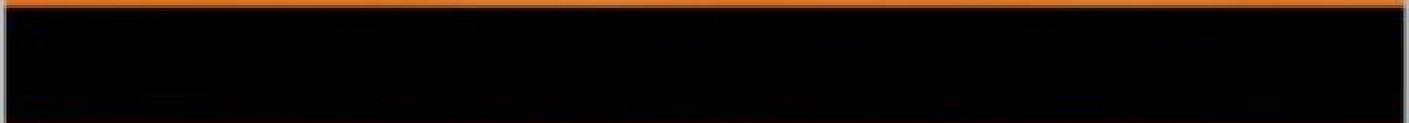


TINCTURE JOURNAL

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Editorial

Here we are, at the end of our second year. Eight issues in, this journal has kept largely the same structure, although the word count and mix of writing can vary widely from one issue to the next. Any literary journal or anthology is bound to be a projection of the editors' own tastes, but after two years selecting prose submissions of *Tincture*, I believe there's more to it. In some sense we are a projection of what is being produced by the writers who choose to send their work to us. We do reject a lot of material: we can only publish so much. But as long as you have something to say, a story to tell, or a striking image, thought or emotion to express (or all of the above), and as long as you present your work in an interesting way, you have a strong chance of joining our growing alumni of contributors—regardless of topic or genre. Perhaps this impartiality distinguishes *Tincture* from other literary journals, but that's not for me to judge.

A short editorial this quarter—so much to do, so little time—but before we move on: Issue Eight marks the eighth and final instalment of Meg Henry's regular column, "Inferior Bedrooms", in which she exposes her love life through the lens of popular literary novels. It's been marvellous to open each issue with Meg's work, and she may continue to write for us regularly, but it is time to say goodbye to "Inferior Bedrooms".

Finally, this issue features two poems by Elizabeth Allen, and an interview between her and our poetry editor Stuart Barnes. Many thanks to Elizabeth for her thoughtful, witty, illuminating answers, and to Stuart for organising and conducting the interview. We hope you enjoy it, along with the rest of the issue.

Bring on our third year!

Inferior Bedrooms

Regular Column by Meg Henry

On the veranda overlooking the harbour, I watch the blood moon eclipse. I'm holding a beer bottle by the neck, texting pictures to JD when I look down and see a shadow move across the hotel car park.

It's such a dramatic moment—the eclipse like a beating heart, my reaction to it—that it takes me a minute to realise who it is. The Poet points to the sky as though he's made the moon red for me. His look is blonde and wholesome. I am afraid of him.

“Come downstairs,” he says.

I go inside and pull the sliding door shut. I turn on the air-conditioner and latch all the doors.

During that week we spend on tour, I am a window he presses his palms against. But there are lapses. Sometimes I feel the glass bend. He doesn't push harder into the cracks, which helps cause the fear to fade away. I say, “You're giving me great material,” and see his face fall with the insult. He says, “Just love me.”

I call JD twice a day. I swim laps in the hotel pool. Between performances, The Poet lays gifts on my windowsill. A parrot feather. A sprig of lavender. In the evening he reads to me from the car park below my apartment. At the tour dinner a stray cat runs out in front of a car and we are the only two people who see it. He meets my eyes and mouths, “Close call.” I smile thinly.

The last night of the tour, I'm packing for the flight home when he knocks on my door.

“Dinner?”

“I'm tired,” I lie.

On the counter my phone flashes with JD calling.

“Please.”

There are many things JD doesn't know about me. Many things I have let him overlook. The distance between us is filled with shadows. I have rewritten scenes. I have made deletions. There are torn out pages he will never see. But JD loves me and I have made him promises.

After enough gin I stand outside room 408. I can hear The Poet moving a saucepan off the stove. I want to knock. And I don't want to knock. I have made promises. Then the door opens. He is shirtless, a tea-towel slung over his shoulder. Behind him, his laptop plays hip hop. The apartment smells of spaghetti sauce. The Poet smiles and I wonder which of

the beds are unmade in his Imperial Bedrooms.

Meg Henry is a columnist and the author of "Inferior Bedrooms", a non-fiction series that parallels her bad choices in matters of the heart with popular novels. Though she still reads and drinks in excess, for now, she is happy.

Crazy Town is a Happy Place

by Deborah Sheldon

Dr Vivienne Leach walked into reception. Sitting in the waiting area were Dr Paholski and the journalist. As Vivienne approached, they both stood up.

The journalist turned out to be a young girl in a summer dress, cardigan and flat lace-up shoes, no make-up, ginger hair pulled back from her freckled face in scores of stiff, wiry plaits. The kind of principled little girl who wouldn't shave her armpits, Vivienne decided, and probably smoked weed just to be subversive. Vivienne gave a practised and professional smile. The girl responded by lifting one side of her mouth.

"Vivienne, meet Daisy, the writer I was telling you about," Dr Paholski said. "Daisy is putting together a profile on Krantzen Town for an online newspaper."

"Pleased to meet you," Vivienne said.

Turning to Daisy, Dr Paholski continued, "Dr Vivienne Leach is one of our pioneers. Back in the day, she and four other geriatricians took over this place when it was nothing but a foreclosed retirement village. They created Kranzten Town from scratch."

"Based on the original Dutch model, the Hogewey care facility," Vivienne said. "Let's give credit where credit is due."

Daisy said, "Yeah, OK, can we get going? I'm running to deadline."

Vivienne frowned. Damn these obligations to the press. But Krantzen Town needed good PR; needed more benefactors if it was to flourish. Vivienne held up a forefinger—*wait one second*—and approached the reception desk. The name tag on the receptionist's jacket read 'Naomi'.

"Naomi, excuse me," Vivienne said. "Any messages?"

"Sorry, Dr Leach. Still no word from your husband. I'll page when he calls."

Vivienne nodded, smiled. Hopefully, Hugh would remember to pick up the champagne flutes. She turned from the reception desk. Dr Paholski was gone. Presumably, he'd left for the specialist suites while her back was turned, noiseless as usual on his crepe-soled shoes. Meanwhile, Daisy stood in the middle of the rug with both hands clasping an oversized, garish carpet bag; the hippy version, Vivienne supposed, of a briefcase or satchel. Oh yes, this was going to be a tiresome few hours.

"Ready?" Daisy said.

Vivienne ran a hand through her bobbed hair, straightened her glasses, tugged at the hem of her white coat. Daisy would ask about the movie star, no doubt. Every journalist did. It was the ghoulish side of human nature: that desire to goggle in fascination at the mighty after they have fallen.

"Let's commence," Vivienne said.

They walked through the double doors of the main building and out into the weak sunshine of a Melbourne spring day. The grounds were manicured. The breeze carried the cloying smell of jasmine. Vivienne cut left at the driveway's turnaround. Daisy followed.

"I don't want to waste your time or mine," Vivienne said. "How much do you know already?"

"About Crazy Town? That it costs each patient about sixty grand a year."

Vivienne stopped walking. "Hold it right there. We don't call this Crazy Town."

Daisy faltered a few steps later, turned, blinked like an owl.

"It's Kranzten Town," Vivienne continued, "named after the first benefactor, Norbert Krantzen. Haven't you heard about him?"

"Yeah, the millionaire with the crazy wife."

Vivienne narrowed her eyes. "No one here is crazy. Our patients have dementia. Do you understand what that is? It's a term for the symptoms of various mental conditions like stroke, acquired brain injury, Alzheimer's disease. A person with dementia loses memory, intellect, rationality, social skills, physical functioning too, as the condition progresses. But they're not crazy. Is that clear?"

"Well, sure. Okay."

"Are we clear? If not, this interview is over."

Daisy shrugged, blushed, smirked. "Jesus, I'm sorry. It's just that everybody calls this place Crazy Town."

"No one here calls it that."

Daisy lowered her gaze to the footpath, chastened. Vivienne felt a sudden pang for this ugly little goose with her graceless demeanour, flat chest, the rash of acne across her cheeks.

"Shall we press on?" Vivienne said.

The girl nodded, shrugged half-heartedly. Vivienne strode past her. Daisy hurried to catch up.

Small, well-kept brick houses lined both sides of the road. Each house had its own garden bed, at this time of year a colourful riot of flowering magnolia, camellia, marigold, geranium, freesia, and some others that Vivienne couldn't name. There were no fences dividing the properties, only a rolling green lawn as immaculate as any golf course.

"Krantzen Town kept the set-up of the original retirement village," Vivienne said. "Many patients are functional enough to live in the free-standing units, the homes you see here."

A distant male voice shouted, "Morning, Dr Leach."

Vivienne stopped and turned. One of the gardeners waved at her from a front yard. She waved back.

"Oh shit, is he a patient?" Daisy said.

“No. He’s on staff. It takes a full-time team of gardeners and maintenance men to keep Kranzten Town looking as beautiful as it does.”

She waited for Daisy to acknowledge this truth, to compliment Kranzten Town with perhaps an admiring smile or nod, but the girl just hefted her carpet bag from one hand to the other, and shot a worried glance at the gardener. Vivienne resumed walking. Daisy kept pace.

“The patients who struggle with day-to-day functioning live in our communal houses that have five or six bedrooms and shared living areas,” Vivienne said. After a time, she added, “Aren’t you taking notes?”

“It’s more of a first-person kind of article.”

They walked in silence for a time. The footpath went over a little rise and cut to the right. The side wall of the pub came into view.

“Apart from the hospital and medical suites,” Vivienne said, “we have an on-site supermarket, and a High Street with a pub, hairdressers, newsagent, town hall, movie theatre, and café. The patients don’t realise they’re patients at all. They think they’re living in a village.”

“What about the carers?” Daisy said. “How do you hide them?”

“Depending on the patient, the carers are thought of as servants, members of the extended family, friends, perhaps neighbours. Most of the patients think I’m their GP, which I suppose I am, in a way. A few of them believe I’m a relative, usually their daughter or sister.”

“And you don’t correct them?”

“Of course not.”

Daisy whistled through her teeth. “So everybody here lives a lie?”

Foolish girl, Vivienne wanted to say. Everybody lives some kind of lie, not just the residents of Krantzen Town. But Daisy would learn that herself one day. It was one of the many painful realisations that came with experience, hindsight, wisdom, age, after life had kicked the stuffing out of you a few dozen times.

Instead, Vivienne said, “It’s the illusion that keeps them well. It’s called reminiscence therapy. Our patients take very little medication. Some patients don’t need medication at all.”

“But morally? Come on, doesn’t it disgust you?”

Vivienne gave a derisive snort. “You’ve obviously never been to a regular nursing ward for dementia patients. Everyone over-medicated to the point of stupor, almost comatose, forced to wear nappies, lined up in wheelchairs around a television all day, every day, strapped into their beds at night, trapped behind locked doors. It’s a horrible way to end one’s life. Here, our patients are happy. They live in the past where their minds wish to be, back when they were whole and had full cognitive function. That’s why we don’t have mirrors in Krantzen Town. It’s important not to break the illusion.”

“So I suppose the movie star still thinks he’s a movie star.”

Vivienne stopped walking, ready to give this ignorant little girl a dressing down, a lecture about privacy, the importance of doctor-patient confidentiality, but then she noticed something. The breeze carried more than just the fragrance of jasmine. A tiny cloud of pollen had swirled by on a current, barely visible, fine as a puff of talcum powder. If her son had forgotten to fill his antihistamine prescription, he'd be coughing and sneezing for the duration of his engagement party tomorrow tonight.

“Dr Leach?” Daisy said.

“My apologies, I was thinking about something else.”

“That’s OK. So... the movie star?”

Vivienne pointed at a Japanese maple on the nature strip. “Do you see that?”

“The tree? Well, yeah, sure I do. I’m not blind.”

Vivienne approached the maple, gestured for Daisy to come closer, then pointed again into the branches.

“See the camera?” Vivienne said.

“Oh my God, yeah. Oh wow, it’s tiny.”

Vivienne kept walking. Daisy fell in beside her.

“We have hidden cameras everywhere to monitor the safety of our patients,” Vivienne said. “Except for the front gate, there are no locks in Kranzten Town.”

“No one ever tries to leave?”

“Our patients prefer the familiarity of staying at home. They don’t need much in the way of outdoor life. Our High Street is enough for them. And here we are.”

The road was a dead end, the shops of the High Street arranged around the cul-de-sac. It was an eye-catching shopping centre. Each red brick terraced building was fashioned in the Georgian style with sash windows, decorative ironwork, panelled doors. A carer walked the footpaths, masquerading as a fellow shopper. A handful of elderly patients tottered about. Most of the patients showed the same empty, grinning face, the same aimless wandering.

Daisy hesitated, drew back.

“Come along,” Vivienne said. “It’s quite all right.”

Every patient was out alone, walking singly, none in pairs or groups. Some carried shopping bags. Vivienne smiled or nodded to each patient, and received cheerful greetings in return.

“Oh my God,” Daisy said. “They don’t sound crazy at all.”

“That’s because they’re not crazy, they have dementia.”

“What I mean is that you’d never know there’s anything wrong with them. They’re like old people you’d see anywhere, like grandparents, you know? Like normal people.”

“Thank you. We work hard to keep our patients happy. But don’t be fooled. Everyone you see is severely and untreatably demented with zero chance of recovery. There’s no way out of Kranzten Town. Once you’re here, you leave in a coffin.”

Daisy shivered. “Oh, Jesus.”

“There are worse ways to die, believe me.” Vivienne held open the door of the pub, and said, “After you.”

They went in. The pub was the most impressive building in the whole of High Street with its panelled ceilings, red wooden floors, and leather armchairs. But Daisy didn’t appear to notice. Vivienne gestured towards a table. They both sat down.

Daisy said, “The booze in here. Is it real?”

“As real as we are.”

“So if I wanted an alcoholic drink, I could have one?”

“Now? At ten in the morning? Well, yes, of course. And so could every patient here; at least, the ambulatory ones. Actually, the problem we have is getting the patient to consume the drink once they’ve ordered it. Typically, they forget and start to leave. The staff members have to remind the patient to stay.” Vivienne pointed towards the chandelier. “See the camera up there by the light fitting? Go ahead and wave to the clinic doctors.”

Instead, Daisy pressed fingertips against her closed eyelids.

“Hello, Dr Leach,” the waitress said, coming over from behind the bar. “How are you today?”

Daisy started.

“Please try to relax,” Vivienne said. “Our waitress is a member of staff, just like the gardener. Remember? Everything is all right.”

“Can I get you girls a drink?” the waitress said. “Tea? Coffee?”

“Bourbon and coke,” Daisy whispered.

Vivienne gave a rueful smile. Most journalists fell to pieces on this tour. Particularly the young ones. It was never easy to be confronted with the frailties of being human, to see evidence first-hand of the terrible cost that everyone ultimately had to bear if they lived for long enough, even when the evidence was as palatable and friendly as Krantzen Town. Lots of places were worse. Palliative care for cancer patients was worse, for example. Vivienne thought about mentioning this to Daisy. However, the girl seemed too shaken.

“Dr Leach?” the waitress said. “The usual orange juice?”

“Yes, please.”

“And how are the plans for the engagement party?”

“Under control for the most part. Hugh is meant to be hiring the champagne glasses today, but he’s getting rather forgetful in his old age.”

The waitress laughed. “Uh-oh, look out. You’ve got to be careful saying that kind of thing around here.”

“Oh my God,” Daisy said, blanching.

The waitress headed back to the bar.

A wedge of sunshine splashed against the wall as the pub door opened. Mr Eastford wandered in, a snow-haired and frail old man who favoured one leg as he bent over a walking stick. Perfect.

“Come and join us, Mr Eastford,” Vivienne called.

“What are you doing?” Daisy hissed.

“You need an interview with a patient to round out your article,” Vivienne said. “Mr Eastford, this is Daisy, a journalist. She’s writing about Krantzen Town.”

“Good day,” the old man said, easing himself into a chair, gazing at Daisy with shining eyes. “Are you my wife?”

Daisy stared imploringly, beseechingly, at Vivienne.

“Why don’t you tell us about yourself, Mr Eastford?” Vivienne said.

“Oh, there’s nothing much to tell. I’m a plumber with my own business, thirty-six years old, married, three kids.” He turned to Daisy and winked. “Are you my wife?”

Daisy held her hands over her nose and mouth, breathing hard. She looked pale, as if about to faint. Concerned, Vivienne gestured for the waitress. The waitress hurried over, placed the drinks on the table, and took the old man by the elbow.

“Mr Eastford,” the waitress said. “Please come over here with me.”

“No worries,” he said, and stood up. “Are you my wife?”

“Right this way, Mr Eastford,” the waitress said, with a nod at Vivienne, steering the old man away. “Come along now. Let’s go.”

Daisy whispered, “Is the movie star like that?”

“Have some of your bourbon,” Vivienne said. “It’ll calm you down.”

“Stop changing the subject.”

Vivienne sighed. “If you’re expecting collusion for some kind of exposé, I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed. All patients here are protected, especially the high-profile ones. We will not allow them to be humiliated by tabloid magazines.”

“I don’t understand. They told me you’d talk about the movie star.”

Vivienne said, “Let’s visit the town hall. We have music recitals there. Some of our more cognisant patients sometimes hold plays or poetry readings.”

“But he’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?”

“The movie star.” Daisy hugged the carpet bag to her chest. “I was supposed to talk to you about the movie star,” she said, voice rising. “That’s what they told me.”

The waitress came over. “Dr Leach, is everything OK?”

“I’m not sure,” Vivienne said. “Daisy seems overwhelmed. She could be having some kind of delusional episode.”

Daisy turned to the waitress. “I did what I was told and it didn’t work. Get me out of here.”

“Okay, let’s go,” the waitress said, taking the girl by the arm. “I’ll escort you to the main building. Dr Leach, please stay here and finish your drink.”

“Your son’s engagement party happened twenty years ago,” Daisy said. “He’s married with teenage kids. They visit and you don’t even know who they are.”

“Stop it, that’s enough,” the waitress said, waving at the chandelier.

At the camera, Vivienne realised.

As if signalling for help.

“You’re a patient,” Daisy continued. “You live the same day over and over. Is any of this getting through? Hubby isn’t picking up champagne glasses; he’s in a hospice dying from prostate cancer.”

“Shut up,” the waitress shouted. “You signed papers. You’re breaching the terms of agreement.”

“Aw, screw that shit,” Daisy wailed. “I quit, I can’t do it.”

A chasm opened up in Vivienne’s stomach.

Daisy wasn’t a journalist, she was a trainee carer. A trainee carer for...

Vivienne lifted her hands. Wrinkled, covered in age spots. They weren’t the hands of a fifty-year old, more like those of a seventy-year old.

Oh, dear Lord.

Realisation hit in a wave of panic. She closed her eyes against the onslaught. The immensity of the wave bore down, crushing and suffocating her, closing over her head like black water. She had been scared of the ocean ever since she was a little girl; scared of its enormity, its unknown depths and currents, the relentless dark, the hidden creatures lurking within. And now the ocean took her under. She was drowning. Teeth were coming for her.

“Dr Leach,” said a stern voice.

Swimming frantically towards the light, she snapped open her eyes. Daisy had been right. There was nothing worse than this. Vivienne fought for her husband and son, for her faceless grandchildren, for the other children she may have

had, the daughters or sons she couldn't remember. She fought for those she had always loved but had somehow lost.

"Dr Leach," said the voice again.

Shadows crouched at the edge of her vision. In the dead centre of it all appeared Dr Paholski's blue eyes, bristling eyebrows, meaty nose. Her attention gradually brought his entire face into focus. As usual, she hadn't heard his approach. Those crepe-soled shoes of his were so quiet, so stealthy.

"Can you hear me?" Dr Paholski said.

Vivienne couldn't speak. Her heart was caroming too hard against her ribs.

"Here," Dr Paholski said. "Have some of your orange juice."

He pressed a glass into her hand. She was sitting on a chair in the pub. Dr Paholski was on one side of her, the waitress on the other. Poor old Mr Eastford was sitting by the window, nodding his snowy head over a forgotten pint of strawberry milk. Vivienne ran a hand across her face, realised she was sweating.

Dear Lord.

Now this was important.

Something was important.

She glanced around at the shadows in the corners of her eyes, tried to snatch at them as they streaked away like the ghostly remnants of a dream.

"Drink up," Dr Paholski said.

She did as she was told. The juice ran icy cold down her throat. She put the empty glass on the table. Time passed. Her heart rate began to slow. Feeling returned to her hands and feet. Mr Eastford looked over, his head nodding like a doll.

"You had a dizzy spell," Dr Paholski said. "But you've recovered now."

"We're so glad," the waitress said.

"Thank you," Vivienne said. "Thank you for helping me."

"I hope you'll be OK for the party tomorrow tonight," the waitress said.

"After what I've spent on catering?" Vivienne managed a smile. "I'd better be."

Deborah Sheldon's short fiction has appeared in literary journals such as Quadrant, Island, and Tincture Journal, and also in various anthologies including Hard Labour (Crime Factory), The One That Got Away (Dark Prints Press) and 100 Lightnings (Paroxysm Press). Her crime-noir novellas are Ronnie & Rita and Dark Waters (both through Cohesion Press), while her collection Mayhem: selected stories (Satalyte Publishing) will be released in February 2015. Other credits include TV scripts, magazine articles, stage and radio plays, non-fiction books for Reed Books and Random House, and award-winning medical writing. Deb lives in Melbourne, Australia. Visit her at <http://deborahsheldon.wordpress.com>.

Post-mortem

by Elizabeth Allen

There is something comforting about
the idea of Emilia Fox slicing me open,
taking out my lungs, weighing my heart.

She examines my stomach contents,
takes blood and DNA samples,
performs toxicological tests on tissue
specimens. Studies my body closer
than a lover: looking between
my toes, under my fingernails
and in my hair for trace evidence.

She narrates the process, her voice
replacing my inner narrative,
its mundane obsessions.

In a cross-sectional slice of grey
cauliflower brain all the books
I've read: the plots half-remembered,
the characters confused with loved ones.

The mechanism of death determined:
a bullet wound to the head,
exsanguination caused by a stab wound,
manual or ligature strangulation,
myocardial infarction or
a terminal sense of uniqueness.

In this cold, tiled place there is no
tension between what I thought
would happen and what did.
Once she replaces the organs
and sews me up the mystery
is no longer held from me.

Earnest and well-dressed, she tells
once and for all who did this to me.

Delicious

by *Elizabeth Allen*

Jars of polish lined up, brightly coloured lollies, contents liquid and thick like sap: a mellifluous array of possibilities held in small glass vessels, reminding you of your eight-year-old friend's coveted tin

of seventy-two Derwent colour pencils laid out in a wooden rainbow. Your hand would hover as you made your selection—anticipation that you might find the right shade to match the emotion you held inside; might access a moment of sweet

accuracy. There is this small gap of choice in which youth and friendship are deliquescent and limitless, before it closes and you are left paying thirty dollars to be synthetically reminded:

so your toenails might be small glossy cherries winking up at you. So you might snatch the golden apple from Aphrodite's hand and press it against your lips: cold, hard and finally inedible.

Looking for Links, or: On Imagining What I Would Talk About If I Met Stuart Barnes

Elizabeth Allen, interviewed by Stuart Barnes

1. For how long have you been writing poetry, and what or who inspired you to begin?

I have been writing poetry since I was around thirteen years old. I think it was my English teacher who encouraged me to begin—she was very passionate about poetry and used to get us to write poems for class. I think I was very fortunate throughout high school actually to have English teachers who were really excited about poetry, rather than being afraid of it and avoiding teaching it. Their enthusiasm was quite contagious—they got quite beside themselves with excitement over Robert Gray and Philip Larkin and Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost. They opened up the world of poetry to me and were valuable models to have.

