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Moxyland

Lauren Beukes

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Extract

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an excerpt from
MOXYLAND
Lauren Beukes

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Kendra

There is already spillage out of the doors by the time I get to Propeller, which can only be a good sign when it's just gone six-thirty. I feel fractal with nerves, or maybe it's that I'm on my fourth Ghost in under an hour.

'You're late.' Jonathan latches onto my arm at the door and swishes me inside through the crowd. I can't believe how many people there are, crowded into the gallery. There is a queue up the stairs to see Johannes Michael's atom mobile, but the major throng is in the main room, and not, I regret to say, for my retro print photos.

They're here to see Khanyi Nkosi's sound installation, freshly returned from her São Paulo show and all the resulting controversy. She only installed it this afternoon, snuck in undercover with security, so it's the first time I've seen it in the flesh. It's gruesome, red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers, which makes the name even more disturbing: '*Woof & Tweet*'.

I don't understand how it works, but it's to do with reverb and built-in resonator-speakers. It's culling sounds from around us, remixing ambient audio, conversation, footsteps, glasses clinking, rustling clothing, through the systems of its body, disjointed parts of it inflating, like it's breathing, spines quivering.

It's hard to hear it over the hubbub, but sometimes it's like words, almost recognisable. But mostly it's just noise, a fractured music undercut with jarring sounds that seem to come randomly. Sometimes it sounds like pain. It *is* an animal. Or alive at any rate. Some lab-manufactured plastech bio-breed with just enough brainstem hard-wired to respond to input in different ways, so it's unpredictable – but not enough to hurt, apparently, if you believe the info blurb on the work.

'It's gratuitous. She could have done it any other way. It could have been beautiful.'

'Like something you'd put in your lounge, Kendra? It's supposed to be revolting. It's that whole Tokyo tech-grotesque thing. Actually, it's so derivative, I can't stand it. Can we move along?'

I run my hand along one of the ridges and the thing quivers, but I can't determine any noticeable difference in the sounds. 'Do you think it gets traumatised?'

'It's just noise, okay? You're as bad as that nutjob who threw blood at Khanyi at the Jozi exhibition. It doesn't have nerve endings. Or no, wait, sorry, it does have nerve endings, but it doesn't have pain receptors.'

'I meant, do you think it gets upset? By all the attention? I mean, isn't it supposed to be able to pick up moods, reflect the vibe?'

'I think that's all bullshit, but you could ask the artist. She's over there schmoozing with the money, like you should be.'

Woof & Tweet suddenly kicks out a looped fragment of a woman's laugh that startles me and half the room, before it slides down the scale into a fuzzy electronica.

'See, it likes you.'

'Don't be a jerk, Jonathan.'

'There's some streamcast journalist who wants to interview you, by the way. And he's pretty cute.'

My stomach spasms. This is another thing Jonathan does to keep me in my place – as in, we're not together.

'Great, thanks. I need a drink.'

'I'll get it. Just go talk to Sanjay. What do you want?'

'Anything.' It's unlikely that the gallery bar would have Ghost on hand.

Jonathan propels me in the direction of Sanjay, who is standing in a cluster of people, in deep conversation. The one is clearly money, some corporati culture patron or art buyer; the other, I realise, is Khanyi Nkosi. I recognise her from an interview I saw, but she is so warmly energetic, waving her hands in the air to make a point and grinning, that I can't match her to her work. And the third, I realise with a shock, is Andile. It shouldn't be a surprise that he should be here, considering he picked me on the basis of my work, but I still haven't come clean with Jonathan about the branding, and this doesn't strike me as the time.

I can't deal with this right now. I push through the queue, detouring back towards the entrance and the open air – only to skewer someone's foot with the '40s-style blue velvet heels I bought for the occasion.

'Hey! Easy!'

'Oh god, I'm sorry.' Shit, I really, really, really need a Ghost. I wonder if I can make it to the spaza down the road and back before Jonathan notices.

'No worries. Art is what the artist does, right? So technically, my bruised toes could be worth something?'

I didn't even realise it was Toby whose foot I had crushed.

'So you must be the famous artist, then?'

'I'm the less famous artist. I mean, I'm not; the thing, it's not mine. But you know that.' I laugh self-consciously, still thinking about how to get a Ghost, my mind chanting a little litany of need, wondering if they serve them at the bar.

'Is now a good time to get an interview?'

'*You're* the journalist?'

'Ouch!' He mock-staggers back, clutching his heart. 'Yeah. I brought my own phone mic and everything.'

'I'm sorry. That's not what I… Oh God. Can we just start again?'

'Sure. No prob.'

He turns away, clears his throat, and then does a little twirl, one hand raised in fabulous salute, hamming it up like he's on the red carpet.

