

Brine

Campbell Meas

The heat creeps, finger by finger—clawing across the treacle rug—her ankle exposed, a slow and steady pulse clear—a homing beacon. The creaking wood had felt glacial underfoot when she first stepped into the room carrying a squirming bundle that cooed against the sleep her mother was trying to rock her into. On the rug she had found respite for her stockinged feet, having left the dusty heels at the door, she didn't want to walk death into the room with her. It had followed all week and here in his office, where his proud … tired body had been found slumped in the armchair, she could instead sit with her regrets and converse with his.

Heavy darkness is what she wrapped herself in, the crackling of tinder and crumbling coal starting a tune she couldn't follow along to—her eyes straining to read her own handwriting—*what was I saying here?* Maybe three or four lines back—there she would find the trail, something to grasp onto and this time she'd promise to follow the thread. She searched her own words for a way to fill the gap—a quarrel that had grown into a rift that reconciliation couldn't find six feet under.

The light the infant fire promised eventually arrived; the darkness envious at how she seemed to shift in her seat with relief. Her stillness had not been a sign she was content in the dark but rather betrayed her fear to tread in it.

Here on the floor she—a glacier crumbling under the weight of her own sadness, struggled to move further away from the heat she was tentatively waiting to feel—to put even more distance between herself and the things he last touched. You would think—I mean you would think returning this time would be easier; that the separation, the choppy videos, the missed calls and the texts unsent—not because of unsure fingers but rather bad signal—would all compress into a bursting that they both would give in to. He would fall into the familiar step of guilt tripping, and she wouldn't reach out for a helping hand when scraping her knees—*what was I saying here dammit?*

But not this time. This time, the separation had only cemented the chill in the air that had been growing all these months. The budding heat unwavering in its mission clasped at her ankle. It came unexpected; she had been sitting there longer than she realised. But to move, now? Impossible. Close to calling out for a hand to help her up, she stilled that voice. The voice he had taught her to use unashamedly—getting her practice in, slicing barbs at him from a young age; he would laugh at her cheek, until she began drawing blood. That voice was last heard spewing out of her gut when Matthew had stood and without a skip in his tune casually credited himself for work she had spent hours away from her family hypothesising and confirming. She had just got the news, Matthew not getting out of the way in time, she loosed the acidic sadness on him until he, red-faced, blue-veined and defeated, retreated into the bottom cabins and she staring at the glare of the cold recognised its violence.

She could hear the other voices in the other rooms—the other conversations she would miss and have to smile meekly through the next time they were brought up as a secret handshake between their speakers. She hated those conversations the most. Having to pretend that it was easy sitting, fiddling with her earring, through rehashings of commiserations already spoken. What new thing could truly be gleaned from words already partnered together, forced to link arms in an attempt to relay a fumbling point to begin with? This thought, like the Antarctic wind shearing across

her face—became necessary to understand where she was in the scheme of things. Without the wind how could she know they had reached the right pole—the peace of the Arctic frightened her. Here in his room her thoughts knocked against the walls holding the amber shadows of a fire growing confident that the slack remains of a previous day could sustain it.

The beating of the pulse in her ankle quickened—the only signal she trusted when she was back home. Her daughter stirred in the bassinet near the family photos he had put up so proudly—her daughter would awake every afternoon to aunts and uncles looking past her to the minibar that emptied quicker and with growing desperation. Elders frozen in poses that belied their own past carelessness were watching the single set of hands that grabbed, staggered, quietly slipped out bottle after bottle … they were watching those hands. Those same hands that never picked up her daughter as quickly as those hands used to. And so, this time as her daughter awoke and once again saw the now fire agitated faces of aunts and uncles hovering on the wall above, the baby in the bassinet didn't cry, the crying never made the hands come faster. Ignoring the soldering warmth that was now leaning into her, her ankle began to throb at the heat that was only interested in ensuring she stayed awake. The bottle that glowed green was only interested in putting her to sleep—her daughter sat up right in her bassinet—she was only interested in following along to the song the fire now sang.

Her stomach cramped. A good sign? The voices were dying down their polite sobriety that was a necessary performance when mourning—now they picked up in revelry and joyous cracking of memories of the dead one. They could be heard drilling down, doing their best to get the core of the story that would bring as much laughter and patting on the back as was needed for comfort—*no no: he was an academic at heart, his wife just happened to have a lot of friends—yes yes: she was always his favourite but why with a mouth like that, couldn't they have taught her better manners—maybe maybe: if he hadn't smoked as much we'd be celebrating baby's second birthday instead—poor baby, stuck with a mother like that*—the voices were incessant and so she knew she wasn't leaving this room

any time soon. She looked over at his regrets, the drafts of the third dissertation he was struggling to focus on. His wedding ring that had rolled into an unswept corner, she had learnt from the best to be alone. The walls shrunk even more as the heat seared closer to her than her alcohol induced state should've allowed.

Eulogy scrawled on the back of some funding proposal she was in the middle of securing, turning over from her undecipherable handwriting, she now saw how to connect the channel of SAPRI funding to community outreach—her students had always been allowed to run with their ideas, who was she to stop them when those very steps they took also illuminated more of her path. *By recycling the cylinders from last year's trip as a way to setup community water tanks, that will allow ...* Sell people small chunks of a dream that later become the steps to your pathway—when did she first have to start thinking this way? Did she think this way because of him? Had it been him that thought and spoke this way—that she started adopting it as a way to pacify the thoughts that *charity is not giving money, it's action.* His words sat awkwardly now in her numb mouth. Their new owner not quite as articulate. The memory of strangers with the same anatomical tongue but disclosing different tunes that signalled their homes were kilometres of steps away, walking tentatively through her childhood home was something to look back at later, as well as her mother's under-the-breath complaints that these grimy strangers were not the friends she happily offered tea or a beer. Her ankle or head pulsating—a warning light to get up off the rug—traverse the creaking wood floor. *Get up off the floor!*

Why was this heat interested in clinging to her, she had waited for it, needed it but now it felt too needy to deal with—it wanted her attention, to see the red dance that now accompanied its tune, a tune carried by a small voice in the bassinet. Eventually someone will fetch that small voice from the bassinet and bring it to join the other now revelrous voices in the other rooms—she'd get up to kiss her daughter's forehead as those other hands dug into the layers and layers of blankets wringing loosely around her daughter's body, chastising her for hiding the baby away from family. Those voices would coo at her—those hands would pass her around, fix

the blankets into a tight weave—these hands needed to reply to the text that came barging into the room—

"God gives his toughest battles to He's strongest warriors.
Nka etsa tsohle ka Kreste ya mphang matla … Bafilipi 4:13."

Her unsure fingers lingered atop the keyboard—she left the message and went searching for the one she had abandoned a response to—

"*When are you coming home—"*

She thought for a moment—giving the opportunity for something else to show itself as a viable response rather than the one that now sat on her shoulder watching and waiting patiently to be sent. *Ho tla hae*—coming home had always been—well it had been such a sure thing—the long-term methodology of solve insecurity as a fractal of *y* could be solved by *x*, coming home. Now though … When had she become so unsure of herself—unsure that the homing beacon that marked this place as home, was right this time—the people who populated this home were not people this home was familiar with—the people whose voices she could now hear clearly going through his drawers and cupboards in the other rooms were not the people who had asked just days ago—

"*U khutla neng, morali?"*
When are you coming home, my daughter?