

The Echoes

A NOVEL



AUTHOR OF
*ALL THE BIRDS,
SINGING*

Evie Wyld

ALSO BY EVIE WYLD

After the Fire, A Still Small Voice

All the Birds, Singing

Everything Is Teeth (with Joe Sumner)

The Bass Rock

The Echoes

EVIE WYLD



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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
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Author's Note

Acknowledgements

A Note About the Author

For Jamie—if I go first I'm bringing you a swarm of bees

After

I do not believe in ghosts, which, since my death, has become something of a problem. We can't all just *exist* afterwards—there isn't the room. 100 billion of us floating on the earth? What happens when the world explodes? When there is no planet left to afterlife on? Do we haunt space? Do we sit mute in the dark, staring out like Banquo's ghost, waiting for the cosmos to be eaten by black holes? And then what—drift in the nothing? What vanity to imagine the universe cares about preserving us.

—

Yet here I am. As much as anything else.

—

I don't have a body, so how can I have a brain? Or rather, I assume, my body is somewhere several miles away. My dead brain in it. When I stand (I do not stand, there are no legs to stand on) in front of the mirror, I can see there is nothing there. But if I stare (again, yes, no eyes, but the memory of staring) at where my reflection ought to be, a feeling washes over me. I begin to know my presence, begin to shade in certain features of bones and skin.

—

The rest of the time, I am a transparent central nervous system, floating about like a jellyfish, my tendrils brushing the backs of chairs, sweeping up

the lint and hair from the floor. Sometimes when I come forth I take up the whole of a room, like a balloon slotted between ribs and blown up to make a space for breath.

—

I wasn't. And then I was. And now I am this. Time stutters. I can spend what feels like weeks watching the progress of a dust mote fall from a sunbeam. But Hannah is still there, a shape under the duvet.

There must be, I have decided, a time limit, a path of progression. *Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night. A certain term* sounds nice and legislative. I have a strong urge to file a complaint, to start some admin process that will result in an all-departments email and change of policy.

—

A thing I used to say often to my students—*What does your character want? They must want something, even if it's only a glass of water, The Want will power them through.*

This feels like a way forward, a shape. What would I like to eat, what music would I like to hear, what am I hungry for? What does a ghost want?

What does Old Hamlet want? His murder to be avenged.

What does Slimer want? To fill an endless emptiness?

What does Patrick Swayze want? To touch his girlfriend?

Long term, if I remember the film right—he wants to warn his girlfriend that his best friend murdered him and is making moves on her. Same as Hamlet.

I watch Hannah standing at the sink while she fills the kettle. She stares ahead, eyes swollen. I think of lifting my arm to touch her shoulder. The kettle overflows and still it feels like my arm is on its way toward her, lifting and lifting but never arriving. She swears and shuts off the water, drops the

kettle in the sink and leaves the flat. I try to follow—I end up walking back through the doorway. I try a window and, when I pass through it, I arrive back in the front room, again and again. Each time I am surprised.

I feel something where my stomach used to be. I think of my childhood thumbs turning a rubber toy that springs into the air, how sometimes it was inexplicably wet. A luminous shade of green.

—

I float to the top corner of our bedroom—a vantage point I never knew in life. I watch as the flat becomes the home of others—the moths, the spiders, the silverfish, the dust motes and then the leftovers of the dead before me, the people who left parts of themselves dropped through the floorboards. I am the man who left small shopping lists, I am he of the forgotten capellini in the back of the cupboard, the beard shavings sitting in the U-bend of the sink and the cashews that fell under the appliances when I opened them roughly and they scattered on the floor and rather than sweep them up I kicked them to the corners of the room. Hannah will be the earring that she cried over when it was lost—it is down in the U-bend with my beard trimmings, safe in a nest. And the coppers whose jar she dropped and smashed so they spilled out and £1.26 went behind the washing machine to corrode and turn green.

Tumbleweed of hair and dust.

