The Zoo

I still have the photograph from that day at the zoo taken by your mummy. In it you are wearing a matching floral headscarf and skirt alongside the white peasant blouse embroidered with two girls watering a pot of flowers you loved so much. Your brown Clarks shoes possessed no such charm and you would have gladly buried them in exchange for walking bare foot, which was something you liked to do as often as you could get away with it.

It is easy to talk about your clothes because although the years have faded them, they are the most substantial thing about you. The photograph gives an impression of you - a pale kneeling shape twisted to one side in order balance your new baby brother in your lap without falling backwards – but no more. The dark band of shadow beneath the hem of your skirt, inside which are tucked your legs, makes you seem to levitate as if you are not on the gravel path where your mummy had instructed you to sit but floating effortlessly just above it. In fact you seem no more real than a trick of the light passing for a paranormal aura in the photographs Victorian spiritualists claimed were of ghosts.

Partially you look like a ghost because of the way your body is drenched in sun. And partially because the photograph is old. There is a gap of almost forty years between when the photograph was taken and now. The darker colours have retained a certain depth; the green of the grass, the brown leather of your shoes; the yellow of the marigolds in the flower bed behind you, the red ribbons in the hair of the girls watering flowers on the chest of your blouse. But everything else is faded, the details dissolved into inscrutable patches of light. Balanced in the crook of your arms, toes splayed and eyes squeezed shut, your brother appears to recoil from something unspeakable and horrific just beyond the photograph’s frame. But you hold him and smile, fading into the marigolds and miniature roses in the flower bed behind, giving nothing away.

You had been looking forward to that day all week, drawing pictures of panthers, your favourite animals after reading *The Jungle Book* and writing stories about them. You couldn’t believe the size of the zoo. It was like a thousand back gardens all stitched together into one giant patchwork you could run freely between. Not so long ago you had been too afraid to go in the woods at the bottom of the hill near your house because of the Big Bad Wolf. But although you could sense the distant flicker of tails and grunts of cavernous throats, you felt secure in the knowledge that they were on one side of the tall iron railings of the zoo’s animal enclosures and you were safe from the abyss of their maws on the other.

The zoo had the same smell of sawdust and hay and sweet, earthy droppings as the wooden box where Sammy the tortoise lived back at home. Behind this smell was the scent of wet fur, boiled bones and the dry, chalk of the path, which scuffed the toes of the shoes you didn’t like anyway and turned your ankle socks grey. By the penguins the briny smell of fish was so intense you could almost taste it. You pulled a face because it reminded you of the chewy dry cod your mummy made that tasted like glue and was full of bones. It was almost as bad as the clammy, sulphurous smell of the boiled egg your mummy produced when you said you were hungry. You didn’t like boiled eggs any more than you liked fish. They tasted exactly as they smelled and you held your nose as you ate so you wouldn’t be sick.

Newly sprung from the darkness of your mummy’s tummy, your brother seemed closer to the unfamiliar world of the zoo animals and their snuffles and smells than any recognisably human one. The same milky aroma emanated from the gaps between his toes and his squashed pimple-covered nose, which you took every opportunity to kiss. Your mummy had a similar smell but beneath it was something more pungent that made her breath rich with the almost meaty aroma of the skin on milk when it’s about to turn. Her smell plumed from her wiry, red hair and rolled off the small mound of her tummy, which stuck out from beneath her waistband as if something was still growing there. You had no idea, of course. No one did.

The mound of your mummy’s tummy was eye height. Wherever you were in the zoo it was always there on the periphery of your vision. You saw her tummy as possessing the same mysterious powers as the wand-like horns of the zoo’s gazelles or the papery toiles of snake skin left in the sand. From above her mound your mummy’s voice filtered down to you as she read from the information plaques facts about the weight of an Indian elephant at birth or the fastest recorded speed of a cheetah. Yet beneath her enthusiasm your mummy sounded shrill and offended as if everything she read out was an esoteric defence against some vicious accusation she felt compelled to rebuff. In the shadow of her mound you were vaguely aware of your mummy talking to you and not talking to you at the same time as though your presence was required mostly as a buttress. At school your teachers couldn’t understand why you never asked for help but you had already learned it was safer not to. When you wanted to know why there was no ice in the polar bear enclosure you didn’t ask your mummy. You made up your own story.

 You told yourself that the whole zoo was ruled over by the Sun Queen. The Sun Queen was graceful and kind and loved by all the creatures of the zoo, great and small. Such was her generosity that to each new arrival, she granted a wish. When the polar bears first came to the zoo they spoke with great misery of freezing temperatures and ice floes so thick they had no hope of feeding on the fish swimming beneath. The polar bears’ wish was for their new home to be filled with warm plunge pools in which they could dive for fish to their hearts’ content. It went without saying, of course, that the fish would be without bones. Unlike her sister the Ice Queen, no one was afraid of the Sun Queen. Every evening at dusk she would do her rounds of the zoo, reading the animals bedtime stories until one by one they fell asleep under the stars and no beast ever had nightmares.