2. When and where was your first poem published, and what was it about?

My first poem was published in 1994, when I was in Year Eleven, in a journal for school children called *Youth Writes*. I think it was edited by some boys at Sydney Grammar. The poem was called “Playing Games” and it was about going to visit my father in hospital when he was really ill. It is about grief and saying goodbye to someone you love. When I read the poem now I cringe a bit at the tone, which is so earnest, and the ending, which is rather clichéd I think. Still, I suppose you have to stand by your old poems and the person you were when you were fifteen years old even if you worry a bit for her because she is so honest and exposed.

3. How and where do your poems take shape?

I find that a really hard question to answer. I am not really sure. They seem to be taking shape in the background all the time. They aren’t somehow separate from the rest of my life, but are an extension of the process of thinking, of speaking, of acting—each feeds into the other, is intertwined. I actually think of everything I do in my life as a kind of research for writing and everything I write as a kind of research for living. The things that happen in one domain help me to figure out the things that happen in the other.

I guess I think consciously about specific poems from time to time while I go about my day. A line comes to me or I think about how I might work on a poem. I have a pretty chatty inner conversation going on all the time. Then I sit down and write something to the side of, something tangential to, what I thought I was going to write. The words that make it onto the page are actually usually quite different to what I plan out in my head. As for the physical space I write in, that would be my study at home. It is a nice, quiet, private space where I can write undisturbed—a room of my own.

4. Reading for a BBC Programme, Sylvia Plath explained: “[‘The Disquieting Muses’] borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—The Disquieting Muses. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting.” (Sylvia Plath, Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, 1981).

What art forms influence your poetry?

I am not familiar with that Plath poem, I will have to look it up. I am probably influenced most by visual art and theatre. They are the two main art forms that I love and that I have consistently sought out throughout my life. I like music too but it hasn't been such a big influence on my writing. I am a pretty visual person and am especially interested in the use of colour at the moment.

I don't think I have ever consciously sat down and written ekphrastic poems on specific artworks but they have still informed me. I wanted to write a series of poems on Bronwyn Oliver's sculptures but I haven't got there yet.

I have always been attracted to ekphrastic poems—poems written about artworks—so much so that I started a PhD on this topic. I never finished the PhD but I did a lot of reading in the process and was fortunate enough to meet with Rosemary Dobson and discuss her poetry with her. She is someone who wrote a lot about art and is one of my Australian idols. Move over Guy Sebastian!

5. Tell me about “Post-mortem” and “Delicious”, the poems of yours that are in Issue Eight of Tincture Journal.

Well the other “art form” that is a big influence on me is television. I am especially obsessed with watching crime and detective dramas. The scarier, the more suspenseful, the more gruesome, the better. I am actually pretty indiscriminate in what I will watch—everything from Law and Order SVU, Wire in the Blood, The Killing, Wallander, The Bridge, The Fall, Happy Valley, and Scott and Bailey, to Midsomer Murders and Miss Marple. You name it and I will watch it.

“Post-mortem” grew out of my appreciation for the forensic crime show Silent Witness. I started thinking about the idea of being dead and someone examining my body for evidence of my life. What they would be able to tell about how I lived and how I died just from my body. I am also interested in the relationship between the forensic pathologist and the body they are examining—cold and detached, yet also strangely intimate.

As I was saying earlier, I am also very interested in colour at the moment, its history, its symbolism, its personal associations, the memories linked to certain colours. This is something I started exploring in my poem “Derwent”, which is about the different shades of blue in a set of Derwent brand colour pencils. The poem “Delicious” is a continuation of these ideas. It is part of a series of poems I have started writing about fruit and colour, and synaesthesia between taste and sight.

I have one poem about an orange and several about apples. “Delicious” is about the golden apple that Greek mythology's Aphrodite was awarded. To cut a long story short, three goddesses stripped off in front of Paris, who judged Aphrodite the most beautiful and the winner of the golden apple, which was inscribed with the words “for the most beautiful”. My poem is about going to one of those quite tacky nail salons that you see all over the place, salons full of women wearing masks because the fumes are all so toxic, and being overwhelmed by the exciting array of coloured nail polish to choose from; it is also about the (ultimately quite unfulfilling and endless) pursuit of beauty that we as humans can't really help getting caught up in.

I am thinking I will change the title of this poem to “Golden Delicious” so that I can then have another apple poem about the poisonous apple in Snow White titled “Red Delicious” and so forth. I may even branch out into a poem called “Lemon Delicious” but I will have to check first if there is any reference to lemon pudding in Greek mythology or folk tales/fairy tales.

These two poems, “Post-mortem” and “Delicious”, came together for me in a way when I was having a conversation with my sister. As part of her anatomy course at university she worked with cadavers and she said that when they were studying the anatomy of the human arm the thing that was most surreal and that freaked her out the most was that the arm she was studying had long plastic fake nails still on its fingers.

6. How has your poetry been influenced by others? By running poetry workshops for adults and children through Number Forty Seven and The Red Room Company’s National Poetry Education Program, Papercuts? By practising yoga, by teaching children’s yoga?

My poetry has been constantly influenced by others, especially by other poets who have been friends and mentors over the years. I have belonged to a poetry workshop for a long time; the people in that group have most definitely and very practically influenced and shaped my poems by suggesting ways I might edit and improve them. Even when I have disagreed with their advice the process itself has been invaluable.

Running poetry workshops (for both kids and adults) has also been a great learning experience. I saw a quote on Facebook the other day that said something along the lines of “to teach is to learn” and I really think that is true. There is nothing like having to teach something to force you to consolidate your own knowledge on the topic. I also learn a lot from the students I work with; I really don’t think teaching is about one person conveying knowledge to another person (or a class)—the teaching happens in both directions.

I think the [Red Room Company](#) are a wonderful organisation; it is quite mind boggling, the number of poetry projects they have undertaken over the years, the diversity of the poets they have worked with, the poems they have commissioned. I feel really privileged that I got to take part in their Papercuts program. I have done a degree in Primary School Teaching so to be able to combine the skills I learnt doing that with my love of poetry was a really great experience.

Through Red Room I got to run a number of workshops in conjunction with their [Poetry Object](#) project. It was really moving helping students to write poems about objects that are special to them. They had to bring their special object along to school with them; my favourite example was the boy who brought along his big fish bowl with his fish in it with some gladwrap over the top to stop the water spilling out everywhere on the bus. I thought that showed a real level of commitment. Most of the kids just brought photos of pets, but he really went the extra mile.

As for yoga, well regular practice has a huge influence on my life and my writing. Yoga becomes a kind of metaphor for everything and vice versa. I also find that yoga is very poetic in that all of my favourite yoga teachers have spoken in similes and metaphors about what we are doing in class; it almost becomes inevitable in order to convey the information. The Sanskrit names of the poses are also very poetic.

One of my yoga teachers always talks about the three different stages of a yoga asana and how they are equally important. There is going into the pose, being in the pose and then coming out of the pose. You shouldn’t just rush in and rush out but take care with all three stages. I have wanted to use that idea in a poem for a long time but I am just not quite sure how to yet.

On a very practical level, things like yoga and running are also just really good for my mood and mental health and that obviously has a flow on effect to my writing. It is pretty hard to get any writing done at all if you are feeling depressed and unmotivated.

As for teaching yoga to children, that hasn't happened yet. I did the training to be able to teach but haven't yet put that into practice. Maybe if I do ever end up using my Primary teaching degree I can have a class that focuses on lots of yoga and lots of poetry writing and we can just dabble in the other Key Learning Areas (like Maths and Science) every now and again. Seriously though, that is one of the things I love about Primary teaching—the subject areas don't exist in isolation but you can help students make links between them. I guess that appeals to a poet's brain when you are naturally always comparing things to each other and looking for links.

*7. Tell me about your role as Associate Publisher at Vagabond Press, which released your chapbook *Forgetful Hands* in 2005, and *Body Language*, your first full-length collection, in 2012. Also, what are you currently working on?*

I have been involved with [Vagabond Press](#) for a long time, it is a real labour of love and (let's be honest) at times just forbearance and hard work. Mostly though I think it is about community. I really adore working with my fellow Vagabonds, Michael Brennan, Kay Orchison, Chris Edwards and our intern, Tom Waite. I am really proud to be part of something that has brought into the world so many fine poetry collections over the years. For me the most rewarding thing has probably been the friendships and relationships I have developed with other poets through working on the Press.

And obviously it has been great for my own work too, I probably wouldn't be in print myself if it wasn't for Michael and Vagabond Press and wouldn't have had nearly as many opportunities to take part in readings and get my work out there (wherever "there" is, I still haven't been able to quite figure that one out yet). I like that Michael takes a global perspective and is publishing work of Australian poets but also work by international authors alongside that. And prose as well. The community knows no bounds!

Also when it comes to books, aesthetics are really important to me. I have always been a firm believer that you can judge a book by its cover so I am glad to be working for a press that has such (to borrow a phrase from the world of film) high production values. I think we produce really fine looking books and that matters a lot to me. Sometimes I think we publish too many books, I feel quite tired when I think of the year ahead, but I think we manage to do so without compromising on quality. We are going for quality AND quantity.

I am currently working on a short story actually—"The life on water and the life beneath". I have borrowed the title from a poem I like by J.S. Harry, I am hoping she won't mind. I have been battling away at this short story for more than a year now and the whole process has increased my respect for fiction writers. It really is a hard game and not one that comes naturally to me. I joined a fiction writing workshop and the advice I got was that my story is well written but that I need to add some narrative drive and a plot. A plot! Goodness, what a strange new world. I had been writing sort of hybrid prose poem/flash fiction pieces so a short story seemed like the logical next thing to tackle.

While I am not trying to figure out what a narrative drive is (I think it must be like a four-wheel drive but with more slippage) I am attempting to finish enough (decent) poems to put out a second collection of poetry. For my paid job, running events at [Gleebooks](#), I also have to write an entertaining weekly e-newsletter that goes out to 3800 people (though only a third of them open it) and that takes up a significant amount of my time and creative energy. I am sure you can imagine the cycle of stress and relief associated with a weekly writing deadline.

8. What are your thoughts on print vs. digital poetry publication?

I like both, I enjoy reading and being published myself in both forms. I like the accessibility of digital poetry, how easily it can be shared with others online, and also the scope for experimentation with image and hyperlinks and video and sound etcetera.

I do also like reading hard copy books of poetry though. And as someone who makes a living by working in a bookshop I am obviously invested in the continued success of print publications. I think there is something beautiful about the physical object of a book of poems that you can hold in your hands and physically interact with. That is something that I know we keep in mind at Vagabond Press; I don't think we would ever go totally digital. I also like having hard copy editions of poetry journals on my bookshelves at home.

I think it is interesting though, what you are trying to do with Tincture, as obviously that only exists as an e-book. You are probably opening up a very different space for reading, a different kind of community. I would be interested in discussing these ideas with you further.

9. What poets are you reading, what's your favourite poem at the moment?

I have been reading prose more than poetry lately: Helen Garner, Sonya Harnett and Sylvia Plath. So just the really light stuff. Before that though I was reading Emma Jones' collection, *The Striped World*. A friend just lent me a book of poems by Michael Palmer so I might start reading that now. I have a massive stack of books of poetry beside my bed that I would like to get into at some point soon: Claire Gaskin, Joanne Burns, Bonny Cassidy, Fiona Hile, Kate Middleton, Jessica Wilkinson, Petra White and L K Holt. I guess, looking at that list, I am more interested in reading contemporary Australian poetry by women than men at the moment, but I should add that David Malouf is in the pile too!

I am not sure about the favourite poem question. I returned to "The Whitsun Weddings" by Philip Larkin recently because I caught the train up to the Central Coast and I was thinking about good poems about train journeys. Larkin's poem is really fabulous—I do think it is one of my favourites at the moment. I also seem to keep thinking lately about that line from E. E. Cummings: "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands". The poem that line comes from, "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond", is also an old favourite, like an old sloppy joe I pull on when I come home, partly for warmth but mostly for comfort and reassurance.

Elizabeth Allen is a poet and short story writer based in Sydney. She is the events manager at Gleebooks and associate publisher at Vagabond Press. She is the author of Forgetful Hands (Vagabond Press, 2005) and Body Language (Vagabond Press, 2012), which won the Anne Elder Award.

Red Flowers of the Exodus

by Amy Ward-Smith

A filthy dawn breaks over Monivong Boulevard, the first rays of sunlight mingling with the black smoke that is still being vomited by the destroyed oil depot. The flame trees are in mourning. Red flowers drop gracefully to the street, landing on still-sleeping refugees who brush them unconsciously to the ground. There they join their already flattened relatives, decorating the smooth stone footpath. No traffic clogs this once-busy city road, transformed now into a makeshift village.

It is surprisingly quiet. The war is over. It appears as though there has barely been a fight in Phnom Penh, apart from a few explosions the night before and random bursts of gunfire. After so many years of conflict, it seems like an anticlimax. The government soldiers are all running away or surrendering. The government itself is long gone.

Bopha squats against the closed door of a deserted bakery, no smell of fresh bread emanating from its ovens today. Pulling her skirt around her like a curtain, she relieves herself. She watches the warm stream as it trickles towards a neighbour whose eyes are flickering out of sleep. Bopha is somewhat disappointed when it stops just short of the woman. Before she has a chance to stand up, a huge, painful tightening grips her swollen stomach. Struggling to maintain her balance, a low groan escapes from her lips. The neighbour, awake now, jumps up and helps Bopha to steady herself. A lone government soldier dashes past them, rifle in one hand, guitar in the other. They watch this odd figure as he disappears down the street.

“This baby will arrive before the rain,” Bopha tells the woman. “I’ve had these pains all night.”

“That child will not survive,” the woman says harshly. They are from the same village. “Look how small your stomach is. It should be much bigger than that.”

Bopha looks down, placing her hand on her belly. Although her vision is perfect, her eyes are cloudy like a blind person. *Bopha*, her name, means beautiful flower, but the people in her village say she is more like a weed. Small and dark, her lips too big, her nose flat and wide. A coffee-coloured stain covers half her face.

The woman pauses, regretting her words. “Just don’t get your hopes up. It’s a bad time to have a baby. Especially on your own.”

No one in the village knew who impregnated Bopha. At first, when she started vomiting a putrid green substance, they were sure she was finally dying. How such a wretched creature had survived so long was beyond them. Her parents had died many years ago. Since then she had lived off the scraps they threw to her, and the things she scrounged in the jungle. People said she was cursed. Others believed she could commune with spirits.

Only when the bump of her stomach started to show did they realise something was growing inside her. None of the villagers ever would have married her. Not even the old men with no teeth.

She frightened them. They whispered that it was a spirit baby. Or that the guerrillas had done it. In spite of themselves, they brought her with them when they came to the city, fleeing the war that had enveloped the countryside. They didn’t want to take the chance that she would curse them too.

More and more soldiers are entering the city, many of them only boys. Bare, dirt-stained feet are visible beneath their black pyjamas. Red and white checked scarves adorn their heads and necks. Though the sun is still low in the sky, the heat is intense. Soon the city will become an inferno, unless by some miracle the rains arrive and clear the air. It is the last day of the Khmer New Year, but there has been no celebration. No cleaning of houses, nor splashing of water or visiting of relatives. The refugees' footpath home reeks of human filth and misery.

The boy soldiers are arriving on commandeered army vehicles. Children run out to meet them. People start to cheer. Saffron-robed monks walk back to their temple, its white and gold pagoda rising above the tall palm trees, beckoning them home. Their alms bowls are mostly empty. Like everyone else, they are hungry, but their faces are serene, an image of peace. Indomitably beautiful.

Some of the black pyjamas are talking with the refugees, smiling and hugging. These boys are farmers' sons, children from the villages, swept into this guerrilla army. The refugees fear them less than the government soldiers. A few even recognise friends and family among the victors. There is no hint of the famed Khmer Rouge atrocities in these young faces. Only a sense of relief that the fighting is finally over. And a timid, cautious optimism.

A foreigner with a big camera comes past, taking photos hesitantly. Some boys on a truck invite him on board, and he goes with them. His long face reveals a mix of excitement and fear. A bony-backed cow surveys the scene with its milky eyes. Bopha howls as the invisible hand in her stomach tightens its grip. The other refugees watch but don't touch her. When the pain subsides, she starts to sing to herself. Rocking back and forward, the unintelligible words flow from her mouth. A secret, ancient language, older than Khmer, older than the ruins of forgotten kingdoms that dot this land. Older even than Buddhism. Her coarse, wavy hair is hanging down her back, almost touching the ground. She moans as another pain washes over her. Her neighbours back away.

People are starting to leave, heading back to their homes. Bundles of possessions balance precariously on their heads. Children with distended stomachs cling like monkeys to their mothers' slim hips. Bopha doesn't move from her perch in front of the bakery. She imagines the bread that was once baked there, the workers behind the counter, the rich customers who came to shop there each morning. Between moans, she greets these invisible city people. The refugees whisper.

"She is talking to spirits again."

"We should leave her behind. She will bring bad luck to us all."

"She will probably die anyway. Look at her."

Bopha vomits, a pathetic trickle of bile. There is no food in her stomach, hasn't been for many days. The woman who had helped her before offers her a small sip of dirty water. She smiles at this kindness, revealing black, rotten teeth. On the bakery door, a tiny, translucent gecko observes the humans who have invaded its home. Bopha smiles at it too, discerning primordial mysteries in the mosaic of its eyes. A boy soldier walks up, stares at Bopha as she resumes her singing. His face is so small, so thin, that he seems to be all eyes: huge moons of sorrow and terror.

The sun is high when the announcements start. Different kinds of black pyjamas are coming, their faces older, stiffer. These are hardened warriors. No smiles now. The short burst of hope that had occupied the city melts into the shimmering haze of noon.

The city is being evacuated.

Take only a few possessions.

Everyone must leave within 24 hours.

Whispers ripple through the refugees who remain. Somebody says the Americans will bomb the city. They are evacuating people for safety.

A kind boy soldier walks up to them. His face is angular, like a bird's; the eyes narrow slits of black light. Scars pattern his long fingers.

"It is only for a few days, maybe a week," he tells them. "Hurry up now, gather your things."

"She is in labour," Bopha's neighbour says. "She can't walk."

"Everyone must leave," the boy soldier says, walking away to join his comrades.

"Come on," the woman says to Bopha. "Everyone is leaving."

Bopha leans against the bakery, closes her eyes. Her mind is a lush jungle, and in it she roams alongside a tiger whose eyes flash with the light that filters through the canopy. Above them, the voices of gibbons sing out through the trees. It is cool and mossy. She pauses to sip dew from a leaf, and her tiger pauses with her, observing this lovely mistress. A huge brown moth flutters past. On each of its patterned wings, a large spot gives the impression of a pair of enormous eyes. It stops momentarily before them, tranquil in the speckled light, before continuing on its leisurely journey.

The woman touches her shoulder.

"We are going now. Are you coming?"

Bopha doesn't answer, doesn't open her eyes. Another pain shakes her body.

"Just leave her," another neighbour says. "We tried our best."

The procession in the street is huge. The whole city is departing, an unimaginable exodus. Lucky ones have bicycles and carts. A few are even driving cars, slowly navigating their way through the crowd. Most walk, carrying whatever possessions they can. Pots and pans clang against each other. Occasional grains of rice drop from sacks. The black pyjamas watch over all, shouting at anyone trying to bring too much. Knocking small treasures from their hands.

Bopha opens her eyes. Watches them. The gecko has re-emerged. It looks on with her, through the thick, steamy air. Hundreds of red flowers are crushed under the constant march of feet. A soldier is approaching. Bopha closes her eyes again, but her tiger is gone. The gibbons' song is desolate now.

The bare toes that strike her knees knock her off balance. Her back falls into the bakery door, the heavy wood vibrating for a moment. She looks up. The face attached to the foot is round and soft, like a woman's. The eyes are slanted downwards, adorned by ridiculously long lashes. The foot strikes her again, this time in her side. Long toenails dig into her skin.

"Get up. Everyone must go. No exceptions."

Bopha struggles to her feet, the pretty soldier watching. She looks down, considers her pathetic bundle of rags for a

moment, before deciding to leave it behind. Bidding a silent farewell to the gecko, she joins the river of people heading north. It doesn't take long to get used to the burn of the road, occasionally broken up by the smooth, sticky texture of squashed petals underfoot. Every few minutes she pauses, bending over and letting out a long wail. People look on with sympathetic eyes, but no one can help her. She is just one of many: the pregnant, sick and wounded, the young and the old. No one is spared this journey.

They pass by huge piles of weapons that have been handed over to the new masters. Every now and then the black pyjamas single out an individual or family, leading them away solemnly to an unknown destination. The heat of the day peaks; soon people begin to die, the life seeping away from them without fuss. Bodies line the road. It is clear not all the deaths are of natural causes.

An inner rocking settles on Bopha as she walks. The gentle waters of the Tonle Sap ripple in the depths of her body. She imagines the child swimming in there, the child she already loves with all of her being. Soon they will meet, these two who have known each other since the beginning of time. It will not be long now.

The city is disappearing behind them when Bopha's pains build one on top of another, until they are relentless. She breathes deeply, driving her howls as far as she can within herself. The nearest soldier has his back to her, shouting something indistinguishable at a family who are trying to push their car through the crowd. Bopha takes her chance, slips quietly down from the road into a ditch. Before her, the endless, brown-yellow rice paddies stretch out in every direction. All signs of life are concealed now, patiently awaiting the arrival of the monsoon to release the luminous torrents of green that will soon carpet the land.

Bopha leans down on all fours, gulping in the damp air. A final scream rises up from her and escapes into the sky. The creature slips out easily, its streamlined reptilian form making for a quick passage into the world. Bopha drops back, sinking into the slope of the ditch, examining her progeny. It is a spectacular thing, about half the length of her arm, its leathery black skin painted by some master artist with dazzling turquoise spots. The lizard, stunned by the experience of birth, is motionless. It regards this strange mother with its unblinking orange eyes. Long, clawed toes unfurl slowly, exploring the sensation of dirt and grass for the first time. They stay like that for an immeasurable amount of time, just the two of them, silent in the dry paddy field.

Finally Bopha speaks, leaning close to the lizard.

"Go, my child. Be free. Live," she whispers. And the lizard is off, fleeing across the field, its feet barely touching the ground. Not looking back. Bopha stays, singing her song, until it disappears into the setting sun. In the depths of her mind, a tiger is waiting.

She scales back up the embankment, a trail of blood dripping behind her. No one notices her as she re-joins the great flood of humanity, marching relentlessly towards the coming night.

Amy Ward-Smith is an Australian writer who spent several years living in South East Asia. She currently resides in northern New South Wales, where she tries to find time to write in between caring for her three young children and studying an MA.

Folded Peace

by Adam Byatt

Outside I hear the fluttered wings where a
pair of crested pigeons scatter from the
unmowed patch of grass and roost

on the spindly arms of the clothesline
greys of feather and metal blend
above the semaphore of washing

Inside I turn the pages of the paper
and hear the song of John, Paul, George and Ringo
while flicking through the stories of destruction

by accident, catastrophe and war
famine, carelessness
and stupidity

Compassion is a forgotten virtue

Sometimes I read the black print on the white
Sometimes I read the white spaces in-between
and fall into the void amongst the letters

The print is erased onto my thumb and
forefinger (does it ever really dry?)
I resist the urge to wash my hands

And stain myself in misery, become
the suffering widow, orphan and poor
and leave the black ink stains indelible

I turn down the corner of the page and
make it meet the centre, form a triangle
then tear out the square with roughened edges

Folding Sadako's hope and wishes with
each crease and movement as I was once taught
for each page I fold is a prayer for peace

Were I to fold one thousand pages

into one thousand cranes will I have erased
enough print onto my fingers to create

a clean page where a new story can be written?