Eyelashes with their pinch of skin at the end.

Szechuan peppercorns, enough to fill the gap between your life line and your heart line.

Only the clothes moths move the air in the flat. No breath. All the spiders are asleep and the one mouse who made it up here while the door was open for the rubbish run has died beneath the floorboards before she could have her babies.

—

We had a code, she'd come up to me at a party and say *sandwich*, and then I'd know she needed to leave. If I wanted to stay, I said *haddock*, and she would slope off alone. At first this was a lovely secret, but it started to happen often and it was irritating when she wouldn't say goodbye to anyone, that it had to be a secret between the two of us.

"I don't like to say goodbye," she told me.

"So stay."

"Once I have it in my head that what we're doing is standing around talking and drinking wine, I can't stop thinking about being at home." She started to sandwich me before I'd finished my first drink, and I haddocked her more out of irritation than a desire to stay at the party.

—

Hannah is back. She has a bottle of Night Nurse. She pours a large glass of tap water and then opens the fridge. The light illuminates the toad brown of the crisper drawer. She starts emptying the vegetables: soft kohlrabi I had meant to pickle, though no one would eat it. Spring onions whose green ends look like rat tails. An aubergine, wet and molelike, which collapses as she tries to extract it, her hand in a plastic bag.

Once the crisper is cleared she turns her attention to the half-empty jars in the door. Chutneys and chilli crisp and half a dozen open jars of anchovies. The warning beeps of the fridge sound, but she pays them no heed. She takes out a large jar of pickled red cabbage and puts the whole thing in the bin. Then she stands very still in the door of the fridge with the beeps and the beeps and the beeps. She turns and retrieves the jar of cabbage from the bin and opens it on the counter. She recoils from the smell, takes a fork and stabs a few tendrils and puts them in her mouth. She chews and it is the sound of walking on deep new snow. The skin around her eyes prickles pink. She coughs but swallows. Still the fridge beeps. She puts the lid on the cabbage and puts it back in the fridge and closes the door. In the

quiet after, she opens the Night Nurse and drinks it straight from the bottle, then stands with her fingers over her eyes and her teeth bared. She is not crying; this is something else. I watch her for what might be weeks.

—

The shadow of a cloud climbing a green sunlit hill.

Breath, breath.

Still.

Before

When I get home Max is pickling red cabbage. He has recently decided that the thing about him is fermentation.

“G’day, cobber!” he calls in his bad impression of my accent. “What word from the pub?”

His fingers are pink and pruned with vinegar and I hug him from behind as he stands at the sink.

“There was a man in today who was drinking pints of half Guinness and half Coke.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. And every time I served him he called me Crocodile Dundee.”

This is true, though I only served him once before I had to leave early for the clinic.

“Nice.”

A coldness swims in my gut, an absence—this is what nothing feels like.

He turns his head awkwardly to kiss my cheek.

“Any crisp news?”

“We’re almost out of Cheese Moments.”

Also true. I let go of him and look through my handbag for the painkillers the nurse gave me.

Max sucks his teeth like I’ve given him some difficult information to digest.

“You? Did you have a seminar today?” I pop out one more than I’m supposed to. I fill a mug with water, careful not to splash the cabbage lest I should get blamed for its failure.

“Lots of Cheese Moments for me today—we workshopped a piece someone’d written about falling in love with a robot.”

“A robot?”

“Yes—this is in the future. She used the phrase *his chrome member*.”

“Why would a robot need a penis?”

“This is a sex robot.”

I open the fridge. The nurse advised I eat something, but there is nothing for eating. I have a shower instead—I’m supposed to go out in half an hour. I have planned it this way. I don’t want to be seen by him in this moment. In the shower I sit down in the hot water. I bleed and it is washed away and I bleed some more. A small patch of damp I don’t recognise is blackening the ceiling just above the sink.

