

WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO...

Chapter One



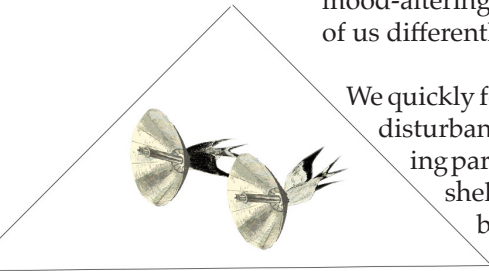
Here is where we began –

A scouting party assembled for this mission from among the Consortium Stars. Landed in an unknown place and thinking of home, wherever that is. The Consortium is a planetary alliance forged through years of antagonism, collaboration and colonisation. Unsteady peace is all we know, we are cautious, curious, and a little shy with each other. Part of the pact is that we communicate in a shared language, but as with all official languages we each speak different variations at home: a place for which we all use different words. Home is hard to describe even if you do speak the same mother tongue, it might not be a physical space at all, perhaps for some of us it is located in the shape and weight of the bodies we love, or might live on as a memory whether good, bad or bittersweet. Anyway, it's important to focus on the mission, and home is not necessarily the place that we're all coming from. Moons revolve, planets can be destroyed. Home might only exist as an imagined future, or a place we could create now with the right tools.

Interstellar travel can be very disorienting, so it's important to quickly find your bearings and establish spaces of safety and escape. Coll, who had been a navigator on a previous mission, had picked up on some unusual sonic activity, so we split up and set out on our own to test out the new environment. The terrain was wet and claggy, so were grateful for a mission that didn't need us to carry more stuff. Naturally, some of us have better trained ears than others – or rather we are tuned in to different things.

We heard:
Laughter (in my head)
Breathing, slurping, self
Under tree applause, Static
Random tick
A leaf fall and hit the ground
"Rub a dub, dub"
Footsteps, door on carpet
Oil boiler
Creaky floor and lots of rain.

Esco in particular was fascinated by the rainwater, declaring that on his home planet of G4ll1c14 "rain is an art" full of subtle mood-altering chemistry. We are all of us differently far from home.



We quickly found the reason for the sonic disturbance – we were not alone. A building party was hard at work reinforcing the shell of the main dwelling structure on the base. It was strange to find them out here making noise on what we had expected to be an uninhabited planet. They didn't ask us what our mission was, but assumed that as key-holders we were residents in the dwelling, not strangers. As such, they expected that we show them hospitality and bring them hot drinks. One of our captains found herself standing in the kitchen making them Chai, stirring water and thinking about all the times that she had done this before. Basic needs outweighing status. And progress? How to judge that?

The dwelling itself had probably once been a farm – one of those sprawling places with uncarpeted floors ready to be mopped clean of the dirt from farmhands' boots. There are similar places on many planets so for some of us this was hugely comforting, reminding us of a time when we had experienced a life organised around the lifecycle of a farm. There tasks, seasons, and weathers were experienced collectively, so much that you might have become a family without trying. For some others of us the house was a half-finished space, with elements tumbled together from the unwanted things left behind by previous occupants: books that came free with magazines, mismatching, tired rugs, broken vases and old

cooking utensils. Tali who is the deputy of a Winter Bed facility, was just grateful for the quiet, finding peace in the dwelling. I too enjoyed standing alone at the window and watching small flying creatures zip about in the dusk air. They reminded me of the swifts I witnessed during my time on planet Earth – birds which sleep on the wing, and can fly the distance between Earth and its moon and back, seven times during their lifetime of migration.

As the day went on we continued to explore and map the location, this time organized into small groups with shared instincts about the space. One group was made up of people who had been speaking with the dwelling and had established its age and gender. As the house creaked out its complaints they harmonised, singing:

[Am Dm G Am]
Irregular flow of footsteps in dusty old veins.
Creaking around, opening doors, rattling panes.

[Dm G C E]
Still so much movement, though this body will never take a step.
What is the lifeblood, what are the



SIDE A: WALLS

Explanation

'Science fiction doesn't try to predict the future, but rather offers a significant distortion of the present... [we] look at what we see around us and we say "how can the world be different?"' – Samuel Delany (1984).

The text on the left is the first chapter of a speculative sci-fi novel. The following chapters have not been written yet because the narrative is a fictionalisation of the first research retreat of Distant Voices: a project that is in progress. The text is designed to be printed onto A3 paper, read and then folded into an origami house. It's a little tricky to make, but there is a helpful video tutorial here: 'make an easy origami house' by Leyla Torres <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtNv2N8CVyw>. When making the house treat this side as side A: the walls of the house, the other side will eventually form the roof.

