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I know that the process began at the beginning but dread still cramps my heart. I have squandered time. I’ve let it run off the surface, leaving its ravages there, but allowing little to take root. I feel a child’s ignorance staring from my eyes and yet the skin everywhere is like crêpe, withered and twisting around these fine, light bones. Yes, I like my skeleton at least. If only I could miss out the beginning and take you straight to where The Spider crouches, I would. Then you might agree that there’s a point to all this. You might be more patient if I gave you a glimpse of Her straight away. But then the point of the story would cast no shadows. It’s through the shadows that I must make my point. I imagine this pleat around which everything is rotated. Which side of the mirror are you on? You might find, like Tom-Tom, that the prowler from another space, another time, is ready to make a different story out of you. That has been our problem, forgetting the prowlers. The prowlers. Like the clutch of eggs we girls are born with, there are the germs of future prowlers already locked into the information register of the DNA or whatever.

The Spider is seductive: she attracts and irreversibly recasts stories from elsewhere. She is their leader but who would know from looking at her in her indigo turban and tight coral pants, lounging against her baldaquins or autographing the fables she writes for children? She is a fabulist who shows that the imaginary is active and that with a twitch of the inner eye, the one that gambles on getting anterior life right now, the future yesterday,
the insurrectionary dreamer in residence, it can be lethal. Oh I
do know this abstractly. It's because I have to meet this
knowledge with my body that I'm trying to get all of this down
quickly. I say if you cannot dance your knowledge, the knowledge
is worth nothing. My eyes are ignorant but between the crêpe
of my skin and those spinning irises, I've seen a few things.
When I know what it is I've seen, I'll tell you first.

I start to understand why people hang on to chronology like
life itself and if the story time is given to them massive, compacted,
tangled or shredded, they strive to restore the line, as if life
itself went in one direction: what will this narrative embryo
become? There's another reason why people are inconsolable at
the death of a child. It's the end of the narrative possibilities
as they would have been lived. They fancy themselves as reliable
narrators of their child's life, at least a step ahead of their character.
What they are left with is the penury of their grief. Grief is
the devastation of imagination. This too is perhaps a reason
why I'm starting at the beginning. A child occupied by loss,
before the possibility of grief, is preoccupied by a passionate
attention to returns, resurgences, resurrections. Beginnings are
already tangled by returns.

What I really want to tell you about is Tom-Tom's obsessional
love, how she lived in the time of repetition even though repetition
is impossible. But our future cannot be built on romances. We
have to deal with the prowlers or we are lost.

Glass had always been necessary for imagination and thus for
loving. She needed a barrier, the space of museum reverence,
casting her in a different time. Let me explain her apprenticeship
in prowling as I think Tom-Tom experienced it, how she learned
the oblique gaze, the prowler's side-step. It was literally loving
herself as her neighbour. It was acquiring the habit of side-stepping
from the windows of her own life suddenly ablaze. Saying: Yes,
that's where I am; that's where we are. Like a writer, like a
future writer, you might say. No she wasn't, any more than
her neighbour, a future writer.

Pitch your iris like a coin and let it settle on a random moment.
Immediately the screen of myth comes down. Inaugurate me now,
you say to the past, give me a founding story. There's no equivalent
ever for this scene. It's condemned by its sudden emblematic
prestige to the endless fatigue of substitution.

Old, receiving as an echo in her bone the faint rhythm of
her first blood passions, Tom-Tom would watch for hours the

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banksia's bright cobs knocking at the glass, their glistening styles held captive, close. Her attention was so trained she could trace their exquisite unfurling until one, two, many, many, would tip at the glass and write a honeyed trail. They were like chameleons' tongues; she wondered about the chameleon's point of view. For the chameleon, the change of self was always the same. It thought that the world changed to suit it, perhaps. Could it tell with its taste-buds the colour of such rewarded solipsism? Tom-Tom old would watch the season through its fast-forward until the cob, still hirsute, but as in the structural memory of hair the artist draws upon, would creak open its polylabial self and speak to her. These old cobs had long since spat their seeds or popped them unwillingly in the fires that nearly took the house. Banksias knew how to live with their skeletons: on the same branches, the glowing cob, honeyed and heavy and the austere old ones like etchings waiting for developments into gaudier media. In disproportion to the stem of the tiniest seedling, the taproots were surprisingly long. They looked robust enough but their secondaries were fragile. They wore their nervous systems on the outside. The tiniest seedling thus required a massive excavation for transplantation. So she had long since let the rule of the self-sown dictate the configuration of glamorous gold and scratchy grey at the window.