By the time I’m done and I open the bathroom door, Max is proudly decanting his cabbage into a giant jar. “This,” he says loudly, “is going to be amazing. We could give jars of it to people at Christmas.” When he gets no response he adds, “It’s a natural probiotic.”

“There’s a little damp patch up there. I don’t know if it was there before.”

Max appears behind me and we both look at it. A roofer came to look at the damp patches. He shook his head, said in a flat this high up, scaffolding would cost as much as a new roof.

Max reaches up and slides his finger along to see if it’s wet.

“Oh,” he says, disgusted, “it’s like wallpaper paste.”

I look at his finger. “It’s a natural probiotic.”

He ignores me and runs his finger under the tap.

We live in a rotting flat because of me. I campaigned hard for it. The commute, the park, the restaurants and bars that popped up like mushrooms all around us. *Imagine*, I’d told him, *we wake early and run round the park, swim in the lido, coffee*. These were the reasons I gave him but, truthfully, it was because of the photograph—the address on the back in an old wobbly hand: *17 Barcombe Ave, London SW2, England, Natalia is waiting at the gate*. My grandmother as a small girl in black and white standing in front of a cottage with a rose garden. She is serious, apart from her hair, which is

wild and white, the same as my mother and sister. An old man stands behind her holding a black and white kitten—my biological great-great-grandfather? He was never mentioned, but then neither really was my grandmother. I suppose he died and was forgotten. This girl who birthed my mother and then died and I never met, but who I spent so much time picturing. The floral arrangements, the quiet mild green of England. Wallpaper and afternoon tea and open fires and knitting in the half-light. Lavender and roses. Shoes worn with socks, a scarf over the head, and an umbrella to carry. The soft coo of pigeons and doves.

We should never have wound up in Australia, with our bare feet and lips cracked from not wearing our zinc. With the smell of armpits, with the white cockatoos screaming us awake in the morning, the waft of meat pies and limeade. None of us should have been there, of course, but my family, my homesick family, were supposed to be in England, in London, on Barcombe Avenue, in that front garden with the roses.

It took me most of the day on my first visit to Tulse Hill—the slither of South London, pressed between a park and a ring road. I thought I'd get a bus, but felt so alien and unusual I couldn't bring myself to flag one down. I was afraid I wouldn't understand how to be on a bus in London, how to pay for it, what to say to the driver.

Standing outside number 17 I had felt the rushing of time, like it blew past my ears. You could see the ghost of the old garden path, the grass grew differently. The rose garden now a privet hedge and daffodils with a small rock and gnome arrangement. The building, boxy and not much changed—it's too small to imagine anyone but an old couple living there, low ceilings like it's keeping its head down. I had the urge, that first time, to call Mum and tell her where I was standing.

Now, my skin pale, my accent curbed, two streets over from where that photograph was taken, my English boyfriend with his English job at the university, I try and sink back into the space my grandmother left behind her.

“I need the mirror,” I say.

Max sighs and slopes back to the kitchen and his cabbage. I pop two more painkillers out of their packaging and swallow them with a cupped hand of water from the bathroom tap. It is ingrained in me not to put my mouth near the tap, even here where the spiders are small and non-lethal. I take a black kohl pencil and start to carefully draw a line on my upper lid. I am meeting Janey, who is always made up extensively, a full face of make-up that manages to make her look fun and pretty and carefree, despite her occasional manic episodes. Last time we met she wore a magpie feather in her hair and a leather harness over a big shirt. I notice a drip stain down the front of my good jumper. My face is white and I will have to paint on some rouge.

“Did you book the time off for Susan’s event next Thursday?”

I don’t reply immediately—am trying to get a straight line. I can’t remember what Susan’s event is. The way the nurse had looked at me when I asked her, “Do I really need the sedative?”

“No,” she’d said. “It’s a very short procedure.”

“I just can’t be groggy later on today.”

“OK,” she’d said.

