



# FORKED TONGUES

A delicious anthology  
of poetry and prose

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# NUMBER SEVEN

SAMANTHA SCHULZ

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On the 29th of July last year, a day not unlike any other, and yet, unlikely, Celia B began to run.

Celia emerged from the toilet – her morning constitutional – and ran down the hallway. Out the front door and across the crunchy, gravel driveway. Leaving in her wake, ball shaped gravel indents. Long before the gravel realigned she was gone.

Tubby, middle-aged – an ironic term – Celia. Running. Soiled slippers, terry towelling, *just one more Tim Tam* Celia. Running. BBC dramas, sweet wine, one glass:

Drink.

Drank.

Drunk – no more. Celia ... is running.

Random thoughts sealed her into a cone of running and random thoughts: *there are tiny, tiny, little workers inside my knees – they must think an earthquake is happening. Boom. Boom. How big this intersection is!* For at that premature stage the breathtaking danger of the truth might have stopped her. It might have brought her to a jolting, crash-test-dummy, world-still-moving-but-I'm-not, oxygen-starved halt. The truth was ... that Celia ... was running.

For a while all she noticed was nothing. Not that Celia ran in a void uninhabited by any form of trigger: sights, sounds, smells. Were she to engage her senses she would have seen that the world was there as it always had been, only closer. But, in a sense, and how can I explain this? Celia *did* run in a void. A bubble. Without intent she disengaged. She breathed. She allowed thoughts to pass her, to pass over and through her. Birds flew in the opposite direction above her and carried with them a mantle of air that licked at her skin, broke her cheesed off surface and popped their way through to the other side. For the first time since her childhood, fresh, free atoms explored her. The dense matter that had become Celia began to break, sepa-

rate, crumble. In a sense, I was utterly correct: for a while all Celia noticed was nothing.

Nevertheless, a great deal was taking place.

At the very moment realisation should have *hit* her Celia noticed a dead magpie. She didn't stop. And, although Celia didn't stop, she didn't miss a thing.

Flash. Her senses re-ignited.

Flash. Her bubble popped.

Flash. Dead magpie.

Not until some time later, with the dead, snapshot bird preserved by mental image hovering right there in her mind's eye, did Celia speculate, *how do I feel about that? A twisted, mashed carcass.* She kept running.

The sun moved overhead and the intermittent, bothersome car roared past. Celia was at first shell-shocked by cars. They drove so very fast and seemed to leave in their wake a trail of devastation: rustled, dishevelled branches and grass stalks and bent flowers. They were repeatedly pulled forward, dragged into the smelly car's vacuum and then, without ceremony, snapped back to the stronghold of their roots. Roots that 'hung on for dear life', her mother would have said. Another vehicle roared past and limp roadside flowers lurched into its wake. But this time, Celia noticed, they did not snap back. The flowers and grass stalks and trees directly roadside were shredded. Tired. They'd lost their snap. They sagged miserably and let life sway them forward, tiredly back and, in between, they hung. Stasis. Nothingness.

A few more chapters of random thoughts unfurled and protected her. Enveloped and embraced her. They arched their spines, allowed the winds to rustle free their pages, and round her they wrapped their tissue-thin fronds.

*I wonder, considered Celia, if life since that party I went to at age sixteen, where I tried magic mushrooms for the one and only time, has been a figment of my imagination? Well, a figment of mushroom, really! Perhaps I never left the party. Perhaps I drank that god awful brown liquid, felt my particles pop into place, out of place, and dance about of their own, mindless will and ...* the gist of Celia's thought, if you'll allow me to take over, considers life as an illusionary construct induced by a small, brown catalyst. A series of events constructed, like

a string of pearls, one after the other, one influencing the next ... but, not real. Not *real* because of that first mushroomy pearl. *Perhaps none of this is real. Perhaps it doesn't matter that I ...*

Celia turned the page. She watched the thought grow and stretched with it, flexed with it: *If I've been at that party all along and reality, though it is not real, is something I have to imagine my way out of, in to - Jesus, either way, it doesn't matter. Either I've been at the party and imagined everything, or I haven't always been at the party and I've imagined everything into existence anyway. It doesn't matter, I'm here now.*

The string of pearls broke and for a moment Celia was brought back to the reality of running. *I'm running. Oh, my, can I do this? I'm doing this!* She wanted everyone to see her.

Another car roared past sucking her forward, off balance into its jeering wake. It knocked her composure like a slap to the face. Nevertheless, she kept running.