As usual there was a lot of fuss when your mummy decided to take a photograph. She was in charge of the camera and under her auspices a photograph was never a simple, spontaneous event. You had all stopped at a corner by one of the ornamental gardens whose grassy island formed part of an archipelago around the mansion-style visitor information centre. There must have been a sign reading *keep off the grass* because at first she wanted you to stand on the gravel path that ran alongside it. Then for reasons unknown, including perhaps to herself, she had you sitting on the gravel with your brother on your knee. You understood your brother was not a doll who could be held upside by the ankle or accidentally dropped on the path and you were nervous that if you didn’t hold him correctly his head might snap straight off his neck. Although your knees hurt from the gravel and your back ached, you leaned into him, determined to hold him up straight.

The late afternoon sun flood lit the ornamental garden, encasing you in its glare as a butterfly in a glass paper weight. You squeezed your eyes shut but instead of darkness your lids swam with a swirling mass of red blotches as if a beadlet of sun had been dropped from a pipette into their corners. More pleasant was the delicate perfume of miniature roses that floated over the warm buttery smell of your brother’s scalp as a soft, gurgling noise rose from him like bubbles through water. Somewhere just ahead you could hear the crunch of your mummy’s sandals on the gravel. Whatever she was doing, it seemed to be taking forever. With each minute that passed your brother seemed to increase in weight, crushing your legs harder into the gravel. You had no idea that such a tiny thing could be so heavy. But because you wanted to show how good you were at holding your new baby brother, you took it as a challenge to be perfectly still like in a game of hide and seek, except the object of this game was to hide in plain sight. You found that if you concentrated on keeping your brother’s head upright against your chest the digging pain in your legs seemed less. Although with your eyes closed it was harder to balance and it took all your effort not to keel over into the flower bed, baby brother and all.

Through the blood-spotted dark you could hear your mummy telling you to look at the camera and smile. On the surface it was a simple enough request. But the difficulty of trying to hold up your brother and the pain of the gravel digging into your shins alongside the additional challenge of looking straight at the sun in whose path your mummy had placed herself – all the while smiling – displaced her instructions from the realm of the reasonable into that of the impossible. What your mummy had asked of you felt no different than if she had instructed you to walk a tightrope across the lion enclosure while blindfolded. Or than if she had ordered you to spin straw into gold like the fairy tale task set by Rumpelstiltskin for the miller’s daughter.

Valiantly you opened your eyes and did your very best to look at the camera and smile but the sun was so fierce all you could manage to do was squint. Through the searing spiral of light pouring into your eyes you could hear your mummy speaking to you in the cross voice that made her sound as if someone had deliberately stamped on her foot or yanked at her hair. *If you don’t smile young lady, there’s going to be serious trouble. Am I making myself understood?*

Although you could hear your mummy perfectly clearly all you could see was blotches of blouse and flames of sun shooting out in fiery red points from her hair.You tried to explain you were doing your best and that you didn’t mean to squint. You tried to say that because of the sun and how bright it was and how much it hurt you couldn’t help it. But it was like your mummy could neither see nor hear you and was instead shouting at some other girl who was not looking at the camera and smiling just to be deliberately naughty. Along with the stinging in your eyes and the ache in your spine and arms and the throbbing pain in your legs you felt something hard and jagged drop from your chest into your stomach as if you had swallowed a large chunk of gravel.

Although it sounded like your mummy was talking to the wrong girl you knew there was only you. You also knew that grownups were never wrong, only children, and that one day a very long way off from now you would be right, too. By this logic you understood that you were the naughty girl your mummy could see. *You* were the girl who was spoiling the photograph and ruining the day. The thought made you afraid but you knew you could not cry because that would make everything worse.

Was this the moment you learned to mask your fear? Was it the beginning of your fading - who you were in and of yourself folding inwards, diminishing to nothing? Clever you. Devastating you. I wish I could reach through the photograph and touch you.

All you wanted was for your mummy to say *it’s okay, don’t worry, I’m sorry I lost my temper, come here, let me give you a hug*. But it was as though she and the sun had merged and the fury of one had become that of the other. It was then that your mummy began to scream. It came towards you in a barely coherent stream. *SMILESMILESMILE.* She howled the word like a curse spitting it violently from her mouth. *SMILESMILESMILE*. Although you were familiar with your mummy’s cross voice, this new screaming voice seemed to come from nowhere. It tore into your chest, a claw with a venomous tip slowly releasing its poison into your blood. You felt it as a strange bloating in your chest and lungs as if whatever had got into your arteries had made them swollen and raw. The pain was unbearable but you knew your survival depended on being able to smile.

Sensing your mummy coming towards you, you held your brother tight and lowered your head. Her footsteps dragged across the gravel as if she were carrying a great weight. Everything suddenly went cold as her shadow fell across you. You could feel her breath on your neck, it’s meaty smell putrefied into the something more like the stench of a rotting carcass. A drop of something slimy and warm fell on your shoulder and your stomach heaved. You could feel your mummy as something solid and dark wrapping itself around you as her fetid breath filled your ear with a hoarse gutteral grunt that may or may not have been the word smile. Terrified of what might happen if you did not obey, you swaddled your brother to your chest as hard as you could and looked up. In the place of your mummy what you saw was a dark, shifting mass whose edges seemed to spill over the grass and onto the path with no end.

You didn’t hear the click of the camera’s shutter. You were already gone, leaving behind in the photograph only a trace of you like the free-floating grin of the Cheshire Cat, forever chilling the air with your smile.