

What are you waiting for?

Twelve

She sits cross legged on the ground, sorting rocks into piles in front of her. Angwusnasomtaqa, 'crow mother spirit'. Her weathered face is lined with wrinkles, her long black hair shot with silver. Behind her the desert stretches out, red ochre staining the cracked earth.

You sit down beside her and watch as she brushes down each rock, looking for tell tale glints of quartz hidden beneath the dirt. You pick up her cast-offs, running the stones through your hands, letting them fall between your fingers.

"It hurts in my heart that my daughter isn't here," you say.

She stops her sorting and looks intently into your eyes. Reaching out she clasps her hands around yours and you feel her pulse drumming, counting time.

"Her blood is your blood," she says, "She'll find her way here when she remembers how, just as you did."

Eleven

You turn on the light and your daughter blinks her eyes open, looking around sleepy eyed and confused.

"Today is Backwards Day," you say.

"Backwards Day?" says your daughter.

"Yes, Backwards Day! On Backwards Day we get up and get dressed while its night time, and sleep during the day."

"Oh!"

"On Backwards Day I make your lunch while it's still dark and you can eat it whenever you like!"

"On Backwards Day, can I walk backwards?"

"You can even talk backwards, just like this. Ah, Ah, Ah! That's how you laugh backwards."

She giggles as you dress her.

"Soon we are going to go visit Angela, even though it's still dark. All because it's Backwards Day."

"Won't she be sleeping?"

"Probably, but we will wake her up."

"I'll shout really loud outside her house. That will wake her up."

The sun makes its entrance into the new day as you drop your daughter off at Angela's. She is disappointed that Angela is already awake, but she shouts anyway just to make sure everyone knows she is visiting.

"I hope your tests go well," says Angela, and she touches your arm, as if to pass on her own luck to you as you turn to leave. You kiss your daughter goodbye and start the long drive to the hospital.

Ten

They said it would be painful. You couldn't imagine the reality of that pain. You can handle anything. You thought you could handle anything. You feel your muscles contracting, your teeth clenching, your head pounding, your body hijacked and out of your control. You slide off the

hospital bed and fall down onto the floor.

Tears roll from your eyes. You try to breathe. You open your mouth, but no words come out. You can barely see beyond yourself, even though your eyes are open. You become smaller and smaller until there is nothing but the glare of light off a linoleum floor.

"She's not communicating with us," a voice says in the distance.

Hands lift you onto the bed and hold you down. You feel a needle going into your spine. You feel ice cold liquid travelling up your spinal cord, and the faces of your midwife and your husband swim into view.

"You didn't tell me it would hurt that much," you say to them both.

"Being induced is more painful because it speeds up the body processes," says the midwife.

"So much for a natural birth," says your husband. "First they induce you, and then they give you an epidural."

You look at the monitor beside you and marvel at the rise and fall of contractions you can no longer feel.

"Thank God for epidurals," you say.

Nine

"You will be boarding through Gate 15 at 9am. Enjoy your flight," says the woman at the check-in counter, as she hands you your boarding pass.

You walk over to the gate with your lover, Pete, and join the line of people waiting to get on the plane.

"At least the weather will be warmer in Phoenix," you say to Pete.

"When we finally get there," he says. "This flight seems to stop at virtually every major city between here and there."

"Very funny. It's only two stops," you say. "Anyway the tickets were a pretty good deal compared to the other airlines."

You sit in your seat and watch the safety presentation while the plane taxis to the runway. The pitch of the engines becomes higher and you are pushed back in your seat with the initial thrust of motion. A loud metallic banging starts up from the left side of the plane and it lurches to the left of the runway. Just as suddenly it veers to the right. The airplane shudders like a car that is about to stall, right before it becomes airborne.

"My God! I've never been in a take off like that before," you say.

"Maybe the cheap ticket prices were because they got their airplanes from an ex-Soviet nation that was strapped for cash," says Pete.

The plane ascends to cruising altitude and Pete pulls out a deck of cards. You have started a hand of Rummy when the captain makes an announcement.

"You may have noticed our take off was not normal," he says.

Your heart lurches and starts pounding as you are overcome by a sudden premonition of doom. Your stomach

churns and you feel like throwing up. With such a strong inner reaction going on you entirely miss the rest of what the captain says.

"What did he just say?" you ask Pete.