'Hello. I'm Toby. I'll be your journo for the evening.' And I can't help but laugh. 'Do you have a drink?'

'No, thanks. Someone's getting me one.'

'Rocking.' He suddenly turns serious. 'Okay, now listen, Special K, if you want, we can talk later. I know it's your opening and you've got things to do, people to schmooze. I will totally understand if now is not the most opportune moment.'

'Actually, do you want to get out of here?'

'What?'

'Just for a sec. I need some fresh air. And a drink.'

'I thought someone was getting you one.'

'A non-alcoholic.'

'Oooooh. Right.' He winks.

'You want to come?'

'Sure. Can my mic come too?'

We're not the only people hanging outside. We have to push through a crowd, including an astonishingly gorgeous blonde, with fucked-up hair, who makes me feel conservative. We get halfway down the block before I take off my heels in disgust. 'That doesn't make it into the copy, okay?'

He holds up his hands. 'Do you see me making notes?' We walk in silence for another block, stepping over a *bergie* passed out in the street. And I'm relieved not to feel any sense of an urgent compulsion to touch him. And no Aitos in sight, either.

At the spaza, Toby opens the fridge at the back. 'Ghost, I'm assuming?' he says, putting it on his phone. It's cold and crisp and clean and it hurts my teeth and I realise my hands have been shaking all this while – or maybe my whole body. And this can't be good, but it doesn't feel bad.

'Mind if I join you?' Toby cracks another can. 'Wow. You really are an addict deluxe,' he says, a little too admiringly.

'Hey, did you check my coat tonight?

'Yeah?'

His BabyStrange is black, which is a relief after the goreporn he was projecting last time I saw him.

'It's my little shout out to *Self-Portrait*.'

'Cute. So, do you want to do this?'

'Am I allowed to take notes now?'

'Yeah, yeah.' I wave my hand impatiently.

He hooks a mic into his phone and points it at me. 'So. What's with the oldschool?'

'Didn't you read the press release?'

'Let's say I didn't.'

I quote it from memory. 'Adams's use of non-digital format is inspired by her fascination with the capacity for error…'

'Okay. Let's skip the press release.'

'Ah, it's just – film is more interesting than digital. There's a possibility of flaw inherent in the material. It's not readily available, so I have to get it over the Net, and some of it has rotted or it's been exposed even before I load it in the camera, but I don't know that until I develop it.'

'Like *Self-Portrait*?'

'And it's not just the film. It's working without the automatic functions. The operator can fuck up too.'

'Did you fuck up?'

'Ha! That's the great thing about working with damaged materials. You'll never know.'

'It's the same in audio, you know. Digital was too clean when it first came out, almost antiseptic. The fidelity was too clear. You lost the background noise, the sounds you don't even pick up, but it's dead without the context. The audio techs had to adapt the digital to synth the effects of analogue. How insane is that? It's contentious, though – now they're saying it's been bullshit all along, just nostalgics missing the hiss of the recording equipment.'

'That's exactly it. You can do the same thing in photography. Apply effects, lock-out the autofocus, click up for exposure, all to recreate the manual.'

'And you're looking for the background noise.'

'Yeah. Or something like it.' I set my empty can neatly down beside my shoes. 'Got enough?'

'Yeah. I'm good. You give good soundbite,' he says admiringly, so that another Ghost down, we're still sitting on the pavement, just talking, away from the madding, when a dark-haired boy I recognise as the guy from the band, from Andile's office, comes walking down towards us.

'Hey, photographer girl,' he says, friendlier than last time. 'Damian, remember? From Kill Kitten?'

'Hey, Dame,' says Toby. 'How's the bandscene? Did you catch the cast from your gig?'

'Yeah, man, it was killer. Shot. We really appreciate the exposure.'

'It was all you. I just filmed what I experienced. You guys were tight.'

'Well, it was *great*, man, thanks. We're playing next Saturday, if you want on the guest list.'

'Thanks. So, how do you know our star rising over here?' Toby asks, nodding at me. We are both still sitting, sprawled on the kerb, so Damian is looking down at us. There is a drawn-out silence.

'Ho-kay,' Toby shrugs in mock defeat. 'There's obviously some deep unspoken going on here, and I do not need to know the gruesome details.'

'It's nothing like that. We're…' I look to Damian for approval, but he doesn't seem concerned. 'We're both branded.'

'How come you're not chugging Ghosts, then?'

'Are you kidding me?' Damian laughs. 'I've had three already tonight.' He drops to sit on the pavement beside us.

'How much do you drink in a day?' I ask, trying to make it sound throwaway.

'Six, seven? Somewhere around there. My girlfriend keeps tabs on me.' I don't say anything. I'm doing nine to twelve. This is my seventh since four-thirty.