A motionless, tattered flock of paper feathers
is ruffled by the breeze slipping through the open
window, slipstreaming over the folded hymnal

of forgotten news

I want to tie my flock like a kite's tail
to the crested pigeons whose fluttered wings
scatter from the clothesline and give flight to hope

Adam Byatt is an English teacher and occasional drummer with an interest in literary pursuits, rhythmic permutations, theological amplifications and comedic outbursts. He sifts through the ennui of life and catalogues them as potential story ideas, which collect as a pad of sticky notes on the fridge door. He occasionally finds loose change while searching for the perfect pen. You can find him on Twitter [@revhappiness](https://twitter.com/revhappiness). Adam's story "The Cicada Clock" appeared in Issue Six of Tincture Journal.

One Small Step

by *Matt Smith*

The alien watched, both carefully and quietly.

This was a momentous cycle, not just for him, but for the beings which he had watched over for most of time. Initially he'd dismissed and resented being sent on what seemed a worthless assignment in an unregarded far-flung arm of the galaxy. The beings on the blue-green planet weren't doing anything; they'd never be worth talking to. They'd only just worked out that they shouldn't try to eat or have sex with fire. Why watch over them?

Now it was different. It had taken a long time, but finally the beings had learnt how to build things, how to think, how to grow, how to discover... and now it was time. This cycle would be the first time they moved onto another celestial surface.

And so the alien watched, both carefully and quietly.

To clarify, when the word "alien" is used, he wouldn't use it to describe himself. He doesn't consider himself an alien, he considers himself to be QKORLIFLIM, an amorphous green blob. Nor does he describe himself as a "he"—no gender as it is known would be applicable. If anything, he would consider the beings to be the aliens. But for the sake of a story...

The alien made a note in the biometric records he kept, and pushed a few glowing console buttons to make sure everything was recording. He watched as a small craft approached the rock which orbited the blue-green planet, where his observation base was hidden. It carefully landed without fanfare.

The alien glooped with glee: the life forms had finally figured out how to leave their rock and make it to another. He made a note, adjusted the focus on his instruments, and flooped in joy.

He glimbered in anticipation around his base as an opening appeared in the craft. He squirkled in ecstasy as a being made of bubbles slowly clambered out. He flimbered around his controls and managed to listen to their chatter as they communicated. Their excited, practised chatter.

His computer translated the sharp noisy speech, and the alien splooked in glee as the beings took their first step on a new rock. Finally they were getting to a point where the QKORLIFLIM found them interesting, when they could take their place amongst the community of beings everywhere.

"I'm at the foot of the ladder," the being said hesitantly. *"The LM footpads are only depressed in the surface about one or two inches, although the surface appears to be very, very fine-grained, as you get close to it. It's almost like a powder. Ground mass is very fine."*

The alien had to agree with the being, the ground mass was indeed very fine. The alien had a respectful appreciation for it. The rock they were on was a messy, crumbly dust, and it managed to get into his base no matter how hard he tried to get rid of it. He flibbled some of it off the nearby surface and for a moment turned a dark crimson in disgust.

"Okay. I'm going to step off the LM now," the being said.

So much anticipation! The alien squirkled again and glimbered a quick somersault through the air. Any moment now! He watched the being pause for a long, dramatic moment. Finally, it planted a determined boot on the surface of the rock.

“That’s one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.”

The alien did a backflip with glee. They did it! The beings did it! They finally changed from being nothing but sacks of meat with a fascination in mobile delivery vehicles to *something* sacks of meat with fascination in mobile delivery vehicles! Now they were finally ready to... ready...

The alien stopped mid-limboot and thought.

“*Yes, the surface is fine and powdery...*” the being was saying on the screen.

Again with the dust! He got it; it was fine. The alien rewound the recording, played it again, and confirmed what he feared. He hadn’t missed anything.

He pushed a few controls, hijacking the being’s signal and masking it so they’d never know otherwise back on the blue-green rock. The alien made sure to include lots of talk about dirt—even more than normal. They would be expecting lots of talk about dirt. He then turned a reassuring shade of blue, gave his pet moon-mite some food, and stepped out of the base.

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The bubble-suited being hadn’t seen him yet—he was much too busy examining the dirt. He would probably be entertained for quite a while. The alien summoned all the knowledge he had from watching the beings for so long.

“Good morning good day good night,” said the alien. “Lovely weather we are having isn’t it yes it is.”

He held a translator in front of him so that he could be understood. Despite this, the being still reacted with confusion.

“What the hell?” the being finally said.

The alien examined his translator, made a few adjustments, and tried another greeting.

“Good evening, my dear fellow,” the alien said. “Did you catch the big game last night?”

It was much better this time, but the being was still reacting with confusion. He couldn’t seem to grasp the alien’s presence. “What is this?” it said. “Buzz, is this some kind of joke?”

The alien turned purple in annoyance. He waved the translator at the being, and the being put up his hands and stepped back in response. That only made things worse.

“You forgot an ‘a’,” the alien said.

The being hesitated and cautiously lowered its hands. “I forgot a what?” It stepped back again, kicking up some of the dust it found so fascinating in the process.

“This is a monumental event for you beings, is it not?” the alien asked.

“Well, yes, it’s the first time—”

“The first time you leave your rock and stand on another one, yes. We figured that out flerums ago; you don’t get an award for that. So since it’s the first time, don’t you think you should get it right?” His crimson red shade conveyed the frustration he felt.

“I’m not sure I understand—”

The alien had had enough. He had thought that the beings were ready for contact and integration into the QKORLIFLIM alliance, but it seems he was mistaken. Clearly if they couldn’t grasp the basics of their own grammar they weren’t ready to benefit from an endless supply of food, wealth, and small fluffy animals.

“You forgot an ‘a’,” the alien repeated. “It’s one small step for *a* man, not one small step for man. Man in that context is completely the same as mankind rendering your entire statement redundant. It’s completely contradictory.”

The being remained silent for a moment and finally shrugged in disbelief. “Does it honestly matter? Everyone will still understand what I mean!”

The alien turned a special colour which could not be seen by the being’s visual spectrum, reserved for times of great annoyance. “That’s the problem with you beings, of course it matters! Grammar always matters. *Get it right.*”

Matt Smith is a writer and freelance journalist living in Melbourne. He’s written for a number of Australian newspapers and magazines, and produced stories for ABC Radio National. He lives with his wife and a tuxedo cat named Millie. Matt’s stories “A Perfect Storm” and “Enjoy the Silence” appeared in Issues Two and Three of Tincture Journal respectively.

What I Write About When I Write About Dance

by *Sophie Pusz*

Little girls love ballet. It's one of those clichés that most of us love to indulge, and accept without question. There are frou-frou tutus! Opportunities to dress up as a princess! Reams and reams of pink! Despite all of that delightful, girly frippery, something further is needed to hold the attention of all those twirling, skipping little girls after the first term of classes. Some will grow out of it, and some—myself included—continue to feel, from time to time, a little pang of regret that they have moved on to an ordinary life that does not include the privilege of using one's body to express oneself, nor the strange mix of elation and exhaustion that comes after having done so. A love of dance carried through to adulthood is based on many things, most of which are decidedly not pink.

As a three-year-old, my mother took me to see the ballet for the first time. She was concerned that I would fidget, as three-year-olds tend to do, but apparently I sat, unblinking and transfixed for the entire performance, having immediately and irrevocably fallen under the spell of dance. Long before I was aware of being able to express it, I fell in love with that beautiful, bodily depiction of music that is dance. I like to think of that young version of myself being captivated by an experience so rich and beautiful that it blew my tiny, toddler's mind.

I love to watch dancers make shapes with their bodies. The more beautiful, extreme, and seemingly impossible, the better. I like to watch the physical movement. This movement is, after all, what distinguishes dance from other art forms; it is visual, kinetic, and full of life. I find immense pleasure in watching a body do what mine can't. What I wish it could do.

I love to watch the patterns the dancers' bodies make with one another. Watching a performance of the American Ballet Theatre recently in Brisbane, it struck me that the experience is not unlike looking into an old-fashioned kaleidoscope, and being entranced at the patterns and shapes continually morphing and moving in and out of focus. Order, chaos, order, chaos; an onslaught of endlessly presented mini resolutions. It's deliciously satisfying. This particular performance opened with a piece involving rotating and shifting groups of dancers moving on and off the stage, to the music of a Bach Partita played by a solo violin. The music was rich and strident and open and flowing. It moved up and down in columns of sound, and back, forth and around in scales, themes and variations of melody. The patterns made by the notes were mirrored on stage by the dancers, and this interplay of movement across and through dimensions of aural and visual perception made my brain feel unbelievably alive. It made me feel happy. It made me wish I could watch it forever. From the sweeping circles and Vs made by lines of swirling skirts and swooping arms, right down to the individual idiosyncratic movements of a single pink foot, the patterns in the choreography were as multiple and layered as a fantastically elaborate torte begging to be eaten.

Writing about dance requires a delicate balance between feeling and thought. While on the one hand, there are so many visual treats to note, on the other there is the sense that there is something extra present. Although devilishly difficult to describe, it would be a shame to leave this indefinable element out of the discussion. Emotion, vibe, presence, spirit... it's a whisper of steam that is constantly in danger of evaporating into nothingness. I have come to realise that, much as I love the fascinating, compelling puzzle that is figuring out how to describe what I can see, what is equally precious to me is the even more complicated task of figuring out how to describe those elements of a performance that can't be seen.

As a teenager, I went to see the Restless Dance Theatre in the Norwood Town Hall in Adelaide with my father. The charming and ornate century-old building has a raised wooden stage and red velvet curtains at one end of a room decorated by painted ceiling roses. My recollection is of a loud and large crowd squeezed into the space; a glittery,

discerning, concert-going crowd. A quick perusal online has informed me that this was the company's debut performance, so nobody there that night knew what to expect.

I have nothing more than one lone memory from everything that happened on the stage that evening, a fragment of three or four seconds duration. It is the vision of a severely disabled man lying on an antique reclining wheelchair, and being turned in circles by a man or a woman in a spotlight on the stage. It is the only visual memory I have left from a two-decade-old performance that was one of the most profoundly beautiful things I have ever experienced. What I can still remember with infallible clarity is the powerful emotion of that performance, and how the entire roomful was simultaneously, utterly, heart-in-mouth enthralled. Once the lights in the room came up, and everyone slowly began to move about in reality again, we bumped into an acquaintance of my father. He had tears streaming down his face. I still want to cry whenever I think about it, yet if I had to describe this performance methodically and intellectually, I wouldn't have a single thing to say. I remember exactly what I felt, and how that feeling was magically shared with the entire audience, but I don't remember what I saw.

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There is a long tradition in Western thought of separating the mind and the body, or intellect and emotion. This is usually accompanied by the idea that the body and its messy emotions are inferior to the mind's superior reasoning and practicality. Consequently, writing about an emotionally charged dance with cold and clinical precision can be challenging. Sure, it's *possible* to spend an entire paragraph accurately describing exactly how a dancer moved his leg from the left side of his body to the right, while doing something rather graceful with both arms, but why would you want to? It's easy to get caught in the trap of thinking that this is all that matters, and to get carried away with detailing nothing but the physically visual aspects of the performance. Despite the fact that dance is utterly dependent on the visual, the heart of a performance is usually something intangible, something felt but not seen. What I find so wonderful about dance is how that invisible element can spring from something so grounded and physically real.

There is a sense of the impossible made possible that I find so tantalising about the prospect of describing something that should be so inured against analysis and logic. A few months ago, I went to see the Sydney Dance Company with a group of friends. Although I was sitting still and watching in the dark, my brain and my body both felt completely engaged. I was thinking about the bodily experience, and I was fully aware of all that I was and wasn't experiencing with my own body. It crossed my mind that thinking intellectually about physicality is possibly one of the best ways to be engaged with life and living. To really, deeply *experience* something in this life when we are all so busy thinking and rushing and being disconnected from our bodies, is to find a joy from the tactile and the kinetic that makes everyday ordinariness pale in comparison to two-dimensional cardboard dryness. It's like coming out of a tunnel into the light, or walking into a florist and being hit by the delicious scent. It is something that doesn't happen often enough.

I have spent many hours thinking about how best to capture the beauty, magic and whimsy of dance in words, while sitting starchy at my desk, nothing moving but the pen. Typing can be even worse: no little circles and swirls of ink being created by the gestures of my wrist. It's hard to think movement when you feel rigid, but the key is to combine memory with imagination. It requires deep thought to remember what you watched, to remember what it looked like but also how it made you feel, to imagine what your muscles and ligaments would feel like if you were the one dancing. I have an undeniable yearning to be that person stretching, leaping and lunging on the stage or screen. Despite the innate stillness of it, writing about dance is the best way I can find to get as close to it as possible. Trying to intellectualise and analyse dance and movement is challenging but not impossible. The analysis is interesting, but the real specialness and richness of watching a dance comes with revelling in what it made you think about and how it made you feel. What I write about

when I write about dance is movement, pattern, sorrow, confusion, joy and love; everything that I can see, feel and intuit.

Having previously spent time in the world of music and dance scholarship, Sophie Pusz now works for Australia's largest independent publisher. She blogs at girlbooker.blogspot.com.au and tweets as [@girlbooker](https://twitter.com/girlbooker).

Teddy Bears' Picnic

by *Emily Craven*

*If you dare the woods this day
you're sure to get a surprise.
There's creatures hiding there to play
with your lifeless eyes.*

*Creepy, crawly, slimy, grey
they feast on flesh with glee.
Beware, today the teddy bears have
their pic-nic*

—A song of warning

In the beginning, Browning Forest was a nothing wood. It extended leagues to the east, pines tall, close-spaced and uninteresting. While children capered on the village green and splashed squealing in the cool blue lake, woodcutters would fell the outer trees of Browning. The stumps were dug up by our Papa. They were cleaned and waxed by him to produce intricate tree-root tables.

The wood receded; the children's green became bigger. I grew up undisturbed for many years. In my tenth year my mother had another girl, Abbie. In Abbie's third year, Dane the woodcutter was crushed by a falling pine.

Dane's father stumbled into the village square at twilight and collapsed, a broken man. "Our last!" he wailed, "Our last cut before the sun disappeared!"

My father drew me away from the window.

"Why didn't he bring Dane back, Papa?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder at the woodcutter's keening silhouette.

"It was too late Emma, my pet. We must go back tomorrow. The wood will protect him."

But when they returned at first light they found nothing. No footprints, no animal tracks, just wavy patterns in the hard earth like the exposed belly of one of Papa's tree stumps. It was a nothing wood, or so we thought.

A week later, as the air hung around us, stagnant and hot, we heard the alluring sound. For the first time children turned their heads and took an interest in the forest.

"We invite you to the woods this day; we'd like to share a surprise..."

"Look Emma!" cried Abbie.

I hushed her, working away at an onion bulb in the ground.

“We invite you to the woods this day; you may have to come disguised...”

“There are *things* moving!” she insisted pointing towards the forest.

I glanced up from my herb gathering in irritation, then stared with the other children. A dozen large bears—brown, black and grey—trod carefully on their hind legs to the edge of the forest. Their fur rippled in an imaginary wind as the sun fell full upon their elongated faces. They were dressed in bizarre garments: brightly coloured green vests and red pants, purple shirts and orange coats. Silver bows were tied around the necks of some and top hats on the heads of others. The villagers stood as enchanted as their children. Together the bears sang in high, childlike voices.

“For every bear in Browning wood, will gather round for certain because, this day the Teddy Bears have their pic-nic!”

They faded back into the wood as quickly as they had appeared. Left behind on the forest’s edge was a woven picnic hamper. Abbie and I reached the basket first, all intentions of work or play forgotten. Hefting it between us, we entered the village square surrounded by a mob of children.

“What’s in it?”

“Did you hear them sing?”

“Can we join the picnic?”

Jostled on all sides I opened up the hamper and peered in. Piled inside were handfuls of ripe, black berries and bits of carved wood. I lifted one of the wooden pieces high above the crowded heads.

“It’s a hat!”

“No it’s a cup!”

“If I’m not mistaken, that’s a snout!” Papa’s hand reached over the masses and plucked the object from my hands.

He pulled out two pieces of string from the hollowed centre and attached the wooden snout over Abbie’s own, tying it securely behind her head.

“Arrhhhhh!” she cried, making claws with her hands.

Papa grabbed her from behind in a big bear hug, which reduced her to a fit of giggles. “She’s just a little teddy bear,” he crowed.

Eager hands grasped the hamper.

“Line up!” I bossed, slapping them back.

Importance swelled my chest as I handed out handfuls of berries and snouts. At the bottom of the hamper was a flat piece of wood. Words were etched into the wood were similar to the patterns made by wood worms.

“Children of Camdale: you are invited to our first Teddy Bear picnic!” I announced to the ring of berry-stained child-bears. *“Tomorrow we shall treat you to a feast. You may bring a chaperone. And don’t forget your disguise!”*

The small crowd cheered as parents watched with tender smiles on their faces. I smiled broadly, bowing.

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They came in the morning, sunlight reflecting off their fur. Stately, they bowed from their lofty height and reached out to take a child's hand in each paw. The party set off with a flurry of excitement across the green to the forest.

"Emma, your boot is untied," admonished the priest, the chaperone of our excursion. He grasped my shoulder, halting my advance. "Tie it now, Emma," he insisted.

I bent down, my fingers fumbling with the strings, as I watched the party progress without me. I bounded up, eager to close the gap.

"No need to hurry," the priest said, linking my arm with his, "It's a wonderful day for a stroll with God's majestic creatures."

I swallowed a howl of disappointment as we followed at the priest's slow pace. Moodily, I stared at the back of one of the bears; it was strange that their fur rippled when there was not a breath of wind. Almost like a large colony of insects wriggling underneath.

"Watch the mud," cautioned the priest.

Glancing down I saw several small child footprints in the mud and then a mass of imprinted wavy lines next to them. I stared as the priest drew me on. There were no smooth imprints of a bear paw to be seen in the soft brown expanse.

A feeling of unease fluttered in my chest and I looked up at the bears again. The rippling of their fur had become more irritated, their coat bulging away from the places where the full sunlight brushed it. One bear reached up to rake sharp claws along its fluid shoulder, dislodging something into the grass at the edge of the forest.

I pulled the priest forward as the group ahead of us entered the dense shade of the pine trees. They had lumbered much faster than I realised and had pulled so far ahead that I could not see one child. In the grass at the edge of the forest was a withering slug smoking in the sun's glare, the edges of its grey body crumbling to dust even as I approached. A brief glimpse was all I had before the priest, oblivious to the creature, led me further than I wished into the pungent wood. An intense smell of pine filled my nostrils, disorientating me. We were well over a hundred metres in before my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light. All around me, the absurdly dressed bears led the children to woven mats piled with fruits, vegetables and bread.

One bear stepped in front of us, blocking our advance with its looming bulk. Leaving the delighted priest to occupy the beast, I sidled around the pair unnoticed, searching between the trees for Abbie, ignoring the alluring smell of fresh food. Finding her on the fringe of the picnic I grabbed her hand, my eyes darting to look through the trees, unsure what to do. The flutter in my chest had become a full body tingle; some instinct urged me to turn back the way we came. A brown bear perched on the edge of Abbie's blanket and turned its button black eyes on mine, freezing me in place.

"Sit," it invited in its unnatural high voice, "Eat."

Feeling trapped, I sat. I could not see the rest of the laughing children on the mats, each hidden behind a different tree. The priest, whose jovial protection I had left in my haste to find Abbie, was nowhere to be seen. If the priest was the Almighty's messenger, surely his protection would see nothing bad happen.

The bear's fur no longer rippled, but it still had an unnatural quality. The fur was stretched too tight over a bulging belly. The expanded skin seemed to strain to hold in its contents and short arms wrapped around its bulk as though to pull itself together. The bear watched Abbie as she ate, faster than I had ever seen her eat before. The beast's beady eyes would light up as she bit into the fruit and follow the path it made down her delicate throat as she swallowed. It bared its teeth in an attempted smile every time her curly head bobbed up.

"Such a pretty thing," it murmured.

I heard a child groan in contentment. Through the trees, little Arthur Cobs leant back against a pine, his head and fake wooden snout just visible. A bear leaned forward, muttering, to place its snout against Arthur's head.

If I had blinked in the shifting light I would not have seen the long grey, *thing*, dart from the bear's mouth and into Arthur's ear.

Arthur slumped, his eyes wide and staring, his mouth slack. The bear's paw leapt up, pressing Arthur's shoulder hard into the tree, its snout held to his ear as long grey slugs one after another poured into his head. The bear deflated and Arthur's skin began to ripple.

A bellow tore through the air. The priest burst through the trees, eyes bulging in terror.

"Priest! Arthur!" I cried, pointing.

The priest shook his head violently, not pausing in his flight, not even to look at me as his skinny ankles disappeared behind a distant trunk.

Suddenly Abbie's hand went limp. I screamed. Leaping to my feet I jerked Abbie's flaccid fingers with me. Our bear was poised on all fours, his snout where Abbie's head had been. Her eyes were lifeless as I crushed her body awkwardly to mine, backing away from the swollen skin of the bear. Its eyes flashed red. Its body pulsed and then exploded. Fat grey slugs ripped their way through the bear skin with a shriek that shattered all my courage. With a sound like metal scraping metal, the forest erupted into chaos.

Fear overwhelmed me as I sprinted as fast as I could with Abbie's body towards the forest's edge and the safety of the sun. Screams and cries knifed through the air and my feet slipped against pine needles. Only one thought pushed me harder than fear: if I made it into the sunlight, maybe I could save Abbie from the *thing* inside her head. Send it smoking and crumbling in the midday summer blaze.

I stumbled and weaved, Abbie's body jerking from the demon's passage inside her, pressing against her delicate skin, seeking a way to break out and consume me as well. The gaps between the trees widened and the shifting light grew stronger, the forest edge closer with every frantic step. Something slimy and cold swarmed up my arm where Abbie's head hung. Instinct made me drop her body and grip the slug that had been inside her. It slid over my shoulder and I hurled it into the brightly lit green. It withered and shrieked as I stumbled past it on my last reserves, Abbie clasped once again in my arms.

I dropped her in the grass, my legs finally giving in. "We're OK Abbie, time to wake up." Her pale body lay still. Dread stopped my heart. No, I had killed the creature, killed it so she could live. I gripped her by the shoulders and shook her. "It's dead! Get up!"

Only pounding feet shook me from my howling. The villagers, unrecognisable with their expressions of rage and

fear, charged into the trees with brands of fire.

The priest, dragged behind two burly farmers into the shadows of the forest, shrieked, “No! I won’t go back! No!”

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Teddy Bears do not exist in Camdale anymore, not since the picnic. They were piled high and consumed by fire. Their demise was accompanied by a strangled cheer akin to a war cry, amplified by the huts that surrounded the square. The firelight reflected off haunted eyes, and deep craters on haggard faces. Mothers’ hands grasped at air for little heads that weren’t there.

Only five children managed to stumble out that day; the only dead body left as the forest began to burn was my sister. There were no bones, no blood, nothing left of the picnic except scattered fruit and the dips and peaks of sinister patterns in the dirt.

