



FORKED TONGUES

A delicious anthology
of poetry and prose

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D & M

SAMANTHA SCHULZ

Meet D. I don't call him father. I never have, if only in jest. I call him Dad. Because 'father' is a cold, laminated chipboard table from the seventies, it bores me. 'Dad' is a comfortable chair. It is indented and personalised. It's part of a set: a three-seater and two singles. It's squared off in front of the television in poll-position with the heater going and shoes off.

Dad likes liquorice allsorts. I like to pull them apart. He likes radishes. He likes heavy rye bread with butter, raw onion and salt. His breath smells like bread mixed with coffee and smoke. When I pour black coffee at the café, I watch a rich brown bridge flow into the cup, off-white foam dissolves and separates and there it is: his face. Not a visual image, a feeling. But it's still his face. It's Dad so spontaneously and concentrated that I've over-poured another long black espresso. It's the same with smoke butts. Smoke butts, black coffee, and the ash at the end of a burning Winfield Red. Still-formed ash. Ash not yet crumbled and disappeared. With the wind it's gone. It must be something to do with my cortex and neuro-pathways, well-worn paths, deep grooves. I've been sensing him a lot, lately.

His forehead is soft and oily and terraced. It reminds me of fresh pizza dough, fresh yeast. It yields to touch.

Black coffee, cigarette butts, Nissan headlights, fishing rods, computers, bikes, his hands, thick hair, my hands, his feet, my hair, our eyes. I watch the line of smoke from his cigarette rise and split, spiral and twine. Does he even know that he has that cigarette? Yes, there it is: the automatic bend of the elbow trailed by a long, heavy inhalation. Out. In with smoke. Out with smoke. In and out. In and out. I'm convinced that life is a spell preserved through habit. Everything is in and out, that's how it starts and that's how the spell will end: out.

My hair stinks like smoke today. I went out to a friend's house

after work and had a few drinks. I walked in their front door to see Paul's dad asleep on the couch in front of the television. We were all relaxed. My dad's started to drink wine lately too, red wine. When I say lately, I mean to include the past couple of years. He never used to drink wine; he never used to drink alcohol at all. No alcohol used to be a part of my knowledge of him. But, our time together has stretched out. Our road of years has stretched out and coasted over hills and around corners and through dark patches. Dark patches. Dark. The word dark makes the list before red wine does. He named himself, did you know? Dad changed his name when he was a new boy to this country and didn't bother to tell his parents. He named himself Darcy. Darce. Dark. A good choice, I think. Perfectly warm and chill. A good cover for Detlef.

Dad used to be a big bear with a sore head. The thudding earth would enter a room before he did. I'd straighten up. My spine would straighten to attention. Is he cuddly right now, or are his sharp, buried teeth poised to snap? Cuddly is not around when the bear's brow is thick and heavy and knitted. Don't touch the fucking forehead when cuddly is not around – it will not yield, it will swallow your entire hand, like iron jaws: snap, lock, the rabbit is caught. Dad calls me rabbit.

Dad used to take an afternoon sleep when I was a small rabbit. A heavy sleep. A not to be disturbed sleep. I would climb into the triangle created between his curled legs and the back of the couch. I would be careful not to wake him with touch. I would curl into a ball and sleep a warm sleep. A sleep balanced between fear and complete safety.

Dad used to spend a lot of time hibernating. He has a cave. Now though, the doors are open and the sun has found an entrance. I could never understand why Darcy locked himself away. Darce rarely came to family functions. Darce dwelt in his cave, in his shed, in his world of curling smoke ribbons and black coffee and jobs. Mechanical jobs. Fiddly jobs. Jobs that require precision and concentration and knitted brows. That reminds me, Dad is a genius. No list would be complete without genius. He is. He is perfect and considered and that which he produces is flawless. People marvel at his craftwork. Whatever it is. He is fastidiously perfect. I am proud of him. So proud that it draws me to silence.

I've realised lately and when I say lately, D (*because I know that*

you're listening) I mean to include the past several years. I've realised that my father's genius has drawn me to silence in *several* ways. It has drawn me to the silence of caves. It has drawn me away from the sounds and smells and laughter of family functions and into the silence of *my* cave. It has drawn me to a silence as thick as brick and as heavy as lead that materialises most notably whenever I wish to speak with the one person I know has a deep knowledge of these caves. That's why I'm writing to you, D. That's why I'm writing.

