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TEXT prose

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From Variation for three voices on a letter to nature

The case has been made – catalogue of cells – words on a page – thirty-seven trillion of them, I kid you not – maps of human history caught between the lines – immortal beloved – not a machine, but a fabric – death certificates for foetuses written into law while four hundred and eighty-five thousand starve – describe it, this dead thing, this lump of flesh, describe it down to its very last cell, let it live in the records – no beginning, just becoming, no ending, just dying – stupidity the next evolutionary step – new species grown from cancers, no wait, they're here already – memories passed down like eye-colour, I remember the massacre, I remember the exile, I remember the conflagration, I remember the child sliding out of me, it all written here, G-C-T-A-A-T-C-G-T, and on and on, a wall of books, a linen sheet, a coagulant mesh, a whirling masquerade – not a fabric, but a field – absolute beauty – truth is beauty is truth is – more than just a segment of genes, more than just words on a page – more than – interconnection, context, post-truth truthiness – fruit flies, you see, were the first models of life, I kid you not, first animal in space – blind-white noise – merchants of doubt – people are dying who have never died before – in the beginning, no beginning, just the possibility of an ending, in the end, no end, just the trace of some beginning – and the detritus of life, there on the ground, wanting to be – not a field, but a library – rats eating corpses, dismembered and rotting on the donation room floor, the bins overspilling, the garbage bags ripped, a severed head mouldering under the coffee table – cell fate, cell fragility, cell evolution – growing brains, not brains, just layers of

cells, but we say 'brain' to explain it and in explaining it misrepresent it – hearts beating that have never beat before – hearts beating that are nothing like hearts, brains churning that are nothing like brains – does anyone see my hand shaking? – no thinking, no feeling, no history – carrying inside you all the instructions for a past, a future, a beginning, an end, a terrifying present – and you try to get yourself out of the storm and into the shelter, pushing through the outfall, it rampant and seething, and all the scraps of all the pasts rushing down from the mountain towards you, rushing so thick and rough you fear you'll never get through them, not without the scores, the abrasions – a soul, once lacerated, bleeds through to forever – does anyone see my hand shaking? – not a library, but a web – this is not a living brain, rather it is a cellularly active brain – the dirt under God's fingernails, all of us – somewhere in this buzzing world there is a single genome that will change the face of – put a crown on its head and call it king – a single genome – in this introduction to human development we will be examining the first fourteen days of life – the first fourteen days and one hour, the first fourteen days and one minute, the first fourteen days and one breath – on which day, sir, did life begin? – there is a difference, my boy, between life as a process and life as it pertains to an individual – we walk on cells that could have been used for thinking had they been in a different part of the embryo – the soul placed inside on the third day – those drains in Ireland, all those babies – how many more little corpses buried, little bundles of history – unravel the genome and out it comes, the history, the plague, the smothering, the life, the death, the death – death: the totality of functions that resist life – writing poetry on a virus – etching *Ulysses* in a gene – can anyone see my hand shaking? – and the creation so beautiful even God must have felt a little sick in the stomach on the seventh day, a little fearful of it all, of the thing that would Jack-in-the-box out of it all at the end of the long unravelling – babies dying who have never died before – rewriting life – brains not brains, hearts not hearts – my hands – thoughts not thoughts, truth not truth – and the words rushing out of the storm, rushing still from the top of the mountains, I kid you not – monkey hearts in pig brains and dog brains in pig hearts – *Frankenstein* – am I not a man? – it's not clear what forces hold the structure together – walk softly, carry a big stick, black suit and red bow tie – the second violin concerto – immortal beloved – could do worse – the tide, its slow about face – soul's laceration – my hands under my head and him revealing the want beneath – the case has been made to push the boundary of life from fourteen days to twenty-one days – massacres and revolutionary songs – nothing to catch your heart when you wash them down the proverbial – to infinity and beyond – viruses, you see, would rather jump to new hosts than evolve with them – who owns a life? answer for ten – who owns a death? answer for twenty – when is it science and when is it something else – when is it life and when is it, sun blazing down, what does it mean to be

human, hot as all get out, what does it mean to be, shaking, a bit of a breeze, coming and going, being and becoming, DOES ANYONE SEE MY HAND SHAKING? not a web but a system, a broken river, an endless torrent, eddying steams, feeding in and feeding out, cluttered junk and leaves and lives and wishes and faiths and disease and hatred and failure and failure and hopeless failure and all the while thinking it's you shaping the embankment, it's you pushing you on, hurtling you towards, stew of souls, clag of dreams, delta of death, does anyone see? bathed, new dress, pushed out into the, drifted, lifeless clumps of bleeding hope circling down and down, and pretending my hand is steady, and pretending that my life, its course, its consequence, is not a river, not a river, not a river, but an ocean.

Diane Stubbings is a playwright based in Melbourne, Australia. Her plays have been staged in Sydney, Melbourne and New Zealand, and she has been shortlisted for a number of awards including the Patrick White Playwrights' Award, the Griffin Award, and the Rodney Seaborn Playwriting Award. Diane is currently undertaking doctoral research at the University of Melbourne (VCA), investigating biological dramaturgies. This creative work has been supported by a Research Training Program Scholarship provided by the Australian Government and the University of Melbourne.