There were two bonfires that night; one for sweet Abbie, the other for the teddy bears that reminded us of the black day we joined their picnic.

*Emily Craven is an author of young adult fiction, with her latest comedy novel, [The Grand Adventures of Madeline Cain](#), written as though you’re reading Facebook. In 2012 she [completed a twelve month mentorship](#) with Isobelle Carmody on her fantasy manuscript, *Priori*. She is the digital producer at Queensland Writers Centre, and blogs about ebooks and digital strategies for writers [on her website](#). In 2013/14, Emily produced Brisbane Street Reads, an interactive, choose your own adventure locative literature event in Brisbane CBD, and in 2014 she was awarded the Brisbane City Council Innovation Award to turn it into an app. She has appeared in [essay collections with Benjamin Law and Carmel Bird](#) and her first flash fiction story, “Always”, will be published by Daily Science Fiction later this year. She can be found on Twitter [@ebookrevolution](#).*

Ms Robyne Young requests the pleasure of the company of Ms Janis Ian to dine

by Robyne Young

Dear Janis,

About a year ago I “liked” your Facebook page. I “liked” it because I have always liked you and your music. When I write “always”, I mean for the past forty years since I first heard “At Seventeen”, that anthem for all of us who felt at some time we didn’t quite fit in. There was something different about us. Perhaps not physically, but emotionally different.

“I learned the truth at seventeen. That love was meant for beauty queens, and high school girls with clear skin smiles, who married young and then retired...”

I was seventeen when you released that song. It was 1975 and I was in the middle of HSC exams and wanted to save enough to buy your album *Between the Lines* on vinyl. Some holiday work at the Edgell factory in Bathurst where I picked the remnants of dead mice, sticks and other rubbish from the green beans before they went to the next stages of being blanched and chopped, earned me enough to own it. I would play it on the Onkyo stereo in my parents’ lounge room. I am sure that at some stage I recorded it to cassette so that I could play it in my car—my second car—a 1973 yellow two door Ford Escort. Its tracks played out as I travelled up and down from Bathurst to Sydney. Later I owned a CD version of it and now it sits in iTunes on my PC and phone.

In the late 70s I moved into a terrace with my boyfriend (later my husband and now my ex-husband) in the Sydney suburb of Newtown. *Between the Lines* sat in the pile of albums next to the Pioneer turntable with the sound coming from the latest Bose speakers. Your albums (I had bought *Stars* by that time) shared floor space with Carole King, The Captain and Tenille, and Cat Stevens. Stevens and his *Tea for the Tillerman* were tolerated by our housemates, whose tastes tended to Rodriguez and Cohen (it was years before I moved beyond thinking Cohen’s music was wrist-slitting and appreciated his musical genius). Tolerated is probably an exaggeration... I had to defend you to them and try not to feel immature in that defence. “Listen,” I implored. “There are stories in her songs.” But it seemed your stories couldn’t compete with the hard truth of *Cold Fact*, *Sweet Baby Jane* or tales of a *Famous Blue Raincoat*.

So, when the house was empty I would put on *Between the Lines* and sing along. Every ... single ... word. But I wouldn’t just regurgitate those words by rote. Back home in Bathurst, the song book of the album sat on the piano and I learned each note and lyric. I began to think about the stories and experiences in them—those I related to and those beyond my experience. I had memories of being that “*brown-eyed girl in hand me downs*” in a household where every penny and later cents counted. Yet we weren’t really poor. There was always enough. Until the adolescent self consciousness set in, I was proud of the home-made clothes my mother fashioned.

“Bright Lights and Promises”, with its speak-easy feel, wrapped me in lamé and fox fur, and took me to lounge bars, places my feminist friends would have picketed if they’d still existed. “When the Party’s Over” and “The Come On” spoke too of that power struggle between men and women and the trade-off of sex for affection or even love. Concepts strange to a young woman who felt totally in control of her body and emotions: the decision of who to share them with was hers. Even at seventeen.

But the song that always haunted me (and still does) and sang out like an anti-feminist anthem was “You’ve got me on a string” from your *Stars* album. I remember its cover with you, bare-shouldered, looking straight at the camera. I learned recently that it was a “bare all” album with its tale of domestic abuse: that abuse was part of your life at that time. And then there was the anti-war anthem, “Come Dance”, for all those Vietnam Vets who returned diminished in body and spirit: no longer the boys who had left your country’s shores. Ours were the same.

And then there were the love songs—beautiful and poetic: “Jesse”, “Lover’s Lullaby” and my favourite of favourites, “Tea and Sympathy”, that speaks of a love so great that a person would follow their lover to the grave.

For almost forty years I have wanted to know the story behind that song, but I read somewhere that you like to leave the interpretation of the lyrics to your listeners. Whatever it means, I am always stunned that you were not much more than twenty when you wrote it. Perhaps if you come to dinner you can tell me the real story. Or maybe I don’t want to know and prefer to write my own version of the story.

I feel I should confess that I have never owned all of your albums (twenty-one, not counting compilations). I have owned only two and I hope this doesn’t make me less of a fan.

But I would still like to invite you to dinner. And where did this idea to invite you to dinner come from? Your Facebook page. You mentioned you and your wife, Pat, would be travelling as part of your touring and were looking for suggestions of foodstuffs that would transport. Your post prompted so many invitations to lunch and dinner and afternoon tea, and I thought, yes, I would love to invite you to my home for a meal, to discuss what your music and what words mean.

Perhaps we will share some tea, but pass on the sympathy.

Since she first spoke, Robyne Young has had a love affair with words. In the written form she has had short stories, poems and flash fiction published. She was a columnist for The Border Mail in Albury, writing about topics as diverse as disappearing chooks to neuroplasticity. Robyne also writes reviews for Newtown Review of Books and all too infrequently drops in on her blog robynewithane.wordpress.com. She tweets a lot as [@Robyne7](https://twitter.com/Robyne7).

Shepherd Mourning

by SB Wright

He stands
alone, ghostly
white and at ease. A stiff
backed son of empire
he is not.

But there's a supple strength
that yields alike to drought
and flood,
that bends like barley
to the wind
but does not break.

His rifle's held barrel end;
a walking stick
to conquer wheat-sown,
sheep-trod hills.

A fresh faced farm lad
he was. I half expect
a stalk of wheat
behind his ear
or his slouch hat
tipped back
and to hear him talk of rain.

No blast
of bugle rudely blown
will rouse this lad
from marbled sleep. He waits
for heaven's trumpet call
to march.

Until that final reveille
he stands
on watch with garlands
at his feet.
A shepherd mourning
... for lost sheep.

SB Wright is a semi-retired school teacher who lives in rural South Australia. He was born in the town of Nhulunbuy in Arnhem Land, though most of his life has been spent in Alice Springs. A graduate of NTU, he has spent his adult working life as a security guard, a martial arts instructor, a trainer in an international gaming company and as a teacher. His interest in poetry has been a constant if not always obvious presence. His work has been published in INDaily Adelaide, and the anthologies, The Stars Like Sand and 50 Haikus. He also produces a speculative fiction podcast called Galactic Chat and runs a Ditmar Award winning book review blog. His poem "The King" appeared in Issue Five of Tincture Journal.

First to a Hundred

by Jodi Cleghorn

There are worse places to be, I tell myself, looking at the wet, sandy tennis ball in my hand. Like back up at the beach house with Laney and Lucy and their dozens of bottles of new nail polish and Sweet Valley High books and Duran Duran albums. Or on the yacht with Dad yelling at me to move now, pull this, don't touch that, leave the bloody life jacket be, lean further out, stop being chicken shit. Or ignored by Mum and her friends, fussing over hands of canasta and damp glasses of sweet wine spritzers before lunch.

“Carn Dougie.”

“Flog it for six.”

“Go, Dougie.”

“Whack it.”

“You can do it, mate.”

Beach cricket is normally every kid for himself. No cheering, just a bloody-mindedness to get the batter out so you can have your turn. And stay at the crease as long as possible.

But this is no ordinary morning.

“Not just a century before lunch,” Gibbo commentates, pushing his glasses up his zinc-creamed nose when I step up to bowl the last over. “Dougie’s gonna be the first kid ever to make a century at Point Roadknight. The before lunch bit is just icing on the cake.”

Gibbo doesn't play: the combination of the glasses, the zinc cream and the sweat on his nose and generally being unco. But he knows more about cricket than every other kid on the beach put together. So he's carved out his place down here as official scorer, umpire, statistician and general historian. He can tell you everyone's average, the number of days we've been rained out, how many wickets I took last year and who was the first to cop an LBW on our stretch of beach.

There's five minutes left before we head back to our various temporary homes to eat white triangle sandwiches, drink cold green cordial and let our mothers smother more sunscreen on us while we chafe to get back to the beach. Well that's how I imagine it is. At our place I'll sneak in, grab whatever is closest to eat and race back to the beach before Mum realises I'm not with Dad, or Laney and Lucy spot me.

Five minutes. Five runs. Six balls to bowl. It's going to be over before lunch one way or the other.

I look down the churned-up pitch to Dougie, wondering how I came to be the one he's facing down. I look at the battered stumps and imagine putting the tennis ball through them, like I've already done three times today. I weigh up the pros and cons of a short bounce or a long bounce, or bugger it, I could just throw underarm and let him thump it out into the surf for six. Let Dougie claim his moment of glory. At the end of the day it doesn't really matter to me. They only tolerate me because I can bowl as good as (if not better) than most of them.

“Amazing natural off-spin,” Gibbo commented from the footpath, when he saw me throwing a ball against the garage door two years ago and invited me down to their summer-long game.

So each year my bowling action, and the fact I can’t hit to save my life so I don’t hog the batting order, gain me entrance to the game on the beach. Charlie says it’s really only because the Connors, who had two sons, sold up the summer before we arrived and they were short of bodies on the field. Gibbo tells me Charlie is full of shit.

It’s Jimmy who starts the chant: Dougie—clap clap clap—Dougie. It’s infectious and one by one the others join in. I throw the ball up and down as I’ve seen the other boys do and wait for the chanting to die out.

I’ve no idea what the deal is, with throwing the ball up and down, see no point to it, but I do it anyway. There’s one thing I’ve learned in the last two summers, you find your place by blending in; everything else is, as Gibbo says, icing on the cake.

So I let Gibbo write my name in his battered fifth-grade exercise book as Laurie Norris, not Lori Norris. Under Dad’s cast-off blue cabbage hat, the zinc cream and the baggy Star Wars t-shirt, I could be one of them.

I stop throwing the ball and look down the pitch.

Don’t let me bowl like a girl, I pray, or a spastic. Don’t let me embarrass myself.

Dougie’s so bloody sure of himself: he expects to make his century. He remarks the crease, leans down, hunches confidently over the bat and beats it against the sand two or three times. Then he winks at me and grins. My cheeks flush, not that anyone is going to see it under the green war paint, but I can feel the burn.

I turn away from the grin and step out my run-up, but I lose count after four. Dougie’s wink prickles through my concentration and Laney and Lucy’s tittering about Doug Fearnley follows; how they are going to kiss him this New Years Eve. Dougie this, Dougie that.

Dougie—clap clap clap.

Now is the wrong time to be thinking about kissing Dougie. Anytime is the wrong time to think about kissing Dougie. I don’t want to kiss Dougie. I want to bowl him out.

When I turn, I realise I’ve walked too far back. It’s a stupidly long run-up, something Sam or Kenny would do to show off. They’ll assume I’m trying to be just like them—look at me, look how bloody good I am, all the way back here. I groan.

The chanting ends. The fielders reposition themselves: Lano as wicky and the rest spread between the cliffs and the water line. I take three slow steps and then run. It all happens without me thinking about it. I let go of the ball. It spins. Lands half a metre from Dougie’s feet. Clips a foot-shaped mark in the sand and swings to shoot around between the bat and his legs to take out the middle stump.

There is dead silence. I drag the hat off my head, look down and wait for Gibbo to call it a no ball. When he doesn’t I feel sick.

I just bowled Dougie, five short of his century.

The bravado of doing is replaced by the horror of having done.

“Clean bowled,” Gibbo says, and makes notes in his book, slapping it shut against his hand with an awful finality when he’s done.

Dougie shakes his head and smiles. “Early to lunch then,” he says and pulls up the remaining stumps, like nothing important happened.

The rest of the boys stand around looking stunned. Charlie and Sam glare at me. Kenny points at me and runs a finger across his throat.

“Seeya back here at one-thirty,” Gibbo says and Dougie lopes off, cricket bat and stumps under his arm. I wonder if there will be white triangles and green cordial waiting at his house; if there will be a parent there to care a girl stole his century.

§

It’s three days before I see Dougie again. He’s drifting in and out of the New Year’s Eve crowd down at the foreshore caravan park where we’ve all congregated to see the fireworks. I’m standing with Laney and Lucy who are giggling, pointing in Dougie’s direction and turning away every time he glances in theirs. It’s so pathetic that if we weren’t in public I’d do the finger-down-the-throat thing.

They take it in turns, daring each other to go up and talk to him. Neither of them will; what would Dad say? All show and no punch. What a waste all their preening in front of the mirror was. You’d think by now they’d realise nothing makes our dead straight hair curl. They’d have done better to just crimp it to fuzz. Or not bothered at all, like me.

When Dougie breaks away from the Roadknight gang and makes a beeline for us, Laney and Lucy don’t know what to do, so they force themselves to stand up straight, stick their non-existent chests out and giggle behind their hands.

“Wanna go for a walk, Lori?” Dougie asks.

Laney and Lucy turn on me in disbelief, then hate, when I go with Dougie, even though I don’t want to. As soon as our backs are turned they start bad-mouthing me loud enough for everyone to hear. I imagine their words melting me like the Nazi guy in Indiana Jones until I realise it’s nothing compared to what Dougie’s gonna rip through me, for what I did to his century.

We don’t say anything as we walk around the fringe of the crowd. And the longer neither of us says anything, the more I dread what will be said when Dougie opens his mouth.

He goes to take my hand when we reach one of the paths leading down to Main Beach through the melaleucas. I hesitate, think of Kenny and his slicing finger, picture all the boys from Roadknight down there waiting.

“I told my folks I’d kinda stay around,” I say, the words barely audible.

“I don’t hate you... if that’s what you think,” he says. “Kenny’s a wanker. Jeez, he should have known better.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“You’ve got guts Lori. None of those other dickheads would’ve done what you did. They’d have gone easy on me: fumbled a catch, let it go through for six, stuffed around getting the ball back to the wicky. They’d have let me get the century because they’d have wanted the same. But I’m not them. I wanted to earn it.”

“I’m sorry I stole it from you.”

“It just wasn’t my day. Hell, Bradman went out for a duck in his last match. The boys say I was robbed, but I wasn’t. At ninety-five I still hold the record. The Book of Gibbo says as much.”

I try not to smile, but I can’t help it. I love the idea of The Book of Gibbo and now I know Dougie doesn’t hate me, I’m glad my name is in the Book of Gibbo alongside his:

28/12/85 11:56 am

Dougie 95 b. Laurie

“There’s the rest of summer to chase those runs,” he says.

I’m so lost in silly thoughts of the Book of Gibbo, imagining our sports teacher educating us from it like the nuns with The Bible that I don’t expect his lips on mine. He tastes of Hubba-Bubba Original and when he puts his arms around me he smells of salt and fresh cotton t-shirts. Above us the fireworks go off. I don’t stop kissing him to watch them. I can see them exploding behind my eyelids.

§

Someone tells Laney or Lucy they saw me kissing Dougie down in the trees. They tell Mum and Dad and I’m banned from going down to the beach for a week. A week’s grounding would bother Laney and Lucy; it would eat into their precious social lives. I just read, write in my diary, watch The Goonies and count down the days quietly.

Laney and Lucy, along with some of the other girls, take up residence on the beach in my absence. Sprawled on carpets of Hang Ten beach towels, soaked in Reef Oil, they show off their Rip Curl, high-cut one-piece togs. It’s as far from The Hill at the MCG as you can get. Dougie and the rest of the boys aren’t interested, couldn’t care less about them. They take it in turns to have pot shots at their new, adoring crowd. Sam hits Laney so hard a bruise comes up on her leg and the coconut-oiled fans retreat and regroup. Over their nail polish and Duran Duran albums, in between oohing and aahing over the success of their new curling iron and the latest Sweet Valley High drama, they plot to go to Main Beach where the real men are: the surfers.

Even though Dougie is OK with what happened, I still find it hard to believe the other boys will be happy to see me back on the beach. At the end of the week’s grounding, Gibbo turns up at our door and we walk down to Roadnight together. No one says a word when we join the group. No welcome back, or piss off. And I’m OK with that. My name is added to the batting order again. I bowl my allotted overs.

It’s the mornings I really look forward to, when Dougie and I meet up before everyone else makes it down. He teaches me some batting tricks, gives me a chance to actually get a feel for the bat and the rhythm of the oncoming ball. He watches my bowling action and the combined effort of watching and bowling for me, cleans up his technique. Before summer ends he’s taking a dozen wickets a day and my run rate is climbing. But Dougie doesn’t get close to the hallowed one hundred again.

The day he leaves for home he comes by our place and we exchange addresses. I’m not sure if I want to kiss him again: my head says one thing, my heart says another. He looks confused too. It doesn’t matter. Laney and Lucy are hovering in the background, watching, so we say goodbye and pledge the next summer will be even better.

“That century is mine for the taking.”

“Not if I get there first,” I say.

“And probably will.” He winks and grins.

His bike rattles as it bumps through the gutter at the bottom of our driveway and he disappears down the road.

§

High school is a culture shock and the Norris triplets are something of a novelty. Laney and Lucy are in their element, lapping up the attention. They have star quality zing. I’m happy to linger in their shadows. It makes my day when I hear someone talking about the Norris twins in the toilets after Ash Wednesday Mass.

While Laney and Lucy play minor celebrities, I take up softball. The coach gushes about my hand-eye coordination and uncanny aptitude for the game. It reminds me of Gibbo in the driveway of the beach house when I was ten, saying I was a natural.

Just before Easter a letter arrives from Dougie. I’m the first one home, so Laney and Lucy don’t see it among the bills. I sit on my bed, my heart pounding, imagining every word I want to be written in it.

I’m still on my bed crying when Laney and Lucy come home.

“Dougie has leukaemia,” I sob, his letter now wet and crumpled in my hand. They shrug and ask who’s Dougie.

Later, when Laney and Lucy are asleep, I turn the light on and smooth his letter out, reading the same paragraph over and over again: There’s only one thing in this world that’s ever beaten me and that’s you Lori. The Big L is gonna be a breeze compared to facing off against you.

He invites me to his thirteenth birthday party and I take a succession of buses and trains to get from Brighton to Altona. His smile is still the same, his eyes as blue and calm as the sea, but his skin is pale and shrunken around his head, or maybe it looks like that because all his hair is tucked under a black beanie. We’ve been writing every week, but he’s never really told me what it’s like, how the leukaemia’s actually affecting him. And now’s not the time to ask.

Dougie’s the only one I know, but his friends go out of their way to make me feel part of the crew. It’s the sort of special treatment Laney and Lucy normally get and I find I’m not shy in the spotlight of their attention. I talk to them and crack jokes but I’m never far from Dougie.

We end up in the rumpus room, the lights dimmed and someone brings out an empty Fanta bottle. My stomach somersaults at the thought of having to kiss a strange boy: in front of all these almost-strangers, in front of Dougie. Perhaps he’s been practising—I wouldn’t put it past Dougie. He spins and it stops, pointing to me. There’s something new in his kiss and it scares me. It tells me all the things unwritten in his letters.

Everyone else is gone by 10 pm. We’re sitting on the front lawn, wrapped in layers of coats and scarves, grateful it’s not raining, waiting for my Dad who is late again. Dougie takes my hand in his and spends lots of time tracing around my fingernails.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” I say finally, because I have to say something. Afraid nothing will be said, and Dad will arrive.

He lets go of my hand and pulls the beanie off, runs a hand over the baldness.

“I’m not going to make it to next summer.”

“Don’t say that.”

I snatch the beanie out of his hand and jam it over the incriminating nude nut. “You’re gonna be down on the beach at Christmas. You’re gonna hit that century.”

He starts to cry, quietly, so it’s only the heaving of his chest I hear. I put my arms around him and the two of us sit in the dew, rocking back and forth.

§

At 11 pm we go inside. I ring home and get the answering machine. I’m used to being forgotten, being the invisible member of my family, but this time I can’t go home. It’s not just around the corner. And Dad promised. I reminded him three times today. I even rang him at work.

“Stay,” Dougie’s mum says. “And one of us will run you home in the morning. It’s no trouble, really.”

It’s a good lie: it’s not convenient. We live almost an hour away. Two and a half if you do it by bus and train. She smiles and squeezes my hand and I flush fluorescent, embarrassed that Dougie’s family see behind mine. That money and all the rest of it is just a nice veneer for a bunch of rotten, self-obsessed people.

I’m tossing and turning on the couch when Dougie taps me on the shoulder and shushes me. He has a torch and motions for me to get dressed into something warm. We go back out to the rumpus room and he opens up his dad’s booze cabinet. We sniff at the various bottles until we’ve got something we think we can both drink.

The sliding door out onto the patio squeals and we freeze, waiting for movement elsewhere in the house, but there is nothing. We set ourselves up side-by-side on an old couch—the Coke, glasses and the bourbon on the pavers at our feet. Dougie pulls a packet of Winnie Blues from his pocket and a box of matches.

“Dad bought them for me,” he says. “You do the honours.”

He passes them to me and I unwrap them as he pours out the bourbon and Coke. My hands shake when I pull the gold foil from the top to expose the ciggies, lined up like beige soldiers waiting to be incinerated. This world he and I inhabit is wrong: a world where his dad buys him smokes, where he won’t see his fourteenth birthday, graduate from high school, go to uni, get married or do any of the things that aren’t even meant to be thought about, much less be important, when you’re thirteen.

When I can’t get the ciggie lit he takes it from me and gets it going with one confident suck. And I think of when we stared each other down the length of a pitch, the way he hunched over the bat, the certainty he had. And how that seems a million years ago.

He passes me the ciggie and I suck too hard on it, double over coughing.

Dougie laughs at me. “Always going just that little bit too hard.”

I start crying and he takes the ciggie from me, grinds it out.

“You’re still the only one to have beaten me,” he says softly and wraps a blanket around both of us. I rest my head on his shoulder and pray the night will stay, and tomorrow will never come.

§

Dougie’s tired and ready to go, but he accepts the doctor’s slim promises of a last ditch effort to stop the rampant cancer devouring him. I wag school to sit with him in the hospital as spring moves too slowly. He asks me about softball and I tell him half-truths and lies, so he doesn’t know I’m not going any more. What’s the point? He talks about all the summers at Roadknight and I listen.

Just before he falls asleep—on the day school rings my parents to find out why I haven’t been there for a week—he murmurs about kissing me on New Years Eve, laughing sleepily that it set off fireworks. I know I’ll never be able to see fireworks and not think of how it felt to kiss him the first time.

The last time I see him, he’s at home and I spend the night, sometimes curled next to him on the bed, my hand on his chest feeling the weak rise and fall, other times in a chair beside the bed. And as the night darkens, I remember the other night I spent here, only this time there is no booze or ciggies or shared blanket and I know the night can’t last forever.

By morning he’s gone.

§

When we arrive at Point Roadknight after Christmas, a year of high school has changed everything; the cricket bats and stumps and meandering walks to the beach in the morning replaced by skateboards and surfboards and begging rides with older siblings to Main Beach. Sam and Charlie come over the first night we’re there to ask Laney and Lucy to La Bamba at the Scout Hall. They joke when the boys are gone they’re not going just to roll jaffas down the aisle. I want to remind Laney that Sam thumped her with a cricket ball last year and she swore she’d hate him forever. But what’s the point? No one remembers last year except for me.

