a punishment, such as for failure to meet rubber harvesting quotas. According to Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost* there was a belief that, despite the label, the Belgian's cans of corned beef (a common colonial food) were filled with the hands, which is why so many were required.<sup>85</sup> The vignette 'Hands' is drawn from these anecdotes. There is much in this small section that depends on how much background the reader is aware of, but at each level it directs attention to other sources. Readers may not know what the Force Publique is. If they do, or when they find out, this reminds the reader it is not a simple matter of the Belgians enslaving and massacring

<sup>85</sup> Adam Hochschild. *King Leopold's Ghost*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1999. 166.

Congolese – there was a more complicated political strategy of employing one tribal group to police another. For those who do not already know about the Congo Free State it will be shocking, prompting further questions and, perhaps, the same astonishment I experienced that I did not already know. For those who do already know about the Congo Free State atrocity, by presenting it neither in a simplistic humanist mode of innocent Congolese victims and evil Belgian colonisers, nor in graphic, shocking, sensational detail, I hope *Ordinary Things* still raises questions, not only about that time and place, but about what anyone anywhere is capable of. By analogy with the history of tires the reader is encouraged to wonder about the sources of other ordinary things and about how history is reflected in events in the Congo today. This is reinforced by references to mobile phones and the coltan trade and the contemporary stories 'Kinshasa' and 'Traditional Barbeque', which mention economic exploitation and international development projects and child soldiers.

Because the story 'Hands' is a small fragment of a much larger story, the reader must wonder who these characters are, how they arrived at these circumstances, how the hands were obtained and what will happen. Their attention is directed beyond the text to its sources. What are and where are these literary sources to which readers are invited to refer? They range from fifteenth century letters from the Kongo and Ndongo aristocracies to the Portuguese, to traditional Lukasa memory boards and the contemporary literary magic realism of Alain Mabanckou. For example, 'The Bridge' is a retelling of a Mangbetu folk tale. 'Canned Beef' is drawn from historical anecdotes on the Congo Free State. 'Baths of Sand' and 'Baths of Gold' are drawn from Zanzibar slave trader Tippu Tip's<sup>86</sup> and Zanzibar Princess Emily Ruete's<sup>87</sup> accounts. 'Master's Will' uses letters from Queen Nzinga, letters and legal documents pertaining to slaves in Latin America,<sup>88</sup> and Andrew Battel's contemporaneous observations.<sup>89</sup> 'Kinshasa' draws on contemporary documentaries, sociology – such as de Boeck's work<sup>90</sup> – and quotes from documentaries about child

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Q Reefe. *The Rainbow and the Kings: a history of the Luba Empire to 1891*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. 110.

<sup>87</sup> Emilie Ruete. *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess From Zanzibar*. New York: M. Wiener Pub, 1989.

<sup>88</sup> *Afro-Latino Voices: narratives from the early modern Ibero-Atlantic world, 1550-1812*. Ed. Kathryn McKnight. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Battel. "The Strange Adventures Of Andrew Battel Of Leigh." *Angola And The Adjoining Regions*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1901.

<sup>90</sup> *Cemetery State*. Dir. Filip de Boeck. Film Natie, 2010. Accessed 2013

<http://www.filmnatie.eu/CemeteryState.php>;

Filip de Boeck. "Inhabiting Ocular Ground: Kinshasa's Future in the Light of Congo's Spectral Urban Politics." Accessed 2014. <http://www.culanth.org/articles/34-inhabiting-ocular-ground-kinshasa-s-future-in-the>;

Filip de Boeck. "The Modern Titanic. Urban Planning and Everyday Life in Kinshasa." *JWTC, The Salon*, 4 (2011). Accessed 2014. [http://jwtc.org.za/volume\\_4/filip\\_de\\_boeck.htm](http://jwtc.org.za/volume_4/filip_de_boeck.htm)



soldiers.<sup>91</sup> 'Kongo is not Kongo' draws on the early history of Portuguese and Dutch involvement in the region, using contemporary letters and documents. It also adapts history texts and includes parts of the history of the Luba/Kanyok region accessed through anthropological transcriptions of traditional oral and written histories.<sup>92</sup>

Despite this plenitude and diversity, these literatures are seldom accessible in thorough, original or complete form. Most of what is available are small surviving segments, translations, isolated studies, texts mediated by people with limited understanding or politically-vested interests, or the voices only of a literate minority with time, resources, liberty or courage enough to put pen to paper. Access to traditional literature is commonly through anthropologists and missionaries. Anthropological texts provide interesting insights, though they are typically mediated through Western theoretical constructs and often do not include much original source transcription from 'informants'. As discussed in the chapter 'Reading and Writing Others' in *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, Hallen and Sodipo argue a clear case that translation and the understanding of other systems of belief does not involve a one-to-one mapping of words and concepts.<sup>93</sup> We do not all share the same concepts and conceptual relationships, such that, in order to understand the thought of another culture, we need only find which concept a given word relates to from a set of 'universal propositions'. This is particularly the case for immaterial concepts. If we say, 'There are the cattle' in one language and another, it may be trivial to translate the word 'cattle' denotatively. The cultural meaning and connotations of the word 'cattle' differ. With abstract concepts translation is even more difficult because we cannot point to them in a material sense.<sup>94</sup> It is unavoidable that translations always fail to some degree to translate the 'philosophy' of other cultures since all the connotations and relationships and assumptions of an utterance can't be packed into as few words. The words that a text is translated into may also have connotations that do not exist in the source language. Translation inevitably leaves out some meaning of the original and adds some that wasn't

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<sup>91</sup> Rachel Brett. *Young Soldiers: why they choose to fight*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004; Jean-Stephane Sauvaire. "Documentary on Child Soldiers in the film (DVD Extras)." *Johnny Mad Dog*. Dir. Jean-Stephane Sauvaire. MNP Enterprise, 2008. DVD.

<sup>92</sup> *Europeans in West Africa, 1450-1560 v.1* Ed. John William Blake. Nendeln: Hakluyt Society / Kraus Reprint Ltd, 1967.;

Andrew Battel, "The Strange Adventures Of Andrew Battel Of Leigh." *Angola And The Adjoining Regions* London: Hakluyt Society, 1901.;

*Afro-Latino Voices: narratives from the early modern Ibero-Atlantic world*. Op. cit.;

Thomas Q Reeve. Op. cit.;

Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom Of The Kongo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

<sup>93</sup> Barry Hallen and J Olubi Sodipo. "Indeterminacy and the Translation of Alien Behaviour." *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. 15-39

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

there. Whether an English or Azande person translates into either language, the problem remains. Even if an exact translation of worldviews is not possible with absolute accuracy, this does not mean translation is impossible. Translations, including folk tales, can convey a partial understanding. At the very least they indicate there is something to be understood differently to our own understanding; they may increase our understanding. Translation remains worthwhile so long as its limitations are understood.

Most of what is available to me on Luba mythology, for example, such as De Heusch's *The Drunken King*, is structuralist.<sup>95</sup> While this provides some understanding of Luba mythology, it is focused on amalgamating the oral texts of countless individuals from divergent cultures into a single generalised model of the myth.<sup>96</sup> In doing so, much is lost that contributes to the meaning of the text and which relates the text to individual subjects. In structuralist abstractions we lose the entanglement of the original text or utterance in other facets of life: the daily routine, sacred ritual, politics, pedagogy, divination, visual art, and history; we lose the relation of the story to the immediate environment that may have prompted the story or coloured the way it was told, such as the building the narrator is in, or what sort of day they had at the market. For this reason, while I have drawn on folktales and mythologies as abstracted by outsider anthropologists, I have re-presented scenes with some sense of individual context in a real world. In 'Kongo Is Not Kongo' the historical King, modelled loosely on King Garcia II of Kongo, sits with his bowl in the shade. In 'The Bridge' I do not write 'During the crossing the bridge collapsed and many of the Mangbetu were drowned, half way between freedom and slavery' but instead present an individual person who has waited for the crossing with her basket and son, and falls from the bridge in the crossing.<sup>97</sup>

Where possible I have attempted to draw on primary sources, trying to read or listen to the voices of people of the Congo region. One of the versions of Luba history I have drawn from is the one attributed to Luba memory man Inabanza Kataba in Thomas Reeve's *The Rainbow And The Kings*.<sup>98</sup> I focused on this version because it at least recognises an individual as the source, in contrast to the Structuralist versions of the myth that obscure the subjectivity of sources by merging multiple recitations into one formal ideal of the

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<sup>95</sup> Luc de Heusch. *The Drunken King*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

<sup>96</sup> Fortunately, in some cases direct transcriptions are published as part of anthropological or historical works, such as in *The Rainbow and the Kings*, which quotes and cites the Mbudye society member, Inabanza Kataba's version of Luba mythology. (Thomas Q Reeve, op. cit.).