With one eye a smoky green or blue, depending on the light, depending on who looked or how they remember, one eye brown but variegated as in crushed velvet or tie-dyed cloth, Tom-Tom elected once again to cast back. She tossed the green or blue iris like a coin, for her fatheree's sake. She needed to know how her rehearsals had veered into something else. When they began to mean.

Of the society of childhood she could only remember the pathetic ceremonies. She'd had the children from Lots 15 to 20 race around her bonfire to which they tossed their underpants, yelping and waving their sizzling sparklers. In some freeze-frames, she thought she could see something written in the sparklers' looping trace. Around them they sensed the old banksia cobs mumbling words without saliva, catching, tearing the syllables on their horny lips. Tom-Tom's grandmother would caution from the veranda. Her eyes were almost transparent and her hair like spun glass through the hurricane lamp. Smilingly, she'd remind them of spiders pitched between the branches, of the danger of collisions. The other children never demurred when

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Tom-Tom called the celebrations to an end, as sudden as their beginning. The celebrations, they seemed to think, celebrated nothing but their own rhythm.

A wing was added for Tom-Tom to her grandmother’s house. Was it to accommodate the prowlers? This is what she preferred to think. A rectangular protrusion, it ran through the banksias. She revered the plate-glass window where she conjured the prowlers. Mothers, fathers, delighted her in their animal proliferations: wolves, banksiamen, witches and numberless bogeymen.

The imaginary is a wild ecology respecting no boundaries; no habitat is unsuitable for the lascivious tongue of the steppenwolf, for the rancid breath of banksiamen, breaking through their carbuncular lips. Their hairiness, sighted through the glass, confirmed their taste for the hairless nudity of gumnut babies.

There was a boundary between the extension and the main body of the house. It was a draughty transversal room filled with ferns: fishbone ferns, tree ferns, maidenhair ferns, Kimberley ferns rustled in the lace of their shadows. From this space, her own room was an elsewhere. Any day at her will could contract into darkness where predatory creatures materialized in an animate frieze at her windows. The stories that she told herself were only meant as a lure, to dare them to fog the glass with their breath.

The Golden Book had a centrefold. She taped it to the outside of the window so that it looked in on her. There was the Big Bad Wolf. The mouth opened its magnetic cavern. Blood filled the room. The long tongue lolled and dripped saliva just for her. She was the anticipated meal. After a long, delicious scrutiny of every detail, her screams sounded, climbing the octaves to improbable pitch. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and she danced her wordless pleasure. If her grandmother walked in, Tom-Tom would simply turn down the sound and hold her posture. There was nothing to explain. Grandmothers and wolves had reversible relationships: Tom-Tom could cut the belly and, being thus the wolf’s midwife, give birth to her grandma. There would never have been a need for parents. They both knew this. For them the leering wolf became simply another level of the architecture.

One night she had silenced the wolf’s panting, the polyglot mumblings of the banksiamen enough to hear the sleep moaning of her grandmother and then her mother’s solicitous voice breathing through the crunching of leaves on the metal roof.

which side of the mirror are you on?
Tom-Tom was sufficiently the initiate of darkness to try to make her way to the toilet without light. Why couldn’t she have a bottom like the gumnut babies with the ever-clean slit and no hole? She’d do anything to prevent her grandmother calling out, anxious, ‘Is that you, is that you Tomasina?’ She dreaded her fear of prowlers. The house in its other wing was full of ladders, paint tins and roller trays. In a way she saw the painter as a prowler in negative, painting the inside white, as he did, day after day. It was her grandmother, dressed in her father’s old pyjamas, who did the painting. Caught amongst his gear in the hall, Tom-Tom found she couldn’t go forwards or backwards without making a clatter. ‘Is that you, Tomasina, Tom-as-ina?’ The fake manliness in her grandmother’s voice and the fear which this only partly masked filled her with horror. She was the prowler in her grandmother’s house. She couldn’t find the charity to give her a reply. Fascinated, she listened to the stricken voice: Who is it? Who is it? Whowhohooo? She had become the thing in the black hall amongst the white prowler’s clutter.

The light switch was thrown. The brushes, roller trays and tins with their white salivations down the side, the collapsed ladder barring the wall with its shadows, introduced her to a new Tomasina. Black and white cross-hatched red: her fear lodged like an egg in her throat. With her hand screwing the crotch of her pyjamas, the puddle of urine spreading at her feet, counting her toes warmly, one to ten, she shrank: humiliated child imposter, fake prowler, wrong sex.