I just want to say, to say a few things. I didn't understand when I was young, when our road hadn't reached the hills or the forests, and when I'd only felt sunlight on my back. I didn't understand why you left me for long stretches. Left us. I couldn't work out what that cave had over us. What does a smoky cave have that could beat me? I'm fun and funny and cute and, sometimes, naughty. I'm brilliant at everything I do. My grades are impeccable. All of my teachers are astounded. I am a polished piece of work.

I just want to let you know, for what it's worth, D, that I *now* know. And I don't need to write a list or describe the scenery to portray my deep knowledge of caves to you. I am so proud of you. You've let the sun in. If I can some day bear to let the sun in too, if I can ride the road that you have ... you know what I'm thinking. I love you, D. You love me. Even though I am a bit naughty and I'm not always fun and I'm not always funny and I'm not always as polished as my creator intended. I'm not a fool, I understand the irony perfectly. Perfection. To shine in a cave? To shine in the sun.

Yes, it is a heavy burden to bear – that of a cave. And, I must say, D, that my father has done it well. Perfectly, you might say. He turned his cave into a workshop. That'll show you, Fate. Land him with a cave and he'll turn it into something brilliant, because that's what he does, he produces brilliant things. Of course, the transformation of a cave into a functional workshop comes at a price. I know; I'm turning my cave into a study. There are people to be ignored. There is a sun not to be seen.

M. M is for Maureen. M is for Mum. Mum comes before Maureen. D & M: Dad and Mum. Darcy and Maureen. Deep and Meaningful? I've never thought of them in that way. Though I have often thought of them. I always think of them. Can a child ever escape the world of

Mum and Dad? The thoughts of Mum and Dad. The opinions of Mum and Dad. Even when oceans and landscapes divide us, they do not divide us.

To find the Maureen before Mum. She is a people person, she is not a hibernator. She is related to people via the duties she undertakes for them and rarely does she set to selfish tasks. She does things for other people, and in a mum-like sense, that is Maureen.

Maureen is my mum, she always has been, she always will be. I do not know the Maureen who came before Mum and there shall be no Maureen after Mum. The role that is ultimate, and ultimately transforming. Maureen is Mum.

As I said, she is a people person. She aligns herself with people, they gravitate to her and she does things for them. Nice things. Dutiful things. I missed my parents' anniversary. In a count of hits and misses I am utterly consistent – I have never hit their anniversary. But Mum never misses. M never misses birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, due dates, bills, rsvps ... M is a rock.

I visited D and M's house when they were away and found the anniversary card that M gave D. I stole it. I stole it for posterity and hid it in the frame of a photograph that D and M gave me for my birthday. It is a picture of them on their wedding day. M is wearing a bright green flared suit and D a purple suit with red flared inserts and long, black cascading hair. Longer, in fact, than M's.

It was M's second marriage. She married the big bohemian D who worked at the same factory. They married in a registry. D and M were both naturalised Australians. They came from different places but shared Australia's common ground – the land of opportunity.

'M,' Doreen McAllister called her over, 'Trevor Holder's having a divorce party. Come along. That big guy from the tool room will take you.'

'That big guy? What's his name, Dark, Darce?' M rubbed her sweaty palms down either seam of her flared denims and balanced on one foot at a time to shake the blood back into her safety booted feet. She knew very well whom her co-worker was talking about. M had known for weeks that Darce *fancied* her. Everyone knew. Was Trevor Holder's divorce party to be the natural end point, the catalyst for the dance they'd begun weeks, even months before? M and D's courting

dance had been taking shape silently. It had been easy for M, a small thrill in an otherwise soul-sapping factory job. She didn't talk to him, didn't socialise with him, but she knew he watched her. She felt his gaze follow her within the factory's crowded, grey and industrially crammed walls. But, was she prepared for yet another change? M rubbed her naked ring finger, 'Bloody 'ell, no thank you. Just give me the address and I'll drive myself.'