"He said there is something wrong with the landing gear and none of their instruments are showing if the wheels will be functional when we land. So we are going to have to make an emergency landing at Oakland airport," says Pete.

"So we are not going to fall out of the sky now and die a horrible death?"

"No. We wait another two hours for that."

Eight

You are restless and the sun beats down on you, the air dry and hot around you. You stand up and walk across the desert, trying to find the way you had come, the way back to your daughter. You walk by towering red rock formations, smoothed and sculpted by millennia of desert winds. You kneel on the ground in the shadow of a rock and draw a picture in the earth with your finger. You draw water flowing into the ocean. You draw horses running across the plains. You draw life into the empty space around you. Then you get up and keep walking, your skin burning and cracking in the heat of the day.

Seven

You walk into the Neurological Department at the hospital, and wait for the receptionist. When the receptionist appears you say, "I'm here for the evoked potentials test."

She checks your details then tells you to take a seat. You look around the waiting room at posters and leaflets with information about illnesses that have names you have no idea how to pronounce.

After a time your name is called by a medical technician.

"You may want to use the bathroom now, as the first test will take about an hour and a half," says the medical technician.

You follow him into a room full of computers, with a bed in the centre.

"I need you to remove your jacket and shoes, and then I'd like you to sit on the bed," he says.

Once you are seated he starts marking your skull with some kind of gel.

"I'm going to attach wires to the top of your head and under your ears and these will be connected to the computer," he says. "It's very important you don't move."

You look at the world map on the wall in front of you while he glues the wires in the right places.

"During this first test you'll have headphones on that will be playing loud sounds. You need to be as still as possible and keep your eyes closed," he says.

You ask him what will appear on the computer. He says it will show amplitudes and frequencies of wave forms, a measurement of the neuronal response to the stimulus of the tests.

"Do you like working in Neurology?" you say.

"I used to be a paramedic for the Navy and we did all sorts of things. But I've had to specialise since leaving there. I chose Neurology but really I prefer the variety of work I did in the Navy."

"Were you ever involved in warfare?"

"In Asia and in the Middle East. It was a great life, travelling the world and drinking. I only stopped because I got too old to be dodging bullets any more."

He dims the lights and you lie still and close your eyes. In one ear you can hear loud static that sounds like the sea. In the other you can hear a toneless clicking. You follow the sound running through the convoluted pathways of your brain, an army of clicks scouting for the enemy.

Six

You look out the window of the hospital. Cars are driving on the road outside, impatient drivers cutting each off and honking at each other in annoyance.

"I wonder what they are thinking," you say.

"Who?" says your husband.

"All of them," you say, pointing outside.

"Does it really matter?"

"No. I just wonder why everyone is such a hurry to go somewhere and make their life happen. Yet here we are, just waiting for something to happen. It's like we aren't living in their world anymore."

"We can hardly claim that we didn't make this happen."

"Of course; but even so it still feels strange, like we're not in control of this bit."

Your husband is obviously bored by the philosophical turn your mind has taken and starts playing his gameboy.

The midwife comes in the room and examines you.

"You're five centimetres dilated," she says. "Are you feeling any pain?"

"No. This epidural is remarkable."

She leaves and you close your eyes, enjoying the numbness of not feeling anything at all.

Five

The plane is half empty, so the airhostess comes by and starts moving people to sit closer to the emergency exits.

"We are going to radio your names and addresses ahead so if anything happens everyone on the plane will be accounted for," she says, as she moves you to your new seat.

"How reassuring," says Pete.

"We need you to remove your jewellery and anything else that may be sharp from your body," she continues.

She sits down beside you and demonstrates the crash position. You are not comforted by her manner and the adrenaline that had started pumping through your body at the captain's announcement seems to surge all the stronger. You want to run but there is nowhere to go. In your mind you call out to every friendly god you can think of for help, but no influx of supernatural reinforcements appears in the cabin.

Pete examines the phones built into the seatbacks.

"It says here you can make calls from these phones to anywhere you please," he says.

"For five dollars a minute. Well, I guess it hardly matters now. Who are you going to call?"

"I think I should probably let my parents know," he says and starts dialling.

"Mom, we're flying to Oakland airport for an emergency landing," he says into the phone. "We've been told our plane has no wheels. Yes, they're not sure if the wheels are working or not."

