

In Worlds Unknown

Seen from an angel-height we are five small dots on a brand new white canvas. Five cherries in whipped cream. The arctic wind is so strong that we struggle to walk. We lean forward with our bodyweight to take each step.

We fall into the abyss. Our skulls spiral. Eyes bounce in oval prisons. The will of the waves lashes at our stern and starboard. Billowed cloth trembles. The vessel groans. Then still. We float hopeless in the hollow. We wait for a reason.

Chernobyl stillness.
Gravelly clay greys.
Dust hanging speechless in the air.
No car horns.
No café chatter.
No joyous playground.
Perturbed browns.
Drunk to oblivion greens.
Hungry climbers scavenging low.
Black bodies of the eucalyptus trees struck down.

A vast forest dripping with sharp-edged leaves. Oily stump of rock, powder dry dust.
A thousand weaving greens.
We see the frog and ant. We count ourselves among their number.
Teeth bared taut tendons ready.

Snowflakes are needling our faces. Each in-breath stings. Far off, the northern lights buck in the sky, beckoning.

A wavering pathway leads through termite towers, labyrinthine bowels burrowing to a hollow. Ochre outlines splayed across the walls.

No bird song
No windy leaves

Thirsty memories of a city still standing

Colossal distance. Dreamy horizons. Pebbled white. Heat engulfs us, merciless. A parade of wailing people. Knee high boots, underwear, and masks. Breasts free and defiant. A towering marionette suspended in the sky by a crane, manipulated into balletic forms. A staircase of jellyfish. A crashed plane. A city in the dust.

“Welcome home. What took you so long?”

Tall enough to flirt with the stars, to cup the cheeks of the clouds.
Flare guns burst. The sky is barren.

Just one perfect blink of blue.

Weary branches, wailing leaves. We pile them high, intent on burning their miasmatic bodies.

Our slow bodies rejoice. In the days since we left the base, time and space melt together.

An infinite pallet of different whites. No meadows, no dandelions, no bee flight flapping the breeze. White deep beneath our feet. White stretched out around us.

Feet softly rooted in earth. Five spines unfurling, reaching up. Quintet of vertebrae. Femurs, ribs, skulls - seeking rhythm together. A reason to move.

We are heading south

Past the bright dandelion gardens

Towards the riverside scent of wild garlic

Anaemic quince trees, bloody blackberries, shrunken figs - picked along the way

Moist heat

Hot cement, cracked glass

A forest host. Writhing with a slow-play shimmer; cold and relentless.
Your many ribboned limbs drip flowers, frogs adorn your feet, mosquito
swarms hover around your brow.

As intimate as a snake pit. Skin, wood, dust.

Death lies draped casually across your damp forearms. Mosses and
lichens stitch tattoos in your body. We receive your toxic nectar into our
wide waiting eyes and mouths.

Silhouettes of bodies levitating and rebounding. Toppling over each
other. Shrieks of laughter. The desert whitens as the sun slips away.

The cadmium yellow sun burns out to a breezy orange.
Green and blue ribbons from the saints festival still strewn across our
path

We recite the liturgy of foods we love whilst searching in pairs for
weeping sugary juice, or fishing for termites with honey-tipped sticks in
the bleached miniature citadel.

Pancakes, Momos, roast chicken, potatoes, bok choy, spaghetti. We
scrabble in the roots like dogs. Lick wet rock and scry for signs of life to
hunt. We interrogate our belongings for any leather or suede we could
consume. We draw straws for who will climb the trees to raid the bees
nests for honey, daubed whole bodily in mud.

Our stomachs shrink and pucker like lemon skins. The arctic winds hum
through us like we are hollow.

The termites drive their cities higher.
One of us studies their intricate labour structures as inspiration
Another sees a delicacy, added protein to our scarce diet
Another twists up in disgust.

We tell stories about cooking. We recite recipes from memory. But our
bellies still revolt. The only food we have left is two flapjacks. With nuts.
None of us like nuts.

The symphony crunches as instruments are struck.
We bind our work with song. The rain plays a duet.

Endless nights jittering soggy trenches
Furious rain
Even the rats famished and fearful

Our adagio is undeterred. Our palms become mountainous. We find the
freshest leaves and hang them from our tents. Hues of brown and green
harmonise with the carcass of our ship on the shore

Across town, a fire is burning.

Scattered bikes. Constellations fracturing, scaling, re-forming. Structures
rising from the dust. Fierce, imposing, magnetic. Insistent.
Pouring of drinks. Neon and fire. Whooshing. Gravel growling. A smash
of wheels. A man sprawled in the dust

Alone still. Clothes discarded. Wasted muscles, proud ribs, drunken
gazes. damp skin and festered nails. We are as layers of dirt, growing
green.

We have many roots and shared dreams.

Since the disaster we have heard no animals calling. They fled early,
knowing everything.

Matted peaty hair, scored skin. Many toed and fingered suckers
grabbing. Jet claws, cavernous mouths, feathers bouncing bristling, wide
eyes blinking out from the tapestries of green.

We are as layers of dirt, growing green.

