

A. J. Ashworth was born and brought up in Lancashire and is a former journalist. She studied writing at Lancaster University and also Sheffield Hallam University, where she was awarded an MA (Distinction). Her stories have been published in a number of literary magazines, in print and on the web. *Somewhere Else, or Even Here* is her first full collection and was a winner of the Scott Prize.

Somewhere Else, or
Even Here

A. J. Ashworth



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*For Mum, Dad, John and
James—and in memory
of Sadie.*

Contents

Sometimes Gulls Kill Other Gulls	I
The Future Husband	14
Coconut Shy	20
Paper Lanterns	27
Bone Fire	39
Zero Gravity	47
Bananas	54
The Prophecy	67
Eggshells	84
Tattoo	93
Trees	103
Offerings	120
Overnight Miracles	132
The Rings of Saturn	144
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	150

Sometimes Gulls Kill Other Gulls

A STICK, SCRAPING OVER sand. Lainey bending low as she drags it near the water's edge, tongue poking out of her mouth. The stick stutters and the lines break. She tuts and goes back, fills in the gaps.

She glances up every now and again to check for movement in the distance. But her dad's asleep on a towel the colour of dull grass; her mum's still reading the magazine that's collapsed in her lap like a huge, tired butterfly.

'What are you writing?' A boy a couple of years older than Lainey is beside her. Milky coffee skin, in shorts and with sand grains up to his knees.

'Nothing.'

'Doesn't look like nothing,' he says, and digs a hole with his big toe, skewers it into the damp sand. 'Is that your name?'

Lainey pushes the stick in deeper to make the lines stand out more. 'Yeah,' she says. 'Lainey.' The stick makes a 'shhh' sound that she wants to keep going for as long as possible.

The boy squats, swipes sand with the side of his hand and fills the toe-hole, smoothing it until it can no longer be seen. 'Do you not want to know my name?' He stands again, puts a hand over his eyes to block out the sun. He looks as if he's saluting her.

Lainey shrugs. 'Not bothered.'

'Jeremy,' he says. 'I live over there.'

She squints up as the boy points in the direction of a sand dune, tufted with grasses. She shrugs again. 'Can't see any houses.'

'Well, that's because you can't see it from here, stupid,' he says. 'It's behind the dunes.'

Lainey tuts. 'I'm not stupid.'

'Whatever,' he says, gouging crescents with his toe now. 'Anyway, that's where I live.'

She listens to the 'shhh' of the stick mingling with the sea's low rumble. 'So?' she says. 'I'm busy.'

There's a squawk above and two seagulls swing into view, one swooping in low on another. Lainey stops scraping to watch. The attacking seagull has its beak open like a pair of yellow scissors. The other smaller one dives out of its way.

'They kill each other sometimes,' says Jeremy. 'Gulls.'

'They don't,' she says, brine in the breeze making her eyes water.

Jeremy grabs a handful of sand, balls it in his fist and throws it at the birds. It crumbles and dies into the sea. 'They do,' he says. 'I've seen it before.' He sticks his belly out and rubs his hand over it. 'I saw one dying with its eye hanging out.'

Lainey screws her face up. 'Disgusting.'

'Another gull got it.'

'Yuk,' says Lainey.

A second squawk and the two birds fly over the children's heads and become lost above the town.

'It was last week,' he says. 'I stamped on its head to kill it.' He kicks his foot down onto the sand five times to show her. When he stops there's a hollow with streaks

of grey inside. He stares at the hole and doesn't move or speak for a long time.

Lainey sees the boy's clenched jaw and how his eyes have become fixed to the spot. She also sees how, near to where he's looking, there are two halves of a razor shell still joined at their inner corners — a pair of pouting lips on the browned beach face.

'So *you* killed it then, not the other bird,' she says, pushing the stick in again and grinding it down to make the dot of an 'i'. 'It wasn't dead until you stood on it.'

He blinks and is back with her. 'No,' he says. 'I just put it out of its misery, that's all. It would have died anyway.'

Jeremy is searching for washed-up jellyfish further along the beach as Lainey draws a circle around what she's written. As she links the two ends together the boy is back, holding lumpy ropes of seaweed.

'Find any?' she says.

'Nah,' he says. 'But I got these.'

He swings them towards her until their crisped ends almost touch her nose. 'Stop it,' she says, throwing her head back. 'They're horrible.'

