

**travelling in grey space**

Kim Sherwood

We need a new greeting. Hi is too casual when you are so far away. Dear too formal. Hello too empty. Did you know a competition was held to find the best way to answer the telephone? Alexander Graham Bell wanted 'Hullo!' So: hullo. Not that you can hullo back. Have we ever been so far apart from each other, from Wi-Fi, Skype, Facebook, emails, Twitter, phone lines, post boxes? I don't think so. When I press send this message will pinball about until you reach some known point and the bearing strikes. Does that make each word worth more? Probably. Does it mean I have anything of greater significance to tell you? No. Only, hullo. X

Where are you now? I am here, still, pacing the house. It's raining. It might never stop raining. I pick up books – I'm tired, I can't concentrate – I put them down. I look at blank pages and imagine you crossing them. I am here, still pregnant. I read a letter from Captain Scott's wife once, written while he attempted to reach the Pole: 'Now don't forget to brush your hair. You're a ducky darling and hurray for you!' Hurray, Ducky Darling, hurray. X

Our friends try to alleviate my inertia by telling me that I'm working too. That's why they call it labour. This house is pregnant with me. I can't escape it. The rain it raineth every day. I want out. The baby wants out. You are out. I've never felt confined or left behind when you've gone away before. I've often been relieved for the space. Space – what space? I'M THE SIZE OF A LUXURY BIRD HOUSE. Tweet tweet tweet. That's all my brain feels good for. My screenplay

has broken down. How many films have there been about astronauts abandoned on an empty planet struggling to survive? At least six on Mars alone. What seemed original at first – the astronaut a pregnant woman, the child soon to be born to a desolate environment – now seems a dead end. She is saved, or saves herself. The child lives, or the child dies. The End. X

My mum says I'm stuck with the screenplay because, as a soon-to-be-mother, I can't allow myself to imagine a baby in peril. I don't tell her this isn't true. Am I an unnatural woman? Probably. Spent the morning researching how wives communicated with polar explorers. Some gave letters to men bound to meet their husbands at depots or ports. Others gave their husbands letters in advance, rationed and dated, not to be opened until \_\_\_\_\_. I wish I'd done that for you. But how could I know what to say? These women were self-effacing fortune-tellers. 'You shall have the Pole,' Kathleen Scott told her husband. 'Do take risks.' Ducky Darling, I'm not so easily effaced. Don't take risks. X

I take back my last message. Self-effacement was not what characterised these women. Kathleen Scott was a sculptor and volunteer nurse in Macedonia. She was a friend to Rodin and George Bernard Shaw. Jo Peary joined her husband Robert in Greenland, reloading guns in the event of a walrus attack and conceiving 'a snow baby' on the journey. X

Last night I dreamt I gave birth to seven pounds of red sand. X

Robinson Crusoe never thinks about his family. Stories are always about the one stranded. The family waiting at home isn't the story. There's nothing interesting to anyone else in my waiting to hear from you. If this were a film the audience would feel the plot wasn't really a plot until they knew where you were: maybe you're a soldier, or a cameraman in the Arctic, or a writer on retreat in Devon with no signal. Waiting isn't a story until you know the stakes. Without that, it's just dead time. If you didn't know what happened to Scott, would you bother to read his wife's letters? X

My mum says I have to make the story about the astronaut and not her family waiting at home because I can't find myself interesting – I have turned my desire for active female protagonists into a blinding dislike for typical stories of "female experience". Now it's my own experience, I can't see what's interesting about it. She might be right, but I still want to tell the story of the pregnant astronaut, not a pregnant woman stuck at home. Because a woman's experience cannot be limited to waiting. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell's models for narrative quests are all men. When a female student asked him why, he said women don't need to go on the journey: they are the place men are trying to get to. I hope Mrs. Campbell always "forgot" to pack her bags and delayed family holidays. X

But – when a postman delivered news of a son's death to a mother during the Second World War, the mother struck the postman with a loaf of bread. That's a story too. X

Jo Peary in her journal: 'Many a time I have found myself in cloudy weather travelling in grey space. Not only was there no object to be seen, but in the entire sphere of vision there was no difference in intensity of light. My feet and snowshoes were sharp and clear as silhouettes, and I was sensible of contact with the snow at every step. Yet as far as my eyes gave me evidence to the contrary, I was walking upon nothing.' X

There are so many narratives about having a baby that I can't locate how I really feel about it. There's, Having a child changes you forever, and, I don't want to be changed forever. There's, Children are a placebo against mortality. (As an existential teenager, I was comforted by my mum's confidence that becoming a parent moves you beyond a fear of death, because there are bigger things to worry about.) There's, It's what makes women so powerful. There's, I've always wanted a child and am now too old to let fear convince me I'm too young. There's, Yummy Mummies and Brunching Mummies and Tired Mummies Who Never Have Sex. I used to childmind for these people. I know the words exchanged like scrap metal between mother and father behind closed doors. I know the hour in which the baby is fascinating, followed by the five hours in which you wish it were old enough to be entranced by TV. I know that eye contact with a child is as astonishing as it's supposed to be. X

Are you ever afraid? X

If I am the story, what does that make you? An absent man. Call the newspapers. No, you are not my father, or even Darth Vader. You are something that does not fit into the script of my childhood. Kathleen Scott wrote to her husband: 'I love you more than is at all comfy and moreover I think you are splendid.' You are my love story. But I don't write those. X

It's stopped raining, Ducky Darling. X