<sup>97</sup> This story appears in Knappert's *Myths and Legends of the Congo* (Knappert, 1971).

<sup>98</sup> Inabanza Kataba. Op. cit.. 23-31.

myth.<sup>99</sup> Yet these voices, as far as they are accessible to me, remain fragmented, partial and mediated. They are what survives from an often violent past; what was recorded of oral traditions; what outsiders are able and have taken the trouble to interpret of writing systems and traditions which are also sometimes available only to initiates; and what was 'selected' by collectors from a vast body of language and signifying systems, for their own purposes and with their own assumptions.

While it is difficult to find any texts that are not fragmented and mediated in this way, one advantage of this mediation is that it highlights that in searching for sources, there is often no end, no single authority or final truth. There are many sources, with each recitation slightly different at different times and in neighbouring places and as it is retold from person to person, generation to generation. We usually think of writing as establishing an immutable version of a text, in contrast to a story being told differently each time orally. If it is written, it remains unchanged. However, even when writing systems exist, readings of the same text may vary. Members of the Mbudye society use Lukasa memory boards, carved and set with beads, to record the mythology and history of the Luba region.<sup>100</sup> These boards also set out a landscape of relationships between the physical world and those of the spiritual world, of social organisation and journeys made in myth and in rituals. Lukasa boards are read in memory performances and these readings are made differently according to the needs of the occasion, including shifts in politics. Versions vary across space as well. The relatively well documented myth of the 'drunken king' Nkongolo and the civilising hunter, Mbidi Kiluwe, varies from the central Luba region to outlying areas such as the Kanyok version (documented as an amalgam of recitations by Father André Casteleyn).<sup>101</sup> As with pre-Columbian Mesoamerican glyphs, Luba history and the reading of Lukasa boards blur the distinction between oral and written literature – a purely oral text would be communicated and taught to others simply by speaking, chanting or singing. A purely written text could be read word for word the same each time. In the case of Lukasa boards the story is signified by the beads and carvings on the board – the story is read, yet like oral stories, it varies in its telling each time. It is not read word for word. The beads are not mere mnemonic pictures or illustrations but are abstract. Nor do they, as in phonetic and syllabic scripts, represent simple sounds or even simple ideas to be assembled atomistically. They must be taught in order to be understood. They are symbols representing complex concepts, 'read' to tell the same recorded history differently from

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<sup>99</sup> Luc de Heusch. Op. cit.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts. Op. cit.

<sup>101</sup> *The African Past Speaks: essays on oral tradition and history*. Ed. Joseph C. Miller. Connecticut: Dawson, 1980.

time to time and place to place. In addition to Inabanza Kataba's version, I have drawn on a Kanyok variation of the Luba myth for 'Kongo Is Not Kongo' to acknowledge this mutability of texts, and the diversity of sources.

The Kanyok myth features a princess who was given an ordinary rather than a regal name, 'Calabash', because she was given as payment for a broken cup. She later gives her subjects the names of other ordinary things. The Kanyok story of Princess Calabash highlights how, in traditional culture, myth is imbued in everyday objects and activity, in contrast to the monetised modern culture of the framing narrative where the main character's actions are governed by money. Where everything is mediated by money, where 'my' activity earns money and things and food are obtained by money, mythology falls by the wayside. Mythology that was once required to direct activity for survival and social organisation is replaced by the 'mythology' of money: our activities are governed by income, budgets, and debts. We do not need to wait for the right season to sow and harvest asparagus. We only need enough money to buy it at the supermarket. It is only by chance and with idle curiosity that I noticed the sticker that says the asparagus in a Novocastrian supermarket comes from Peru. This is one way objects lose their stories, their meaning, a meaning which can none the less be restored by actively reading them.

The Kanyok story provides an example of how actively reading things can dramatically transform their meaning. Now when I eat my breakfast it is 'made strange', regardless of how uniformly mass-produced the bowl is. Now when simply using a bowl, I am reminded of the Kanyok story. Because Hunahpu's head causes the calabash tree to fruit I am also reminded of the *Popul Vuh*. Bowls also become important in the Japanese parts of *Ordinary Things*. Kentaro and Chiyo are most happy when they feed people for a living rather than work for money. So, as I eat breakfast I find myself thinking of hungry ghosts and cybernetics. I think also of Neruda's *Odes to Common Things*<sup>102</sup> in which he describes a spoon as an extended arm and cupped hand; similarly a bowl, this most simple of technologies, is a cybernetic enhancement of two cupped hands, as referenced in 'Kongo Is Not Kongo'.

The indeterminacy problem of translating language and conceptual systems influences what qualifies as writing and literature. Dance, music and the plastic arts of the Congo region have long, rich and internationally celebrated continuing traditions. By contrast recognition of Congolese literature seems limited. This is perhaps because traditional 'writing' is inseparable from these other arts, such as music, dance, sculpture and patterns in textiles,

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<sup>102</sup> Pablo Neruda. *Odes to Common Things*. Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1994.

weaving, scarification and kitchenware.. Lukasa memory boards, for example, have been discussed above. The two soft/hard 'lips' of 'talking' drums are used to match the tones in tonal languages to beat out complex expressions. These long articulations, such as epithets rather than simple names and proverbs and similes rather than simple statements, generate complex patterns that eliminate ambiguities that would remain in short phrases.<sup>103</sup>

Kerchache notes that large, circular, vertically symmetrical Teke masks are typically appreciated by outsiders for their aesthetic value as static, abstract, visual art objects in museums, but they make much more sense in context when worn by dancers at a distant tree line doing cartwheels.<sup>104</sup>

One way I have tried to acknowledge the means writing is embedded in other arts is by re-arranging the proverbs associated with Woyo pot lids into a conversation between two men citing proverbs to each other as they discuss their domestic problems and work.<sup>105</sup> In constructing a conversation from the proverbs represented in Woyo proverb lids, I have included some which will make sense to modern English readers ("A crab without claws is defenceless") and some which, when translated into English, have a much more obscure meaning ("The toto-nti made a flute"). The arrangement of proverbs, read from their written 'lid' form, recognises that sculptural lids representing proverbs is a form of writing, since the proverb can be read from the lid. It also allows for a broader understanding of writing as the arrangement of meaningful parts into larger meaningful texts, which can occur at any level – from phonemes to words, words to sentences, sentences (proverbs) to conversations or paragraphs to stories up to the sampling of texts in different genres.

An investigation into 'Others' in the Congo includes trying to understand how or why Belgian individuals would exercise power so savagely. Dembour's *Recalling the Belgian Congo* is an anthropological text including transcriptions of oral stories from white colonisers in the Congo region.<sup>106</sup> Dembour's text is a fascinating source of firsthand accounts from white colonialists in the era following the Congo Free State, and gives valuable insights into the motivations and psychology of those exercising power. It emerges that, being a tiny minority wielding power, Belgians in the Congo felt it essential to maintain 'prestige',<sup>107</sup> to

<sup>103</sup> J F Carrington. *Talking Drums of Africa*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.

<sup>104</sup> Jacques Kerchache et al. *Art of Africa*. New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc Publishers, 1993. 160.

<sup>105</sup> "The Proverb Pot Lids of Lower Congo." *Royal Museum For Central Africa*. Ed. Woyo. Accessed 2011. [http://www.africamuseum.be/collections/browsecollections/humansciences/display\\_group?languageid=3&groupid=355&order=11](http://www.africamuseum.be/collections/browsecollections/humansciences/display_group?languageid=3&groupid=355&order=11).