Showered and flushed, M stole another quick sip of white rum and coke from the tumbler perched on her dresser. She hugged her towelling robe round her waist and stared at the clothes she'd laid out on the bed. It was a warm night. Australia's warm nights, despite all the trauma this new land appeared to have brought her, were still a thrill; a prize to regale family with who remained in England. 'It's true, I'm not lyin'. We wear shorts and sandals outside *at night*. Sometimes it's so hot we *sleep* outside.' Balmy Friday nights were celebrated out of doors reclining at barbecues. Australia's weather was celebrated with the odd glass of cask wine, shimmering beneath the back porch lights. Kids running naked through sprinklers celebrated it. Women camped at the beach for whole days celebrated it with crocheted bikinis, bottles of baby oil, and sandy sandwiches and lemonade packed in eskies.

M looked at the clothes she'd selected: black silk flares, a white crocheted peasant-style top, heeled knee-length lace-up boots and a blue neck scarf that trailed on either side of her slim front and back to waist length. *Classy but not too revealing*. She backcombed her shoulder-length, brown hair into a stylish, very trendy bouffant. Carefully she applied a sheen of green shadow and a glaze of frosted lipstick. She blinked on a full coating of black mascara and opened her eyes wide. She blinked again into her dresser mirror and assumed her transformation.

Was it the slight burning of white rum in the pit of her stomach that evening, or the cast of dusk light through her bedroom window? M looked beautiful. She felt beautiful. She was not the young bride who travelled to Australia with her husband and two children six years ago. She was a single, working mother of teenagers in the early seventies. Her Australian tan was no longer a novelty but a common feature. She was paying off her *own* mortgage. She had a

small treasure of going out clothes for weekends and sensible clothes for work and chores. Michael and Lesley were in high school and performing very well. Her children were popular and well adjusted. M was thousands of miles from the home that no longer meant home. She was an independent woman in her new home. She was a woman. A Liverpool lass and an Australian woman combined.

D was already at the party when M arrived – she'd noted his white falcon parked opposite Trevor's house. The place was full. The Master's Apprentices reverberated from Trevor's new Akai sound system. People, mostly from the factory, clutched tinned beers and wine in plastic cups. They filled the house and spilled out in chatty, laughing clusters onto the backyard and Barbie area. M collected her keys into her tassel-fringed wrist bag, drew breath and strode through the front door.

'Oh, hey, M,' Doreen caught her in a drunken, pink lipstick smeared smile and thrust a plastic-cupped drink in her hands. 'You know, there's a certain dark bloke who's been asking after you. Nice of you to finally show!'

'Oh, u-huh. So, how's everything been going? Have I missed much? How's your Henry?' M nursed her plastic lolly water and scanned the crowd as Doreen swayed happily, her gold loop earrings slapping each side of her jaw in turn.

'Don't you go pretendin' to make small talk, Mo, he's out the back near the shed. Go on, don't be a bugger. He'll be smashed on flagon port by the time you go an' talk to him!'

M ignored Doreen's drunken chatter almost completely and made her way slowly through the crowd and toward the back door. She hadn't been to Trevor's house before but knew its layout precisely. Trevor Holder and M had migrated from the shadows of England at virtually the same time. They'd divorced their partners beneath Australia's radiance at virtually the same time. They'd visited the same display village and eagerly selected the same AV Jennings show-home at *exactly* the same time.

M chatted her way through the lounge room and past the spanking new wooden veneer and black Akai. She sipped away another one or two plastic drinks and languidly pressed her lips to the feel of frosted gloss. *It was still there.* She was in no rush. She knew the news of her arrival would have reached D even before the chain

of Chinese whispers carried it to him. She felt the sea of people surround her and knew her passage through them was merely scenic. *Why not enjoy the journey?*

D stood tall and dark in his maroon synthetic body shirt and worn denim flares. His neck medallion glittered at the edges of his shirt's top button and swung freely every time he laughed. He threw back another mug of flagon port and sucked his way through another Winfield Red, one laughing eye on his entourage of blokey blokes, one peering eye half concealed by a sea of black hair, resting on the sea of people still concealing *her*. *Any minute now and she'll appear.*

Mystery and darkness worked to D's advantage. No one knew his real name, no one knew his past. No one knew that his four-member family had slipped the iron curtain that contained East Germany and made their long and arduous journey to Australia. All these people knew was of his choosing. D had chosen a new name and created with it a new life. A life, for the most, quite apart from his German parents, who dragged with them too much of the Germany he'd chosen to dim. M, he knew, would concrete the new life and identity he'd chosen. It didn't matter that she was older than him. If age were to be a problem, he'd dissolve it.