I made this piece because as the research associate on Distant Voices I was tasked with making a creative response to our first core group research retreat, that aimed to capture different perspectives on the experience. The core group is a diverse collection of people who have come together to try and map out and understand experiences of homecoming after prison. Some of us have lived experiences of imprisonment or familial imprisonment, some are social workers, some others are academics (representing musicology, criminology, politics, and sociology), musicians, artists, writers, third-sector workers, and probation or prison officers. For many of us these areas of expertise and experience blur or overlap – for example we might be a probation officer and a musician. We're trying to build a shared understanding and approach through this research, but this is not the place that we've started from. My response acknowledges collaborative research is not an easy thing to do, requiring the creation of mutual trust, respect and the destabilising of existing hierarchies.

I wanted this response to include some text and images based on some of the things we had made during the retreat. My first thought was to produce something that looked like the surface of a crystal, with segments containing fragments of the work we had done that would intersect in interesting ways. I could have stuck with this idea but decided to create a narrative that wove together some of the things we made and had done, and rewrote our retreat as a piece of science fiction. To retain the idea of juxtaposing fragments, I designed the work as a piece of foldable origami. As such, when you fold the story into the shape of a house the folds will create new combinations of words and images, and perhaps a new story. I chose the shape of a house because we were exploring the theme of home and homecoming during the retreat, as we are in the project more broadly. The images for this piece were made by collaging photographs taken on the retreat by my colleague David Shea, with images from the British Library's online collection of cop-

yright-free sources. I found that within the collection of historical images relating to science and technology there were the raw materials I needed to craft future landscapes. The library is free and available here: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/albums>.

I took the title for this piece: ‘We Who Are About To’ from a novella of the same name written by Joanna Russ (2016). First published in 1977, her story is a feminist take on the genre of the ‘space western’ in which a group are thrown or come together to explore an unknown planet (‘beyond the final frontier’). I chose this genre because it seemed to parallel the experience of setting out to do collaborative research with a group that doesn’t know each other well. Like others in the group I wondered how we could find a shared language, or sense of community, and what it would be possible for us to create together. Russ’s story flips the conventions of the space western by focussing not on the dazzling progress of science, but on ‘how it will feel to land on a new world, how the old dynamics of human personality and inter-relations will play out in the future’ (Alderman, 2016, p. v). In other words, Russ does precisely what Samuel Delany suggests science fiction should do, and what many have argued art in general should do: it makes us look at the world we think we know with fresh eyes.

With this in mind and in the spirit of not averting our eyes from experience, I wondered how the rest of the research group would respond to seeing our retreat given back to them in the form of fiction. What it would do to transpose some of the things, thoughts and feelings around the first core retreat onto a fictional exploration of an alien planet? How would they feel about my interpretation of events? To write the story I began by amassing the feedback from group members as it emerged, looking for common and repeated reflections and words. I also wanted to capture differences and divergences in people’s experiences – a shared story isn’t about everyone agreeing, but about finding ways to hold differences together in the same place. I have previously experimented with this in my PhD where I conceptualised bringing together data in this way to create something new, as a practice of ‘translation’ in which although material which might be significantly transformed, the translator works on retaining the sense of the original material in the final work (Thomas, 2017). I am excited about the development of our shared story together and invite the group members to collaborate to write the next chapter.

Philippa Thomas, 2017

References:

Alderman, N., 2016. Introduction, in: We Who Are About To... Penguin Books, London.
Delany, S.R., 1984. Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction. Dragon Press, New York.
Russ, J., 2016. We Who Are About To... Penguin Books, London.
Thomas, P., 2017. In Different Voices: A Practice-Based Intervention into the Assemblage of Crime UNPUBLISHED THESIS. Goldsmiths College, University of London, London.

trinkets we never should have kept?



My new companions and I were those who had felt uneasy in the dwelling, which seemed to us neglected and somehow off-key. We decided to perform one of the rituals which had comforted us in other times and spaces. In this ritual, you seek out the most under-appreciated element in that place and bring it together in one room to celebrate it. I’ve seen it done with dust, insects, disease, or in hierarchical societies with slaves or servants. The idea with the ritual is not to effect a radical change in the order of things, but to placate the house by showing it that you are paying attention to all of the parts that make up what it is. We were grateful that everyone participated in our ritual with good humour and indulgence for our alien custom. Memory and ritual seemed to be on everyone’s mind in this first day in a new space. Kerr who had lived on a neighbouring planet all his life, saving two years in a galaxy far, far away, told us about a grounding ritual he had witnessed in his travels. In this, an indigenous lifeform touched their newborns’ feet to ground from their ancestral home. If they couldn’t birth on their homeland they brought containers full of sacred earth to the scene of the labour. Perhaps thinking of his own children back home, Kerr wrote:

Where heel struck ground first, (whether jarred or feather-light), from there you will run.