He swings them above his head then drops his arm. 'This is boring,' he says. 'Do you want to go over to those rocks instead?' He nods at a far corner of the beach where the sea sweeps around in a crescent. 'There's rock pools and a cave. I can show you.'

Lainey turns to her parents; they are two fish pulled from the water and laid out to dry. 'I have to stay here,' she says, shrugging one shoulder.

'They your parents?' he asks.

Lainey nods.

'They're asleep,' he says. 'They won't even know you've been anywhere.'

She rubs her eyes for longer than is needed, but stops as a man walks past shouting to the sea. 'Bess! Bess!'

Lainey stares too but can't see anything. 'Is that a dog's name?' she says to Jeremy.

'Don't know.' The boy shrugs. 'Come on,' he says, flicking the seaweed at her again.

The man moves off down the beach.

'Lay-knee,' says Jeremy, a whine in his voice now. 'There's all sorts to see. Stuff you won't have seen before. Honest.'

Lainey frowns. 'Like what?' she says.

'All sorts,' says Jeremy. 'But if I tell you it'll ruin it.' He drapes the seaweed around his neck.

'What though?'

He sets off, marching towards the rocks. 'Forget it.'

'You're telling lies,' she says.

'Yeah, yeah,' he shouts.

Lainey watches the boy's feet leave dark footprints behind him as if he's being followed by somebody who's invisible. 'What's to see?' she says.

Jeremy ignores her and starts to run. Still holding the stick, she arches her arms up over her head until she blocks out the sun. Then she gives a sigh to the sky before running after his shadow.

Lainey keeps an eye on her parents, but they never move. She thinks she sees their chests rising then falling, but she isn't sure from so far away. The one thing she can see are the pages of her mother's magazine reflecting sunlight and turning over like a waterwheel.

In front of her, Jeremy scrambles along the jutting boulders towards the cave. Lainey follows, but she can't grip the rocks properly because of the stick. She throws it down onto the sand and carries on.

Some of the rocks are too big to just step onto and they make dents in her palms that remind her of teeth marks. She keeps on though, hoisting herself along whenever a rock is too big; trying to move as fast as Jeremy who zig-zags through as if a path has been marked out for him.

Eventually she sees Jeremy jump down and disappear around the corner. 'Come on, slow coach,' his voice comes, echoing.

Lainey's parents are smaller now, just two patches of colour on the paler band of sand away from the water. The magazine is no longer visible. She can't even tell if it's flipping over anymore. She hovers for a while and Jeremy reappears, smiling and wiggling his fingers at her.

'Nearly there,' he says, in a sing-song voice. 'Getting hotter.'

She feels shaky in her stomach; it's the feeling of something tumbling inside. She takes one final look at her parents and follows him down into the cool, dark cave, whose waters are made of dazzling ripples the colour of liquid emerald.

Jeremy shouts 'hoo-haa!' and twenty other Jeremies shout back. Lainey feels a chill run down her, goosebumps and tall hairs sticking up on her arms. She rubs them to try and generate some heat, or courage, but when she stops the bumps are still there.

The cave is small with sea water flowing in. It has ledges running alongside the water that are dotted with small rock pools from an earlier tide. Jeremy walks along the left-hand ledge and crouches down, drops his seaweed beside him and stares into one of the pools.

'Look,' he says, dipping his finger in the glassy hollow. 'Look in here.'

'Is it a crab or something? I don't like crabs.'

‘No,’ he says, moving his finger a little. ‘Come and look.’

Lainey steps forward slowly, craning her neck to try and see over him. ‘What is it?’

‘God,’ he says. ‘Don’t be such a softie.’

Lainey notices a hardness in his voice, an edge to it she hadn’t heard earlier. Even so, she kneels down on the cool rock and stares into the pool. At first she can’t see anything, but when he moves his finger again, a small, elongated shape darts and moves away to the side furthest from his finger. It looks like a black submarine in miniature.

‘Oh, yeah,’ says Lainey. ‘It’s a tiny fish.’

‘Told you,’ says Jeremy. ‘Told you there were things to see.’

Lainey dips the tip of her finger into the pool, but pulls it out again straight away.

‘You baby,’ says Jeremy, wagging his finger in the water, the fish refusing to budge from its corner. He flicks his finger nearer to it. And when the fish flees to another side, Jeremy follows it there too.

