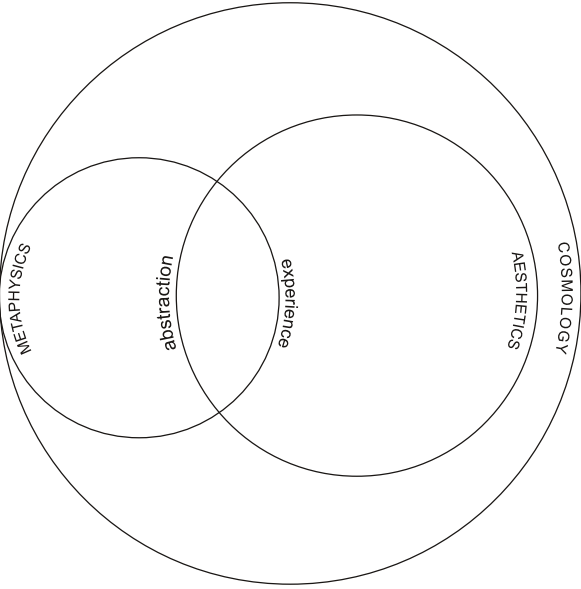


SILVER/LEAD

Sarah Jones



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She lies calmly amongst her abusers. Even with their machines

I am digging a hole. I had thought that the hole would be around a metre deep, but already, at thirty centimetres, the ground is harder than I'd planned. I had planned (plans for the Earth?) that the Earth would submit to this unannounced displacement. Looking into the poor excuse that is the beginnings of my hole, I consider that the earth might have had other plans. The soft burn of frustration at dirt that will not heed my effort is rising in my cheeks. Two types of scarlet exertion flush my face. I'm probably also sunburnt; three. I stop digging. Hot from the inside and the outside, I throw the shovel down, the short unsatisfying thud it makes does nothing for what feels like an inherent specie-al inferiority. The dirt is too hard, the sun is too hot, I have no impact of the scale that I had imagined. I watch as two drops of sweat, accumulations of consumption, digestion and action, fall from my brow and into the hole. Two drops made of water and salt and the sunshine that burns the back of my neck. Two drops, as concrete as the idea of emptiness with which my hole is filling.

they can't bear her winter temperament; can't rip so carelessly

If I could write anything, it would be a cosmology. To write a cosmology you have to have an idea about everything. All of the space taken up by all of the things and the spaces they leave when they're gone. But also all of the non-things, as well as the space where the non-things aren't, but could've been, had they become things at some point. You have to take potential, chaos, disappointment, and lies into account; and then take them into account twice again so that you get them in the past, and in the future. A cosmology is a map, a model, an account, and a forecast —and most important— a cosmology is a whole.

I switch tools. The mattock handle is unpleasantly old and dry. It absorbs the moisture from my skin as it extends outwards from my body and I can feel it rubbing into blisters by the fifth strike. My right arm is long on the upward swing; my left arm meets it in extension. Both arms stretch out and find one another on the handle for the downward drive. The crack of the metal on the rock is a shattering re-introduction

into her with the icy-rain that comes in sideways and cuts at

of two things, exhumed, to one another. The mattock's heavy metal head remembers its place in the earth. The contact shoots up through my forearms, unsettling my elbows and landing in my shoulders. The mattock's memory of the earth that bore it is pressed into my body with every crack. It suffocates face down in the earth whilst my muscle memory learns its past. The mattock is not an imposter to the underground. It is unafraid and the earth yields. They know each other and each blow marks a small, smile-like opening for old friends to get under one another's skin. What comes of the tangling of their bodies — the force of their remembering — is the becoming of a hole — a cosmology is a map, a model, an account, and a forecast — the beginning in the end, a black hole. A cosmology is written from the event horizon. It should detail completely the things that are too small to be seen, too quiet, or too far away. Equally, things that are beyond scale. Things so big that they must take up space *and* time — like the big bang, still banging. A cosmology must be constructed from all of the things that you can retrieve from

the corners of their unappeasable mouths. They are always

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memory, that take up the whole of the present,
but are bigger than this present, *since they have
come from*

timid in winter and they temper their approach. She uses

somewhere else the people are carrying torches. Tiny silver grains of light spray weightlessly around the cylinders of the beams. Silky dust falls like sea spray inside the lucid columns reaching upwards into the bottomless sky. The white light stops the stars from shining and everything is illuminated to blind. Pointed into the scrub on either side of the bush track, the torch beams soften as they find things. They become sluggish, they spill out over their infinite straight silver sides, and their light seems to yellow a little. Circular coffee cup stains break over the trunks of the gums and pick out the small, paired, earth-bound stars of the possum's frightened eyes. Everything is crunchy under my runners. I look down at my brightly coloured shoelaces that are trying to stay red in the darkness. My dad has double knotted them into small sculptural balls that bounce a little as I walk. He is walking in front of me. I take five four-year-old steps for each one of his. My mum is behind me, carrying my brother. I am dressed in a ski suit and I can feel my puffy polyester arms slipping over the sides of my puffy polyester ribs. I'm mute with expectation. I barely look

the respite to reach out in every direction and she tries to

when my dad points out the possums, frozen in his spotlight or someone else's. It's so exciting to be here in the dark.

The train of people ahead of us round a bend. I step off the path and tilt my head sideways so that I can see past my dad. The crowd drops away one-by-one at the curve of the path like lemmings into the dark throat of the rough scrub. Half the town has disappeared ahead of me, a procession of neighbours and butchers and writers and rangers. A long street of not-so-strangers, snaking like the river, up the bush track to the top of the hill. Night's secrets are broken by whispers; we are respectfully silent mourners in all of its black. We are preparing. The humming warmth of a hundred bodies puts heat on the rise of the hill.