'So, Darce,' M skirted her glossed lips around his name and captured his black eyes. 'Tell me about yourself. I don't really know anything about you. I mean, where do you come from, how old are you, where do you live? All that sort of stuff.'

D offered her a Winfield, though he knew she'd refuse, and let a mat of black hair fall across one eye. 'I'm fifty-seven and Russian. *Dobre Dan. Zdreve caxi. Dovis nia. Nogul si grasiva. Da.*' (rough Bulgarian to English translation: Good morning. How are you? Goodbye. You are very pretty. Yes.)

M stared, caught motionless by a sudden, mixed wash of confusion and amazement. She said nothing. D searched his flagon port headiness for words to fill the silence quickly dividing them, before a feeling of discomfort embezzled his golden opportunity. 'I'm going to search for a shop that sells Lebanese coffee tomorrow, it's so thick you can stand a spoon in it. Do you want to come?'

Several months rolled out with a push from fate that slowly transformed D and M into D and M. Despite M's widowed mother,

who proclaimed, 'He's a dark mountain of a man, Maureen. What do you really know about him? You've made some mistakes, my girl, don't make this one.' And M's sister Dorothy winced when she said, 'It's your life, Mo, I just want you to do whatever makes you and the kids happy.'

Michael and Lesley, of course, entrenched in all that was dark and seventies and *out of sight*, thought D was great. He listened to the same music as them. He drove a great beast of a car. He liked to include them in parties and social events and life. He liked to be included.

D picked M up for work at the factory. They often had lunch together – M was happy to pack for them both. Occasionally D grimaced with a shadow of stomach pain, which had nothing to do with M's cooking. D had no idea what it had to do with. He simply chose to bury the pain beneath another Winfield Red and another steaming cup of long black. Fifty-seven year old Russian D was too happily taken with M and his newly crystallising Australian life to be concerned with niggling pains.

'I think I should move in here with you,' D firmly stated over his morning coffee. M actually agreed and part of her was undeniably warmed with the idea, but she didn't say this. She looked into her cup of tea and watched her hesitations bubble and surface. Her mother thought D was 'a mistake'. Dorothy thought, clearly enough though beneath a thick layer of cotton wool, that M was still fragile from her divorce and needed to take things slowly. M wandered through her thoughts, drank her tea and wondered to herself, *Are they my hesitations, or theirs?*

She set her teacup down and kept both hands wrapped around its warm exterior, as though in this action she was able to cultivate some precarious strength. Her eyes remained fixed on the beige fluid.

'Darce,' she finally looked up. 'You know I'm very fond of you. The kids and I, we're all fond of you.' She watched a pained expression enter his dark eyes and instantly, without warning, felt the same pain enter her own. *We're connected*, she thought. But before she'd time to reevaluate and register the flux of thoughts bubbling to her surface, D turned a quick pale and slumped toward the table.

'Darce!' Maureen released her teacup and stood up over him. 'Darce, what's wrong, what's the matter?'

'Michael, quick,' she called him out of sleep and into the kitchen. 'Michael, something's really wrong with Darce. Can you drive the Falcon?'

Michael fired up the Falcon with all the gusto of an excited child and virtually flew the three of them to the closest hospital. Michael seized the moment. For him, it was glorious. The Falcon was D's pride and joy – no one else drove the Falcon. They checked D into emergency and bent over the admissions desk.

'I can't do anything without his records,' the attending nurse pronounced. 'If he hasn't got them on him, well, you'll just have to go and get them. Sorry, love, I don't make the rules.'

So, while D lay in hospital, half unconscious with searing appendicitis pains, Michael and M made their way to his flat. They rummaged through his car magazines and odd collections of paraphernalia: nuts and bolts in curiously organised compartments, a polished harmonica, a carved wooden tobacco pipe, papers in string-tied piles, comic books, photographs – some still in their paper envelopes and others pasted in albums. They quickly searched his cupboards and drawers until, in a shoebox under his bed, Michael found the documentation they, *D* required.

'Mum,' Michael called M over. 'Mum,' a skerrick of laughter began to fill his gaze, 'what do you really know about Darcy?'