<sup>106</sup> Marie-Benedicte Dembour. *Recalling The Belgian Congo Conversations and Introspection*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000..

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 154.

go towards trouble rather than away from it,<sup>108</sup> and not hesitate to use the chicotte.<sup>109</sup> The colonials highlight that their roles were dangerous, had a high workload and are now grossly misunderstood.<sup>110</sup> They remind Dembour that living conditions in Europe were not much better than for people in the Congo, and that Europeans were also under analogous social constraints and oppressions.<sup>111</sup> The colonial administrators Dembour interviewed were in the Congo after King Leopold II's ownership, in the period that it was under the control of the Belgian government. From the Belgian colonial administrator's point of view, their civilising mission was not only directed towards Congolese but, in reaction to King Leopold II's barbarity, they were civilising Belgium's behaviour in the Congo.<sup>112</sup> Many were proud of the infrastructure they built and saddened by the collapse of the country and the contempt for their efforts when the Belgium government withdrew, reminding Dembour that many Congolese welcomed Belgian paracommandos, hoping they would restore order in 1993.<sup>113</sup> It is also worth recognising European colonisers were not the only people to violently oppress people in the Congo region. The Congo region was subject to violent invasion before the colonial era, and the techniques for recruiting child soldiers have a long tradition. This is not to downplay or to take an apologetic revisionary stance towards colonialism. While some of the colonial administrators Dembour cites are well-intentioned she also cites anecdotes of the sort of psychopathological cruelty we might expect.<sup>114</sup> In *Ordinary Things* I present the severed hands and the use of the chicotte by Belgian colonialists. In 'Ash Child', even though the new Belgian officer misses his chance to shoot someone, his mere presence has devastating consequences.

Dembour gives us a self-reflexive account of the issues she faced as conspicuously belonging to the political left while interviewing informants on the political right and from another generation with norms incompatible with the political discourse of her day. One colonial administrator also complains about the 'indeterminacy' problem – her informant, 'Milnaert' rebukes her:

"Let us take you as an example. You reside in England. Can one say that you are immersed amongst the English? No, you select a restricted number of people with whom you are more 'intimate' (I do not like the word) than with others. These are

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 69-74.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 170-171.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 18 and 183-184.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 51-52.

persons who touch you in one way or the other, for example professionally. You probably could not feel at ease in such and such a bar, amongst such and such a group. And it is like that everywhere. When you come to my house for an interview, are you immersed? There remains between us a distance [an enormous distance]."<sup>115</sup>

People are 'subjects' for whom 'objects' have uses and meaning; nobody likes to be reduced to an 'object' of knowledge. Using an anthropological text in which white colonisers are the object of study inverts the power imbalance prevalent in accessible discourse on the Congo region. Dembour's anthropological work on the colonisers turns the tables. Whereas it is usually the colonised who become the object of the colonisers study, the colonisers become the object of Dembour's study. This also affords a space for the voice of individuals who might easily be dismissed as villains 'objectifying' their victims. Dembour's informants, in particular 'Milnaert', criticise the all too easy portrayal of Congolese people as passive victims, which also reduces them to 'objects':

When he complains about rigidity in my work, I take him to refer to a lack of sensitivity on my part towards the way relationships were established in the colony. This comes out clearly in his criticism of the way I talk about Africans. He contends that I give them a purely passive role: "For you, the African seems to be the passive subject of all the actions by the European. In the colonial situation, however, there is a symbiosis. Each actor exists on the horizon of the every-day presence of the other, influencing him, simultaneously organising and dismantling him. Behaviours are always correlative; you do not stress this point enough."<sup>116</sup>

Despite extreme power imbalances 'Milnaert' asserts that colonial administrators recognised the agency and subjectivity of Congolese people in ways that Dembour, as a distant observer, cannot. Given the complexities of these subtle problems in conducting anthropological research within her own culture, we can begin to guess the vast extent to which subtleties must be lost in Western reworkings and interpretations of Congolese discourse. I cannot hope, in a few chapters of *Ordinary Things*, to represent the millions of lives that have been lived in the Congo region. I hope that by presenting diverse scenes and points of view from various moments in history, of people at varying levels of the social spectrum in a variety of ways (royalty and slave, coloniser and colonised), that I have indicated the millions of other subjective experiences beyond the novel.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 177.



Among the many vignettes in *Ordinary Things* there are some set in the present day. These relate back to those set in historical periods of the Congo. This highlights the historical sources of current issues, such as poverty, economic exploitation and warfare. Many colonial attitudes, for example, remain today, played out in different ways. At present, external influences are less ideological than the mid-twentieth century Soviet and Western post-colonial involvement in Africa, which led to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. While less ideological, there remains extensive economic interest in Africa from external political powers. I was able to draw attention to this by including an adaption of conversations I had with someone who is a modern parallel of a 'colonial administrator' – a project manager working on major internationally funded infrastructure development projects – in *Ordinary Things*, in the chapter 'Traditional Barbeque'. Again, rather than a two dimensional 'typical' villain interfering with innocent victims, I have attempted to portray an individual who, despite sweeping cavalier statements, sees himself as struggling against the odds to ultimately bring about good in the world. At the same time I question that self-perception.

The fragmentation and diversity of Congolese literature resonates with the ethical or 'subjectifying' techniques of *Ordinary Things*, of incompleteness, deferring to sources, polyvocality and avoiding conclusive understanding. As a means of avoiding conclusive understandings I have presented multiple views on various topics such as slavery, child soldiers and witchcraft. Witchcraft for example, is used benevolently to treat 'post traumatic stress disorder' in 'Ash Child' forms part of the drug induced psychosis of a homeless young former soldier in 'Kinshasa' and, although little more than charlatanism in 'Master's Will', it provides a slave woman in the Americas with a route to freedom and economic independence.

In 'Master's Will', a slave is liberated and becomes a slave owner. Slavery existed in African societies prior to Arab and European kidnapping and trading such that while the conditions of slaves were probably worse under foreigners, slavery was already an assumed aspect of social organisation.<sup>117</sup> This reminds us that when we are embedded in a system, we can't always recognise it, its injustices or alternatives. Even if we can it is not so easy to change them. If we are a slave in a society where there is manumission our aspirations for social climbing may not be the revolutionary overthrow of slavery, but simply to be freed and to one day have slaves of our own. This reminds us that there may be similar situations that escape our awareness in our own society. The slave in 'Master's Will' notes that even

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<sup>117</sup> Anne Hilton. *The Kingdom of the Kongo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.



when formally released from slavery, to pay off debts she must continue working in similarly servile work such that paid work is not necessarily the opposite of slavery. These foils and disruptions of expectation work in many directions. In response to Achebe's critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as racist, I have adapted a passage from Conrad that Achebe uses in his essay *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*<sup>118</sup> to exemplify Conrad's objectification of Africans as a primitive 'mass'. This ironically applies the objectification to the 'West' in the context of 'rave' or dance party with all its fetishes of the future:

and you went back up the stairs to the club and once more into the burst of beats, a whirl of limbs, a mass of hands flailing, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the turmoil of strobes and colours. You grooved slowly along the edge of an ultraviolet haze, a laserlit, black incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric cyborg was cursing you, praying to you, welcoming you – who could tell? You were cut off from the comprehension of your surroundings; you glided past like a phantom, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, the blindness of last ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories, of ages never to come, with empty promises and no trace of hope. You foresee pasts that never were. You remember futures that will never be.

'Accelerator'

This is, none the less, part of a stream of consciousness – a literary technique with takes subjectifying to an extreme by engaging the reader directly with the internal consciousness of a character. This stream of consciousness chapter of the framing narrative is paralleled in the stream of consciousness of a contemporary youth in Kinshasa, in the chapter 'Kinshasa'. 'Kinshasa', draws on gothic themes, with the narrator living in a graveyard<sup>119</sup> and the retelling of an episode from Lautremont's *Maldoror*<sup>120</sup> in the context of Congolese sorcery. A contemporary Congolese literary author would certainly be *au fait* with French

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<sup>118</sup> Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'." *Heart of Darkness, An Authoritative Text, background and Sources, Criticism*. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. London: W W Norton and Co., 1988. 251-261.