‘Don’t,’ says Lainey, pulling at his elbow. ‘You’ll frighten it.’

He yanks his arm away and carries on.

‘Stop it,’ she says. ‘You’re going to kill it.’

Jeremy puts his whole hand in then and flaps it about until the rock pool is churning, coughing up water.

‘Jeremy!’ shouts Lainey, feeling the tumbling inside her stronger as she sees the two black points in the boy’s eyes.

He pulls his hand out. ‘You baby,’ he says, frowning. ‘You’re no fun. I should have left you on the beach.’

Lainey feels her chin tremble, so she bites her lip to stop it.

‘Baby Lainey,’ he says, his face a pink bon bon. ‘Frightened for a teeny tiny fish.’ He sulks and shakes his

hand in the air, making drops of water fly off in all directions.

Just then there is a light splashing in the cave waters and they both look. A black ball is bobbing along in the dimness. Something has got in through the opening and is making its way deeper inside the cave.

‘It’s a dog,’ says Lainey. She can see its grey tongue hanging out now and its paws bashing a path out in front of it in little explosive bursts.

They stand and watch it.

‘Ten out of ten,’ says Jeremy.

Lainey raises her chin and tugs her shoulders back but doesn’t speak.

Jeremy grabs for the back of her neck with cold, wet fingers, making her shiver. She tips her head forward and steps away.

‘Be like that then,’ he says.

‘You’re silly,’ says Lainey. ‘You’re just a silly boy.’

Jeremy spits into the water.

The animal, a black Labrador, paddles along without seeing them. It swims to the opposite side of the cave, sniffs the air and tries to lift a paw to get out but can’t find a ledge low enough to scramble up on. The dog carries on swimming, reaching with a paw every few inches, before crossing back on itself, trying to find a way up.

‘Fido,’ shouts Jeremy, lifting one side of his mouth and clicking his tongue. ‘Here, Fido.’

The dog hears the voice and turns. It splashes in the direction of the children, its eyes wide and ears pinned back.

‘How do you know its name?’ says Lainey, bending and holding her fingers towards the dog.

‘I don’t,’ says Jeremy.

The dog loses its rhythm and slips below the surface.

When it comes back up, it sneezes and shakes its head before swimming again. As it gets nearer, the two of them reach out to touch it.

‘I think it’s old,’ says Lainey, seeing two rings of milky white inside its eyes, a grey moustache beneath its cracked nose.

‘And fat,’ says Jeremy, pinching a mound of flab on the dog’s shoulder blades until it lets out a whine.

‘Don’t hurt it,’ says Lainey.

The dog pants harder and the two of them pull and tug at it to try and lift it out.

‘It’s too heavy,’ she says, straining.

‘Fat,’ says Jeremy. ‘Fat dog.’ He puts his hand beneath the dog’s jaw and shakes it, talking to it like a baby. ‘Who’s a fatty? Who’s a fatty dog, then?’

Lainey feels for a collar, for something to grab hold of, but there’s nothing. They continue grappling, their efforts not enough to hoist it from the water. The dog tires of being wrestled and paddles away, going first one way and then another, its tongue sticking out further and its breathing getting faster.

‘I think it’s done for,’ says Jeremy. ‘We’re never going to get it out.’

‘It isn’t,’ says Lainey.

Jeremy rubs sand from his stomach then pokes about in his belly button. The dog’s head drops beneath the surface again.

Lainey gasps. ‘It’s going to drown,’ she says. ‘We need to help it.’ It bursts back up in a splutter of water.

‘Nah,’ says Jeremy, one side of his nose lifting. ‘It’s had it. Look at it. I think Fido’s going to doggy heaven today.’

As Lainey watches she remembers the man on the beach, calling out to the sea. She tries to remember the

name he shouted, but can't. Then it comes to her as if on a wave. 'Bess! It must be. Come on, Bess!'

The dog shakes the water from its head and blinks but doesn't come any nearer. She continues shouting until it turns in her direction and paddles towards them again.

'Keep its head up,' she says to Jeremy, as she hurries away. 'I'll get my stick. We can try and get it to bite it and then pull it out.' She is jittery with the need to save it. 'Come on, Bess! Come on, girl!'

Jeremy shakes his head. 'There's no point,' he says. 'It's more or less dead now. Look at it.'