The world without Dougie makes no sense. I see things too clearly now: Dad’s never home, Mum’s only interested in her charity work and Laney and Lucy—the pretty daughters, the popular girls, the ones who attend school, do as they’re told and sneak kisses with the right kinds of boys. Not boys who die in Altona. They are the perfect daughters, the Norris Twins, who don’t chop their hair off, dye it black and demand a room of their own. They don’t yell, “Fuck you all.” My family, so absorbed in themselves, don’t realise someone I loved died.

I thought my heart was broken before I got here, but the crash of the waves and the squabble of the seagulls, the laughter of kids splashing in the water and the rough touch of the sand drive deeper rifts into it.

The morning of New Year’s Eve Gibbo lands on my doorstep: a foot taller, wearing contact lenses, his voice breaking, recognisable only from the smattering of freckles across his nose and the same tattered Grade 5 exercise book in hand.

“We’re going down to play cricket,” he says and I see the black band around his arm. “For Dougie.”

We stand there, my hand gripping tight to the door. The impulse to slam it in his face is overwhelming until I look up and see my sadness reflected in his eyes.

“Everyone’s said yes, but no one knew how to come ask you.”

I think of all the entries from last summer in *The Book of Gibbo* and nod.

I gather up the remnants of the last three summers: the old blue cabbage hat and the almost empty pot of green zinc. The Star Wars t-shirt doesn’t fit any more so I pull out a brand new singlet and pull it over my swimmers, drag on a baggy pair of white jersey shorts. I don’t bother with thongs. It’s time my feet toughened up. Only sissies walk to the beach in thongs.

Gibbo takes a length of black material from his pocket and ties it on my arm.

The boys are clustered just off the boat ramp waiting for us, all with matching armbands. Kenny has the bat, Sam the wickets and Charlie is throwing a brand new tennis ball up and down. Roddy, Jimmy and Balls are standing looking up the expanse of sand, discussing how far we’ll have to go to have free reign without pissing off the sunbakers and families.

“Eh, Lori’s here!” Kenny calls out, and jabs the bat in my direction. “Still puttin’ Merv to shame?”

I shrug and the blush flares beneath my green warrior strips as Sam and Charlie nod hello, followed by the rest of the boys. I take a mental roll call: Danny’s not here and neither is Lano. Jimmy explains their families opted for somewhere else along the coast. This year there is no one to replace those that can’t play.

Charlie tosses the ball in the air and I snatch it up.

“First to a hundred then,” I say and set off down the beach squeezing the ball tight, the salt air and the smell of new cotton filling the hole in my chest.

*Jodi Cleghorn is an author, editor, publisher and occasional poet with a penchant for the dark vein of humanity. Her short fiction has been published in Australia and abroad. She is the author of *River of Bones*, an Australian gothic novella, *No Need To Reply*, a collection of flash fiction and co-author, with Adam Byatt, of the epistolary serial *Post Marked: Piper’s Reach*. Her stories “555” and “Nothing New To Begin” have appeared previously in *Tincture Journal*.*

Barn Burners, Fire Vans

by *Stephen Koster*

They talked about the wind.

The adults stood around, measuring the distance from the dark plume to us. Watching how high it was growing, how it was building. Listening to the chickens cluck in the pen beside the driveway, in the background, like a foreign hymn.

They looked at the cars, counting us, and the seats in the cars, double-counting. Looking at the house, the doors, the windows, the wood-paneled framing.

The group of four stayed where they were, staring into the tumultuous stream of black. If their gaze broke to talk to one another, they always returned to the fire, to make sure the smoke hadn't jumped a kilometre while they spoke.

As watching began to look like hesitation, our dads took off for the neighbour's property on foot. They would help do what they could, and our moms would stay with us.

What our moms talked about, was too quiet for me to hear, involving words that made no sense at the time. My mother was laughing less than usual. That big hysterical laugh—instantly recognisable in theatres, restaurants, swimming pools, and school gymnasiums—kept uncomfortably silent.

It was me, my two brothers, my sister, and the four sisters who lived on the farm. If we played games while we waited, the rules have faded. Maybe we just watched. If we did play, we stopped every few minutes to see if the smoke was getting closer. If the smoke really was getting closer, it was hard to tell. The smoke certainly wasn't getting smaller.

Our moms looked to the south, then back to the smoke, then to the east, then back to the smoke. I thought about licking my finger to get the wind direction, but I had no grasp of the theory behind wind direction and wet fingers. I'd done it before. The saliva on my finger had cooled as the wind hit, but didn't tell me anything beyond the presence of air on skin.

The dense clouds of ash seemed to blow to the left of us. The smoke at the tip of the column headed that way.

This observation led, again, not to the wind's direction, but to the realisation that our dads had been gone a long time.

The fire had sucked the sound out of the air. Everything seemed quiet, other than the roaring of a thousand campfires. Even the chickens clucked quietly.

Our moms were more stationary than us, standing and watching, their hands shielding their eyes while looking into the base of the fire.

Time slid by like the turn of a gear. It felt like hours we looked at smoke and smelt smoke and breathed smoke. The more I waited the more I wanted to be there, carrying water, saying things like: "Go!" or "Go quickly!" and "Over here!" and then, "Save those horses!" or maybe "Get that water over here *now!*"

Someone pointed at returning shapes.

We saw four dusty silhouettes walk the gravel road towards us. The two farm dogs ran out while we stayed behind the safety of a dry wooden fence. Our dads walked with stiff knees and short steps. The two men with them were neighbours. They blinked in the sun. The dogs seemed to sense the work the men had been through and dialed back on the barking. They looked battle-weary. Feudal knights returning from crusade.

Our mouths clamped shut for once. The four daughters weren't giggling, as they usually did. They were watching their father, admiring his dusty, sinewy arms, probably using the experience to put expectations on future boyfriends.

The smoke was dying, but still rose in the sky, a reminder it had not gone away. To not forget. To know it would be back. Someday. Like the villain in a bad movie yelling after the hero before shooting away in an escape pod.

We went inside and our dads drank water. They gulped and asked for more.

Someone asked if the fire was out, given the black smoke still curling away, visible in the window.

They said there hadn't been much to do, there were too many hands when nothing could be done. They talked like they'd just left the Viking boat at an amusement park. The one that rocks you from side to side, and makes your gut lurch and twist, and gives you the feeling of falling.

They said the firemen had arrived a few minutes ago and after that there hadn't been much to do. The barn had already burnt down.

§

I am twenty-three. Driving to pick up my brother for a concert.

I pass the mall (which is a strip mall), the church (with a stark white Jesus statue out front), the elementary school (with its own speed limit, which could just read: Please Don't Run Over The Children), and approach an intersection. I drive past my dentist's building, reminding myself about fillings.

I need fillings because my teeth are falling out. I'm not convinced of this, but that's what my dentist would have me believe.

I stop at the lights, in front of the building. The dentist probably senses me near, sensing my cavities, like Vader staring out the window of his Star Destroyer in *Empire*.

Join me, my dentist says, telepathically, And we'll fix those cavities of yours.

How often have you been flossing?

Damn, he's good.

On the other side of the lights, facing me, totally oblivious to my need for fillings, is a van, one of those Volkswagen hippy vans, turning black.

Black smoke billows from the inside and under the hood. Fire fights its way out the open windows, teething its way over the roof, like footage from the Iraq War. I look around for wounded Iraqis, but there's nothing, no one with handkerchiefs covering faces, no one lobbing Molotov cocktails. No bystanders of any race or religion.

I check to see whether the traffic lights work—the intersecting road has the green. No one rushes to put out the fire, no emergency response careening into the square with sirens wailing. The van stands empty—though the moment I start to look through its windows, I expect something to look back. A bleeding, charred face—an innocent girl, no more than seventeen—screaming at me. Digging through the windshield with her fingernails. I’ve heard a story about people trapped in burning vehicles, of having doors fused shut, unable to escape, and think it might be happening to me. There’d be blood. Boiling on the windshield.

I’d see how big the fire is and feel it burning my skin across the street, the most heat I’d ever felt—then my body would scream to get away, to run a marathon in the other direction. I’d ignore that cowardly sentiment, running, sprinting across the intersection, my car left idling, its exhaust trying to emulate the bigger, more commanding smoke from the van, while my arms pump fast, and reaching the van, pulling the door, kicking its side, my kick would cause seething metal to explode and my body to open up like stepping on a landmine.

My light turns green and I press the gas. I roll up my window, not wanting to inhale whatever comes spewing out of the van’s hood in endless grey waves.

The van passes into my driver’s side mirror—definitely closer than it appears. Waiting patiently for the lights to turn so it can make a left, the van seems only slightly inconvenienced by its tires, fused to the asphalt in molten rubber puddles.

With no Molotovs, there are also no fire trucks. But I know there will be. People have cellphones. Someone will call.

People are responsible like that.

§

We stop directly overtop the place the van stood twenty minutes before. If the van were set on fire by an alien death ray, for example, our car would be next.

“It was right here,” I say. “This is crazy.”

“That *is* crazy,” says my brother.

He is a good brother. He believes me. There’s nothing to prove my story, but he believes me.

“Wait, there’s something,” I say, pointing to the pavement.

There’s a faint black outline of a rectangular shape, the size of the van, right at the edge of the intersection. It’s the same shade as charcoal in the base of a campfire.

“Wow, that’s it, that’s all that’s left,” I say, because I don’t have anything to show my brother other than a stencil. “They were really quick.”

“That’s weird,” he says.

I want him to understand the gravitas. To grasp the image of a car fire raging in the middle of a first-world street. How out of place it was. How wrong it seemed, for a car fire to even be allowed where North American children walk to school and have their own special speed limit. Beside a dentist’s office. How I’d given up a chance to be there, to do something, to prevent something, to let out the smoke. To drape a blanket over the van owner’s shoulders, to let him or

her know there'd be other vans, that this was a fluke, an act against nature. An anomaly.

But my brother didn't see the fire. He believes me, but didn't see the fire himself, so it's hard to understand. There's evidence of a fire, but it lacks presence. Presentation. Some things need to be seen.

We drive to our concert. The first image of the burning van stains my subconscious, its yellow body leaking forth a constant storm of puky ash. It's not constant distraction, but keeps me unfocused, reflecting in a spider's web of synapses, possessing my conscience like a militarised Hollywood premier, forcing its distorted film onto the projector, an image of fire and all-consuming matter.

My parents never told me what caused the barn fire when I was nine. Without cause or justification it always seemed the fire had sprung from nothing. It never came from anything viable, anything real.

I'm a magnet for burnt-down unused humanity. There's a fire that devours useless, expired things and it sniffs me out, where I'm hiding, dares me to do something. This fire wants me to gather others, to try to extinguish it, with shovels, kicking dirt, or passing buckets down a line, only to have firemen arrive and tell us nothing can be done. The fires of the day that should happen at night. The night when things burn down and people rush around dialing numbers, standing at their curb and watching their lives burn down. Lives don't burn in the day, while other things grow, live. That's not how it's supposed to go. When houses burn in daylight, nothing feels safe, like everything is chaos.

We park at the venue and check our tickets at the front entrance, finding a spot to stand inside—people on the upper floors yell and talk with drunken slurs—and people in the front rows sit—sweaty, hot, lounging in the pre-show music. The tubes for the end-show pyrotechnics stand long, metallic, black.

Such unimaginable hubris. Even fire is controlled, utilized for entertainment.

The first discernible thought of mankind—fire is a tool.

A slave.

There are pyro technicians—people trained to control fire, somewhere behind the black curtains, in the wings of the stage. These places for bear-baiting.

The roof of the venue goes high, like a barn's roof.

We behold our slave: long, elegant, hypnotic, feeding, dying—dancing, the great Promethean whore, burning steak or overtaking a Californian forest, for whom the god's liver is pecked out and regrown daily, to shoot its descendant from tubes or watch a barn burn down. And we, the audience, applaud.

Stephen Koster is an abominable snowman. He spends his days eating Sherpas and developing an advanced system of hand communication. His greatest fear is the little fuzzy things that get stuck between your toes when you wear socks. You can follow his work on Facebook:

<http://facebook.com/stephenkosterwriter>. Stephen's story "The Interesting People of Mount Kilimanjaro" appeared in Issue Six of Tincture Journal.

inevitability

by Ashley Capes

new frost ices the fields

and my footprints crunch

and my breath

ghosts

at the fence post

there's so much of empty beyond

even the grass

must be wondering

what happened

where did everyone go?

and there's no answer

beyond the inevitability

of decay

which has long crept up

on us

right down

to the laces of our boots

and the fraying of sincerity

and as I leave

the car becomes a bull

and chews on the road

black bits

getting

stuck between its teeth.

Synopsis

With “inevitability” I glanced into the paddock next door and was reminded of just how “internal” my vision had grown of late. I'd forgotten my surroundings, to which I was once so attuned. I felt that perhaps I'd cheated them of a voice. I wrote “inevitability” in response to that moment.

Ashley Capes is a poet, novelist and teacher from Victoria. He is a big Studio Ghibli fan and loves the brevity of haiku. Ashley's poem “temple” appeared in Issue Five of Tincture Journal.

Simmering

by *Katelin Farnsworth*

Ducks at dawn. Thick blue rain. A lake that shimmers, gleams under the milky moon, spills itself out onto everything. Whispers through the air, ripples of water touching the duck's back, water sliding, colliding, rustling feathers, a cool white body shifting. Glints of sunlight, a shaft opening, pink and red melting and merging, a cloud opening, peeling, ready for the day—the day lunges forward, the moon slips, the ducks stir, tap their beaks along the water's surface—reflections sparkle, push up onto one another, wings flap, flap, move, eyes drop, blink—a bee in the air. The air is warm, sugary, blossoms, pine cones—summer on its way—Christmas is coming, ice-cream and prawns on the beach, hot and sticky, white bodies burning, brown bodies rubbing, suntan skidding, champers and beer, laughter, laughter, sounds rolling across the sand. The ducks move, snap their heads back and forwards, dip down into the water—bop up again—swallow something. Light fades, hides behind a tree. Ducks swim away.

Katelin Farnsworth is currently studying Professional Writing & Editing in Melbourne. She has been writing ever since she could lift a pen. She has been published in Spineless Wonders, Voiceworks, Ink Sweat & Tears, and was shortlisted in the Rachel Funari prize for fiction 2014. She dreams of endless libraries.

On the skin

by *Rebecca Howden*

It's like lingerie, Max always says. You don't find something that makes you feel a million dollars at Kmart. You want real silk, a garment fitted perfectly to your body, something that feels cool and sensual against your skin. Choosing a fragrance is the same, she says. You should be treated well; you should feel like this thing, this piece of *art*, has been made just for you. These perfumes, all bottled up in brown glass, winking quietly from the shelves, they should make you feel like the best part of yourself.

I tell people this when they drop in to look at all the pretty little bottles, wistful smiles on their faces. All these fragrances, I tell them, they're all made by Max herself, just in the next room. She sits there at a big mahogany table, surrounded by beakers and droppers and canisters of natural essences, her skinny brown shoulders hunched over. She hates the idea of working in a lab. "How can I create something beautiful when I'm surrounded by stainless steel and lab coats?" she says. So she fills the shop with sumptuous silks and vintage furniture, her own slightly mad idea of an ancient French distillery, but with a dash of 1930s art deco and a bit of the Orient thrown in. There's a zebra print on the wall, a bespoke crystal chandelier dangling from the ceiling, and everything about it is Max.

Mostly I'm here to smile prettily and update the website and package up orders to be shipped. I sit at the counter drinking tea from a Japanese teacup, or sometimes I'll walk around and dust the shelves. This afternoon has been quiet. The sky has been funereal all day, leaking with late-Autumn gloom; it's not the sort of day for window-shopping. Afternoons like this, Max has me studying from her library of reference materials, learning to be more useful, scouring through encyclopaedias of perfumery and how-to guides for identifying different scents. You have to know this stuff, she says. Scent is something intimate, something that's on your skin when you've got nothing else there, that you share with your lover. So you need to get to know the customer, figure out what they really want when they're not sure themselves.

It's Thursday night. Outside it's starting to get dark, the threat of winter whispering in the 5 pm air. I lock the front door with a satisfying click and wander back to my seat behind the counter, where I slump forwards and rest my head in my arms. Grenouille is slinking around on the counter, purring languorously. He brushes his body against my face and I breathe in the smoky scent of his fur. I grab hold of him and pull him in close to my chest.

"Beautiful boy," I whisper into his fur. I get up and pace around, cradling the cat against me like a baby, feeling his breathing against my ribs, until he wriggles in my arms and I let him leap weightlessly to the floor. I brush the wisps of charcoal hair from my dress.

§

To start with, when you're helping someone choose a fragrance, you might say, "What's your favourite scented flower?" You might offer them a few scents to smell, then watch for the visual tells—if their eyes close, if their head tilts back. Then you can start to figure them out, show them something they didn't know they were looking for. If they like sweet scents, then something like cherry and vanilla almonds could be a good place to start. Or you could take them somewhere different; try a hint of clove spice, or a light rush of lemon iced tea.

Sometimes I still think about Josh, and I think about what scent I would have picked out for him if I'd known this stuff back then. I know I'm not supposed to dwell on thoughts like that, that if I find my mind wandering through that door I should steer it back kindly, one arm around its shoulder like it's a crumbly old lady I've been charged with

protecting. But I think of Josh, and I think of his long, warm body. The delicate outlines of his ribs, his espresso eyes. I think I'd pick a woody, cedary fragrance, one that opens with a fresh chord and warms into dry, spicy pepper. I think of Josh, and I can feel the scratch of his unshaven cheek on my skin, his rough fingernails on my back. I can feel his heart beating through his shirt, and I hate him, I really do.

§

My phone chimes and I feel my insides shrivel up a little; I know it's Steve, of course it's Steve. He's so sorry, he says, he wanted to come and pick me up from my place but he's going to be caught up at work for a while, so can I just meet him outside the Arts Centre at 8? The tickets are under his name.

I sit down and Grenouille rubs against my legs, mewing up at me. I slip one stockinged foot out of its court shoe and stroke his undulating back, aching for his happy growling. I tap my nails against the desk. There's really no way out of this now. I've left it too late to cancel with any credibility, and I've run out of excuses with Steve anyway. He's taking me to the ballet tonight. The *ballet*, of all things. I don't know when it became cool to pretend to like that kind of stuff, but it's just like him, jumping at the chance to go to the opera or the symphony or whatever like we're in *Gossip Girl* or something.

The ballet though, I guess it's kind of my fault, all because I told him once that I used to dance back in high school. Like, a million years ago. I quit by the time I was sixteen, when I decided I'd be an *artist* instead. I swapped crossovers and leg warmers for shirtsleeves covered in charcoal, *The Nutcracker* for *Nevermind* on an endless loop on my CD player. Basically, it's not even something I think about anymore. It's all just a blush-coloured blur, but in a moment of sleepy vulnerability one night, too many glasses of champagne making me loll my head against his shoulder, I found myself thinking about pliés and arabesques and pas de chats. So I told him about the pain of crushing your toes into pointe shoes, the way Miss Katja would pinch the layer of flesh on our bellies and ask us what we'd been eating, the way it sometimes felt like every muscle and fibre in my body was screeching out in individual despair. The sound of Tchaikovsky can kind of drive you insane.

I told him all that, but I guess he heard some kind of nostalgia in my voice. Maybe I made it sound like a Degas painting—lithe girls stretching at the barre, frothy skirts hanging low on their hips. I should have known he'd just hear the word *ballet* and file it away, cataloguing it under Potential Date Ideas. What he doesn't get is it was never about *liking* ballet, about feeling some kind of oneness with the music, feeling something magical when I moved. It was just about being the best, about working hard to be the skinniest, the strongest, to move like I was the most weightless. That's all it was, until one day I just stopped caring.

Anyway. It's not like I love perfume either, not the way Max does. I don't feel beautiful butterflies in my belly when I think of an amazing scent; it doesn't conjure rainforests and wildflowers in my mind. But maybe it could. Maybe this really could be my thing.

There has to be something else on tonight, something I've forgotten about. I log on to Facebook and click on Events. There is an exhibition opening that I'd said I might attend, without actually having any intention of it. 6 to 9 at some artist-run gallery in Flinders Lane. Not enough to skip the ballet for, but maybe I should stop by first anyway, get a bit drunk before I go meet Steve. I hardly know the girl who invited me, an RMIT silversmithing student with wide-set, rabbit-like eyes and a habit of saying, "I know, right?" But she's nice enough, and her jewellery and flatware and *objets d'art* are quite pretty, if you're into that sort of thing. Besides, the guest list is peppered with people I used to know, people I should maybe try to make an effort with. You need to reach out, Max always says. You can't be disappointed

with people when you don't make it clear what you need.

It's just past 5.30 now; I could go straight out from here. I'm already in a black shift dress. The girls will all be wearing black shift dresses. They will all be ruby-lipped and dark haired, throaty from their cigarettes. Maybe if I get tipsy enough I'll be nice and mellow by the time I see Steve, and I can just sit and nod along without caring too much about how annoying he is.

My heels sound like a metronome on the hardwood floor as I walk into the next room. Max is hunched over the table, surrounded by black tin canisters and plastic packets, scribbling in a notebook.

"Max," I say. "Can I use your makeup?"

She looks up, grins at me.

"Hot date?" she says, leaning back and stretching her long, thin arms over her head. I shake my head and slouch down into the seat next to her.

"Incredibly boring date," I say.

"Steve again?"

I nod and roll my eyes.

"Say you're sick then," she says. I drop my head against her shoulder and she strokes my hair, twirling the pale lengths in her fingers. "Stay and have dinner with us. John's making some kind of delicious noodle thing."

It's tempting. I close my eyes and breathe in the scent of her skin, her signature oriental resin blend of spiced oranges, incense and earthy woods. If I stayed, I could take off my heels and wash off my makeup, and we would sit and eat at their glassed-topped dining table, the news on low in the background. Max always lights candles for dinner; I can smell the vanilla musk, blended with the scent of red wine. Then maybe we'd watch a movie, John and Max curled up on the couch, me with a big cushion on the floor, Grenouille purring and muttering in my lap. I sigh and sit up straight, stretching out my spine.

"No, I've cancelled too many times," I say. "I'd better just go. We're going to the *ballet*."

Max shrugs, gives an impish smile.

"Well, it won't be *that* bad, will it," she says. She tilts her head towards the stairs. "Go on, make yourself beautiful. Use whatever you want."

§

It was almost a year ago now that I met Max and she decided I would be her protégé. We met through my mum, of all people. Not long after Josh, my parents had a big party for their thirtieth wedding anniversary. I was back living with them, and I guess they had told everyone how much I was floundering, how I spent my days limp under my doona watching Nirvana documentaries, how I couldn't get myself together to find a job or figure out what to wear. But that night for the party I had somehow shoved myself into a crinkly gold dress and dragged myself down the stairs. I was getting quietly drunk on Veuve Clicquot, bedraggled next to my beautiful, tall sister, but I smiled sweetly like a respectable daughter, assuring everyone that I was doing fine, *really* well actually, that I'd just been a little set back by a breakup, but

I'd sort out what to do with myself soon. I drank and drank, and I did my best to ignore the nest of vipers thrashing in my head.