<sup>119</sup> *Cemetery State*. Op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> Le Comte De Lautréamont. *Maldoror and Other Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.

literature so this kind of hybridity makes sense, especially after 500 years of globalisation. This chapter is, in part, influenced by Republic of Congo born author Alain Mabanckou's satirical adaption of a wide array of sources from French and world literature in *Broken Glass*<sup>121</sup> and his first person treatment of sorcery in *Memoirs Of A Porcupine*.<sup>122</sup> It is not inconceivable that of the millions of people in Kinshasa, someone might think that way. My intention is to present unique individuals and possibilities, not an 'authentic' Congolese person, or a typical Congolese story. In *Kinshasa* I present a possible set of thoughts of an individual, and through their idiosyncrasies and by that individual's perception of themselves as markedly different to everyone else they see, it is implied there are as many other possible strains of thought as there are people:

so many people here, so many, each with their own secret cares, each wanting what they want, each with so many million memories, as many as my own right now, but all different, and each could be snuffed out in just a moment, just like that, a machete in the back of the neck, a bullet from anywhere, there could be someone aiming at me right now, some men coming up the next street with their machetes, you get used to that, when you have to sleep you have to sleep even knowing you might never wake up, look at this man, talking on a mobile phone, like a rich person, but everyone has one now, all the poor people are rich now, I don't even have a phone, does he know where that comes from, it comes from Kivu, made in China, sold by America and Europe, mined in Kivu and Katanga, with all these minerals we are the richest nation in the world and we are the poorest

'Kinshasa'

This excerpt from *Kinshasa* relates to two other sections in the framing narrative:

Looking down from a balcony overlooking the frenzied thumping laserlit electro-chemical meat machine mass, you couldn't get it out of your head that with the amount of people in the world that someone somewhere right now was looking down the barrel of a gun, and each moment there was a different person pulling a trigger and a different person shot, out of hatred, contempt, for fun, following orders, what was in the head of that person looking down the barrel and that person dying, and as much as you tried to put it out of your head and as much as you knew it was the psychosis starting again, and as much as it felt grotty and

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<sup>121</sup> Alain Mabanckou. *Broken Glass*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010.

<sup>122</sup> Alain Mabanckou. *Memoirs of a Porcupine*. Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2012.

disgusting and you didn't like yourself in such a debased state without any style at all, you just couldn't stop the fear, the sensation that someone was just on the brink of whacking a machete into the back of your neck.

'Accelerator'

and

[...] till everyone in every house, in every car, is dead. Consider your own memory, every single thing you remember. Multiply by 5 million.

'Site Inspection'

The similarity of the stream of consciousness style in the train of thought of 'Kinshasa' and some parallels to the Western scenario of 'Accelerator' should prompt readers to imagine their own adolescent anxieties under different circumstances – to imagine situations at a personal and ethical level, rather than abstractly through news and history and charity.

There is no way I can authoritatively tell a 'typical' story of a former child soldier now living in a Kinshasa cemetery, yet it is important to acknowledge the existence of such people in a book that deals with the sources of ordinary things.

By sampling events from many regions across history I hope to provide the reader with a more complicated understanding of the complicated issues of the Congo region. By leaving stories incomplete and open-ended, establishing foils and using many literary traditions and forms I hope not to argue some case, to advocate a particular solution or to place blame, but to present plenitude as plenitude, to read and write in a way that draws readers' attention to important events of which they may not have been aware and that refer them to a wide variety of relevant sources.

## Japanese Allusions

Ordinary things play a particularly important role in Japanese aesthetics. Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) provides an insightful account of the significance of 'things' in Japanese literature with the concept of *mono no aware*, "the pathos of things."<sup>123</sup> Norinaga's account of this concept resonates with what has been discussed in earlier chapters on Ethics, *ostranenie* and *Ordinary Things*: the contemplation of the meaning of ordinary things. While other Japanese aesthetic concepts, such as *wabi sabi*, *yugen* and *iki* can be found in *Ordinary Things*, it is *mono no aware* that is most prevalent and has been most influential. Although many contemporary, modern and traditional Japanese sources, movies, poetry, prose, mythologies, philosophies and art have been drawn on, Norinaga's theories are the most relevant starting point for articulating the role of Japanese sources in *Ordinary Things*.

For Norinaga our mutual intelligibility depends on our capacity for having emotional responses to things in the world.<sup>124</sup> In his essay 'On Mono No Aware', through an erudite etymological discussion that follows subtle changes in meaning in poems over time, Norinaga shows how the phrase combines 'sigh', 'one's heart being stirred', 'sorrow', 'pity', 'compassion', 'Ah, alas!', and means not only sadness but any deep feeling.<sup>125</sup> Importantly, this relates specifically to being stirred by *things*:

It might sound as if in this type of poetry things are forced to suit one's feelings, but an examination of the real root of the issue tells us that this is not the case. When one has deep thoughts in his heart, he relates each of them to objects that he sees and hears about. These objects are moving, and poetry comes from using these objects just as they are.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Michael F Marra. "The Vocabulary of Aesthetics Creation in Meiji Japan." *Essays on Japan: Between Aesthetics and Literature*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 28.

<sup>124</sup> Michael F Marra. "Translator's Introduction." *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: a hermeneutical journey*. Motoori Norinaga. Trans. Michael F Marra. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. 17-18.

<sup>125</sup> Motoori Norinaga. "On Mono no Aware" *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: a hermeneutical journey*. Trans. Michael F Marra. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. 172-194.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 192.

Poetry arises when this experience moves us to the extent that we must speak, to share the depth of this experience with another. Since we respond in similar ways to things, this shared experience enables us to use things as signs that can cause similar pathos in each other. This strategy of achieving pathos through recitation of 'things' rather than statements about emotion is regularly used throughout *Ordinary Things*. Most obviously this occurs in the haiku-like summaries of people and their residences in 'Site Inspection', but it is also a general stylistic approach. Taking a simple example from 'Chilli':

If they were not asleep or eating they were screaming, any time of the day or night.  
Nobody could sleep. Grandma said they must go up the mountains. We took them  
on a long walk up there and threw them on a thorn bush. That's where they grew  
up, in the mountains

'Chilli'

It is a stylistic choice that they didn't scream 'in pain'. They are not described with words like 'suffering' or 'annoying'. The statement that there is screaming suffices. What is done to the screaming children is not described as 'cruel', 'heartless', 'callous'. It suffices to say they were thrown on a thorn bush. It is not even necessary to say they survived, nor that they raised themselves with many hardships, that they lived a lonely life – these are sentiments implicit in the simple phrase, "they grew up, in the mountains." While here the style is at work as a matter of course, this thing-focused brevity can lead to elegant dramatic effects, as in 'Fruit' where the simple line, "The unripe cornstalk grows brown and dry." has extensive tragic implications. From these few simple and direct words we understand that Grandmother believes her grandchildren, along with her children, have died.

Norinaga also grounds ethics in this empathy for things:

Furthermore, what we call poetry does not simply set the heart free spontaneously, emerging when one is overwhelmed by *mono no aware*. [ . . . ]. Whenever one is moved by seeing or hearing something strange, or frightful, or funny he necessarily wants to share his feelings with others; it is difficult for him to keep them to himself [ . . . ]. To make other people listen is not something done on special occasions; it is the essence of poetry [ . . . ]. Even if one discloses his feelings to another person, it is of no avail if that person is not moved [ . . . ]. Accordingly, the fundamental thing in poetry is to have someone listening and feeling *aware*.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 192-193.