Celia ran through her childhood and beyond the mushroom party at age sixteen. She ran through her pregnancy and the day of Lonnie's birth. *If I had a child now, she thought, there is no way I'd call her Lonnie. What was I thinking? The poor baby.* She ran through her marriage to Wesley and then fast-forwarded to their divorce. Celia remembered their divorce not with contempt but with sadness. And then she remembered a song from the radio that had caught her ear. How did it go? *This life's turned out nothing how I'd planned. These days slip away just like quick sand.*

More time spread out and with it Celia's malaise was gradually dissolved. *Maybe life has turned out just how I've wanted it.* Her gait grew shorter and quicker. *God knows if I were still married to Wesley I wouldn't want to be.* She buried strength into every uphill step. *I'd planned to get married at some point. I got married. I didn't want to be married anymore. I got a divorce. So, my plans have changed and I've changed with them. Why has there been some part of me that's hung onto the original plan, the plan that didn't see past marriage and early forties? Why have I let that part of me see life beyond forty-five as a failure, a departure from the plan? I didn't have a fucking plan for that part anyway!*

Celia made it to the top of the hill and laughed. Sweat enclosed her, inhabited her; she must have looked like a melting ice sculpture,

every part of her gushed sweat. So too did her eyes – tears, sweat, what's the salty difference? Celia jogged on the spot at the top of the long bitumen ribbon. *Silence*. She looked back down and along the tremendous climb. A weight lifted. A huge weight. The dam within broke and Celia cried. She nursed her heart and, with what she could only describe at that moment as *gusto* (and a whole flippin' lot of it), Celia laugh-cried simultaneously.

She was a long way from her home. If she were in her car she would still consider herself a long way from home. How many minutes had passed, how many hours – she didn't know. She hadn't checked time when she left the house. How was it that she had ever even left the house? She'd never been for a run in her life. The idea was so foreign that it might as well have lived in Afghanistan. Who had sent the idea over to her, and how had it burrowed its way into her head? She didn't know. She didn't remember planning upon a run and yet there she was: half way through a 'run'. Was she half way?

Celia had little choice but to keep running. It must have been some kind of half-conscious dream state, some nexus between darkness and light that had got her there – *whatever* – she'd made it this far, however far this far was, so she decided to make it a little further. If she had at that point been in her car she wouldn't have to think twice about negotiating her way home. She knew all the routes of her half-country, half-civilised districts by heart. And yet, she had never been there on foot before. It was as though she was visiting her homelands for the very first time. She had to reorient herself in accordance not with the outlay of the land by car, but with the law of the land by foot.

The sun beat down from above, it literally *beat* upon her, and her feet echoed the beat from below. She found her rhythm. Somewhere between the unseasonable blue of the sky above and the finality of the grey-black road beneath her, Celia found a middle ground pace that suited her. She'd heard of runners settling into their own pace. She'd probably flicked past a televised play of the City Bay one year, or had heard the Olympic marathon commentators refer to the term, *pace*. It had meant nothing to her. Less than nothing. Watching *running* on television – she could see herself shifting uncomfortably on her couch, rolling back the sleeves of her terry-towelling robe and picking up the remote with a huff – televising

sport on the TV was a crime, she thought, an indictment upon our basic human freedom from boredom. The term *pace* she would previously have hurled into the same contemptuous category as running, cricket, or football ... any boring sport to stain her Sunday afternoon television (except tennis – everyone, including couch dwellers like her seemed to make a space for the tennis, why is that?)

But now she greeted the term *pace* with pride. She, Celia Jacqueline Brown, was a runner and she had *pace*. She'd found her very own running pace.

Meanwhile, in a weatherboard transportable rental home surrounded by vineyards and almond orchards, Nathan and Jo played a game of completing each other's sentences.

'I think,' began Jo.

'That time is omni-directional,' continued Nathan.

'And, despite our one-dimensional *sense* of perception,' Jo.

'If we were somehow able to open our minds to a perception beyond the *past, present, future* sense of unfolding,' Nathan.

'We'd see ... we'd see ... is it your toke, or mine?'

'We'd see,' Nathan handed the bong to Jo, 'that it doesn't matter! I think we'd see that we were meant to share this smoke today, Jo. It's written. Some part of us woke up this morning and already knew what today holds. What order we toke in ... they're details, Jo, details.'

Jo stuck her hands to the bong, raised the mouthpiece and flicked the tiny BIC lighter to flame. Nathan leaned forward to stare at the meagre amount of burnt grass glow, but sat back with a jolt when he realised he'd failed to stop leaning forward. He'd very nearly head butted the bong. *Details, details*. The thought of Jo half swallowing the trapped smoke contraption made him laugh. The thought of the word *contraption* made him laugh. Actually (Nathan furrowed his brow) the word *contraption* firstly reminded him of an old movie about hot air balloons and other flying machines, and then it led him to think about a song, *those magnificent men in their flying machines, they go up diddly up up, they go down diddly down down*. Which, for some reason, depressed him, as though in his mind he'd swallowed dust. Finally, after the train of thought pulled him in its wake forward only to have him snap back, he



thought about the word *contraption*, free of its original load of associations, and it made him laugh. Geez, he thought, that all happened a bit quickly.