The length of the procedure, it turned out, had little to do with how painful it was. I drank a lemonade on the walk home. I stopped in the park and watched some kids throw white bread at a swan and I bled into my pad. My thighs chafed.

“It’ll just be like a long period,” the nurse had said.

It didn’t feel like a period. One of the children had her finger nipped by a swan and screamed and her mother picked her up and counted her fingers for her. Max gets quiet watching kids. His friends all have them, he throws himself into ball pits with them, holds a baby and rocks it, catching my eye with excitement if it falls asleep. I don’t touch babies for the fear I might

suddenly fling them into the fireplace. It would be too cruel to tell him and then say I had it taken away. Best to pretend it never happened.

I have fucked up the line and rub at it with a wet flannel. I try some lipstick instead. I've read somewhere that to get the most flattering shade you ought to match your lipstick colour to your nipple colour.

I go into the kitchen and flip on the kettle.

"Well, look at you," says Max. It's not clear if he means that in a good way or a bad way. "I was thinking—we should plan a trip to Australia for next year." He says it with his back to me and a forced offhand attitude, like he's suggesting we go to Sainsbury's for the big shop. It's not the first time he's tried this.

"Sure. Or we could go on holiday to Japan—you've always wanted to go, haven't you?"

There is a long silence between us which I fill with noisily blowing my nose while the kettle boils. He seems to need more.

"I mean, it's going to cost a shitload either way—we might as well spend it on a new adventure, don't you think? We could stay in one of those ryokans..." I look up. He's turned around to face me. "Coffee?"

"It's too late for me."

I knew this would be his answer, but it gives me a little bit of space.

"I want to meet your family," he says.

"I'm just saying, if I'm spending all that cash, I'd want to go somewhere that's new for both of us—I've done my time in Australia, I'm over it. Maybe the fact I haven't been there in ten years should tell you something about how much I want to go back there."

It comes out louder than I'd meant it to. The painkillers have not kicked in yet. I don't have it in me to navigate this well-trodden terrain.

"*Why* don't you want me to meet your family?"

I try to laugh but it comes out as a loud clap. "What's so exciting about my family?" I look around for something to do with my hands.

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I? I'm not allowed to know anything about them. I've never even spoken on the phone to your mum or dad. In six

years. Don't you think that's weird?" He leans back on the counter and crosses his arms in a way that enrages me.

"I'll tell you what's weird," I say, but manage to stop myself before anything irreversible comes out of my mouth. There's something sour in my throat. "There's nothing to know—they're just average boring bogans. They're uneducated—they're, you know, they're..." I have started to fold tea towels aggressively into squares.

"They're what?" He loves it when I can't find the words. I pat down each tea towel with a heavy hand.

"They're racist—and homophobic. And they don't believe in vaccines or global warming." None of this is strictly true.

Max runs his fingers vigorously through his hair—he does this when he's frustrated. "So they're exactly the same as my parents then. What's the deal? Is there something you're not telling me?"

I've run out of tea towels. I open the cutlery drawer and look in it, start to straighten the forks and spoons noisily. "Well, I've never met your brother."

"My brother? My brother lives in Spain and we don't get on. I've talked about him with you, I've told you about our fight. If you really want to meet him, I can book us flights now. I can guarantee you won't like him or his wife, but I'm happy for you to meet them."

I close the cutlery drawer. "It's not the same." I move around him to look in the cupboard for coffee.

"I know it's not the same—that's my point!" Max flaps his hands in the air in frustration. "Just—what's with the fucking secrets?"

"I'm not going to spend two thousand pounds to go and sit in a dead paddock that smells of dead goats." It's a new packet of coffee and I need scissors to open it. I can't find them in the drawer.

Max is deflated and a bit quieter. He says, "Fuck's sake, I was suggesting it as a nice thing—as much as anything else, I thought, you know, maybe one day we might want to get married and it might be nice to have exchanged one or maybe two sentences with your mum and dad before that happens."