But she and her grandmother had met in a new time. They could meet again. Her grandmother with the growling man’s voice, herself as the returning prowler to counter her grandmother’s fear. Or was it her grandma’s own imposture returning in the dark? At these times she had to recover her parents to enact other possibilities. Her grandmother’s silence was broken by strange admissions. Your mother asked more of life than was possible. Your father did what he could, poor lamb. It seemed from the photos that they never went out together. The photos of her mother showed a separate world. She was surrounded by women her grandmother couldn’t identify. There was always a glass of wine or beer before her and a cigarette smoking. Her eyes had an excess of radiance and she was never looking at the one behind the camera.

Tom-Tom was placid like her father, her grandmother said. Like a duck, he was: everything trickled off his feathers. Highly

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strung, with all the temperamental trappings of the would-be artist, your mother. (She had written a couple of plays in a jerky quick hand in which the heroine always died or disappeared, having left a garbled message about the other characters being better off without her.)

The memory machine was like the rusted trampoline in Tom-Tom's garden, activated by the grandmother's talk.

A chance detail would saturate the image. Like German currency. He'd come back from the war with this pile of German coins. Tom-Tom herself kept some in a saucer. And there was that pair of striped pyjamas her grandmother used to paint the house. So in this favourite animation Tom-Tom had him with the German money in his striped pyjama pocket.

There he was, buttons mismatched to holes, pyjama cord frayed and the pocket agape, nursing its little shadow. The shadow made him real. *Agape* also: the picture window of love, on the inside of which Tom-Tom lay dreaming, stretched before them. The lawn beyond was as vivid as algae in the bright garden. There he bounced, cheeks flushed, trampolining in his pyjamas. Serious, poor lamb, a good man, as you could see from the velvety puckers at each side of his mouth and his big grey eyes. Tom-Tom's mum was there too, moony but bouncing. Her eyes were more than bright – they glared; they illumined the whole scene. She slouched or perhaps deliberately stooped as she bounced, as if tempted to bend to pick up something, left at another level, in the recesses of another day. Sloucher Claws and Sad Claws, Tom-Tom called them, according to her pronunciation of Big Klaus and Little Klaus. There was a photo from an improvised dressing room, behind the stage of some amateur theatrical society: it showed her mother in a cream satin bra, doing her eyes, a pleasure smile working on her lips. So in the trampolining romance her mother was always like this, stripped down to bra and pants. She could see the satin of her mother's shoulders, the porcelain fragility of the shoulder-blades. She wanted more than the face sent back from the dressing room mirror: she longed to interpose herself in the space between mirror and mother, to feel and not to see, to sink her head between those breasts, to drink in the mixed smells of perfume and cigarettes and perspiration. But her father bounced between Tom-Tom and her mother. The bra in cream satin coupled its conical breast encapsulators with a frontal clip; it could have been designed by an aeronautic engineer, by a ballistics expert

*which side of the mirror are you on?*
or simply by a Barbie Doll manufacturer looking for bigger products. Tom-Tom’s father looked slack as well as sad, his undemanding mouth without tension as he bounced, bounced, and sending him up, Tom-Tom let her come down. She could never get them in the picture window together. With him up and her down, her desire ran electric in the vertical space between them, not her any more, not him, but the space between. The semi-circles of perspiration grew under her mother’s arms. From his pocket, coins sprayed as he bounced. Tom-Tom knew he’d buried a pile of them in the swimming pool pump-box in Ecuador, in the rainwater tank at Wyalcatchim, where they’d tried farming for a while when he came back from the war. The coins rained between the trampoline springs, scuttling across the lawn. She shouted to Tom-Tom ‘I’m not where he thinks I am, I’m back with Daddy in Leeds.’ The coins jiggled sadly in his iris. ‘Trampolining, like marriage, is always a collaboration, whether she likes it or not,’ he said. They wanted Tom-Tom to intervene, before it was too late. They wanted her to adjudicate, to stop them from splitting, to magnetise their bodies back together. To show them she had the currency too, Tom-Tom said ‘Aaaah’ like a good girl at the doctor’s and exhibited the Deutschmark on her tongue. ‘Hold it there girl and practise your elocution. It’ll stop your stuttering. We’ve all got to pay the ferry-man,’ he said. He gave a different moral lesson each time, without conviction because it was Tom-Tom’s script cobbled from eavesdropped conversations or songs on the radio. Sloucher’s toe caught in the springs as she landed back on her childhood sofa. Sloucher’s dad, the miner, was calling from the shower, as he scrubbed the red skin out of the black: ‘Mrs McPhee saw you lurking in the lanes again with those larrikins.’ (All the crimes Tom-Tom invented for her mother alliterated.) ‘You’d better watch out for yourself my lass or you’ll end up like your mother. Too much too soon and it’ll be too bad, too late for you.’ It was Sad Claws who said this to Tom-Tom, looking straight through the window at her before bouncing beyond the frame to land with a tiny splash in his swimming pool in Ecuador.

