EXCERPT

INTRODUCTION

I was the typical quiet child – overly polite, always with a book, and straight home after school – but before this, I was a fighter. My uncle, upon seeing my run across the garden to pounce on my unsuspecting older sister, nicknamed me 'Edingwe' after a Congolese wrestler. Also described by Western enthusiasts as the 'Hulk Hogan' of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Edingwe had popularised voodoo wrestling (*cache fetiche*), a style where combatants would dress flamboyantly, carry around fetishes (objects believed to carry magical properties) and use the power and assurances of their ancestors to gain the upperhand in matches. After becoming the most decorated Congolese wrestler of all time, he gave up his wrestling and this old religion and adopted Christianity. At three years old, I wasn't quite 6 '6 and 100kg, and, from a Christian household, I certainly didn't have any fetishes, but, like Edingwe, I would scream and charge at my opponent. And if my opponent was out of range, I would attack myself. Before I was afraid of suggesting my presence to the world, I would smash my head against hard surfaces, walls or floors, until somebody would acknowledge my anger.

As the quiet child, I once asked my mother why I didn't talk like other children. She told me of my fits of anger. Like most, the memories of my toddlerhood are fragmented, like the frayed ends at the start of a rope, though it did help to explain the odd name my uncle would often call me.

"It's because you damaged your own brain," my mother shrugged. "That's why you have a stammer, and that's probably why you don't remember it."

As an adult who has dealt, and still deals, with the jubilation of getting through days at a time without stammering and the heavy shame when a mundane sentence gets the better of me, I have come to see things differently. The image of my anger given to me by my mother, collated through anecdotes and completely detached from my own memories, has been replaced by another one:

Imagine it is a beautiful day, and people are jumping off a high surface – a cliff perhaps, or a mountain.

All of these people are identical – same face, same body, perhaps differing clothing. They all have the same name, and know instinctively when and how to act. They simply put one foot in front of the other until there is no more land, and then they stiffen, bent at the knees, and launch themselves into the open space in unison. They do not know where they are going. If one were to look down from the edge, one would not be able to see the bottom, or, rather, one would not be able to make out any shapes, or colour or pattern, or passage. Only darkness.

These people do not know where they are going, but they do know (an internal knowledge, something that is not learned nor taught) that the only way is down.

Now imagine these people to be words.

Alive in the mind, sparked by thought, they run down the synapses, taking care of the nostrils, brush against the taste buds like toes relishing in grass wet with morning dew, and then, upon speech, they dive into the open air. Their bodies land audibly.

If words live in the mind and die on lips, what happens to those words that flounder prematurely, the marathon runner who trips just before the finish line?

Everybody has speech disfluency (he *um* when searching for a word, the *like* when gossiping to a friend). The brain searches for the word that best captures the sense of what they would like to say – the tone, the situation, the possible implications – is like zipping around in a maze. Some dead ends are to be expected, and readjustment is needed.

This is not the speech disfluency I will be speaking about. To stammer is to find the end of the maze and not be able to proceed.

Or to run to the edge of a cliff and not be able to jump.

Of the people jumping off the cliff, three are anxious. These three run in parallel with the way in which stammering presents itself: repetition, prolongation, and blockage.