This ethical relation is a presupposition of the intention of poetry to invoke pathos in a reader. Norinaga argues that the origin and the cause of poetry, and the ethos of good poetry, is being moved by things to an irresistible or uncontainable utterance, such as when we sigh at some melancholy scene. One of the functions of poetry is, like the sigh, to alleviate suffering through expression, and through the pleasure and consolation of shared experience. This 'ethical' aspect of Norinaga's poetics resonates with the ethical intentions of *Ordinary Things* discussed in the previous chapter, particularly in so far as Norinaga draws a distinction between this 'ethical' quality of poetry and didactic or moralising poetry, as described in his essay on love poems:

In any case, poetry responds to external reality when one's feelings are stirred up [...]. The real intent of poetry is not to choose and decide what is improper and what is questionable. Poetry is unrelated to teaching; its main purpose is the articulation of *mono no aware*. As poetry belongs to a different category than politics and ethics, it ignores the good and the bad, no matter what these may be.<sup>128</sup>

It is important to note that the apparent contradiction in the word 'ethics' here is only a matter of definition and usage. As is often the case in English, the translation uses 'ethics' to mean something similar to 'moral' or 'didactic', rather than the way I have used it to relate to interactions between Self and Other, involving signification, pathos, strangeness, potential violence and so on – concepts more akin Norinaga's discussion of *mono no aware*. Norinaga's theory is that poetry is 'Ethical' in so far as it involves the problematics of signifying pathos through a mutually experienced world between two differing people, without being didactic. (Ironically, he teaches that this is how Japanese poetry is and how it *should* be, and that it is superior to Chinese poetry because of this distinction.)

In *Ordinary Things* individuals are not depicted as representations of what people should or shouldn't do, nor are they set up as victims as a pretext for a one-sided moral argument. Rather, I have attempted to present individuals with their own reactions to circumstances. They are situated in relation to an identity rather than being an identity. Perhaps the best example of this is in the allusions made to Mishima's 'Patriotism' and the expectation of women, during World War II, to have sex with departing soldiers.<sup>129</sup> Mishima's *Patriotism* presents his moral view of what a man of martial honour should do when one aspect of his

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<sup>128</sup> Motoori Norinaga. "On Love Poems." *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: a hermeneutical journey*. Trans. Michael F Marra. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. 197.

<sup>129</sup> *Patriotism*. Dir. Yukio Mishima. 1966.

moral code conflicts with another. His partner also is expected to depart this world with her lover, and their final moments to be erotically charged by their impending death. We can easily imagine that when a young woman's lover is departing for a war in which he may well die their final night together might be equally charged. In some sense the Japanese couple Chiyo and Kentaro do represent a 'typical' Japanese experience of Modernisation (going through the conflicts of tradition and modernity in the Meiji era, post-World War II disillusionment, and so on) according to Japanese literary history, but *Ordinary Things* adds personal idiosyncrasies and atypical experiences to situate them in relation to that 'typical' experience, rather than set them up merely as exemplars of it. In contrast to the eroticism of impending honourable death in Mishima's *Patriotism*, Chiyo cannot feel passion towards her lover as he departs for war precisely because that is what is expected of her.<sup>130</sup> They reject the obligations to work at farm and factory, and instead immigrate to the Amazon. There, rather than be the diligent workers they are expected, as Asians, to be, they flee to open a cantina in Iquitos. *Ordinary Things* attempts always to portray individuals, not as types, but as situated in relation to expectations and constructions of identities which they accept, reject or modify; Kentaro and Chiyo may be Japanese, but they are not merely Japanese, they are Kentaro and Chiyo.

The many ways that Kentaro and Chiyo are caught up and respond to global political and economic events beyond their control resonates with the themes of modernisation and cybernetics discussed earlier in 'Cybernetics'. The era they live in, the end of the Meiji and through the mid-twentieth century, is ideally suited for illustrating these themes, bringing to the fore not merely modernity but the transition to modernity. The Meiji era in particular is well known as an extraordinarily quick political, cultural and economic transformation, in which Japan moved from centuries of isolation to being a global superpower. Because the change was so rapid, what has changed, what characterises modernity, is brought into sharp relief, as exemplified in Chiyo's debt bondage to the silk factory in 'Hungry Ghosts'. The later difficulties Kentaro has in trying to avoid the soldier and salaryman roles established for him re-iterate the theme of working to pay off debt as the primary means of governing behaviour in a modernised society.

Norinaga also poses and answers the question of why, when using things to invoke pathos, ordinary language is not sufficient. Norinaga suggests that the 'patterns' of poetry aren't decorative or forced, but that being moved to speak through depth of feeling results in poetry – the words come of necessity, as an outburst we are moved to, rather than being

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

contrived. Even if someone says a single word, their emotional state will cause it to have some complex pattern beyond the way it is normally uttered – it may be a long drawn out plaintive word. This difference, the 'pattern' of poetry, its elaborateness or 'non-ordinariness', contribute to its effect, as he describes while explaining *mono no aware*:

The person who listens to ordinary language is only mildly moved, no matter how moving the event he is witnessing might be. On the other hand, there is no limit to the depth of what he feels when words come with an ornate pattern [...]. At this juncture his words take on a meaning that is different from what they mean in ordinary language, thus showing the bottomless depth of *aware* in the patterns of natural expression and in the long lasting rhythm of the voice.<sup>131</sup>

Effectively, Norinaga is giving an account of a form of *ostranenie* – the poetic pattern of language prevents us from experiencing it in a 'shallow', 'background' or 'automated' way, compelling us to focus on it, and experience it more 'deeply'. As well as the general stylistic approach of *mono no aware* applied in *Ordinary Things* the practice of de-automating ordinary things to establish 'deeper' ethical meaning can also be regarded as an application of 'mono no aware'.

In *The Box Man*, post-war avant-garde author Kobo Abe articulates how objects become aesthetic when the viewer forgets their intended use or purpose. One thing is no more useful than another if one is not preoccupied with some objective for which something might be useful. Kobo Abe makes this explicit early in *The Box Man*:

When anyone comes into contact with the scenery around him, he tends to see selectively only those elements necessary. For example, though one remembers a bus stop, one can have absolutely no recollection of a large willow tree nearby ... However, as soon as one looks out of the box's observation window, things appear to be quite different. The various details of the scenery become homogenous, have equal significance. Cigarette butts ... the sticky secretion in a dog's eyes ... the windows of a two-story house with the curtains waving ... the creases in a flattened drum... rings biting into flabby fingers... railroad tracks leading into the distance... sacks of cement hardened because of moisture... dirt under the fingernails... loose manhole covers... but I am fond of such scenery.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Motoori Norinaga. 'On Mono no Aware' op. cit., 189.

<sup>132</sup> Kobo Abe. *The Box Man*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1974. 41-42.



Here the traditional Japanese appreciation for the pathos of humble, old and worn things is adapted to the contemporary context and applied to the dross of modernity. This is mirrored in the chapter 'Depreciation' where 'you', who analogously was also once a useful thing that has become useless, recognises the aesthetic values of the things around him, and so also begins the restoration of himself, not as useful, but as himself. As discussed earlier in relation to Heidegger in the chapter 'Cybernetics', this attention to the 'pathos of things' occurs to the main character in 'Depreciation'. Elements of Abe's *The Box Man* (above) are re-used in 'Depreciation':

Since nothing was useful to you any more you saw things you had never seen before. You would see the bus stop and the willow tree beside it. The number on the bus was no more important than the black smudge in the shape of a hat on its fender, the price of something no more or less significant than the dent in the stainless steel rail beside the conveyor belt.

You saw things, beautiful things: a rubber glove with a missing finger, cement that had gotten wet and hardened in the bag, an umbrella with holes in it, a folded piece of aluminium siding.

The washing up glove was difficult to ignore. It reminded you of your daughter.

'Depreciation'

This passage is layered with multiple meanings. It is a reference to Kobo Abe's *The Box Man* and so it is a contemporary application of a long Japanese tradition of intertextuality.<sup>133</sup> It is a Heideggerian emergence of things from the background when their usefulness is disrupted and an account of *ostranenie* towards ordinary things. It is breakdown of the individual's usefulness as an object within a global economic system, part of a process of reclaiming subjectivity and ethical interactions. It is a description of the main character experiencing *mono no aware*.

Norinaga highlights the limitations that cultural background places on the capacity to experience things empathically with others. As Michael Marra notes,

In Japan, the issue of 'common sense' reached a peak in the philosophy of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), for whom the stability of a society was based on a shared cultural experience that would elicit common emotional responses from like-

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<sup>133</sup> Abe, Kobo. *The Box Man*. Op. cit.

minded people – what he called *mono no aware*, or the knowledge of being moved by external reality.<sup>134</sup>

In attempting to recover a distinctively Japanese poetry, Norinaga regularly contrasts it with Chinese poetry, attempting to remove centuries of Chinese influence from Japanese literature:

Words, ideas, and objects are things in accord with one another, so that the ancient period had its words, ideas, and things, and the later periods have their words, ideas, and things, and China had its words, ideas, and things. But the *Nihon shoki* took the words of later age and wrote of the ancient period and the words of China and wrote of the imperial land."