These meetings could be endlessly rehearsed. The sun climbed through its diurnal stages as she went to school; ran races, painted pictures, had crushes, bled, ran away, got involved, made posters, wrote manifestos, loved savagely, murdered love, crawled back into the tepid comforts of bourgeois life and as the sun swung along its zodiac curve, she would find herself still repeating or

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still rehearsing. She was trained to the maintenance of impos-
sibility as a condition for desire.

With Asif, love had been a betrayal of ethics on both sides,
of his commitment to his people's struggle, of the rules she'd
ventriloquised at the church school:

Don't raise your voice;
Don't do unto others
as you wouldn't have done unto you;
Walk don't run;
Sit when eating;
Keep your legs together;
Don't laugh like a sea gull;
Tell only white lies;
Never litter.

She knew years later, that if he walked in wordlessly and if
she opened her arms, they would fall to the floor and combine
again: in their transport they'd absorb one another leaving no
space for language, so osmosed through mouth and ear and eye
would they be, their volatile love an acceleration before
evaporation. Their love had been literally unstable, like glass,
more liquid than solid, like perfume, or a heady alcohol, always
a becoming-gas, a speedily expanding nimbus. Old, she would
still long for the outrageous catalyst of his kiss, where demon
surfaces multiplied and inside and outside were no longer . . .
Oh his returns in the wake of his departure.

To be nursed by him! She was infant again, with her own
infant in a cot. She'd worked all day in the sun, clearing the
dry grass and her legs were unevenly burnt, radiating still past
midnight. She wanted hands laid on her, as undemanding as
an ideal mother's, as cool as cucumbers. She wanted to be inside
a cucumber. And lying in that cool encapsulation, she wanted
to bring him back, guiltily as she first brought him to her country,
like a prize, an exotic, to show off: *This is the beauty I snatched
from his political and moral purpose in the Real World.*

The altar of the past.

Instead, she consoled herself with drawing. Leaving her legs
bare, to yield their heat, she stroked the paper with the charcoal,
a savage stroking. Repeatedly the squeaky cylinder broke into
splintery constellations: the nimbus of black shards stayed as
part of the drawing. The cat at her side maintained her pose.

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Something bold, determined was emerging. The cat she was
drawing was hieratically erect like the sacred cats of Egypt. The
cat had the permanent energy of the prowler locked in granite.
The power of the drawing made her fear for the model. As if
by depicting such stiffness, she had cast the cat as her own prowling
destiny, outside the windows of domestic time. She swung around
to reassure by a pat the animal left outside the drawing. There,
after all, were fur, warm blood, and a busy metabolism working
away. But on touch she found a granitic resistance in the muscles.
Viper-quick, the cat broke from her pose, sinking teeth into
Tomasina’s drawing wrist. The cat dashed to the picture window. Tom-Tom saw herself as she had been framed, in horizontal strips
through the angled venetian slats. Well, both of them: the cat
in her black fur and she in her skin.

They were the active elements seen through the picture window.
She tried to compose herself. She resumed the drawing. It was
only her fatigue that had hallucinated the prowler. After all,
the cat was a nervous animal at the best of times. Biting her
had been a reasonable reaction to posing.

Again the charcoal stroked the paper and squeaked, shattering
its stored fires. The hair pricking at the back of Tomasina’s
neck, the coldness seizing her blood suggested that she check
other windows. Prowlers can move, she told herself. The cat ran growling ahead of her to the front of the house, to another
picture window. This one was firmly masked by the closed
venetian blind. *Throw the porch light switch and part the slats*
were the reasonable instructions she gave herself. The lawn again
had the sickly green of algae under the electric light. The rest,
she would assure herself in a second’s readjustment, was phantasm,
pure and simple.