You look around the plane while Pete carries on talking. You see a worried mother attending to her child. You see an elderly woman crying. You see a businessman casually flicking through a magazine.

"Look at him," you say to Pete when he gets off the phone, and you point at the businessman.

"Maybe he flies on this airline a lot," he says.

Four

You find your daughter through the space that exists between one breath and another. She is veiled behind water and no matter how you try to catch her attention she can't see you or hear you. You return to the desert and feel the earth beneath your bare feet, a group of crows shadowing behind you, calling to one another.

Angwusnasomtaqa has gone, so you sit in her place and wait for your daughter to find her own way to you. The sun is sinking below the horizon and the sky is a haze of pinks and purples. The crows circle around you and then as one they fly off into the dying rays of the setting sun.

Three

"In the next test I will attach wires to your arms and legs and run an electric current through them. You may find your fingers and toes start twitching. Some people find it a little painful, but the sensation varies from person to person," says the technician.

He starts gluing wires to your legs and you ask him to tell you more about his life in the Navy. He relays a humorous story from his time in the Middle East and you laugh.

"It's always the funny things that you remember," he says.

"My grandfather fought in World War Two but he never talked about any of it," you say.

"Most people don't. They'd rather forget about it. Psychiatrists don't have a clue when they push people to talk about things that are better left well enough alone. They don't seem to realise that the human body knows what it's doing when it shuts memories away in places where you can't touch them. All this fuss about talking about things; it just makes people soft."

He dims the lights and starts running the current through your right foot. You feel a thousand stalagmite spikes surging into the sole of your foot. You lie still, waiting for the test to be over, and you try to forget about how much you want to go home.

Two

The room seems as if it is lit by firelight and you can see faces in the shadows.

"I want you to push now," says the midwife. "Come on, be a good girl."

You vow with every breath to ignore her when she speaks. The midwife berates you, trying to shame you into complying, but you resist with all your will.

"You're going about this the wrong way," says your husband. "She's never had any patience with those that try to force her into doing what they want."

The midwife leaves the room and you say to your husband, "Tell her not to come back."

"It's a bit late for that now," he says.

A doctor appears and he talks more gently to you.

"The baby's not coming down properly so you're going to have to help it," he says.

"How can I? I can't feel anything because of the epidural."

"Imagine you are going to the bathroom and you are straining with all your might to void your bowels."

"What if I do?"

"It's very common," he says. "Don't worry about it."

You wait for the next contraction. You breathe and push through it, but nothing emerges.

"The baby's stuck," says the doctor to your husband, "We'll have to do a forceps delivery."

You are wheeled into an operating theatre and see the doctor approach with bucket and waterproof apron. You decide it is better not to see anymore and turn your head away.

"Here comes your baby," says the doctor.

And there she is, a squalling, writhing mass of blood and gunk, beating her fists on your breasts, furious at her forced entry into the world.

One

You call your daughter from the airplane phone but she isn't home. You want to leave a message but what can you say? That you're on a plane that may or may not be about to crash? So you tell her answering machine that you love her and hang up the phone.

Oakland airport appears in the distance and your plane starts its descent. You look out, drinking in the sight of the tiny houses, the trees, the sun pouring in the oval window. As the plane circles round to land you notice the line of fire engines and ambulances beside the runway.

"Everyone take your crash positions," says the captain.

You brace yourself, head down and hands pressed against the seatback in front of you, and you wait for impact. You know you shouldn't, but you can't help but turn your head so you can see out the window as you make your final descent. You don't want to lose sight of the brilliant blue sky. You keep looking steadily out the window, willing the sky to hold you safe. You don't feel ready to die.

Zero

You hear her voice laughing, carried by the night breeze towards you. You scan the horizon but you can't see her. Laughter again, this time from behind you. You look around but there is no one there. You close your eyes and you feel little arms enfolding you in a hug. Tears spill out and run down your cheeks.

"I've missed you," you whisper, not wanting to open your eyes in case she disappears again.

She wipes away your tears with her fingers, but you just cry all the harder.

You feel the light of the dawning sun touch your eyelids and you finally open your eyes, eager to see her face. But she is gone. The sunlight illuminates a drawing scratched out by small fingers in front of you. A child's picture, made up of crooked circles and jagged lines, of a little girl and her mother holding hands, under a giant smiling sun.