'It's not,' says Lainey. 'Shout to it. Keep its head up.'

Once outside, she squeezes her eyes shut against the light and when she opens them again she can see how it's begun to turn grey; a dull, patchwork of clouds hanging over the beach, masking the sun with a cheesecloth haze. She clambers along the rocks and grabs the stick.

'Here,' she says, as she goes back inside, holding it up. 'I've got it.' It feels as if it's almost alive in her hand, as if it's burning to be used.

Jeremy is staring into the water, throwing a pale scarf of seaweed onto its surface. All the other pieces are already floating there, knotting together like wreaths.

Lainey looks for the dog but can't see it. There's nothing moving on the water, no splashing sounds. Then, as her eyes readjust, she can see a black lump against the green; the hump of the dog's back as its body floats near to where Jeremy is. Its paws sunk down, head fully submerged.

'What have you done?' says Lainey, the dog and the seaweed turning slowly in the current.

Jeremy turns to her. 'Nothing,' he says. 'It just went under, that's all.'

‘I told you to keep it up,’ she says. ‘Why didn’t you keep its head up?’

Jeremy shrugs and squeezes past her. ‘It’s not my fault,’ he says. ‘It was too far out. I couldn’t reach it. It got tired.’

‘It was coming towards us,’ says Lainey, staring at him. ‘It was almost at the side.’

‘Well, it stopped,’ he says, waving to the centre of the water. ‘It just went under. I don’t know.’

Lainey sees something just below her vision and looks down at the ledge. On the dry parts where Jeremy has walked there’s one wet footprint following him — one single, grey shape that stops where he’s now stopped. Then, she sees his leg; how the sand from earlier is no longer there; how the skin has been rinsed clean.

She feels a flash inside her brain. ‘You’ve killed it,’ she says. ‘You’ve killed the dog.’

Jeremy lifts his hand to the wall and leans against it. ‘What are you on about?’

‘You’ve drowned that dog,’ she says. ‘Look, your leg’s wet.’

She points down. Jeremy swings his leg forwards and backwards then forwards again before putting his foot down.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he says. ‘I haven’t touched it. It was just old.’

Lainey points at his leg again, this time poking the air. ‘You have. You’ve pushed it under with your foot, haven’t you?’ Her voice wobbles.

Jeremy stares down and swings his leg once more. ‘I haven’t.’

The seaweed nudges up against the dog.

Then, almost so he can’t be heard, Jeremy says, ‘What do you know anyway, you baby?’

Suddenly there’s a hushing sound and raindrops begin

to hammer circles where the sea-water comes in. They spread out until they bump into other circles. Then smaller circles come and do the same.

‘Tell me,’ she says. ‘You’ve killed it.’

‘No,’ he says, his voice still low.

Lainey notices how the boy’s coffee skin now seems grey in the dull light of the cave, and how his eyes are so dark she can’t tell whether they’re brown or soil-black.

‘I’m going to that man,’ she says, her voice strong again. ‘And I’m going to tell him what you’ve done.’ She marches towards the opening.

He sticks his leg out so she can’t get past. ‘You’re not.’

She pushes at his leg, but he steps in front of her, still looking at the ground.

‘I am,’ she says.

He speaks again, so low this time that at first she doesn’t understand what he’s said. Then her brain makes sense of it. ‘What if I push you in the water with that dog?’

Lainey sees the shadows on the rocky walls of the cave and how they lurch and stagger from side to side. Her heart taps inside her like fingers on a window. ‘What?’ she says, noticing how Jeremy seems bigger now, so that she can hardly see the way out at all.

‘I could,’ he says, ‘push you in.’

She thinks of her parents now, how they don’t know where she is; how they’d be unable to hear her if she calls out to them—especially now with the stuttering sounds of the rain. She feels their absence in a sudden hole that grows in her chest, and in the burning sensation that rises up from it and hurts the back of her throat.

Just then, she remembers the stick in her hand and grips it tighter. It is a glowing poker against her skin. But as she is about to lift it, use it in a way she’s not even sure of yet, there are sounds from outside carried in on the breeze.

‘Lainey,’ a man calls. It’s her father, his voice rough and raw from sleep. ‘I know you’re in there. I’ve just seen you come out, so don’t try and hide.’

‘Dad,’ she says.

She stares at Jeremy, who still won’t look at her.