For the moment she observed, fascinated, the slow side shuffle
of the prowler into the mesh of the wattle tree. Some
hallucinations are given in fine detail. This one was provided
with baggy, somewhat iron-shiny serge trousers, low in crotch
with a twisted leather belt which was knotted rather than buckled.
The buckle spike must have broken, she took time to think.
The shirt was a North American stevedore’s flannel, green checked,
not a real tartan. She had one the same. The venetian slats snapped
together and only then did the question shake her. Was it the
side-stepping prowler who had drawn the cat? Had the crochet
of shadows travelling out from the trees like the work of demented
spiders found its expressive channel in her drawing?

*which side of the mirror are you on?*
The police came to measure the footprints. 'Small feet for a man,' they said. 'The sandals must be soled with tyre tread.' This was the time when hippy artisans fashioned sandals with bits of Michelin tyre to last. Tom-Tom had some like that. The police took moulds of the prints between the bushes. Durable sandals, durable prints, she thought.

Certain fissures cast shadows as if immeasurable fall were possible. She felt the cracked vinyl of the seat in front of her. He had chosen to sit close by. Sometimes when their questions, carefully mouthed though they were, came too quickly, he swung back to her in an appeal for translation. His confusion shone from the black marble of his eyes: What are they saying, help me. On his arrival in the country he had said: 'These people speak like Donald Duck.' She had laughed along with him. Now, with the return of her native accent, she too was Donald Duck. 'Stop shrieking at me in your ugly accent,' he had said, when she used her own language to shock him into recognition of the new distance between them.

But then it was as if all the quick work of hatred had to be begun again, this time through reason. The magistrate continued to probe their memories of that summer day.

The weatherboard house with its midget rooms had cooked to the point that they could smell the paint, the exhalations from the acrylic carpet. The baby they had stripped and bathed again and again in cool water. The fan staggered through its circuit. The boys from Laporia, cousins of a friend of his second cousin, called. He had served them with blackberry syrup. Cordial to her. Unlike Tom-Tom, these grown boys did not find that strange. 'She is a bourgeoise,' she heard him say. 'These people have never known what struggle is.' She returned to the washing machine. He was posturing before them. 'But I continue my work . . . She's inherited a property that has all sorts of possibilities as a training ground,' he was saying. 'Struggle,' she muttered to herself. The twin tub danced on the cement. The load in the dryer was unbalanced. It would take five loads to get through the nappies. Bourgeoise. Breadwinner, ego-nurturer, manic cleaner, health food shopper, nappy-soaker, bourgeoise. She'd heard him call: 'Couldn't you leave that? We're trying to talk. The noise is unbearable.' She switched it off and threw a scorching glance straight into his pupils. The cousins of a friend of a second cousin said: 'We had better go.' She went to the

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front porch. The day opened like a saucer, rimmed with silence, ringing with it. Anger occupied her with a plenitude almost pleasurable, detonating through her blood. She could have run like a champion, hurled projectiles, driven the axe blade through rock-hard wood, cleaving it like butter, but the hands at the end of those driven arms only trembled.

They were both on trial. They could still bolt out of the room, break through the records these people were taking. If he could just bury his head in her arms! They were still closer to one another than they’d ever be to the rest. She would work for his world if he would only let her. These people were her class enemies too. They didn’t know anything: they would not confront the squalor in their own backyard. But then again they were already on different levels. This proximity was only apparent. He was already on the other side of the glass, bound for the other side of the world.

She thought of Gloucester blinded, led by mad Tom: how great the fall to purgatory on the flat boards. She was at the fault line now, the slipping edge. She watched his back for clues as he rose to answer the questions. ‘Are you contesting your wife’s custody?’ The voice was gurgling in his throat. He was going to win them with his tears. ‘No she is better for that than me,’ he said. ‘She will look well after the baby.’ The stenographer interrupted her shorthand and took off her glasses to wipe her eyes. He had shampooed his hair, conditioned it with the bottle she’d left behind. He had lost weight. He had been living on cheese and fruit. Here was the would-be guerrilla standing to attention in their family court. She had to think enemy. Let her hatred fuel itself. Those beautiful dark hands hanging inert, they had hit her, wet-slapping from behind as she wept for the terrible shift in that hot summer afternoon.

She was at the fault line, the slipping edge. She saw him descend along with all she knew about him into his landscape restored at the other side of the world.

