

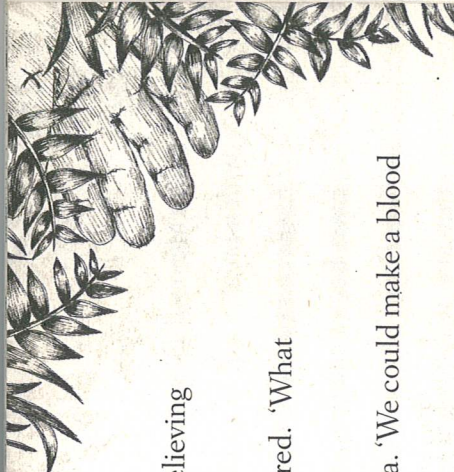
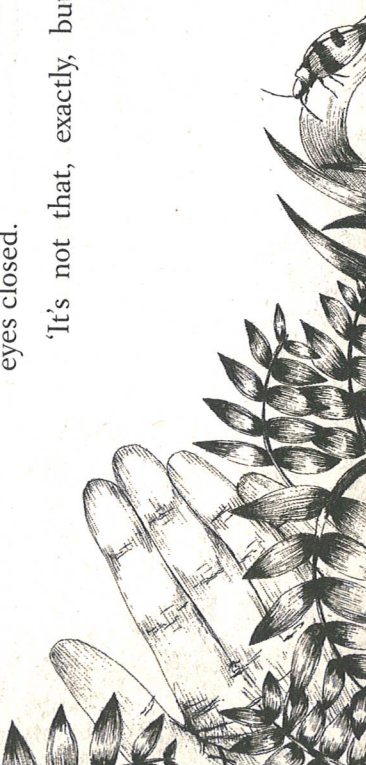
Nobody wanted to sleep that night. They sat over the fire, cooking the fish until it spat and sizzled. Fred explained to Lila and Con about the canopy, and the man working every day to protect the great green secret at the heart of the jungle.

'We should do something,' said Con, 'to prove to him that we won't tell.'

'Do you think he doesn't believe us?' asked Lila. Baca lay snoring in her lap, with

Max curled up on her foot, his eyes closed.

'It's not that, exactly, but I



think he's not the easily believing kind,' said Con.

'I like that idea,' said Fred. 'What would we do?'

'We could swear,' said Lila. 'We could make a blood vow, like they do in books.'

'I want something more permanent than that,' said Con. She looked up at the roof, through which the stars shone, silver woven through green. 'I want something bigger. Something that will make all this last forever.'

'I know!' Lila sat up straighter, jerking Baca awake. 'We could make a mark – like a tattoo!'

'We don't have any ink,' said Fred.

'But the explorer does!' said Con. 'I saw it, when I was collecting wood – he said, he keeps his most precious things he doesn't want stolen under his hammock while he sleeps.'

There was a pause. Then Fred said,

'If he doesn't want them stolen,

I don't know if I'd want to try stealing them. He sleeps with a knife.'

Excitement seemed to have made Con bold. 'I'll do it! Even Baca looked surprised.

'Con!' said Lila. 'Are you crazy?'

But she was already up and running across the square, on her tiptoes, half bent over and muttering warnings to herself as she went. Fred and Lila exchanged startled glances.

Con returned five minutes later, bearing the ink aloft. 'I did it!' she said.

'You stole it?' asked Lila, her voice full of admiration. 'Yes!' said Con, flushed with victory in the light of the fire. Then: 'Sort of.'

'Sort of?' said Fred.

'He was sort of awake. He sort of said, we could borrow it; he said it's precious, and if we spill it he'll put snakes in my hair. But I would have stolen it, if I'd had to.'

Fred grinned. 'What shall we tattoo, then?'

'We could write, "I swear"?' said Lila.

'Too' complicated. It would give us too many chances to go wrong,' said Con.

'Or an X,' said Fred. 'Like the one on the map.'

'I like that,' said Lila. Con nodded. She sharpened the tip of the penknife with a flint, and Lila burnt the tip in the flames of the fire to sterilise it.

'Who wants to go first?' Lila asked.

There was a silence; a silence sharpened by the knife in Lila's hand. 'I'll do it,' said Fred.

He tried not to let his hands shake. It was harder than he'd expected, to cut his own skin; he dug down, wincing sharply, and cut a thin line into the base of his thumb where it met his palm.

'Does it hurt?' asked Con anxiously.

'A bit,' said Fred, his voice coming out tight. 'But not compared to everything else.' He added a second line, and dabbed away the blood. 'How do you think they put in the ink?'

'I think they just drip it on,' said Lila.

The ink stung, and Fred bit his teeth together, but Con and Lila were both tactfully looking away.

'There!' he said. He held it up to the firelight: a small X, marked in ink and blood.

Lila went next. She winced when the ink was added, but said nothing. Con took longer over hers, making sure the lines of the X were perfectly straight. 'If it's going to be forever,' she said, as she rubbed in the ink, 'I don't want it to be wonky.'

Max suddenly jerked upright. 'I want one!' he said.

'Max! I thought you were asleep,' said Lila.

'I was pretending.'

'Shh, Maxie. Go to sleep.'

'I want one too! I want to do the secret swear!'

'No,' said Lila. 'Absolutely not. It hurts, and you'll cry, and the explorer will wake up. And anyway, Mama and Papa would kill me.'

'I won't cry!'

'You would,' said Con.

'But it's my secret too!' said Max. 'If you want me to keep it a secret you have to let me!'

The others looked at each other. Lila sighed.

Max did cry, but he tried very hard not to. Lila took

the knife and Max screwed up his eyes and bit his lips together and drummed his feet on the ground, and though the tears trickled down his face as Lila added the ink to his hand, he didn't yell.

'Shall we swear?' said Con. 'What shall we say?'

'You do it, Fred,' said Lila. 'You're oldest.'

Fred grinned, half-embarrassed. 'We swear —' he began.

'Just a second!' Con threw an armful of kindling on the fire, and it roared upwards towards the sky. 'OK, go.'

'We swear to keep this place a secret,' said Fred. 'Until it's safe to tell the world about it, or until we die — whichever comes first.'

'I swear,' said Con solemnly. Then: 'Though, statistically, we're more likely to die before we get a chance to tell anyone, you know' — but she was smiling.

'I swear,' said Lila. 'Always.'

'Swear,' echoed Max. 'It's *my* city.' He looked proudly down at his X. 'Nobody gets to share it with us.'

Con looked at Lila and Lila looked at Fred. The three of them grinned at one another over Max's head.