Then something changes around them; a strange bubble popping and breaking up in the air. Jeremy’s shoulders drop and he stands aside to let her pass, presses his back into the cave wall.

‘I wasn’t going to do anything,’ he says, in the same quiet way. ‘I wouldn’t have touched you.’

But Lainey ignores him and runs outside, ready for the feel of rain on her skin, its cool eyes all over her.

As they climb along the rocks, Lainey knows her father is upset with her from the way he speaks in that flat voice of his.

‘You shouldn’t have gone off like that,’ he says. ‘Think, next time.’

She also knows it won’t last because of how he lifts her over the biggest boulders, slowly and softly.

Her mother, just below, shivers against the turn in the weather—an umbrella held above her, waiting for her daughter to come down and get into the shelter beneath it. She doesn’t speak but just rocks from side to side.

Lainey halts and glances over to the spot where she carved her name into the sand. All she can see now though is how the rain has wiped everything away, leaving just the dot of the ‘i’ and part of the circle she’d drawn around it.

She remembers the stick, still in her hand, and wonders what kind of marks it would make in the rain, whether it would make the same soft ‘shhh’ sound, whether the lines would hold. She wonders if it would even write her

name at all now or something different—begin to scratch its own words out, against her will. But instead of finding out, Lainey throws the stick towards a gap between two boulders; watches it bounce and roll before falling in.

The three of them run towards the car at the back of the beach. She doesn't look for Jeremy or the man searching for his dog; she just grabs hold of the door handle, pulling at it until her father gets the key in, the door finally releasing.

'Let's go,' she says, pushing the locks down with the heel of her palm. The rain has the sound of bullets now. 'I think the tide's starting to come in. Honest, I think we need to go.'

The Future Husband

I SEE HIM, A carrier bag at his feet, leaning over the smeared glass case of a museum exhibit. It's the mummy of a once-young woman displayed in an open casket, like the strange pearl of a sprung oyster; her name long forgotten, her fragile body wrapped in strips of ancient linen, stained orange by time.

I feel the pull of him but don't go, yet. It's not quite the time when I will walk over and he'll turn and see me, feel me carve a space within him in those first moments. *It was instant*, he will say in the months and years ahead. *I felt it as soon as I saw you.*

And I feel it too.

He reads the card that rests against a small stand inside the case, its surface yellowed and buckled, the ink from its typewritten words bleeding into the walls of each tiny indentation. It says how the mummy is more than three thousand years old, and that the gold leaf found on her head is proof she had both wealth and status. It says she's been scanned and X-rayed to find evidence of her past—disease or abnormality in bone and flesh; the arthritic afterglow of birth in her pelvis; the age at which she died after breathing in too much sand from Egypt's many dry and dusty desert storms.

Pushing up from the case, he raises his hand and scratches at the rash of sideburn mown into shape like a dark lawn. And although it's hard to see from so far away,

I already know of its grey flecks newly sprouting, how those threads of silver shine as they catch the light. I also know that many times I will tease him about getting older, about being white-haired and distinguished by the age of 45—eight years older than he is now. But I also know that those pale hairs will be the last thing I will want to see before I go to sleep.

He keeps his eyes on the mummy, looking over each small revelation of waxy, brown skin that can be seen where the linen has rotted or fallen away: the toes of a misshapen foot, the small mound of one knee, the papery droop of a creased earlobe.

I watch him from the far end of the room, through a tall glass case which holds other Egyptian artefacts: a papyrus will, a stone tablet carved with birds and tools and a canopic jar—an Egyptian vessel which has a lid made into the head of an ape called Hapy. One of the four sons of Horus. The guardian of the lungs.

If he should turn from the mummy and look towards me now, he will wonder whether anyone else is even here. The dimly lit room will make the glass I'm standing behind as hard to see into as a midnight pool. He might think I'm just a shadow or a reflection caused by the faint spotlights in the ceiling. Not really a woman at all. Not even human. Just a trick of the light. But he will not turn yet. There's still time to watch from where I am.

I see him take a step, then stop at the X-ray photo of the mummy's face which is taped into the corner of the case. It reveals high cheekbones, two pale stones which cover her eyes like coins and a horse-grin of teeth which has been worn down by the gritty Egyptian bread she ate throughout her short life.

I run my tongue along my own teeth and feel their ridges and ripples, remember the many trips to English