But there he was, waiting in the foyer of the building after the custody hearing. ‘I liked your lawyer,’ he said. ‘He had style. Pity we couldn’t enlist him for our cause. He seemed a nice guy. What about a drink, Tom-Tom?’ His voice affectionate, soft. What had happened to her hatred? That reservoir of distilled hatred? Her head lurched. She saw the peach tones of the quarry where they’d first met in the offer of a glass. He would have to mean a fruit juice at this time of day. They could try it

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all again. She had said: ‘Yes, he swung the bassinet and it sailed through the air and slid across the floor. He becomes violent when his nerves are on edge.’ That sounded like an apology for him, so she added: ‘I fear for my baby.’ After such a hearing she could not go off with the antagonist.

Like a bad joke from her imaginary past, his face had appeared, his mouth a wound against the dark on the other side of the kitchen window and she’d screamed. The prowler. ‘You are identical,’ The Spider had said. ‘You’ll always be bound together, no matter how you learn to hate one another. But you will stay farouche. You will never walk with the tame citizens.’

When he refused to leave, she had called the police. ‘I could kill you both. I should, because it’s no life for a child without a father. You want to repeat your own story. You want to condemn her to the same. I will not have it.’ Had he been talking hypothetically? She chose not to think so. She tasted the vitriol of his passion. She repeated his threats to the police as they arrived, sighing. ‘We’re not keen on coming to domestics, you know. The best we can do is get this poor fella into the van and take him home. He’s hardly dangerous. See, meek as a lamb. He said something about Gandhi. Hunger strike. I told him to go on a diet at his own place, if that’s what he wants.’

Now in the main street, she turned to him, willing the tears to stand, not to spill. ‘No, Asif. I can’t take a drink with you. We can’t go back there.’ She felt him watching without protest as she headed for the bus back to her office. His pulse beat in her temples, throbbed in her arms, tugged at her back. She dragged herself away from its influence. They were not yet in those separate landscapes. They could return their lives to the same level, go back to that Sunday afternoon when the terror began and simply miss the cue. Or she could rejoin him now. She watched the strawberry Celtic faces blur past her in the main street, a wind tunnel on this March day. She ached to swing back to him, to see his eyelids working like a speed shutter, to see his sun-black skin, the cutting blaze of his teeth. He was so quick to recover tenderness if she gave the forgiveness cue. These men were mice compared with him. These men were scalded mice in their business suits.

But from now on she was locked into repetition.

She read about the Maldive crabs. Every day the Maldive Tourist Board had the sweepers come from a neighbouring island to erase the crab prints from the sand. Tourists want a smooth
beach, they said. Without the cachet of Sisyphus, Tom-Tom still found herself haunted by that daily erasure, keeping her outside time. Oh yes, she knew about those crabs.

She was caught in the light and again extinguished with a throw of the switch, sidestepping away from the windows of her life suddenly ablaze. There was nothing unique in her situation, she told herself. Yet no statistics recorded her trials outside the social calendar. Ageing perhaps on the exterior. She had caught glimpses of her shattered face but still the infant spied upon by Banksiamen stared out. Even tracing a quick sketch in her notebook, she felt herself purveyed. And again she’d take on the prowler’s baggy trousers, the twisted belt, the feverishly flicking eyes. The old habit of alliteration took her — a version perhaps of the stuttering to which her mother and she had been prone — as she condemned her own gestures to erasure. In permanent anticipation of the marauder in the margins, she became his mimic. Would she for ever unravel the wild crochet of his gestures, travelling out from the trees of childhood like demented spiders?

The crab advances its massively developed claw as if this specialisation of the limb escaped any notion of monstrosity. The crab carries the great pincer with practised flair, like the napkined arm of a waiter; or probes the ballooning cushion of air like a Kung-Fu fighter. Its dancing legs tack-tack the sand. With the wave-wash, the crab writing is a dimpling merely of the smooth-bellied beach. And then, at dawn, the sweepers come to erase even that. Since the first moulds were taken of the prowler’s foot prints, there had been no record.

For whom does the erased crab writing exist? Do the sweepers keep a mental trace? Tourists need memory performed for them. But this? This is the Maldivian inspiration. It’s the forgetting they do for the tourist.

So Tomasina in middle age was taken by the Principle of the Low-Profile Side-Shuffle. She danced, without grace, as an old, oedematous, pram-pushing woman might dance, outside the windows where she could have lived. She celebrated without joy, without mirth, her marriage to the nib-tipped arm, sewing cloud, parrying horizons, writing her poisoned love onto the face of night. Again and again the erasers came but still she tack-tacked at space.

Perhaps I could be the archivist of that ephemeral writing.

Extract from a work in progress.

which side of the mirror are you on?