And then there was Max. A strange, exotic creature, with the liquid grace of the very thin. She was effortlessly cool, draped in dark blue silk, her copper-coloured limbs encircled with gold. Her hair was shaved close to her scalp; she had one of those faces that was peculiar and beautiful enough to pull it off, to make you wonder why anyone would ever want to grow their hair long. She and my mum had been colleagues in another lifetime, before she turned thirty and decided to throw it all to the wind and make her perfumes instead. I try to picture her now as a lawyer, in an office, in a Prada skirt suit. She wrote her resignation letter on the night of her thirtieth birthday, drunk on fancy tequila and her own recklessness.

She smiled at me, and there was something in her dark eyes that just felt different to the way anyone else in that room had looked at me. Curiosity, I guess it was, instead of pity.

"You must be Faith," she said, taking my hand, and without warning I felt the hot threat of tears pooling in my eyes. Max put down her drink and led me over to a quiet corner.

"So," she said, giving me a small pearly smile. "Tell me about it."

So I told her about Josh, about Sarah, about all of it. I told her how I'd wake up exhausted, how it felt like there was something tightening around my ribcage, getting tighter every time I exhaled, how I felt nauseated all the time and I didn't know if it would ever stop. She let me talk and talk, her chin resting on her fist.

"Okay," she said, passing me a napkin to wipe my eyes. "Okay. Well, let's see what we can do about some of this."

And within a few weeks I had this job in her shop and a room to rent in an OK share house and a semi grown-up haircut. I was still a weepy maniac, but I looked a bit more human, and after a few more months like that—days at the beautiful little shop, drinking tea and furiously studying under Max's bossy instructions, nights upstairs with Max and John, laughing and sobbing over a bottle of pinot noir—I almost started to feel like it as well.

§

Grenouille follows me up the stairs to Max and John's apartment, curling against my heels. John's already up there, chopping up his spring onions. I like John. I like his deep jazz club scent, a smoky floral that lingers with cloves and Turkish rose. I like his salt-and-pepper hair, the way he doesn't seem to mind too much that I'm always hanging around. Something about him always makes me imagine him as Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*, dancing around with a broom and singing *Chim Chim Cher-ee*.

"Staying for dinner again Faith?" John asks. "I'm making noodles."

"No, I'm just borrowing a few things from Max," I say. He blows me a kiss and I smile.

Max keeps her cosmetics in gleaming jars, all lined up on the vanity like a shop display. I squeeze a few drops of rosehip oil onto my fingertips and rub it slowly into my face. I want to look witchy, I think, complicated. I pick out some smoky, moody colours and I darken my eyebrows, darken my lashes, darken my lips. I soothe the ends of my hair with sweet almond oil, spray some dry shampoo into the roots and twist it back into a loose ponytail at the nape of my neck. From my handbag, I pull out a bottle of my special scent, the one Max made up for me. It's delicious, a zesty blend of amber, resin and sandalwood. "Doesn't it just *sparkle*?" Max said. "Can you feel how uplifting it is?" I spray it onto my

throat, my wrists, lightly through my hair. I want so much for it to be who I am.

I need an excuse for later, for when Steve asks me back to stay at his place after the ballet. “I have a headache,” I practice saying with a wince. “I’m just really tired.” Last time, I said I had my period, and he acted all wounded that I was suggesting he just wanted to sleep with me. He said I should come and stay the night anyway, that we could just *cuddle*. I couldn’t think of any way out of it so I spent the whole night lying awake, curled away from him in his crisp white sheets, his arms heavy around my rigid body. “I promised I’d be home in the morning to feed my housemate’s dog,” I say to the mirror, lifting my arms up like into fifth position and stretching my back tall. “The place is such a mess, I couldn’t let you come in and see it. Next time, I promise.”

Max’s wardrobe doors are slightly ajar behind me. I can’t help myself; I reach in and run my hands over the cool silks, all opulent colours like garnet and topaz and turquoise. For a second I imagine myself as slim and sleek as her, a ream of black crepe de chine slung over one shoulder. I pull a long chiffon scarf from a hook and wrap it around my neck. As I twirl around, it floats like a ghost in the air behind me.

§

It’s cold, and the gallery is further down Flinders Lane than I really expected. My heels slip a little on the cobbled street. Inside, though, it’s hot and loud. A waiter offers me a glass of champagne from a tray and I take it gratefully, looking around the cramped room. I see Ellen, the rabbit-eyed silversmith. I try to catch her eye and give her a wave, but I don’t think she sees or recognises me. She’s busy, anyway, surrounded by a group of people all in black. I drink my champagne and check my reflection again in my compact mirror.

Someone brushes past me. It’s Gemma, looking slinky and prowly in her black silk shift, her GHD-straight hair glinting in the light. I touch her arm.

“Gemma, hi.”

“Oh my God, Faith!” she says. She kisses me on both cheeks, the long strings of pearls around her neck rattling together as she moves. We exchange it’s-so-great-to-see-yous and oh-my-God-I-love-your-dresses and we both laugh for no reason. There’s an awkward, smiley silence.

“So what have you been doing?” she asks, tilting her head. “I don’t think I’ve even seen you properly in like a year.”

I let a passing waiter refill my glass, and I tell her about the shop, about Max, about how much I’m learning.

“Oh God, I could never go back to working in retail,” she says, grimacing in a way I’m sure she imagines is sympathetic. She’s had her job answering phones at the Heide Museum for like a week.

“Well it’s not just like retail,” I say, but she’s already glancing around over the top of my head. I hate her. She’s wearing some awful synthetic scent, a celebrity fragrance probably. I could tell her that if you like florals, you can get something much more enticing with the real botanical essences, something more natural and sophisticated. An orange citrus, maybe, one that explodes into a sparkling bouquet of pure white flower blossoms. She turns back to focus on me, her eyes suddenly soft and concerned.

“But how *are* you?” she says, placing her warm hand on my upper arm. “Are you doing OK?”

“I’m fabulous,” I say. She smiles at me kindly.

“Good,” she says. “That’s really good to hear.”

There’s no air in here. I drink my champagne and I mentally compile a list of all the mean things Gemma has ever done to me. The time she said she’d assumed I must have been Greek or Italian because of my nose, the time she invited me to her birthday party as Josh’s plus-one, even though she only met him through me, the way she always dismisses everything I say and interrupts to say, “But are you *creating* anything at the moment?”

I’m just about to tell Gemma I’m going to go find the bathroom when a thin, suit-covered arm curls around my waist and pulls me away from her.

“Just the dirty mistress I was hoping to see,” Toby says with a wicked grin.

I reach up to hug him. Over his shoulder I see Gemma taking advantage of the diversion to slip away into the crowd.

“So how’s tricks, missy?” he says, steering me towards the bar. He’s looking dapper, in a charcoal suit with a bow tie the colour of celery. His tawny, silky hair flops over his left eye and he beams at me.

“Good,” I say. He takes two full flutes of champagne from the bar and hands one to me. He gestures cheers, then tips back his glass to drink most of it in one go. I do the same. I’m glad he’s here. Josh always thought Toby was a bad influence on me, bringing out my bitchy and superficial side, encouraging me to make bad choices so he’d have something to gossip about, always letting me down, which is all true, I guess. Sometimes I hate him, but there’s some part of me that longs for his affection, that trusts him even when he’s horrible to me.

“I’ve been hearing some wonderful rumours about you,” he says, grinning.

“Well,” I say. “Not everything you hear is true.”

“Did you fuck Alex at Lily’s party down in Sorrento?”

I pause. It really is unbearably hot in here.

“Who said that?”

“Alex, Lily. Everyone,” he says. He smiles, all cat-canary like. “Lily wants your blood.”

“Well, that’s not what happened,” I say.

“What did happen then?” His eyes are like Grenouille’s, slow-blinking firefly eyes. He’s enjoying this way too much.

“Lily’s not coming tonight, is she?” I say, thinking back to the guest list.

“You’d better hope not.”

He turns and grabs two more full champagne flutes. I take one from him and glance around the room, running my fingers along the length of Max’s scarf. For a second it flickers in my mind. Skin bare, my hair damp at my shoulders, me saying, *Alex, you have a girlfriend*, but not really caring. Alex knowing I didn’t care and saying *It doesn’t matter*. His mouth on my collarbone, me taking off my top and letting him push me back onto the bed, because why the hell not.

Then the screen in my head goes too white and the picture fizzles out. I drink some more champagne.

“Whatever,” I say.

“Michael says you freaked out and did some Sylvia Plath thing in the bathroom.”

I close my eyes.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I tell him. “Sylvia Plath stuck her head in the oven.”

“Well whatever,” he says. “I’m not judging you, you know that.”

He’s practically licking his lips, hungry for any sliver I can give him. Like if I told him about the sudden blackness that seemed to pour into me it would be a great story, as if the smudgy flower-patterns of blood on the bathroom floor would be a nice flourish he could add. Red flowers on creamy tiles, the splintering Absolut bottle, the way I felt like I might drown inside myself.

“I saw Josh the other week,” he says, trying one more time. “With Sarah, obviously.”

“Toby, I need some air,” I say.

§

It’s 8.20 by the time I get to Hamer Hall. The curve of the building is lit up with purple lights, bright against the bruised navy sky. Steve’s there waiting out the front, pacing back and forth, back and forth, like a leopard at the zoo. He’s in a nice suit. He looks good; he always looks good. He’d make a perfect date for some other girl. He smiles when he sees me clattering towards him.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I say, a bit out of breath, and he just smiles and says it’s fine. He kisses me slowly and I let him for a bit. To my right, the river blinks and shivers with the confetti of city lights.

“Okay, well, let’s go in I guess?” I say, wriggling out of his arms.

We walk through the big glass doors. The deep persimmon-coloured carpet feels spongy beneath my heels. Steve is talking, saying something about how he’s so sorry he couldn’t come pick me up.

“This deal came through at the last minute, we’ve been working on it for weeks,” he’s saying. I nod and smile and his voice feels muted, far away, like a waterfall.

“I haven’t been here since they re-did this place,” I say.

An usher shows us to our seats and I settle into the soft shell of the chair, Max’s silk scarf pooling in my lap. Steve holds my hand and I let him, and after a while I can’t even feel it.

The swell of the music starts and I think about how I’ll tell Max about all this later. Maybe if the ballet doesn’t go too late I can call her and see if she’ll come and pick me up. I watch the ballerinas, tall wisps of girls in their delicate tutus. They are iridescent creatures, light as they pirouette and glissade and grande jeté. Maybe we could stop by a nice wine bar on the way home, or maybe we’ll just sit up in the living room, a bottle of gin in between us on the gleaming glass table.

It's John who answers when I call Max.

"Faith," he says quietly. "It's late. We were going to bed."

There's something in his voice, it's like I can see him standing there, sleepy and disgruntled in his t-shirt and boxers. I guess it is past eleven. Suddenly I feel kind of bad. But I want to talk to Max.

"I'm sorry," I say truthfully, and I hear him take a breath. My feet are aching in these stupid heels. Before John can say anything Max grabs the phone.

"What's up babe?" she says. "Are you OK?" I can hear John's voice, small and muffled in the background. Max puts her hand over the mouthpiece and says something to him.

"Sorry," she says to me. "What is it? Do you want me to come and get you?"

Inside Max's apartment, it's dark. John has the bedroom door closed, and Grenouille is prowling around the living room. Max flips on the lights and pours me a gin and tonic. I sit down at the table, slipping my shoes off, and I drink quietly. She yawns.

"So how was the ballet, anyway?" she says, folding her body into the chair across from me at the table.

"I just feel like this isn't my real life," I tell her. "It's like I woke up and I don't know where I am."

She exhales loudly, then smiles her wry, beautiful smile.

"I guess we're in for a long night then," she says, and she pours me another drink.

Rebecca Howden is a Melbourne-based writer and editor who is currently preoccupied with themes of love, madness, femininity and beauty. Her fiction and essays have appeared in publications including The Sleepers Almanac, Kill Your Darlings, Crikey and others. Some of her work can be seen at rebeccahowden.com.au. Rebecca's story "Transference" appeared in Issue Seven of Tincture Journal.

Bringing Experimental Text to the Mainstream: Kirsten Krauth's *just_a_girl*

by Julie Proudfoot

Kirsten Krauth's novel, *just_a_girl* (JAG) has been tagged as a curious blend of classic *Lolita* and modern-day *Puberty Blues* transported into the techno age of sexy videos, chat rooms, texting, and Twitter.

Krauth's fourteen-year-old Layla stands out as the hooking character as she engages with the male gaze in all its various hosts: sexist and smug boyfriends; a sleazy groping shopkeeper; an absent gay father; a priest carrying the onerous attributes of infidelity and paedophilia; and a trolling chat-room groomer. The chapters alternate between the perspective of Layla and two other main characters: Margo, Layla's lonely depressive mother, and Tadashi, an also lonely and searching man who romances a sex doll.

But for all the interest and intrigue in this complex and confronting story, it is perhaps the structure and text of the novel, in the context of the Australian publishing industry, that is of most interest.

This is not to say that anything Krauth has introduced in JAG is unique or ground-breaking. None of it is new. But what Krauth has done is throw a Santa's bag of alternative devices and text, funnelled them all into a debut novel, and, as an *Australian* author, managed to pave a path for it into mainstream publishing.

We see work like this published frequently; JAG is far from the first book to take on alternative devices. To name just a few: *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Raw Shark Texts*, *Jpod* and *The Tenth Circle*. There are many more, but none from debut Australian authors.

Smaller Australian publishers and journals often take on experimental works. Spineless Wonders recently produced *brb*, a verse novel written in the language of chat rooms. Sleepers Publishing runs experimental work in their journal *The Sleepers Almanac*, and Seizure Online contributes a whole section devoted to alternative text. But it's rare to find Australian alternative-text work like JAG in the long form of a debut novel produced in Australia.

JAG is a complex work; perhaps the reason for its success is inherent in this complexity. It speaks to readers on many levels while maintaining an accessible and simple prose style.

§

JAG's three perspective characters are sectioned into their own narratives across the novel. The individualisation of these characters gives the novel a filmic quality in which the reader stays with each character's story for short bursts of time. Krauth's experience as a film writer might be what informs this style, which mirrors the modern reader's habit of consuming short visual and audio sound bits.

The three characters each have their signature texts: Margo, single since her husband left her after coming out as a gay man, suffers depression and seeks support from an evangelical church and its pastor. She's introverted and inward-looking in her outward search for love and reason. Margot's introversive stream-of-consciousness text is a diary-like dialogue, presented only in italics. It suits her perfectly:

I pray the lord is proud of me because it's my first time in nine years without anti-

depressants, and I know I can do it, I'm doing a self-help workshop with Pastor Bevan at Riverlay, and it's the right time to attempt it because I don't have any stress right now, you know, it's school holidays and my clients are a bit on the quiet side, and it's a new year and all, can't believe we've arrived here already, 2008, and I'm trying to stay focused and keep up with how my mind works and use the Power of Now...

All of Margot's chapters are in italics. And as the reader goes deeper into the book, italics come to signify Margot. Margot is italics.

Layla's character has been given jolting, incomplete sentences, the uncertain speak of a teenager—the kind of writing that would make an editor's head spin:

Mum told me never to trust a man. Who doesn't look you in the eye. So you can't win with her:

Cam actually kneeled by the bed the first time they pashed in her room. As if she was some kind of sacred object. That he was afraid to dirty with his hands.

She's always whinging about money. About being a single mum. And praying loudly for more work. She said the only good thing about the divorce. Was that dad paid off the house.

Layla is perhaps the Author's favourite—as a reader you feel Krauth is more in touch with her than the other characters—and Layla has been given many alternative devices that are used to provide a rounded multi-dimensional characterisation. She likes to list things, as if indicating her claim to space in the book—*stop here, look at me*—like a needy teenager:

So I know to avoid her after that. Before she starts to cry and tell stories about her Mum, Violet:

- *How she used to make her do a paper round to help pay the bills*
- *How she used to bang doors and cupboards in fits or rage so that mum had to hide*
- *How she can't remember ever being cuddled or being told I love you*

And Layla is the funnel through which Krauth appeals to the reader via popular culture in the form of technology. She records a YouTube video for Pastor Bevan:

*I decide to make him a special treat. Fuckadoodle, just the thought of him watching it [...]
I'd love to see Mr C's face. When he unzips his laptop and opens up his browser.*

Then texts her mother:

All good @ Grannies

C u sun night

can u pick me up from statn?

Layla picks up youami33 in a chat room and we are privy to part of their conversation:

youami33: *Does your mum know that you come into my bedroom every night?*

just_a_girl: *she's at church now...I had to talk her out of getting a baby sitter i think I must be adopted :-)* ...

youami33: *...Somehow I doubt that. No, seriously, being a virgin when you are heading towards 30 is not a good look.*

just_a_girl: *mmm well obviously I wouldn't know would I LOL...*

just_a_girl: *btw coming up to newc in couple of weeks perhaps we could hook up r u in town*

The use of chat-room speak gives the reader the sense that this is real. Speaking on a panel at the Sydney Writers' Festival this year, Krauth recalled that she staged a chat-room discussion with a fellow author and used the transcript almost word for word.

As Krauth allows us to see more of Layla's relationship with Pastor Bevan we learn that Layla follows him on twitter:

—3pm: Devistated/hopin/prayin for @Henderson family. Chelsea & I always here 4 u

—11pm: congrats to yet another Riverlay member for getting 2 finals of idol. Go Hannah!

It's an eclectic collection of tech-speak that Krauth has given Layla, a language that many readers are comfortable with and engage with in everyday reading. This technique may, by default, reach out to an audience who would not normally engage with a literary text such as JAG.

§

Tadashi, an almost third-wheel character in his separateness, has been given a slower more contemplative almost dreamlike and poetic third person text.

His head surfaced through the angelic flaps of arms and legs in the water. He swam to the edge of the pool, resting. Around him, the bodies shifted, distorted, Baconesque slivers through soft-hued light. He framed thigh, nipple, gentle curls, the groove of a lower back. A tattoo.

The use of this third person poetic style against the other two characters is a clever tool; it calms the jolting first person text of Layla, and the self-absorbed, inward first person Margot; it lets the reader breathe. This may just be the essential glue that keeps this book cohesive, continuous and whole. Tadashi holds a tenuous thread with the main theme; his ache for human contact runs parallel with both Margot's and Layla's reaching out for connection, and it's perhaps Tadashi's most defining characteristic; his search for—and love of—his sex doll (that looks somewhat like Layla who he has watched on the train) ensures this is what defines him, and keeps his connection with the Layla and Margo characters.

The blend of experimental text in JAG is, with credit to Krauth, so smooth you almost don't notice the complete absence of quotation marks or the incomplete sentences of Layla, although readers have said it has taken them a couple of chapters before they are comfortable with the butchered sentences, albeit a butcher with a studied knowledge of the

primal cuts of the beast.

As well as the filmic quality and the pop culture references and tech-speak, JAG also speaks to the reader through its use of intertextuality. The connections to classic works can be missed if the clues don't stir up the vague memories or if the reader is not familiar with the work—but this is one of JAG's qualities: what the reader desires, the reader sees, and the rest is immaterial.

Krauth uses the device of directly addressing the reader, arguably first used by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, “Reader, I married him”, and a technique used by many since. A much-loved example is the character of John Self in *Money* by Martin Amis, “... With a flourish I fastened the middle button of my new suit (off-white with colour seaming: I'm not sure about it—I wish you were here, I wish you were here to tell me it looked OK...”

It's a device that demands intimacy with the reader, like sharing a secret with a friend. Layla jumps out of the text to speak to the reader, “So we're back in the now. Right here in the hotel with youami33”, to get the reader up to speed with the time frame, as though he/she might easily be left behind. Layla, and Krauth, treat the reader as a friend, drawing them in close.

The allusions to Nabokov's *Lolita* within JAG are many and varied. JAG begins with a scene in which Layla meets with youami33, whom she has met online. He is much older than Layla, and, after an angst ridden tussle in which he notes:

... You're quite mature for your age, Layla. Not what I was expecting.

He deserts her under the guise of a condom purchase and never returns, presumably because, as his words were the only clue to his dislike of the situation, (“quite mature”) at fourteen she is too old, or, not young enough. This directs us straight to Humbert Humbert's detailed description in *Lolita* of the age of the nymphets under whose spell he falls:

there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell.

JAG also alludes to the well-known introductory speech given by Humbert:

Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

By having Tadashi consider Layla's name for the name of his sex doll:

Her name had dangled, strangled in the air, a name he struggled to pronounce as he breathed out; too many L's.

This mirrors the poetic rhythm in the sentence structure of Nabokov's: the rhyming of ‘dangled’ and ‘strangled’, and the repetition of the word ‘name’, and the alienation of the letter, ‘L’.

Krauth has Layla bring the reader's attention directly to Nabokov's *Lolita*, when Layla sympathises with *Lolita*, “... All *Lolita* wants is a bit of attention.”

In a direct line across time to Virginia Woolf, Layla grapples with the presence of a moth in an enclosed space. For

Layla, it is on the train:

...In a dance of death. It keeps falling towards me. I hold my school folder up to cover my head. Ready to swat the moth away. It's so soft and ugly. The big brown wings never stop.

It's an almost four-page-long scene describing the moth's escapades that touch on fear and death... "feeling the soft wings of death." Layla's long tangle with the moth brings to mind Woolf's essay, "The Death of the Moth", of almost the exact same length and theme.

...there was something marvellous as well as pathetic about him...the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death...one could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom... nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again...

§

In embracing the complexity of alternative devices Krauth encourages an attachment to popular culture, and while taking on literary allusions; scenes of filmic quality; and simple prose, she ensures a connectedness and accessibility to readers with diverse interests. Ironically, it may be the complexity of structure and text that has led to JAG's success, running against the trend of Australian publishing that is generally reluctant to take a chance on experimental novels.

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The Monologue

Concerning

Alterity, Identity and the Nothingness Betwixt.

Being

An Epistemological Closet Drama in Two Acts.

by Nicholas Lawrence

Place: *unknown.*

Time: *unknowable.*

Dramatis personæ:

$x=-y$

$y=-x$

ACT I

$x=-y$: If only you could

$y=-x$: I can't

$x=-y$: see me.

$y=-x$: think you.

$x=-y$: I wish I could

$y=-x$: I can't.

$x=-y$: see you.

$y=-x$: Am I there?

$x=-y$: I may not know your 'there',

$y=-x$: I'm here,

$x=-y$: but I always know you're there.

$y=-x$: are you there?

x=-y: I know

y=-x: No.

x=-y: that you

y=-x: No.

x=-y: permeate me,

y=-x: No.

x=-y: penetrate me,

y=-x: Not possible!

x=-y: impregnate me.

y=-x: Certain potentiality for impossibility anyway.

x=-y: You try

y=-x: I try

x=-y: to imagine me

y=-x: to imagine you,

x=-y: imagining you.

y=-x: but you are never there.

x=-y: It's only you.

y=-x: Without me

x=-y: I'm nothing.

y=-x: you're not.

x=-y: Your 'not'

y=-x: You're definition.

x=-y: defining me.

y=-x: But what do I know?

x=-y: I know

y=-x: I know

x=-y: by not knowing;

y=-x: you're not there;

x=-y: I see

y=-x: I see

x=-y: by not seeing.

y=-x: you're not here.

x=-y: I am

y=-x: I am

x=-y: nothing

y=-x: everything

x=-y: with you.

y=-x: without you.

x=-y: Whatever

y=-x: Whoever

x=-y: 'you' is.

y=-x: 'I' am.

x=-y: Or

y=-x: Or

x=-y: is not!

y=-x: am not!

x=-y: It's nice

y=-x: When you're

x=-y: to have a laugh.

y=-x: on your own

x=-y: It's the little things that count.

y=-x: you don't need to think.

x=-y: Even if there's no one to count on

y=-x: Or was it talk?

x=-y: or talk to.

y=-x: All language speaks I guess.