*Soil or grass or swamp, rocky base or shifting sand,
This first touch is yours.*

*Push off, push up
Push off, push on*

We ended the day playing music for and with each other in a room that was too rectangular for us to gather comfortably around the fire. Some of us dozed in the warmth, some wondered whether we were home yet, and what it would take to make a new space together where everyone felt comfortable. Some of us thought about whether we had been wise to accept the mission, not fully knowing what it was to be. It was not a time for stories from our own worlds, but music helped hold us together in the same space and time despite misgivings about the mission. As we became sleepy or even just desiring a little space to ourselves we slipped off to bed. A few who could speak music fluently stayed up late chattering to each other. Someone had allotted us bedrooms and I found my name on the door of a room that had the most amazing murals on it, a space scene painted by someone who had clearly never left this planet (the man in the moon looks nothing like that). Sharing a room promotes an instant intimacy and I found myself speaking without restraint to my roommate. I later wondered if this had been wise, how do we learn to trust and be trusted?

It is notoriously difficult to sleep after intergalactic travel and so to aid in this, one of my tasks was to provide the group with an injection of artificial dreams. I chose some classic tales of adventure and transformation, with an artist turned into a spider by a jealous god, a nymph into an echo because no one paid her any attention, and a girl becoming a secret thing to escape the clutches of a hyena-husband. It is always difficult to be the dreamweaver on a new mission – as time goes on you get better at suggesting content, and the crew start to put in requests. I was a bit worried about the antiquated language in some of the dreams, and not sure that everyone on the mission would recognise it and accept the dream as their own. Sometimes a body rejects them, or they bring on nightmares of incomprehension. This fear was realised and some crew members woke a little disorientated and wary. Nevertheless, we spent the morning of the second day in lively discussion of our dreams – although

we had shared the same dreams, we all had different journeys through them.

On the morning of the second day I burnt food, and that’s when it hit me that I was not at home – I couldn’t control the fire properly, and there was no system of measurement that I recognised. Still the group kindly ate the breakfast we prepared. Everyone is comforted by things cooked in butter, perhaps it’s only a coincidence but once they’d found a way to preserve it for light-years, space travel became a lot more popular.

By this second day we hoped to hear more about why we were selected for this scouting party. Although we were unclear as to what exactly was wanted from us, we nevertheless felt the need to show why we were there, to prove that we had something to bring to the mission. Those of us who hadn’t been on previous Consortium missions felt it keenly, aware that we were dealing in first impressions not familiarity. One of our captains, known as Prof – an affectionate nickname that nevertheless reflected his status as a senior academic, began to explain that we were a mix of people with different experiences of the notorious Winter Beds program, and/or those with skills to help translate and communicate the experience of reintegrating after ‘sleep’ Consortium wide.

Officially hailed a huge success, Winter Beds was a Consortium program rolled out as soon as cryogenic freezing became sufficiently cheap. Those assessed to be socially troublesome or troubled had been frozen, and reawakened at a time when science had advanced enough to return them to society in a permanently ‘neutralised’ state. Governments declared this a ‘gentle correction’ which saved money and prevented social harm. The Consortium News Force has endlessly been running the ‘sleeping beauty’ angle, perhaps forgetting that society is thereby cast as the wicked queen that puts her to sleep. Some people call awoken sleepers ‘cold bloods,’ it’s not a nice name but nevertheless commonly used. Like a brand name the term is the same in all languages. The details of the processes which the sleepers undergo are hazy, but we know that once they’re awoken they can remember their artificial sleep (sometimes centuries long) in great detail, this is part of their ongoing punishment. However, when they open their mouths to describe it white noise comes rushing out in the place of language. It is an awful sight. They wake often in a different time and place, with family and friends gone, and few people they meet want to hear about this kind of suffering. Understandably they sometimes become figures of horror shunned by communities. To avoid this some pretend they were never frozen, attempting to blend in with those who couldn’t imagine what they’ve been through. Some manage this and are quite happy, it all depends.

Esco tried to lead us into a group sharing of our knowledge of life after waking up from the Winter Bed program. His careful approach was clearly designed to avoid triggering incidents of white noise, but it was still difficult to begin to really share. How did my academic study of the topic compare with those who had gone through the process, or lost someone to the program, or run a facility? What could my words do to them, or more optimistically for them? In any case it would be easier for me to speak without the threat of the exposure that comes with the white noise. I had only previously met a few people who’d been awoken, one in particular stays in my mind, put into a Winter Bed as a young man he wanted to tell people what he’d seen. Instead of fighting the white noise he let it happen when it did, and coming up with inventive ways of circumventing the triggering mechanism. This seemed to me to be most astonishing generosity towards a universe that had sought to incapacitate him, knowledge that can only be offered as a gift.