We wear the night hot on our skin. Birth fruit. Make deep new smells. We
press together chattering as birds have learned to do.

We ask a lamp post, who says they are long gone. A young oak explains they have built their own wilding place, far from here. A balcony, tilting from a blast-top says they are happy.

Submerged in water. A group shower. Being assaulted by fire hoses. No one can hear with all the foam and water.

It feels like an eruption
Limbs take flight like dandelion seeds.
Bare feet stroking the sky
Slender bristles give way to wings.

After a day or two, or has it been three? We go inside the temple. It's angular, made of wood. A million lines. The light glittering through. We lie on the sand and look at the opening to the sky. Not caring that the dust and termites are invading our bodies. The desert breathes with us. Photos of lost loved ones looking at us.

Not a single word disturbs this choking howl of the arctic wind. An echo, everywhere.
My limbs are swinging, keeping pace. The gravity clutches at every cell of my body. The cold plucks at my chest.

We meet like old friends. Like planets colliding in the heights.
This washed up toothbrush was going to change everything.
Everything.

We keep walking. There is warmth in it. I cherish the steady beat of this silence.

We draw a rudimentary mud map in the clay with grubby digits situating;
termite town
outcrop ledge
Sandy spot
site of last known contact presumed limit of known world
sunrise bearing
burial ground

accident black spot

We feel the carbon that makes our molecules as we look up at the stars at night.

It is obvious that she is struggling. It twists in her face, it lurks in her body posture, it hums in every gesture. She cannot stand this stillness.

Water creeps higher, floods the temples of our memory. We smell each other. Every morning we pinch and slap one another as evidence that we are still real. We sing, we dance, we gallop and trot around the ruins of our infancy.

We experiment with new folklore and compose a collective home-sick letter stating 'things mark us, but we'll go on like the wind'. We keep track of acts of goodwill and selfishness. We hush, wrestle and sob. We are reassured of our own weight.

We find a taco truck.

We go roller-skating.

We pee into jars

We confess our crushes

We walk beyond the perimeters of the city

Words are hurled catching fire as they go.

Faces contort into offensive shapes designed to intimidate.

Their teeth are bared and three of us just stare.

globes of saliva are propelled through the air.

Puncturing skin with the precise poison of sounds they accompany

The sun sniggers at such a petty inferno

We make love with our laughter, hair strings, and notes plucked from instruments we almost recognise.

Someone gets married

Someone pours water all over himself

We deliver toothbrushes

Someone climbs to the top of a bus and backflips into a perfect squat.

We give foot massages
We play table tennis
We play hide and seek
We practice our vowels.

She wants to map huge circles on the ice. She wants to walk away. But she chooses to stay with us.

Singeing skin, melting bones, heavy limbs.
Legs shuffle through sand, hushing the grains as they go.
A distant ship wraps itself in its own sails.

A skew-leaning telephone tower on the east side of the city appears the tallest of all things. We climb it to become the tallest of all things surviving.

Clouds clustered together. Hung lower, moving closer, cracking their blue bones with laughter.

Fear makes the blood hot and right. We want to see what there is left to see. Movement, any movement at all. Cruel winds. Cloud whispers. Enemies. What remains of the gods. We see nothing.

The skies bubble with rage, burst roaring, crumble over the sea.
We worry for this light.
We might never arrive on land that isn't so hungry for us.
The forest says 'eat me'. The termites say 'strength in Numbers'. The bees say 'die for the Queen'.
The sky says 'Hah! I am bigger than you'
The dust says 'close your eyes'.
The night says 'stay close'.

A stranger gives me a scoop of chocolate ice cream. How do they keep it cold? Impossible.

We meet again at the Orca sculpture. The sun is relentless. My organs are melting. We go inside the Orca. It is dark, moist, and we feel the deep rumbling of whale song.

There she stands: proud and fearless. I can sense her calm wisdom even from a distance. She is so beautiful. An arctic fox. The frost tenderly strokes her fur. I imagine myself sliding into it and sheltering there a while. She does not notice us.

We scream 'Look up!'. They've come to save us from decay. A mass of startling murmurations consumes us. We can no longer go home. If I am a bird, you are a bird.

Arctic music comforts my mind and dives down into my chest. I imagine sitting on a beach, melting into sand, lullabied by a familiar sea. Itching on my sunburned shoulders drags me suddenly back to the endless stretch of white. The silence cracks. I hear a stranger calling.

Yes. We'll stay, put down roots, let go of history, make fresh marks, carve a new future, eat our own flesh and rot, grow flowers, build castles in the sand, and develop theories in the dark. In the morning we'll learn to wait and wait. We'll never grow old.

It is our last night. The temple is burning. Material transforming into energy.

We sway together.

I just know.

I need to stay. I tell the others.

Our bodies know.

Our bodies remember.

The man burns.

Dear one. All things are unknown to me now.

I have appreciated the frivolity of function, the little choices accumulating up to make a life, one by one. I hope to be a better human. A haircut, maybe, a new pair of shoes. I hope to say I love you. We don't need to do anything any more. I don't miss the world. I miss you.