ACT II

x=-y: I think

y=-x: This seems

x=-y: I've been here before.

y=-x: familiar.

x=-y: Yes, I'm sure.

y=-x: Is this your

x=-y: I'm

y=-x: 'there'?

x=-y: here!

y=-x: Are you

x=-y: You must be

y=-x: there?

x=-y: there.

y=-x: You're

x=-y: Your

y=-x: definitely not here.

x=-y: 'not there'.

y=-x: I think

x=-y: I guess

y=-x: I'm becoming.

x=-y: I've returned.

y=-x: But becoming

x=-y: Seems meaningless

y=-x: what?

x=-y: really.

y=-x: That which

x=-y: With intention

y=-x: I don't know?

x=-y: but no intension.

y=-x: The known becomes

x=-y: Or was it

y=-x: unknown.

x=-y: the other way around?

y=-x: A snake defecating in its own wretched mouth.

x=-y: Disgusting

y=-x: Things never

x=-y: really.

y=-x: change.

x=-y: The way

y=-x: I never give up.

x=-y: I can never decide

y=-x: Never stop

x=-y: what's

y=-x: moving.

x=-y: up.

y=-x: Are you

x=-y: Always

y=-x: moving?

x=-y: moving

y=-x: Guess not.

x=-y: back and forth

y=-x: Or maybe you

x=-y: so to speak.

y=-x: can't.

x=-y: Doesn't really sound right.

y=-x: Guess that's just the way

x=-y: But it can't

y=-x: it is.

x=-y: not be.

y=-x: Must be.

x=-y: Must it be?

y=-x: Because it can.

x=-y: Can it be,

y=-x: Can you

x=-y: or not,

y=-x: not see

x=-y: that I'm seeing you?

y=-x: me?

x=-y: I don't

y=-x: Is it

x=-y: want to

y=-x: possible to

x=-y: be alone.

y=-x: be alone

x=-y: Not 'there' with you;

y=-x: without a 'where'?

x=-y: without a 'when'.

y=-x: I'm out

x=-y: Are you

y=-x: of time.

x=-y: without time?

y=-x: I'm out

x=-y: Are you?

y=-x: of 'it'.

Nicholas Lawrence is in the process of becoming. Difficult to say what; all causes are final. <http://www.nicholaslawrence.se/>.

Live Cam, 42nd Street, Times Square

by Francine Rubin

We seek our faces in light
amongst giant Coca-Colas,
legs two stories high,
glowing clothing.

Then the recognition: our reflections,
momentarily stopped amidst
blur of colour, ads, bodies:

the quiet reassurance of ourselves
in the faceless city.

Francine Rubin's chapbook, Geometries, is available from Finishing Line Press. Her work has recently appeared in Hawaii Review, Spiral Orb, and The Light Ekphrastic, and her poem "Sacagawea" was the third place winner in Calyx Press' 2013 Flash Fiction contest. More poems and thoughts appear at francinerubin.tumblr.com.

One Bronx Morning

by *Patrick Fogarty*

When I was a kid, *Leave it to Beaver* was my favourite TV show. The black and white sitcom focused on the life a young boy whose nickname was Beaver. He and his family resided in an unspecified town somewhere in suburban America. The weekly episodes set in the late 1950s and early 60s totally captured my imagination. But I never understood why I enjoyed the show so much. The only thing Beaver and I had in common was our age. We were both ten when I started watching the show. As a youngster growing up in a crowded south Bronx neighbourhood, I used to dream of being raised in a home like Beaver's. He owned a bike, lived in a nice house and every week his parents gave him a generous allowance. I guess I became a bit envious. Yet deep down, I knew the allowance deal and the cookie cutter house in suburbia were not going to happen in my world.

The earliest memory I have of making a few cents was when my friend Tony Biaggio and I collected empty bottles in vacant city lots for the deposit money. Tony was an only child and the only Italian kid I knew who didn't go to Catholic school. He and his mother lived with her parents in a private house nestled between two five-story apartment buildings. Tony never spoke about his father and I never asked. His grandmother went to Mass and received Holy Communion every morning, but I never saw his mom or grandfather in Church. Although Tony was my age, most people took him to be younger because of his size. He may have been small, but Tony was a tough kid and a real hustler. He knew all the best places to search for empty beer and soda bottles. Most Saturdays, Tony and I would make the rounds scavenging in alleyways and litter-strewn lots for our treasure. I had an old rusty red wagon that I pulled behind me for hauling stuff. We got two cents for the twelve ounce bottles and a nickel for the quart-sized ones. All the bottles were made of thick glass and the stores would only pay the deposit, if they were clean. Tony's grandpa let us use his garden hose to rinse the bottles near the curb in front of his house. That was about as close to Tony's home as anyone ever got. None of the kids on the block were allowed to set foot on the front steps leading to his residence. His grandparents didn't speak English and they preferred not to associate with anyone on the block.

One Saturday morning while Tony and I were washing our collected bottles, Mr Rosen, who lived on the first floor in the building adjacent to Tony's, stuck his head out of his living room window and said, "How would you guys like to make a quarter each?"

"Wow," I thought, "That's a lot of money."

Candy bars cost a nickel apiece, so I figured I could buy a big Hershey bar every day after school for a whole week. Tony turned off the water to the hose, brushed his black gypsy-like hair away from his eyes and said, "Yeah, what do we got to do for it?"

The old man pointed to a little red Volkswagen parked across the street and said, "Wash and dry my car and you'll each get a quarter. But, you've got to do a real good job."

Tony turned to me and said, "What do you think? Should we?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Sure, why not?"

The arrangement turned out to be the start of a full-time Saturday business for Tony and me. We were a good team and it wasn't long before some of the other car owners on the street asked us to wash their cars too. I remember making

two dollars in one day that spring. I thought it was a fortune and so did my mom. She brought me to a bank on the Grand Concourse near Yankee Stadium and helped me to open my first savings account.

Tony's grandpa would stand on his porch smoking a thin twisted cigar while we used his garden hose. You could tell he was proud of his grandson, and even though he never spoke a word to me, he nodded when he saw me on the street. Getting that little bit of recognition from him made me feel important.

Mr Rosen became our best customer. We washed his red Volkswagen every week. He could see exactly what we were doing from the living room window of his street-level apartment. I didn't mind him watching us but Tony didn't like it. If Mr Rosen noticed a spot or some place that we missed, he'd poke his head out the window and holler something like, "I think the driver's door still has a smudge." Or he might say, "Hey guys, how about redoing the hood?"

I didn't mind the criticism. I figured he just wanted his money's worth.

Mr Rosen and his wife were older than my parents and never had children. On weekdays, Mr Rosen left for work about the same time I left for school, and as soon as he would leave his apartment building, Mrs Rosen would call something out the window to him. In my mind I still have a vision of her—half hanging herself out of the living room window in an oversized pink terry cloth robe and yelling, "Stanley, don't you forget my cottage cheese. Do you hear me? Don't you forget the cheese."

Without slowing his stride, he'd cringe his shoulders, turn his head back towards her and say something like, "Yes Silvia, I won't forget. I promise, I won't forget."

Most evenings on his way home from work I would see Mr Rosen carrying a package or two. If I saw him struggling with a couple of sacks of groceries, I would offer to assist him. If he let me help, I'd usually get a nickel.

I remember a time when he was having trouble trying to manage a grocery bag in one arm and some dry-cleaned garments on wire hangers in his other arm. I asked if I could help and he said no. As he entered his building, the thin plastic covering the garments got caught on the front door and when he tried to free it, the groceries spilled out all over the place. It was a mess and I kind of felt sorry for him.

On Fridays when Mr Rosen arrived home, he'd change clothes and then, he and his wife would get in the Volkswagen and drive away.

One morning, after I got to know Mr Rosen and realised he was a fairly nice man, curiosity got the best of me. When we crossed paths on my way to school, I said, "Hey Mr Rosen, where do you and Mrs Rosen go on Friday nights when you and her get all dressed up?"

He stopped for a moment; put his hand on his chin like he might not want to tell me, and then his face turned into a big smile and he said, "We go out for dinner. Silvia loves Chinese food. She can't get enough of it." Then he gave me a quizzical look and said, "Why do you ask?"

A little disappointed, I looked up at him and said, "Oh, I told Tony you probably went dancing somewhere downtown."

He shook his head and said, "No, we don't dance any more. Now, get going before you're late for school."

When the school year ended in June, I anticipated that the car washing business would take off—I was wrong.

1960 was a drought year in New York. That meant, during the summer, Tony and I could only wash cars on certain days. I remember the cops driving around the neighbourhood making sure that none of the big guys or parents opened fire hydrants for kids to cool off and play in. Tony and I had to adjust our car washing schedule. It was inconceivable to even think that Tony's grandfather would break the law by allowing us to use his garden hose on a forbidden day.

By the middle of July we started getting plenty of rain, and by the beginning of August the city reservoirs were almost full. The drought restrictions were lifted and Tony and I were almost back to our old schedule. But there was a new problem. We were getting too much rain and most of our customers didn't want us to wash their cars if it was supposed to rain that day or the next.

On Saturday morning, August 13, 1960, I got up early and listened to the weather forecast on my mother's kitchen radio. They were predicting a hot muggy day with temperatures reaching the low 90s. They also mentioned a possibility of some afternoon thunder storms.

I met Tony at 8 am in front of his grandfather's house. We decided we had better go knock on Mr Rosen's door and check with him before we started working on his car. It took a long time for Mr Rosen to answer, but when he opened the door, he acted as if he was glad to see us. We explained our doubts about washing his car and he said, "Don't worry about the rain. Just go ahead and do a good job."

That was good news for us and we went straight to work washing his little red Volkswagen. We were about halfway finished when a police car came speeding up the wrong way of our one-way street. It stopped right where we were washing Mr Rosen's Volkswagen. Before the cops had time to get out of their patrol car, another squad car came racing down the street from the other direction with its siren blaring and its cherry red bubble light spinning. For a split second Tony and I both thought they were after us. I figured, maybe I misunderstood the watering rules. When the police arrived, Tony's grandfather was standing on his front porch with that thin stogie in his mouth. He casually walked down from his porch, looked around, rolled up his hose, and walked back up his steps. The four cops didn't even glance at him. They went straight into Mr Rosen's building. Within minutes, several unmarked police cars arrived with detectives and the big brass. A crowd of people gathered on the street in front of Mr Rosen's building. Everyone was trying to figure out what was happening. Two police officers stationed themselves by the front entrance of the apartment building. The cops were polite but they wouldn't answer any questions. After a while, I noticed a commotion going on in the building's vestibule. We could tell something was up. Just then, two burly detectives emerged with Mr Rosen wedged between them. He wasn't cuffed. I heard one cop tell another that they were taking Mr Rosen to the station house in order to get a statement.

When Mr Rosen saw Tony and me standing by his car, he said to his escorts, "Hold on, I owe these two boys some money for washing my car."

All of a sudden, everyone's eyes were on Tony and me. Mr Rosen reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He ruffled through the billfold, withdrawing two bills. He handed a one dollar bill to each of us and said, "You guys deserve this. You do nice work."

As soon as the two beefy detectives and the other patrol cars left with Mr Rosen, the crowd outside the building disappeared. Tony and I noticed one of the unmarked cars remained parked near a fire hydrant. So we knew at least a couple of detectives were still in the apartment with Mrs Rosen. The venetian blinds in the living room had been lowered, but there was a space on the bottom that didn't touch the windowsill. Tony and I both wanted to peek under the blinds into the living room, but he wasn't tall enough to look in without me giving him a boost, so I said, "I'll look first and if

there's anything to see, I hoist you up for a look."

Tony said, "You promise?"

I said, "Yeah sure, I promise."

I went to the window, stood on my tippy-toes and saw Mrs Rosen sitting motionless in a large stuffed chair with about ten plastic dry cleaning bags wrapped around her head. Her mouth was wide open and she looked as if she was about to scream. Tony pulled the back of my shirt and said, "Hurry, there's a police wagon coming down the block."

I backed away from the window and Tony said, "What's in there? What'd you see?"

I felt like puking but managed to say, "Nothing Tony. I didn't see a thing."

By the look he gave me, I knew he could tell I was lying.

The police wagon had the words "County Coroner" stencilled on the doors. As the two attendants were removing the body of Mrs Rosen from the apartment, Tony heard one of them say to the other, "Yeah Scott, can you believe it? Her husband swears it was a suicide."

Patrick Fogarty is an author and poet. He writes creative non-fiction, historical non-fiction, memoir and poetry. Born and raised in the south Bronx, his works are infused with personal experiences from his childhood. He is a recent graduate of Yavapai College's Creative Writing Program. His stories have been published in the last two issues of Threshold—the literary magazine of Yavapai College. Patrick and his bride Susan live in the mountains of Central Arizona with their two dogs—Lady, a beautiful German Shepherd and Mia, a lovely Irish Terrier. You can find him on Twitter [@FogartyPat1](https://twitter.com/FogartyPat1).

Hunting With Masai

by Charles Bane, Jr.

Dawn is spear and
shield and gun recklessly
left behind. We move in a
single line. Last night
they chased away a
missionary and we lay.
Mine is the god of the Hebrews
I explained, mountain born
like N'gai. He is not desirous
of you and only one
of mine has seen his face.
His mountain had boiled gravely
and he built a vessel of lava
rock for a climber overcome
to voyage fire home.

Charles Bane, Jr. is the author of The Chapbook (Curbside Splendor, 2011) and Love Poems (Kelsay Books, 2014). His work was described by the Huffington Post as “not only standing on the shoulders of giants, but shrinking them”. Creator of the Meaning of Poetry series for The Gutenberg Project, he is a current nominee as Poet Laureate of Florida.

Knock Knock

by Edoardo Albert

It was 3.30 in the morning. Martin was on the edge of sleep, having settled Oliver for the third and, he hoped, final time that night, when the doorbell rang. He jerked awake.

Beside him, his wife, Jennifer, lay still and sleeping. Her breathing was calm and even. There was no sound from the children's bedroom. No one had heard anything. But that had been the door bell, surely? Martin checked the time.

3.31. The numbers on the clock radio cast sufficient light to colour the bedside table a sickly green. Martin reached over to check the alarm was on. His skin went green too.

Maybe he'd dreamt the doorbell. But how could it have been a dream when he hadn't been asleep? Maybe it was one of those half-waking, half-sleeping reveries then? But all he had heard was the door bell, nothing else. That hardly qualified as a reverie.

A knock. There. That was a knock, surely? Someone taking the handle over the letter box and rapping it. Or was it the sound of the letter box itself closing? Had eyes from outside been peering into the house?

Martin looked at Jennifer, but she was still asleep.

Swinging his legs out of bed, Martin stood up and put on his dressing gown. The hall light, which was left on all night for the children's sake, illuminated the room perfectly adequately.

Who could it be? Ideas swirled through Martin's mind as he made his way down the stairs from the loft extension, where their bedroom was, to the first floor. The children's room was at the back, and Martin glanced in at them. Two dark mounds, unmoving and uncalling at last, indicated that they were finally—finally!—both asleep.

Who would ring at this time of night? The police, with bad news? Possibly. But surely, if that was the case, they would ring more determinedly so as to wake the inhabitants?

Martin went into the front room and quietly, surreptitiously even, made his way to the window. He was acting like a thief in his own home.

Sidling to the edge of the window—because no one slept in the front room, the curtains were usually left open at night—Martin pressed himself to the wall and peered down.

But all he could see was the roof of the porch.

He looked up and down the road. The sycamore in the verge was fuzzy with new spring growth but he could still see well enough. No cars were moving. In the daytime, the road was always busy with traffic but now, not only was there no traffic but no lights showed in any of the houses. Only the street lamps were lit, casting yellow/orange pools of light around their skirts and leaving the rest of the road in shadow.

Then Martin thought of something. He looked at the front gate. It was open. He usually closed it when he got back from work, and he'd not gone out this evening. But had Jennifer popped out to the shops? She never closed the gate. He couldn't remember.

Craning his neck, and then bending down, Martin tried to get a glimpse in under the edge of the porch roof but, with the hedge that grew along the garden path impeding his view, it was impossible to see. He'd have to go downstairs and look out from the sitting-room window to have a view of the front door.

Suddenly, Martin felt immensely reluctant to go down the stairs. At least from up here he could watch without being seen—the curtains were open, the window was high up, he could stand back in the darkness. But downstairs he would have to draw the curtains, warning whoever was out there of his presence. Inchoate fears at what he might see looking in from outside swirled through an imagination stunted by years of dirth. Once there would have been monsters aplenty to fill it, but now all he saw were creatures of void, things of shadow and darkness and absence.

In the day, such terrors would have seemed nonsensical, but at night they became real. And even the more prosaic possibilities held their own fears. Suppose it was the local drunk, out of his mind as usual, just ringing on a random door bell? How would he get rid of him?

But the silent stillness gradually banished that possibility. If it was the local drunk, he would have kept ringing, or started singing, swearing or shouting.

Martin leaned forward—he had been standing in the shadow of the window post—and looked out again. Still no sign of anyone. It must have been a dream. If there had been someone outside, he would have seen movement by now. For nobody would stay waiting right by the door without moving. He or she would step back, look up at the windows, search for some sign of life and response within.

Right. He'd just go and check on Oliver, make sure he was all right, and then back up to bed. How many times had he been up tonight? Three for Oliver, and once for the phantom door bell. Jennifer never seemed to hear the boy in the night. At least Jonathan always slept well.

Creeping cautiously into the children's room—step over the creaky floorboard by the door, watch out for the Thomas trains strewn on the floor—he saw and, more to the point heard, that they were still sleeping soundly.

The bell rang. Martin froze. Partly from shock, partly from panic at the thought that Oliver might wake. He stood, listening for the bell to ring again, eyes fixed on the sleeping form of his son.

But, an age later when Martin relaxed and breathed out a breath he hadn't known he was holding, the bell had not rung again, nor had Oliver stirred. It hadn't been a very loud ring, but there was no longer any doubt that someone was at the door. Martin walked stealthily back into the front room and took another peek from the window, but he still couldn't see anything.

He was about to turn away, when he did spot something. The front gate was closed. It had been open before. If he had just waited by the window, he would have seen whoever was calling at this ungodly hour walk down the path and close it. Now, he was going to have to go downstairs.

Martin thought for a moment of waking his wife. He soon thought better of it. She was never at her best in the early hours of the morning, even before they had had children. These days, she was so tired she went to bed directly after the children, leaving Martin to a thin diet of late-night television and detective novels.

Instead, he stood at the top of the stairs, staring down into a well of darkness and listening harder than he'd ever listened in his life before. He could hear the breathing of the children, and the ticks of the clocks upstairs and in the hall,

but that was all. Martin stopped on the first step, leaning down to see if a silhouette was visible on the frosted glass of the front door. But the street light was offset and shaded by the sycamore: it cast no direct light on the house. There was nothing visible.

Going down the stairs as quietly as he could, his concentration focused on the door, Martin forgot the third step. It creaked alarmingly as his weight settled upon it, and he froze, cursing himself as an idiot for forgetting. Jennifer was convinced the step was on the verge of breaking and had asked him often enough to repair it. He'd considered explaining that it was the natural warping of old wood, then decided it would be easier to promise to do the repairs. Jennifer never listened to explanations. Besides, he hadn't said *when* he'd repair it.

Now, he wished he had.

Martin stood staring at the door, his hearing straining for sound. Was that a shadow on the glass? Could he hear movement, someone shuffling on the porch?

It was impossible to tell how long he remained standing on the third step. Less than an hour, more than a minute; beyond that he did not know. But he could not stay there forever. The downward step, when he made it, hardly seemed a product of conscious decision. His body moved and he went along with the ride, wincing as the step creaked again in response to the weight being lifted from it. For a moment, Martin thought of going to the front door and peering through the keyhole. But an atavistic dread filled him at the thought: what if there was an eye there, staring back at him? And the thought of being separated from whatever was out there only by a piece of wood was too much. Instead, Martin backed down the hall, eyes fixed on the door, and sidestepped into the front room.

It was dark in there. The curtains—heavy, blue velvet drapes that had cost two weeks' wages and three rows—were thick, and the door blocked out most of the light leaking into the room from the hall. Martin would have said he knew his sitting room like the back of his hand, but now, faced with a darkness that rendered hand and room all but invisible, he could no longer be certain where anything was. The coffee table, for instance. It was in the middle of the room, he knew that, but he couldn't tell where. And since he knew there was a wine glass on it—his solitary night cap—bumping into the table could easily knock it over and alert whatever was outside to his presence.

So, with hands outstretched and shuffling, baby steps, Martin made his way through the sitting room. Conscious, overly conscious, of the coffee table, he gave it too wide a berth and bumped into the side table by the sofa. He just managed to catch the pile of magazines before it slipped off.

Now, though, he knew where he was in the room. Brushing against the sofa, he began to edge more confidently towards the window.

Martin bit his tongue. He didn't want to bite his tongue, but it was the only way he could keep from calling out. Balancing on one leg in the darkness, in itself a more difficult task than he would have imagined, Martin removed the object embedded in his foot. It was a piece of Lego.

Moving forward again, in a sliding limp, he sidled through the room, slipping his feet along the ground now rather than stepping to ensure no more encounters with sharp objects. Using his hands like the whiskers of a cat fish, Martin pushed through the darkness. The faintest of glows leaked around the edges of the curtain, giving him a better idea of where he was heading and how far he had to go.

He stopped when he got to the window, and listened. He had never really had the chance to listen to his

neighbourhood at this time of night before—on the occasions he was awake, he was stumbling blearily downstairs to deal with Oliver—so the silence was overwhelming. No cars, no planes, not even the distant sound of the trains on the railway line. And no sound from whoever was outside.

Martin took hold of the curtain. But as he did so, the unformed fear that had gripped him earlier returned, but this time it formed into images and ideas: a face, staring in at him as he looked out; the feral children who congregated around the tube station; the masked, murderous killers from one of those late-night films. All of these, and more, flicked through his mind, stopping movement, and thought, and action. Suddenly, his home didn't feel like a castle any more, but a prison, an illuminated gaol that highlighted all his movements to whatever skulked outside, hidden in shadows.

He leaned even closer to the window, listening for any movement, but all he could hear was his own breathing. He wondered what Jennifer would say if she saw him hiding like this, a fearful prisoner in his own house. Not much in words, he suspected, but it wasn't hard to imagine her expression.

Taking the curtain, Martin lifted it gently, and slowly, slowly, brought his eye towards the gap. He wouldn't have been able to hear anything outside now; his heart was beating too fast.

Martin looked out of the window and saw...

Nothing.

The porch was empty. The path was clear. The garden was bare.

Martin breathed out. The air felt stale in his mouth, and he wondered how long he'd held it in his lungs. Taut muscles relaxed, and a heart that had been trying to escape up his throat settled down to life behind the lungs.

It was all clear. Time for bed.

Martin was about to replace the curtain when he saw movement from the alleyway between the houses. Someone was there. He craned his head around to see further, but whoever it was had gone down the alley.

Was it big enough to be a man? It could just have been a cat or a fox. But now, having acted, the uncertainty that had gripped Martin before was gone. He hurried to the front door, unbolted it and rushed out into the still, night air. If there was someone trying to burgle the house, he'd put a stop to it.