Between the river where we swim in summer and the more deliberate ranges, the hills here roll out softly with age. It is hard to imagine them as young, as pubescent volcanos or as proud adult mountains. The hills don't tower or peak,

draw herself tall again. She pushes her face into the pillows

they're not for scaling and they're too tired for faces. They roll in one another's company, having grown so old together that they're no longer completely separate and they rest on each other's shoulders, heavy with age, as if they had died together, just like that, admiring the view. And they are beaten: marked with the pock holes left by the mines, small barren craters, sinkholes for fortunes, pre-cut graves for drunk looters and sweating thieves. And too many of the tall trees have been taken: the ridges have started to sharpen like dry bones under sagging skin. The hills' old bones are the quartzite intrusions forced upwards by the pressure of the fold. The crystalline basement deep in the Earth is ruptured to fault. Earth is pushed against earth and every small joy presses into an anticline that might catch the afternoon sun, and every small loss is a syncline that might be filled by a creek. Freed from the ruthless gnarling of the eucalypt roots, the topsoil has been washing away in secret with the spring rain. Silky and sodden, it has slipped out quietly, tiptoed down into the valley, and looked for the river to leave in. The quartz

of the clouds that gather at her crown. She screams into the

hills are balding and the pieces of a million-year-old earth, that were left because they had no value, have started to break the skin of the thinning clay shift. And the hills crack white and decay.

At the top of the hill in the swollen darkness every star is a wineglass cracking in the boiling water of the black sky. Every star is a millionth of a second, a pinging so high pitched it suggests a frequency of a hairline fracture that is too delicate to be accompanied by real sound. We are all soft looks so as not to break those tiny stars, as we patchwork the hard ground with the blankets we share. We grow steadily silent waiting in the darkness on the razor's edge of the quartz beneath us as the hill holds its breath for eons. And the rocks in the sky might be the same as those under my four-year-old-feeet, made by the young stars at the edge of the solar system that burst with occasional intensity. They are ten times brighter for a few months a year. They pulse outwards, touching with all of their glow the cold in their gravitational pull. They shine so

raving wind that tears at her heavily sloped shoulders. They

brightly that they can put something like quartz in comets. Silicates made in their ebullient heat are dusted onto things made of ice. Things that are never warm are finely covered with pieces of suns. Burning terrestrial chains lie softly across alien bodies like impossible strings of gold in quartz, or the lines of a sunset on a black Southern Ocean; and scientists are confused, and astronomers and geologists debate.

We are waiting in the darkness, for a darkness deeper still. A black that is hollower than is nameable. A black that is so heavy that as it races it can only collect light. The comet will explode, sacrificing its freezing edges to protect the inconceivable fullness of nothing that is its dark heart. Darkness is made of the light that it cannot reflect. The wet sparkling tar that is poured into the scarred roads around here reflects only seven per cent of the sunlight that hits it in the frosty mornings. The cores of the rocks in the sky, that cut the arcuate of a single lifetime for a billion years, reflect less than three per cent of the light that hits them. I am looking

watch her sketch herself formidably on the horizon as they

up at my dad's shoulder, a silhouette of dark on black, and I couldn't say which was darker and if either was darker than tar. His shoulder is the Earth's shadow in my four-year-old-universe and the stars spray out from the hole that he cuts in the night sky.

Everyone must be as excited as I am; everyone must be looking into the eclipse of someone that they love. Everyone in this memory is four years old and is bursting with an anticipation that pushes us into one another. We are a whole town on a small hill in a black night in the southern hemisphere and we are deaf to what separates us from one another in this moment. The edges of each person's joy lays silently across the edges of another's, like the fringes of the picnic blankets or the dropped shoulders of the old hills. And even though we collect the lies of remembering from the air around us in the present in the retelling of how we all stood together on that hill, the sense that we lost ourselves to one another, for the millionth of a second that is one of those stars, is un-takeable by the losses of moving.

await the safe passage of snowmelt. For so many millions of

Memory folds into itself irreparably. It is the curve of the event coming back over onto itself like the smaller of the two waves sucked backwards under the white wash on the shore. A highly eccentric and elliptical orbit for a four-year-old. It is rocks forced together so tightly that they fold. They give in gently to the heat at the core of the lie. Their old spines become hinges from which their once broad shoulders planed out horizontally and they cave, finally lenient to the crushing pressure around them. They fold so as not to fault, so as not to crack or break in to the earthquakes that swallow cities full of churches and school children. The hills are benevolent to teach the memory the same. Trauma is the snapping of a straight line. *Memory is the Chevron of the gullies out here*

years she has grown here, only now to be disemboweled in

where I grew up in the mining towns out west the houses are built almost overnight. Rows of tiny boxes, split in the middle, huddling in the shadows of the foothills where it rains for three hundred days of the year. The water fills the air but the drops are so small they can only be felt as dampness after the fact. You can't *feel* the getting wet. It soaks slowly into your skin before it registers as moisture. It is the feeling of the feeling of rain. Five eighths of each house is the living room. The kitchen and bathroom are left of centre. Two small bedrooms back to back at the far end. Half of the houses are duplex portables —like binary stars locked in a gravitational embrace— the rest free standing cottages. Dotted like stars, indistinguishable from one another when viewed from afar. At the beginning of a mining boom the families move in and paint the houses different colours. There are hanging plants and flowering shrubs, different shifting patterns on the curtains that move with the drafts that waft through the cheap fibro walls. But their crudely-mass-manufactured outsides are the least of what they have in common. These

their short lifetimes. — At first they came without machines,