However, the *Kojiki*

[...] just inscribed what was passed from the ancient age, and so its words, ideas, and things are in accord with one another, and everything reveals the truth of that age.<sup>135</sup>

The dependence of mutual comprehensibility on mutual experience and shared history appears to establish an unbridgeable cultural rift. People growing up in tropical Queensland will have a different sensibility towards autumn leaves and mangos to people growing up in temperate Okayama. My ability to use 'autumn leaf' as a sign invoking a cognitive or emotional response in another person is limited by these differences. The shared experience and assumptions of a culture enable mutual intelligibility and the empathic experience of things – and so also the appreciation of poetry. However, Norinaga acknowledges that this shared experience is not necessarily exact and absolute:

Therefore, to the extent that every living creature has the ability to discern the nature of things, albeit in different degrees and has the knowledge of being either joyful or sad, they all have songs in themselves [...]. Even among human beings there are deep thinkers and shallow thinkers.<sup>136</sup>

For Norinaga then, people, even animals have a capacity for *mono no aware*, for experiencing and communicating the pathos of things, but our ability to do this a matter of degree. If

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<sup>134</sup> Michael F. Marra. *Essays on Japan: between aesthetics and literature*. Op. cit.. 287.

<sup>135</sup> Susan Burns. "The Kokugaku (Native Studies) School." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2008). Accessed 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/kokugaku-school/>.

<sup>136</sup> Motoori Norinaga. "On Mono no Aware." Op. cit.. 173.

our experiences differ because of our different background and experiences, they can also be similar. Alterity is not absolute. *Ordinary Things* explores this shared pathos and these similarities and differences, drawing parallels in the main narrative thread with and between the stories set in particular histories.

In the the framing narrative of the chapter 'Japanese Graphic Design', for example, reflections on 'your' grandfather's stories of the war are later drawn on to describe Kentaro's war time experiences.

He didn't speak much about the war. Late one night, sitting by the kerosene burner in his dressing gown with a cup of tea, he said he watched his friend get shot off a bridge and fall into the river. He wasn't killed instantly by the shot. He was shot and drowning to death at the same time. Dying two deaths ... He took you to Westfield Shopping town to buy a model Vought Corsair and stopped and stood for a moment in the middle of it, looking around at the shops and people and said if you used a flamethrower in here, all the way up to the supermarket at the end, all these people, and he shook his head.

'Two Pines'

These recollections of your grandfather become recollections of Kentaro in the section 'Burning Mansion' in the chapter 'Two Pines' as he sits in the noodle bar:

Kentaro took careful aim and shot. It was a good shot and the man tumbled into the river. Kentaro saw that he was still alive but not strong enough to swim. The opposite bank was silent. He watched the man die a double death, shot and drowning ... Kentaro avoided looking at the other customers, looking at the laminex bench, the pickled ginger pot and soy sauce bottle. They came and swept the flamethrower through the whole noodle bar. The customers opposite screamed, arching their backs, running and rolling and writhing, and that group of three students in the booth over there too, the busboy, the cooks in the kitchen. The whole place flooded in flame and stinking black smoke. The laminex melting to the floor, the chopsticks in the container gone like matchsticks. That's how it would be if they let one of those things off in here.

These enemy soldiers have at least this much in common: horrific memories of what they did and what was done to them in the same war. In this chapter 'you' also shares commiserations about racism, war and unemployment with 'your' Japanese flatmate, but 'your' views on working for a Japanese graphic design company differ:

Later he got a job at a Japanese graphic design company a few blocks away. He didn't want to work in Japan or for a Japanese company. Too strict. Your whole life planned out. That's why he left Japan and came here but he was flat broke and had no choice. They got him in the end.

This contrasts with 'your' valorised perception of Japanese graphic design and the authenticity and respectable discipline working for them would give 'you':

And since every Graphic Design job required 3 years experience to apply, how else could you ever get to work in Graphic Design but through some freak of luck like this? It was a one and only chance. And if it's true about all that Japanese discipline you'd get some serious, proper skills to shut up any condescending bastard who thought you're some half baked two bit wannabe. Like those wood block prints, imagine if you could do those prints [...]. Finally a job you could have loved, not the telemarketing purgatory the DSS sent you to all the time, but you blew it.

Later in the chapter 'Employment' 'you' recognise that despite 'your' best efforts 'you' have become a salaryman anyway. Like 'your' flatmate, 'they got you in the end':

You tried not to stare across the bar at the three tired men in business shirts and loose ties. The youngest heaped pickled ginger onto his noodles. The middle read a paper. The eldest still wore his suit jacket and simply ate. They were arranged as comic strip titled, "Lifecycle of the Salaryman". The bar might as well be a magic mirror reflecting you in time instead of space.

This reflection also occurs across the regions and places of historic digressions in *Ordinary Things*. By adapting stories by Soseki (Japan) and Tutuola (Nigeria) I was able to speak about post-traumatic stress through a fictional individual, to work against the violence of silence, at an appropriate remove from actual individuals' own private experiences which are theirs to speak of if they so choose. In both Soseki's 3<sup>rd</sup> Night of his *10 Nights of Dream*<sup>137</sup> and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*<sup>138</sup> story, a supernatural child clings to the character's shoulders, an insistent burden that controls their movements, directing them. In Soseki, the child directs the narrator to a confrontation with a repressed incident. As an example, the following passages from Tutuola and Soseki were both sources for the excerpt from 'Ash Child' below:

<sup>137</sup> Soseki Natsume. *Ten Nights Of Dream*. Rutland: Charles E Tuttle Company, 1974.

<sup>138</sup> Amos Tutuola. *The Palm Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. New York: Grove Press, 1984.

Then he was telling my wife to take him along with us, to wait and take him, but as we did not stop and take him with us, he then commanded that our eyes should be blinded and we became blinded at the same moment as he said it [...].<sup>139</sup>

Tutuola in *The Palm Wine Drunkard*

"Why are you laughing?" I asked him. There was no answer to my question. Instead he said, "Am I heavy for you, Father?" I answered no. And he said, "I think I will be heavier soon."<sup>140</sup>

Soseki in *10 Nights of Dream*

Afraid, she tried to run away but it blinded her and said, "Take me with you." Still she tried to run away, but it choked her breath and said, "Take me with you." She returned. The child climbed up and clung to her back.

[...]

When they came into the fields, just as she began to wonder if she could let the child down to the ground and rest it asked, "Why? Am I heavy?"

"No." she replied, embarrassed that the child might think she wasn't strong enough.

It laughed and said, "Soon enough I'll be heavy."

'Ash Child'

By combining Soseki and Tutuola's stories I arrived at a means of slowly building tension and describing the psychological process in which a woman confronts a repressed incident of violence during the Congo Free State era in the chapter 'Ash Child'. While nominally set in the Congo Free State it could, analogously, take place in the present conflict.

Japanese poetry has long been extremely intertextual and dialogical. Poetry was often composed as a dialogue with two poets, friends or lovers exchanging short poems, or playing the game of taking turns to write lines. A famous story says that the poet Ono No Komachi, frequently referenced in theatre, literature and visual arts, once composed a poem by changing only one word of a poem that had been sent to her.<sup>141</sup> Among Norinaga's major works is the *Sedge Hat Diary*, in which he makes a literary pilgrimage to Yoshino, visiting sites mentioned in ancient poetry along the way, and composing his own poems in response. It is a journey through the past as much as it is through space. Michael

<sup>139</sup> Amos Tutuola. *The Palm Wine Drunkard and My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*. Op. cit.. 219.

<sup>140</sup> Natsume Soseki. *Ten Nights Of Dream*. Op. cit.. 34-38.

<sup>141</sup> Ono no Komachi. *Poems, Stories, No Plays*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1993.