'I need,' Jo handed Nathan back the smoke trapper, 'to elaborate, no no no, to *summarise* what we've just discovered. *Re*-discovered. Because, we are quite correct. We are quite remarkable.' Nathan nodded in agreement. Jo raised her eyebrows as if in an effort to hoist her half-closed eyelids wide. Her eyebrows soared, her head tilted forward and then back, but her eyelids remained half-closed, red and glassy. She laughed.

'Right,' said Nath, thrust into sudden action, 'let's nail this before it does a runner, before it takes off down the road forever.' He whispered and let trail that last word. *Forever*. 'What we said is this: time is omni-directional but we choose to see it as one-dimensional, maybe we need to. Doesn't matter. Some part of us still knows what's gonna happen before it happens. Nailed it.'

They both sat there and dwelled, not upon the richness of the thoughts just passed, but in a transitory state of exhaustion. A brief aftermath.

Snap! Nathan clapped his hands. 'Let's go, c'mon, what am I thinking?' giving Jo a glassy wink and a nudge.

'To the servo!' Jo said the words with all the excitement of a six year old.

'Yeah,' Nath followed suit, 'if I weren't so used to it, it'd freak me out how in sync we are when we're in sync. But, I'm not freaked out 'cause I am used to it, our in sync'd-ness. To the servo, me lady!'

I'd like to say that stripped of random thoughts, having run right through the cloud that initially started her running, Celia was now naked to the truth that lay before her. Exposed. Pink and squashy and vulnerable. She now knew just what it was she was doing and what she had done. She was many hours from home and completely exhausted. I'd like to say that *the knowledge* of what she was doing suddenly *walked up her spine*, but then I'd be stealing a line from Oprah's book club (I wish I'd thought of it first). So, instead, I'll say that Celia simply ran into the truth. She ran out of her house under a cloud of strangely hypnotic effects. She ran through a colourful

series of random thoughts. She faced and conquered a few lingering demons. She found her *pace*, and then she courageously ran into the truth. The truth prodded a spindly finger into her. The truth hit her. I'd like to say all of that, but I'm equally keen to tell you about Nathan and Jo's adventure at the servo.

Nathan chose the bread-and-butter contingents: your Mars, your Snickers, your Coke and salt'n'vinegar Smiths. He also chose a Chokito, which has been around as long as the others, and really, should be a bread-and-butter contender, but for some reason has always occupied its own special niche. Nath thought about this and was overall glad that Chokitos had remained partially underground. It made them, he decided, cool. Jo spent a far greater amount of time in decision. She was opposed, she wasn't sure why, to the quick fix provided by mainstream junk food. She believed at that moment, when previously she'd had no problem sinking her teeth into any one of them, that Mars and Snickers, etcetera etcetera had lost all attraction to over-commercialisation. She searched the sea of shiny wrappers for something *more*.

It was probably a ridiculous amount of time that was swallowed in the servo. It was probably equal to the amount of time that either one of them could have, umm, let's see: written and posted a cheque to OXFAM, completed a set of sun salutations, weeded a section of the garden, washed the dishes and got dinner started, watched another chapter of *America: the War on Terrorism*, or helped an old timer cross the road. In the time it took Jo, for all of the well weighed reasons, to choose two slabs of Fry's Turkish Delight, a miniature tub of guava frozen yoghurt, a jumbo packet of baked not fried Vege Crisps, one each of the seven-deadly-sin ice-creams and a snack block of Cadbury Marble, Nathan had returned his original selection, picked out a completely new set of treasures, returned all of them, and resorted again to his bread-and-butters.

The service station attendant stared. He virtually stabbed his eyeballs into them – didn't he? Or, was that just the way Jo one-dimensionally perceived him as she slunk behind Nathan and let him make the entire purchase?

They quarter sauntered, quarter ran, quarter tripped and quarter sallied (that last one was Nathan's choice), their way back to the safety of the car. *Christ, I wish we had window tinting*, they said, more

or less simultaneously, and both immediately stared at each other. 'That *did* freak me out,' Nath to Jo.

'What, the whole servo experience, or the fact that we both just said the same thing at the same time?' Jo to Nath.

'Well, both, but mainly that window tinting bit. No one would ever believe it.'

'Do you believe it?'

'I don't know, do you?'

The sight of another dead magpie this time broke Celia's rhythm. She didn't stop running, but the snapshot that swung in her mind's eye, bloodied, contorted and mashed, was strong enough to tamper with her beat. This time she smelt death. It was disgusting. She kept running and lurched forth, snorting like a bull, thinking that maggotty death particles were mingling up her nostrils. She felt a little sick. *Am I ready for this?*

Nathan drove. Jo rummaged through their trove of sugary, salty treasures in the white plastic bag in her lap. They curled their upper torsos, stole a cheeky glance at one another and giggled. 'Are we gonna share everything or stick to our original selections?'

'I don't know, what do you think? I don't care.'

'I don't care. Do you want something now or do you want to wait until we get home?'

'Now.'

The truth hit Celia.

The truth hit Nathan and Jo.

Celia saw it coming.