'It's lucky you're both the same brand,' Toby says, and is that envy in his voice?

'What if you were competitive? There must be a clause about that. "*Section 31c. Thou shalt not fraternise with the enemy.*"'

'Yeah, can you imagine?' Damian says. 'Coke wars for real.'

'No rival soft-drink friends for you!'

'I don't think that's going to be an issue anytime soon,' I interrupt their banter. 'Andile said they're not doing this with other brands just yet. Ghost has the proprietary licence for three months.'

'Yeah, but we're only first gen. They'll be popping out sponsor babies like toast.'

'I hate that word.'

'Toast?' chirps Toby, trying to find a way in.

'And what happened to it being exclusive?'

'You'll be able to buy your way in. Got enough cash, enough cool, you're representing. Just like the cosmetics.'

'So we'll be outmoded already.'

'Bleeding edge no more.'

'So, Dame, where's yours? Can I see?'

'Toby!' I'm scandalised, but Damian shrugs it off.

'S'cool. I don't mind. I signed up for the freakshow.' He turns his back to us and yanks down the collar of his shirt to reveal the faint radiance of the glowlogo between his shoulderblades.

'That doesn't seem exactly high vis,' Toby says.

'Not now, but I have a tendency to take my shirt off on stage. I get hot, okay? It's not like some sex-appeal thing. Hey, are you recording this?'

'Sorry, bad habit. I'm a junkie for collecting vid. I can delete it if you want.'

'No, it's cool. Shouldn't we be heading back, anyway? Aren't there supposed to be speeches and shit? And I know Andile wanted to say what's up.'

'You go ahead, we'll catch up,' Toby says, laconic, and this suddenly strikes me as a very Jonathan thing to do.

'I think I'll go with Dame. We've been gone a while.'

The gallery seems even more oppressive, but I'm less freaked now, even when I see Andile talking to Jonathan. Luckily I get side-tracked by Mr Muller.

'Congratulations. It's wonderful. Wonderful. Although I'm not sure about this messy animal thing. It's very Damien Hirst. Cheap shock-treatment stuff. Yours is infinitely superior. And people will see that, take my word for it.'

I'm still basking in the afterglow, when I overhear some overgroomed loft dwellers giggling into their wine. 'And this. I'm so tired of Statement! Like she's the only angst child ever to embrace the distorted body image.'

'Oh Emily. I quite like the undeveloped. Because she is. You know, still young, coming into herself. The artist in flux, emergent.'

'Well, precisely. It's so *young*. You can't even tell if it's technically good or not, it's all so… damaged.'

'Don't let the heathen savages get to you.' Toby has popped up again, speaking loud enough for the woman to hear, but I'm more amused than insulted. I'm about to point out that under

the black of *Self-Portrait* is a photograph of a photograph, clutched in my fingers, captured in the mirror with a reflected flash of light. That it's all meant to be damaged. But then I realise I don't have to. I don't have to make my motives transparent.

Damian appears at my shoulder with the astonishing blonde, who he introduces as his girlfriend, Vix, a fashion designer for her own small label. Vix distracts Toby, the two of them heading off to the bar to lay in supplies for all of us, leaving me with a convenient gap to ask Damian if he's experienced any weird side-effects. He seems puzzled.

'Like what? I had really *mif* flu for about four days. Sinuses and sweats, but it worked its way out.'

I try and tell him about the thing with the Aito, but it comes out all garbled.

'It doesn't sound that freaky,' says Damian. 'You felt sorry for her. You stopped to help. That's pretty awesome.'

I'm miserable that he doesn't get it. 'It wasn't empathy or altruism or anything. It was like I had to, like a real compulsion.'

The same way we're compelled to drink Ghost, I think but don't say. Damian isn't paying attention. He's watching his girlfriend across the room, trying to get through to the bar while Toby clowns around, making her laugh.

It makes me feel desperately alone. There are all these people circling, like Johannes Michael's swirl of paper atoms upstairs, but the connections to me are only tenuous.

'You know the dogs also function on nano?' Damian says, ripping his eyes from Vix. 'Maybe you got crossed lines,' he jokes.

'Maybe.'

We're cut short by a flurry of activity at the door. I've been aware of a low peripheral clamour, but now it erupts. There are people shoving, wine spilling from glasses and yelps of dismay.

'This is a private function!' Jonathan of all people yells, spouting clichés at the rush of people in black pushing in through the crowd, their faces blurred like they're anonymous informants in documentary footage. It is so disturbing, that it takes me a second to catch on that they're wearing smear masks. Another to realise that they're carrying pangas and a prog-saw.