F. Marra in his essay "The Hermeneutical Challenge" brings out this common literary practice well in citing three poems by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), Saigyō Hōshi (1118-1190) and Sone Yoshisada, (ca. 985) that reference the same experience of sitting under a willow tree in the same location across seven centuries.<sup>142</sup>

I waited them [sic] to sow the whole field  
 Then I got up and left  
 -Oh, that famous willow!

Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)

In this willow's shade,  
 where the refreshingly clear stream  
 flows on by the wayside,  
 thinking, 'it will be only for a brief moment,'  
 I stood rooted to it.

Saigyō Hōshi (1118-1190)

While getting used to these summer robes  
 I came to the cool side  
 of the willows shade  
 on the Tatsuta riverbank.

Sone Yoshisada (ca. 985)

While these three poems are original works of their author, originality or novelty is not their principle preoccupation. While each has a different form (Bashō is renowned for popularising, as a master, the *new* 'Haiku' form), the purposes of these forms is not to trumpet a revolutionary replacement of old with new, but to refine and perfect the same ideals of poetic expression, such as brevity and directness. Bashō's haiku is even briefer and more direct than Hoshi's waka. They each refer to the same experience, each author finding their own words, within poetic convention, to refine the articulation of the same sentiment. Each experience is, none the less, not identical but modified, precisely because of its

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<sup>142</sup> Michael Marra. *Essays on Japan: between aesthetics and literature*. Op. cit.. 286.

iteration.<sup>143</sup> The salient point of the later two is their relationship to the first. The last poem has little meaning without the existence of the earlier two, with its reference to the willow as 'famous': the point of the poem is an appreciation of how Bashō has re-articulated an erudite reference. The reader is expected to be aware of the previous poems. Each poem adds to and refines the same experience. Each poet shares the experience of the other, across the ages, at the 'same' site and with us, empathically by the use of a few simple tangible words. Where Yoshisada signals the season, and so the physical experience of it, with 'summer robes', Bashō signals it with the early summer activity of sowing. Where Hoshi remains 'rooted' despite intending his rest to be brief, Bashō signals the length of time through waiting for the *whole* field to be sown. Most likely we all can remember or imagine this common experience of resting under a tree, by a cool stream, still getting accustomed to the heat of summer after the cold of winter or of intending to rest only a little while but staying a while longer. The purpose of these 'original' poems is in variation, reference and response, dialogue, refinement and the empathy of shared experience; we can share in some transcendence of time, of our own mortality, by partaking in poetry.

In seeking to be influenced by the sources of rubber tires this aspect of Japanese literature is one of the most important influences on *Ordinary Things*. This focus on allusion rather than authorial genius is itself in sympathy with the intention of being influenced by the source. It is sympathetic with 'ethical writing' as discussed in previous chapters – the 'shared experience' of Norinaga's poetics. Allusion and association across history and among people is the main technique by which meaning is interleaved, or read into, ordinary things in *Ordinary Things*, in sympathy with Norinaga's *mono no aware*, 'the pathos of things'.

The transcendence of time is another recurring theme in Japanese poetry. An epithet for poetry is 'wind in pine needles': pine, as an evergreen, traditionally represents permanence in contrast to ephemeral cherry blossoms. In 'Japanese Graphic Design' the main character recollects the Noh play *Unrin-In* that makes the point explicit. (The Noh play *Unrin In* is regularly adapted in the narrative of Chiyo and Kentaro):

This play, Unrin-in, about the ancient poems, Tales of Ise, has been performed in  
this way, witnessed by audiences, for centuries. In that liminal state you understood

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<sup>143</sup> Nothing is the same a subsequent time, even if it is only because the context changes. This paradox of identity and change across iterations in time is well expressed in another poem,

Is this the same moon?  
Is this the same Spring  
as that Spring long ago?  
Only I am the same.

Ariwira No Narihira (McCullough, 1968)

that without you, without the performer and the witness here and now, re-enacting this ritual, without you and him, it won't exist anymore. You are humble and important at the same time. Afterwards you read a translation and learned that this was the intention of the dance, the embodied spirit of Ariwara No Narihira says, "Like the stories of the Tales of Ise, this dream dance transcends time..."

'Japanese Graphic Design'

The idea that the individual can participate in something greater than themselves, something with a longevity far beyond one's own lifespan, at the same time as being essential and necessary to it, can be extended to other arts and to culture in general. Without our own empathic experience of it, and our own continued practice of it, as performer or audience, an aesthetic thing or practice ceases to exist. This theme recurs across cultures. In Luba, myth and history are passed down in written and oral literature, inscribed into important rituals and social structures, into initiation ceremonies and into people's bodies. In the *Popul Vuh* the children of Hunahpu, in the underworld of the death lords, resurrect Hunahpu and preserve his memory and his word. The children of Hunahpu do not simply perpetuate him in flesh, but his *word* lives on through them. This is a climactic point in the section of the *Popul Vuh* in *Ordinary Things*, and is reflected in the framing narrative in the main character's preoccupations with death and memory and with what is passed on from grandparent to parent and parent to child. Culture is life's answer to death. Each of us is both humbled by our smallness in relation to traditions that go beyond our short lifespan and affect so many others, as well as being critically important as the vessel of culture. It would not exist without us.

As Norinaga observed, one of the extraordinary aspects of poetry is that empathy with others can be experienced across hundreds and thousands of years through shared experience of landscape, tradition, literature and other arts. *Ordinary Things* regularly digresses across time and space, through the devices of travel and history and importantly through literary allusions from the modern to the ancient. These allusions operate on large and small scales: for example, crossroads are points where this world intersects with the spirit world and/or the dead in transatlantic African and Mesoamerican religions. By alluding to this in different stories they become connected, reciprocally building layers of significance:



She walked on and on through the night. "There should be a crossroads near here." the ash child said and she came to a crossroads. She stopped.

"Go to the left," the child said but in that direction the road lead into a forest, darkened with more shadows than any other road and any of the forest she had so far come through.

'Ash Child'

One road is yellow, one red, one white and one black. Not knowing which way to go we look around and at each other. The owls are nowhere. "Whichever way we go, this is the beginning of the end," my brother says. A voice comes down the black road, saying, "I am the road you must take." We look at each other. There's no other choice. We go down the black road, walking all night.

'Corn'

"... If anyone flinched, they'd know he'd been in the army, so they took him into the jungle and cut off his head."

You didn't go any further south. Instead you got in the car again and when you came to a T-junction, your dad asked you, "Right or left?"

"I don't have the map. Where are we going anyway?"

"We'll see when we get there. Now, right or left?"

'Travelling Home'

These repetitions and associations establish roads and crossroads as a motif of *Ordinary Things*, taking on greater metaphoric significance each time. It is an example of how throughout *Ordinary Things* themes and allusions connect points in the narrative across time and space. This occurs between the framing narrative and historic digressions, among historic digressions, and across literary traditions in a potentially endless world and age spanning dialogue. The chapter titled 'Hungry Ghost' is accompanied by a drawing of Pacman and a ghost from the game. Pacman is an abstract representation of pure hunger – nothing more than a mouth, constantly performing only one action: eating. Read as glyphs, Pacman and the ghost say 'Hungry Ghost', establishing a connection to the Buddhist myth

of hungry ghosts, highlighting the interplay of the modern and the traditional, the myth and the mundane.<sup>144</sup> With much of Chiyo and Kentaro's story being about hunger and food, Pacman comes to be representative of the human condition, of our common basic need for food, and of the Buddhist view of suffering as desire. With Chiyo reflecting Ono no Komachi, the 'Pacman' scene parallels the story, retold in many forms, of 'Komachi on the Stupa'.<sup>145</sup> Ono no Komachi, in her old age, sits on a stone stupa and is asked to move by a zealous monk. Ono engages in a debate with him. "Tiresome priests and your sermons!" she complains, and demonstrates that everything is the 'Buddha body', that there is no difference between this stone, the elements or flowers that fall from a tree, such that the monk should not be so attached to this particular stone. The monk acknowledges his error and presses her to reveal who she is. As an old and poor woman who was once a brilliant poet, beautiful courtesan and capricious lover, Ono no Komachi is a symbol of impermanence. She confuses the monk by saying she is not Ono no Komachi, because Ono no Komachi is the person everyone knows of: a young brilliant poet, beautiful courtesan and capricious lover, and remains so in everyone's mind. She is no longer that woman.