'What? What do you mean, what do I know? I know everything that you know. Have you found his medical records? What have you found?' M searched her son's face for clues but found only a rapid heat rising within her.

'What is it?' She gripped Michael's arms as though in an attempt to shake the enigma from him. 'What the bloody hell is it?'

'Mum, Darcy's not Darcy and he's certainly not fifty-seven. He's not even from Russia. He's been lying through his teeth to you.' At this Michael began to laugh uncontrollably. So much so that his laughter immediately grew contagious. 'His name's Detlef and he's German and he's barely older than *I* am. You're a cradle snatcher!!'

M sat and waited for D to be operated on and stared, once again, into her cuppa. She sat and waited and stared. *You've made some mistakes, my girl, don't make this one. I just want you to do what makes you happy. He's a dark mountain of a man. What do you really*

know about him? You're a cradle snatcher. What do you know about him? He's a dark mountain. You've made some mistakes. You're a cradle snatcher. What do you know? He's a mountain. Snatcher. Mistakes. Happy. Know. No. Dark. What do you know? ... is this going to work? Can this possibly work?

I stand from my computer, rub my soft, oily forehead and uncurl into a long awakening stretch. I'm surprised at how dark my room has become. I've written another day away and barely noticed the sun make its way from one corner of my window to the other. I roll my cane blinds to catch the afternoon's last rays and open the window onto a gust of sea breeze. It's time, I suppose, to outlay some clothes and get ready.

I choose my favourite pair of black pants, my suede camel coloured boots and a matching fitted shirt. As I stare at them lying on my bed in anticipation I'm surprised to find that I am actually quite looking forward to the family function awaiting me. I can almost hear it in the distance: the laughter, the colourful plates of salads and barbecued seafood, the clink of wine glasses, clusters of people set in among the evening and its music. I shower and make my way back to my study-cum-bedroom and cast my eyes around the space. I adore this space. My space. My paintings and books, my computer, my bed, my clothes and my photographs. My photograph of Mum and Dad on their wedding day in those crazy flared threads. *What were they thinking?*

I take the piece of framed history off the sill and unlatch its thick backing. *They're so different; they're such different halves—how did they ever get it together?* I take the card stashed beneath the frame's lining, tuck it into my bag, dress and check my watch. *Shit, I'm going to be late.*

These days M and D drive home from the hospital in the afternoon together. They've worked at being on the same timetable. Maureen adjusts her Friday roster up on Ward 6D and Darce, down in the biomed tool room, works on until Mo (that's what he's grown to call her), comes downstairs to fetch him. They drive home together.

Darce wheels the barbecue out of his shed, fires it up and starts on the hot foods. Mo, in the kitchen, makes a start on the salads. By

the time I arrive everyone is already there: my brothers and sister, my nieces and nephews, cousins, uncles, aunts. They're all there. I make my way through the crowd with a glass of wine, through the lounge room packed with photographs, through the kitchen packed with people, and out onto the backyard barbecue area. There they are. I make my way toward them.

'Well, I made it, for the first time I actually made it!' I reach into my bag and pull out the card. 'How many years has it been, thirty?'

'Rabbit!' Dad scruffs my hair as though I'm a puppy.

'So,' I insist, 'how many years?'

'I don't know, I don't remember these things. Mo, the rabbit wants to know how many years we've been hitched – you remember these things, I don't.'

Mum confirms my count as she opens the card I've shoved into her hand. 'What's this, an anniversary card? What,' she looks at the card with a laugh and then back to me, 'this is the card I gave your dad last year. What are you doing with it?'

'I might never herald the event, but I notice when it takes place. I thought this card was so funny that I stole it. I just thought it was funny that you should put yourselves right up there with all of the greats!' I begin to laugh and whisk the card back for another look.

'What do you mean, Rabbit, we *are* one of the greats. We're the greatest, aren't we, Mo?' Dad steals the card off me and holds it up:

Antony and Cleopatra
Romeo and Juliet
Napoleon and Josephine
Rhett and Scarlett
Tarzan and Jane
Bonnie and Clyde
Laurel and Hardy
Jack and Jill
Tom and Jerry
Batman 'n' Robin
Abbott and Costello
Darcy and Maureen