A few people scream, sending out a reverb chorus from *Woof & Tweet*. The crowd presses backwards. But then the big guy in front yells, 'Death to corporate art!' and Emily, the woman who dissed my work, laughs scornfully and really loudly. 'Oh god! Performance art. How gauche.' There are murmurs of relief and snickers, and the living organism that is the crowd reverses direction, now pressing in again to see.

Damian grabs my arm and pulls me back out of the front line, because I haven't moved, just as one of the men (women?), towering over the others, grabs Emily by her hair and drags her forward, forcing her to her knees, spitting with contempt, 'Don't you dare make me complicit in your garbage!'

The terrorist raises the panga, pulling back Emily's head by the roots of her hair, exposing her throat. She raises a hand to her mouth, pretends to stifle a yawn.

'Are you going to chop me into little itty-bitty pieces now? This is so melodramatic.' And it is. The crowd is riveted. But I didn't think this kind of promotional stunt would be Sanjay's thing.

From the bar, Toby catches my eye and mimes mock applause to the spectacle. Vix has her hands clamped tight round his arm, looking shocked and excited at the same time. And that seems to be the prevailing mood. Not outrage or fear, but excitement. People are grinning, nodding, eyes overbright, which makes it seem all the more horrific.

But what frightens me most is the reaction of one of the men in smear. When the protagonist yanks Emily's head further back, the other guy moves forward, as if frightened himself. 'What are you–?' he starts, but the one with Emily's hair twisted round his wrist gives an impatient jerk of his head, and his hesitant friend backs off. Bowing his legs, he raises the arm with the panga as if to slice across her throat, only at the last instant – so late that she winces back involuntarily – he deflects the blow to a side-swipe, aimed not at her, but at *Woof & Tweet*, which is directly in front of them.

The thing emits a lean crackle of white noise. The audience is rapt, camera phones clicking. There is a scattershot of applause, and laughter, as the others move in, four of them, with one guarding the door, to start laying into it. It's only when the artist starts wailing that it becomes apparent that this was not part of the program. And only then do the smiles drop from mouths, like glasses breaking.

Mr Hesitant hangs back as the others step in, pangas tearing through the thin flesh and ribs of Khanyi Nkosi's thing with a noise like someone attacking a bicycle with an axe. The machine responds with a high-hat backbeat for the melody assembled from the screams and skitters of nervous laughter. It doesn't die quietly, transmuting the ruckus, the frantic calls to the SAPS, and Khanyi wailing, clawing, held back by a

throng of people. It's like it's screaming through our voices, the background noise, the context.

The bright sprays of blood make it real, spattering the walls, people's faces, my prints, as the blades thwack down again and again. The police sirens in the distance are echoed and distorted as *Woof & Tweet* finally collapses in on itself, rattling with wet smacking sounds.

They disappear into the streets as quickly as they came, shaking the machetes at us, threatening don't follow, whooping like kids. With the sirens closing in, the big guy spits on the mangled corpse. Then, before he ducks out the door and into the night, he glances up once, quickly, at the ceiling. No one else seems to notice, but I follow his gaze up to the security cams, getting every angle.

I'm sick with adrenalin. The woman who was taken hostage is screaming in brittle, hyperventilating gasps. Her friend is trying to wipe the blood off her face, using the hem of her dress, unaware that she has lifted it so high that she is flashing her lacy briefs. Khanyi is kneeling next to the gobs of her animal construct, trying to reassemble it, smearing herself with the bloody lumps of flesh.

There is a man trying to comfort one of the drinksgirls, but he is the one weeping, laid waste by the shock. Toby is clambering down from the bar, why I don't know, Mr Muller is sitting slumped on the staircase, hugging the banister like a friend. Vix fumbles with lighting a cigarette, her hands shaking, until Damian materialises by her side, takes her hands in his, and holds the lighter steady. She folds into him like a collapsible paper lantern. And even from here, I can see him mouth her name. I hadn't even realised he was gone.

There is still a prevailing undercurrent of thrill, a rush from the violence – no one was hurt, apart from Khanyi Nkosi's thing. Everyone is on their phones, taking pictures, talking.

Toby is shouting above the ruckus, into his mic, like he's reporting live. There are even more people trying to wedge into the space, so that the cops, who have finally arrived, have to shove their way inside.

Self-Portrait is covered in a mist of blood. I move to wipe it clean, although I'm scared the blood will smear, will stain the paper, but just then Jonathan wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck. And now it's my turn to collapse against him.

'It's okay, sweetheart, everything's going to be okay.'

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Charles Stross says: *"It's what you get when you take your classic 80s deracinated corporate alienation sensibility, detonate about six kilos of semtex under it, and scatter the smoking wreckage across 21st century South Africa – full of unselfconscious spiky originality, the larval form of a new kind of SF munching its way out of the intestines of the wasp-paralysed caterpillar of cyberpunk."*

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