While I can't expect all readers to recognise all these references, I hope to establish a situation that reflects the experience of an outsider reading Japanese texts. An Ukiyo-e print, for example, is appreciable at face value: it is aesthetically pleasing; the skill of the artist is clearly evident. The more one learns, however, the deeper and more profound its meaning becomes: as one learns the story depicted, its spiritual or mundane meaning, the ways the same subject matter has been treated in poems, theatre and so on. *Ordinary Things* I hope makes references that readers will continue reading beyond *Ordinary Things* in a feedback loop where reading things, texts and history enhances the appreciation of each.

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<sup>144</sup> Hungry Ghosts reside in the space between hell and earth, tormented by insatiable hunger for things that are revolting, such as human flesh and faeces. Their narrow throats make it painful to eat. They are depicted in the Japanese National Treasure *Gaki Zoshi* ('*Gaki Zoshi*' (*Scroll Of The Hungry Ghosts*) in *Kyoto: e-Museum, National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties of National Museums* (Kyoto: Kyoto National Museum 2013). Accessed 2011. <http://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/syuzou/meihin/kaiga/emaki/item03.html> Hungry Ghosts are brilliantly referenced in Kon Ichikawa's film about the Japanese retreat in the Philippines (*Fires On The Plain* directed by Kon Ichikawa, (1959)).

<sup>145</sup> Kan'ami Kiyotsugu. "Komachi on the Stupa (Sotoba Komachi)." *Poems, Stories, No Plays*. Ono no Komachi. Trans. Roy E. Teele et al. New York: Garland Publishing, 1993. 185 and 193. See also, "The Arguments Of Komachi (Komachi Uta Araso)" Ibid. 67-8.; and Kan'ami Kiyotsugu. "Sotoba Komachi." *Anthology of Japanese Literature to the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Donald Keene. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978. 255-261.



Author's drawing of Yoshitoshi's Ukiyo-e of Ariwara no Narihira<sup>146</sup>

Japanese literature is richly intertextual across genres and media. The famous poet Ono no Komachi, for example, features in several Noh plays that focus on her transformation from a fickle young courtesan to enlightenment in old age. *Ordinary Things* includes a tracing of Yoshitoshi's Ukiyo-e print of Ariwara no Narihira (above) which is also about Ono no Komachi.<sup>147</sup> Ukiyo-e prints are meant to be 'read', not simply because they usually contain some text as an interpretive clue, such as a line from a poem, but because they contain multiple layers of meaning. They reference stories and poems that provide their interpretation, and these stories may have philosophical messages which are then also read in the print. The inset print depicts a story about the poet Ariwara no Narihira (825-880). The story is that, one evening, while on a journey across the pampas grass filled Musashi plain, Ariwara no Narihira stopped to rest for the night near where Ono no Komachi was said to have died. In the darkness he heard a voice in the breeze. Listening closely he made out the first few lines of a waka. When he investigated the source he found a skull with pampas grass growing through its eyes, recognised the transience of existence and

<sup>146</sup> Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales*. Ed. John Stevenson. Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. "New Forms of Thirty-six Strange Things." *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales*. Ed. John Stevenson. Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005. Plate 24.

completed the waka. For the informed reader this print depicts Ono no Komachi as much as Ariwara no Narihira, and brings to mind the wealth of poetry and philosophical allegory associated with them. The story is referenced in the story of Kentaro and Chiyo, in the section 'Pampas Reeds' of the chapter 'Hungry Ghosts', where it is the skull in the grass reciting poetry that prompts Kentaro to travel to Unrin In, meeting Chiyo on the way.

In 'Japanese Graphic Design' this image establishes a connection from the main narrative – where 'you' and his flatmate have differing responses to the prospect of working for a Japanese graphic design company – to the stories of Kentaro and Chiyo. This chapter also concludes with 'your' chance purchase of *Ise Monogatari*, an anonymous text generally attributed to Ariwara no Narihira, as a way out of the drudgery of the suburbs. It also includes anecdotes of 'your' experience watching the Japanese Noh Play *Unrin-In* about a young man encountering the spirit of Ariwara no Narihira.<sup>148</sup>

These elements of a long literary tradition, from various media, are brought together in the stories of Chiyo and Kentaro, through repeated allusions to, among other things, the poets Ono no Komachi and Ariwara no Narihira. It is among pine trees (traditionally signifying timelessness) for example, that Kentaro, half asleep, first hears a mysterious distant voice from the Pampas reeds, and, mindful of *Ise Monogatari*, leaves his village. On his way to the temple, he meets Chiyo, the silk reel girl. This parallels the thread of the Noh play *Unrin-In*, in which a young man travels to the shrine Unrin-In and encounters the spirit of Ariwara no Narihira, who reveals the secret that it was he who wrote *Ise Monogatari*.<sup>149</sup> When Kentaro dies, the aged Chiyo wanders aimlessly into the countryside, into Pampas reeds where she calls Kentaro's name, bringing their story full circle and placing it outside of time, just as Noh theatre is intended to invoke timelessness. Noh has been performed the same way for hundreds of years, and regularly reminds us that, in contrast to our ephemeral lives, poetry transcends time. As Kentaro recites to Chiyo, quoted from *Unrin In*, in the chapter *Hungry Ghost*:

The evening's dance transforms the time

time passes in the evening's dance ...

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<sup>148</sup> "Unrin-In." *Twelve Plays of the Noh and Kyogen Theatre*. Ed. Karen Brazell. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University East Asia Papers, Cornell University, 1990.

<sup>149</sup> Allusions in the Chiyo and Kentaro story are not limited to texts relating to these two poets. Their first erotic encounter is adapted from the film "Tampopo" [*Tampopo* directed by Juzo Itami (1985, Ronin Films; Masterpiece Collection, 1990), DVD], the egg being all the more charged as it is a time of famine. Chiyo's conversations with other silk reel workers are adapted from the poems of actual silk reel workers. [Patricia E Tsurumi. *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990].

There is no telling this tale to an end.

The needles of the pine tree

never become scattered and lost ...<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> “Unrin-In.” Op. cit.

## Conclusion

In Norinaga's poetics of things there is both history and timelessness. *Ordinary Things* attempts to achieve such a duality. Rather than generating meaning through plot or narrating a history, it builds layers of meaning into ordinary things through intertextual allusion and historical reference, invoking a sense of timeless immanence in scenes from that history. I anticipate that a reader of this book, when driving their car or riding their bike to work, will contemplate their rubber tires and the many, many stories that can be traced through them. There is a non-fiction genre of showing how fascinating ordinary things can be, such as *Salt*<sup>151</sup> and *The Box*,<sup>152</sup> but these factual, historical accounts can re-enforce a comfortable distance from the commodity or thing. Simply narrating a history is interesting and worthwhile but allows the reader to gloss over the full extent of catastrophes, such as the death of 5 or 10 million people, while rationalising the causes and consequences of historic events. Presenting an individual in that situation encourages us to imagine ourselves in that situation, to consider the full scale and impact on individual lives, beyond a merely rational response. Living in a time of war, famine and natural disasters, the poet Chomei wrote, "Every catastrophe has a personal scale."<sup>153</sup> *Ordinary Things* presents vignettes, memories, imaginations, snapshots of times and places, of individual people in situations, invoking pathos. Despite Norinaga's nationalistic and purist ideals, the cybernetic, ethical, literary techniques, traditions, intertextual structures and *ostranenie*, of *Ordinary Things* could be summarised with his phrase *mono no aware*. These are only some among many frames of reference for reading *Ordinary Things*. Each is a place at which reading may begin and as each leads to each other, deep layers of meaning resonate with each other. As *Ordinary Things* is a reading of ordinary things, ordinary things likewise are resonant with meanings.

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<sup>151</sup> Mark Kurlansky. *Salt: a world history*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2002.

<sup>152</sup> Marc Levinson. *The Box: how the shipping container made the world smaller and the world economy bigger*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>153</sup> Kamo no Chomei. *Notebook of a ten square rush-mat sized world*. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1979.

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