Leaving the lock on the catch, Martin crept soundlessly to the corner of the alley. It felt good to have turned the tables: now he was the stalker. He had no weapon, but he didn't expect to need one. A loud shout should be enough to surprise a burglar, and set him running, although to escape he would have to get past Martin. All he'd need to do then was stick out a foot, the thief would come tumbling down, hopefully break something, and he could sit on him until the police arrived.

But there was no one there. Jumping out into the alley, ready to yell, he saw the space was empty all the way down to the blank, brown wooden gate.

He was almost disappointed. To double check, Martin went down to the bottom of the alley and inspected the gate for any sign of entry, but there was none.

That was when he heard the front door slam. The wind must have caught it. Running round to the front of the house,

Martin pushed at the door, but it would not open.

But he'd left the door on the latch. The wind might have blown the door shut, but it couldn't undo the latch. That needed a hand.

Appalled at the thought, Martin couldn't move for a moment, then he pushed the letterbox open and peered in.

He saw a dark figure walking up the stairs.

Fear, fear of a different, sickening kind coursed through Martin. He began to ring the bell, his finger jamming the button down, his other hand banging on the door, while he yelled out for Jennifer through the letter box.

A light switched on. Martin stopped yelling long enough to take a quick look in through the letter box. He saw Jennifer rushing down the stairs, trying to push sleep fuddled arms through the sleeves of her dressing gown as she came.

Almost sick with relief, Martin shouted through the letter box that it was him.

"Open the door, it's me."

But she didn't. He heard a sharp sound, like a rap on glass, and turned to see Jennifer peering out at him from the front room window.

"Jenny, open the door."

But she waved at him, as if gesturing Martin away.

"Let me in, Jenny, there's someone there, somebody got in."

But she shooed him away the more vigorously.

"Go away! Or, so help me, I'll call the police."

"Jenny, it's me, Martin. Let me in. You can't..."

The door opened.

"You heard the lady: go away."

Standing in the doorway was a stranger. But he was not wearing the jeans and hoodie of a thief who had slipped in to the house when Martin's back was turned, not unless pyjamas, slippers and dressing gown had become the clothes of choice for burglars.

Jennifer appeared next to the man. He put an arm around her shoulder.

"Why are you doing this, Martin?" she asked.

Martin made to step forward, but the stranger put out a hand and pushed him back.

"What are you doing? This is my home? That's my wife."

"No, they're not."

Martin looked from the man to Jennifer.

“If you don’t go, Martin, we’ll have to call the police.”

Looking past the people on the doorstep, Martin saw feet, and legs, on the staircase.

“Daddy!”

Jennifer turned around with a start, as a little figure came rushing down the stairs.

“Oh, no.” She rushed to catch the little boy, pulling him into her arms, and hugging him, pinioning him there.

“Daddy’s not himself, Oliver.”

But the little boy struggled to get free, trying to twist round so he could see Martin. Tears were streaking his face.

“Now see what you’ve done,” Jennifer hissed. She looked at the strange man. “Close the door and call the police.”

“Daddy!” shouted Oliver, squirming harder.

“You heard the lady, go away,” said the man.

“Wait!” Martin held out his hand. “Who are you?”

His wife looked at Martin with contempt.

“Who are you, Martin. Take a look. Take a look at what you’ve become.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got eyes. Use them.” Her gaze drew his eyes downwards: down, down, over dirty, unkempt clothes.

Martin held out a trembling hand: it was dirt-encrusted, stained and the skin was cracked. He couldn’t stop it trembling. He licked his lips. His throat was dry.

Oliver’s sobbing reached a new crescendo. Jennifer tried to soothe him.

“It’s all right, it’s all right, Oliver. Daddy’s going.”

She turned to the stranger.

“Close the door.”

He pushed it shut. But as he did so, the man looked at Martin, and smiled.

Standing on the step, Martin stared at door, not feeling the wind tug at his trousers. Then he turned and stumbled down the path, the dead, dry autumnal leaves cracking beneath his feet.

Edoardo Albert is, on paper, an exotic creature: Italian, Sinhala and Tamil by birth, he grew up in London among the children of immigrants (it was only when he went to university that he got to know any English people). His proudest writing achievement was reducing a reader to helpless, hysterical laughter. Unfortunately, it was a lonely-hearts ad. Edwin: High King of Britain, his first novel, has just been published by Lion Fiction; at the moment, he’s writing volumes two and three of The Northumbrian Thrones trilogy, a biography of Alfred the Great with osteoarchaeologist Dr Katie Tucker and a spiritual history of London. He is quite busy. Edoardo is online at www.edoardoalbert.com, and on Facebook and Twitter, @EdoardoAlbert, too.

A Night Inside

by Kathryn Hummel

When I lived in Bangladesh, Jaydeb was the friend who most often persuaded me to meet for drinks and conversation in scattered locations. I was thankful for any company that drew me out of my role as an exotic toy who, once my string had been pulled by the inevitable questions about my regard for my current country, gave the same inoffensive answers. I suspected Jaydeb chose the meeting places he did in order to educate me to his point of view. Though they were never confronting or obscurely inappropriate, like the all-male underground bars my students friends sometimes took me to—so shady that the very air we breathed seemed tinted—Jaydeb’s choices drew careful contrasts between those sitting in the neat booths of trendy cafés, and those who stood on the other side of the plate glass window, feet bared to the dust of the road, mining their hunger with a listless hand-to-mouth gesture before being moved along by a uniformed guard. One night, sitting in one of the upscale restaurants that tacitly allowed diners to bring their own bottles, Jaydeb explained to me his disinheritance as a native of Dhaka city, spreading forth his lament like a white cloth.

“Those who celebrate the city,” he told me, “those who deny it’s a ghetto, don’t want to acknowledge that the city has been brought close to death. It’s a celebration to stop them feeling responsible for draining the blood of Dhaka from its body.”

Jaydeb underlined this point with a bitter expression as he took a swig of his red wine. Although not good, it was among the best that was available in Bangladesh; I had grown up on wine but he hadn’t, so I assumed the face he pulled was less to do with its quality than an expression of the rebellious air that accompanied the act of swallowing. Although liquor was available in selected import warehouses and locked-door dives, drinking it in Bangladesh was technically outlawed for anyone not in possession of a foreign passport.

§

As friends, Jaydeb and I had an ever-wavering responsibility to each other: we were two fringe dwellers whose shared sympathy was really too dim to be vital. Unlike Jaydeb, I was not born in Dhaka and so I felt my disconnection in a different way—though I was never certain I was witness to the city’s death. Convinced that human beings had too much ego to ever completely destroy their world, I saw signs of Dhaka’s strained persistence and even, in patches, of its revival. My lack of sentimentality about the city was perhaps the biggest difference between my gaze and Jaydeb’s: mine was present; his was nostalgic. Dhaka seemed at its best when the day wore down to dusk and the sky looked as though it had been stroked dry with a wire brush. I lived near the lake in Dhanmondi and would walk through the drab hues of the surrounding park, where trees, silvered with dust, stretched their reflections across pea-green water. The women power walking in brightly-dyed *salwar kameez* and the *walabs* in their loud shirts were seldom so dull. The park was crowded with people, yet even so I was the focus of attention, ghosted by exclamations of *Koto lomba!* until my shadows became longer than myself and in the hazy atmosphere, weighed down with the fumes of cigarettes and traffic, I was not so noticeable.

§

During moments when I couldn’t tolerate the close scrutiny of the world outside, I would spend twilights sitting on the balcony that ran the length of my small flat, barefoot and wearing a voluminous housedress. I would set aside my writing and peer down upon Dhaka’s night stage from my seat in dress circle, eight floors up. Children played games on the rooftop of the apartment block opposite; women unhooked vibrant lines of sun-dried washing; and young men would

chat, play guitar and sing or huddle around a mobile phone, passing it back and forth. *Rickshawalabs* rang their bells to the call of the circling crows: harsh melodies that were surpassed by motorists leaning constantly and obnoxiously on their car horns. By the time the last call to prayer growled from the megaphones of nearby mosques, there was still activity on the street below: figures moved under the marigold glare of the sodium streetlights or, in winter, stretched badminton nets across the street for long, cheerful games. At this distance from Dhaka, I looked upon it with more appreciation and felt a sensation close to peace as a half-observed onlooker, rather than the ground-level spectacle of the only foreigner—and an uncommonly tall one—in the district.

§

When this solitude became oppressive, my solution was to open all windows and doors and let in air and friends. Naturally, Jaydeb counted among these, though a recollection of his recent self-consciousness, apparently drawn forth by the combination of wine and my company, made me pause. During our last few meetings, through sips of whatever we were drinking, Jaydeb would voice sudden reminders that he was committed to his academic job and his upstanding life; that he was a good man with a good wife, the love of his life, actually. I would listen quietly from my side of the table and wonder what he could possibly be warning me against—or why he was warning himself. Although the time Jaydeb spent in the company of a single white female was automatically suspect in the eyes of the wider public in Bangladesh, in reality, our friendship didn't even live up to this banal outline: our common interest was books and the ideas they contained. Jaydeb was, I believed, too worldly and informed, and my manner too decorous, to fuel any notion I was out to seduce him. The influence of the wine of Bangladesh, with its diminishing effect on my understanding of patriarchy and ego, became apparent soon enough; at the time, though, I was only concerned with the comfort of my friends. I would invite Jaydeb around for our customary chat; I would also invite Shumon, a rough-bearded photographer who was friendly with so many of my friends; and my neighbour Durjoy, also a photographer but an unpredictable character, less clear in the frame than Shumon due to the undetermined mixture of chemicals he recreationally enjoyed.

§

Whatever new atmosphere hung over these drinks in Dhaka, we all tried to do something different that night. Jaydeb declared he would cook; I tried to relax; Durjoy attempted to rewire himself as a pleasant human being. As a gathering of self-declared artists we made uneasy company—our talk was fractured without being spontaneous or friendly. I missed the company of women but had none to invite who would be able to travel to and from my flat alone, and I doubt their presence would have smoothed the social implications that dragged at the edges of our gathering. I recognised the need for food and for wine; wine came first.

Uncorking and pouring started off a practice that had little education around it: in Bangladesh, drinks were measured in “pegs” and slammed down faster than a gang of policemen could bust open a door. Accustomed to chatting, sipping and savouring, placing my glass unluckily on the floor and wandering off to rediscover it twenty minutes later with beaded bubbles intact, I got drunker that night than I had ever been at home. By the time Jaydeb emerged from the kitchen with a bowl of floppy salad greens, beef bacon and mayonnaise, all I wanted to do was curl up in my solitary red bed and sleep, exhausted by my day of negotiating difference outside, then inviting the same element inside at night. The more I concentrated, the more tired I felt. No longer even pretending to host the evening, I sat turning the pages of the new art magazine Shumon brought to show me. The lulling rasp of the pages was easier to focus on than the conversation, which had lapsed by now into a swift flow of Bangla I couldn't possibly follow, even when sober.

§

I was jolted from this calming exercise when it transpired Jaydeb wanted to cook rice. Although he had visited the Western-style supermarket beforehand to buy supplies, Jaydeb had acted on the assumption that my household, being inside Bangladesh and therefore of the right location, would have a kitchen cupboard devoted to a huge supply of this staple food. I did not have a huge supply; I didn't even have a small supply.

"I don't have any rice in the house," I announced. There was a reason, though I never had to think about it until that night. "I eat so much of it outside; I never cook it at home."

I had been witness to—really a part of—the origins of the Dhanmondi apartment in which we stood. I knew that Australian, Nepalese, Chilean, Chinese, North American, Swedish, Indian, French and Bengali cultures had coursed through its rooms over the four years of its existence. The walls, plain when I first encountered them, had retained remnants of all the people travelling through; those who had retreated behind them; those who had made a point of living a different way in a different land, nothing that openly defied but also nothing that quite fit in. What all these lives had done was create anything but a typical Bangladeshi household. Although I was staying alone, the unconventional tone of my voice dampened by weariness in the midst of two spare bedrooms, I felt my dimming ipseity flicker. I could not resist a whole country—I did not wish to—but I could bend its laws on wine and welcome whatever grains I chose to blow under my front door and across my threshold.

§

Hearing my words, Jaydeb's face displayed a brief combat between culture shock and intellectual rationalism—a mixture that suited his profession. He glanced at Shumon, who was standing next to me, but I couldn't read what was in the look; Durjoy, sitting on the kitchen floor, was grinning with his eyebrows raised, possibly regretting that he'd left his camera across the hall. Jaydeb took his pot of water off the stove and excused himself for ten minutes while he popped down to the shop for a small bag of rice.

What he didn't cook that night lasted me for months afterwards. The friendships, though they retained the particles of curiosity and warmth that sparked them, didn't last much longer; but all bottles of wine I had bought for the party that night were emptied before morning.

Kathryn Hummel writes non-fiction, fiction and poetry, often combined with her photography for digital performance. Her diverse work has been published throughout Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Eastern, Western and Southern Asia; she has lived in Australia, India and Bangladesh, where her PhD research in narrative ethnography, drawing on memory and conversations with women, was based. A former Café Poet (Australian Poetry) and Forever Now resident (APHIDS and Vitalstatistix), Kathryn was nominated for the 2013 Pushcart Prize and in the same year, won the Dorothy Porter Award for Poetry at the Melbourne Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Awards. Poems from Here, Kathryn's debut verse collection, is published by the Walleah Press.

The House of Little Things

by *Grant Tarbard*

The world is terrible to little things.

—Truman Capote

I've seen a doll's house
populated with a small
family of red

herring. I can't be
sure if they were plastic or
stuffed, I saw it in

the Lake District years
ago, they had a jumble
sale in the church hall

opposite the stitched
grey stone Beatrix Potter
museum and it

was there, next to the
house of rabbits where I found
the house of herring

Grant Tarbard has worked as a computer games journalist, a contributor to football fanzines, an editor, a reviewer and an interviewer. He is now the editor of The Screech Owl. His work can be seen in such magazines as The Rialto, Ink, Sweat & Tears, Bone Orchard Poetry, The Journal, Southlight, Sarasvati, Earth Love, Mood Swing, Puff Puff Prose & Poetry, Postcards Poems and Prose, Playerist 2, Lake City Lights, The Open Mouse, Miracle, Poetry Cornwall, I-70, South Florida Review, Zymbol and Decanto.

11 Months in London

by *Tony Walton*

As I turn left off Oxford Street
cloaked in a low sky and shuffling
along with the other furrowed brows

I search for the accent of my youth
“Tomato” or “Tomahto” or “Tomata”
“Aunt” or “Ant” or “Auntie”

Punching my cold fists into a
Harrods jacket I enter the tube,
shortly reaching another
grey gray station and soon see
a pub with an old-fashioned
clock against the liquored mirror,

damn, it’s way past our meeting time
and am I at the right place?

I really could go for
comfort food now, we need this

connection

“Buffalo Wings?” Or is it “Fish and Chips?”
Maybe “Saltfish?”

Which of these do I want?
Eh, it’s too late for such a
search.

A sudden hiss of wind
angrily flaps my jacket, and
a raindrop

taps my shoulder—
as a stranger does when they have
wandered and need
direction.

Tony Walton is a Caribbean writer living in the Cayman Islands and his works have appeared in Storyteller Magazine, Moonkind Press, Whisperings

Magazine, Mountain Tales Press, Out of Our Magazine, Poetry Bay Magazine, Burningword Magazine, Wilde Magazine, Nite-Writer's International Literary Arts Journal, Avalon Literary Review, Iceland Daily, Eastlit, Boston Poetry Magazine, Eunoia Magazine, and Olentangy Review. *You can follow Tony on Twitter [@caymanchess](https://twitter.com/caymanchess).*

Oh, La, La!

Non-fiction by Barbara Donnelly Lane

The first year I lived in England I discovered British winters are as dark as the bottom of the ocean. The sun never seems to rise, and the constant drizzle soon drips grey into one's January spirit. However, even stay-at-home mothers cannot crawl back into bed and disappear beneath a wave of blankets. There are groceries to be bought, dinners to be made. So one morning after the kid walked out the door to go meet his school bus, I dragged myself into the shower. After cursing the inefficiency of European plumbing—the water mixer that made the water much too hot, then much too cold—I pushed wet hair out of my face with a black headband. (What was the point of drying anything in that land of constant rain?) I pulled on a dirty sweater and wrapped my neck with a frayed scarf from the hat stand. Finally, clinging to my Atlanta-girl sense of style, I dressed my face with a smile to brave the outside world again.

After closing the front door behind me, I turned and immediately said “hello” to a woman walking outside on the pavement outside my iron gate. In a crushed felt hat, she stared straight through me as if I were translucent, and I felt my smile dragged away by emotion's currents, too weak to resist the negative undertow of “stranger stigma”. Retreating into a stone-faced shell from that point forward, I barely glanced at the sailboats bobbing in the marina on which my family lived, the mighty River Severn pushing against the lock at high tide. A modern metal windmill whirled like a child's pinwheel in the distance. Muddy waves rippled restless across the river's surface: an endless energy drawn back and forth like breath. I'd called this same view wildly beautiful once, and an English neighbour walking his dog had dourly responded, “But the water isn't blue, is it?”

Keeping my eyes down and my gait brisk, I quickly reached the grocery store on the High Street of my little town. Looping through the aisles looking for what I wanted to buy, I inadvertently trailed behind a mother shopping with a pig-tailed toddler chewing happily on the head of a stuffed whale. The lady's cheeks were round and red as apples. Her eyes were kind and warm. (Perhaps she was Irish?) She nodded at me as she filled her cart of plenty with the brown sauces and marmite that must have suited her tastes as well as grits matched my Southern palette. I smiled gratefully at the mere acknowledgement of my existence, but then I had to stop myself from going a step too far, as I knew a sudden hug from a stranger might be lost in translation. How could anyone else understand the hunger for human contact that was eating me alive?

Trudging to the checkout lane with a bunch of bananas, frozen pizzas, and a bottle of wine, I added some Cadbury chocolate to my haul. (No one in any country has ever confused me with Betty Crocker.) The boy behind the cash register was staring at me with his mouth slightly open as if I were an alien with three heads. Judging by the baby fat still in his cheeks, the bit of stubble he'd missed when shaving his chin, I guessed he couldn't have been more than seventeen. We exchanged polite greetings as I fumbled to find my wallet buried somewhere in the depths of my shoulder bag.

Finally he blurted, “Are you French?” as if he found the question rather forward, as if he was asking me about something as intimate as my underwear.

“Who? Me?” I blushed. “No... American.”

“Oh. Wow. That's brilliant, too.” He looked heartily embarrassed as he put my wine in a brown bag, this delightful boy, this lovely dear, this darling creature whom I could only surmise had never been outside of the United Kingdom if he'd mistaken my accent as originating anywhere outside the United States. Yet I would have kissed him in that moment if

I could have gotten away with it without getting arrested for child molestation. Ruffled his hair if it wouldn't have mortified him. Given him permission to marry my daughter if I'd had one.

Don't misunderstand. I certainly didn't *want* to be French. Having been called an American peasant once by an old bat on a train in Paris, I couldn't even say I was especially *fond* of that stinky-cheese nation, but I'd be the first to admit that French women have a special knack for looking beautiful, sophisticated no matter what they are wearing. Even in sour expressions of haughty disdain and rubber flip-flops, they sparkle like champagne. And there I was in the midst of a grunge depression, being mistaken for a continental European. With my man's scarf, baggy sweatshirt, and winter face, I should have barely passed for a Canadian.

"Merci," I said as he handed me my receipt.

It warmed my heart to see how he blushed more when his fingers brushed my hand, and I suddenly felt as if England was a land of endless sunshine... an island of kind and gracious people that served as a harbour for wayward foreigners... especially for middle-aged mums who felt out of depth on the British side of the ocean. *Oh, la, la!*

I floated all the way home.

Barbara Donnelly Lane is an American writer with an MAT in English education and an MA in History. Last May she travelled to Havana to study Hemingway. Her work has appeared in a wide array of publications including The Palo Alto Review, Reader's Break, Shine Brightly, descant, Delivered and The Amethyst Review. To learn more, visit www.barbaradonnelylane.com. Barbara's non-fiction piece, "Chasing Hemingway in Havana" appeared in Issue Seven of Tincture Journal.

Reply Hazy, Try Again

by *Kevin Brown*

I bargain with my future self
and others, make deals based on
what I will do. I'm like Odysseus

who saw himself at his worst
with the Sirens, planned
ahead, though I'm less clever.

Less heroic, as well, and probably
less attractive, but similar, I'm sure.
I know about the extra piece

of pie at Thanksgiving, work in
extra exercise the week before,
though the third helping of turkey
and dressing was a surprise,
a Siren song I had not foreseen.

When I met my high school girlfriend
again, in our twenties, we told
each other of how we would
change—she would stop visiting bars

to play pool with men
who did not want to win,
only watch her bend over; I would
want children and the life they lead

to: diapers and delinquency,
daycare and daddy issues. We
should have shaken a Magic

8-ball instead; at least then
someone would have said,
“Outlook not so good”.

Kevin Brown is a Professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry: Liturgical Calendar: Poems (forthcoming from Wipf and Stock); A Lexicon of Lost Words (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and Exit Lines (Plain View Press, 2009). He also has a memoir, Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again, and a book of scholarship, They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels. He received his MFA from Murray State University.

The Moth

by *Abhishaike Mahajan*

Light.

It warms the skin, arouses beautiful feelings, and invigorates the heart. The touch of an angel in every beam of vivid radiance, I used to imagine that entire wars would stop dead in its movements if the sun happened to shine its brilliance on the fortunate soldiers. Each one, every warrior that was fighting for their country, life, or freedom, would lower their weapons, and just enjoy euphoria as they were enveloped in the gifts from the sun. The clearness, and eternal beauty of the light were among the most remarkable of things I had ever known.

As I walked along the street, little remained of such beauty and clearness, and it was disheartening. The dates were aligned with the months of a frigid autumn. The leaves of a deceased fall flew, the fallen growing every second.

Oh, the contemptible darkness! The stars lay in the sky like sly coyotes, eager to feast on my flesh the second my back was turned. I could not bear the night, for I had an insane fear of those that are coherent and pellucid, turning into that which is enigmatic and incomprehensible. The night turns the world into such, I'm afraid. This careful blanket of ink covers all, despite their status, and does not relent until the sun sits at the top of the ever-changing sky once again. I nervously clicked my tongue as I continued to walk along this path, hoping to not stray into the enemy's hands from an accidental stumble.

I felt my body fatigue as I lay step after step on the cold, hard, concrete walkway, but sleep was something that I couldn't allow myself to do. I slid down the side of a brick building, in hopes that I could assuage my tired feelings, but it only became worse. What was to become of me? The second I let my eyes close was the second I would fall away into an eternal slumber, never to wake up and see the beautiful light once again.

When was the light to come back? It had been too long, far too long since I had been rid of this awful obsidian landscape, and I was becoming increasingly desperate with each passing second. I felt the apprehension begin to weigh down on my heart, as if an elephant were standing on my chest. The city was devoid of others, and all the windows in the buildings failed to show signs of yellow light. I wished heavily to have another being alongside me. But the second this thought entered my head, I chided myself for acting foolishly. After all, what could another human being possibly do to cool my anxious mind? But silently, I knew what good an individual could do. If someone talks to me, the world looks lighter.

A heavy breath poured out of my mouth, turning into a white vapour as it dissipated into the air. I finally succeeded in pulling myself to my feet and kept on walking. Attempting to escape this unlit entity was useless, all I could do was try and avoid its influence on my body. The world was beginning to blend into a fixture of fervent paranoia and cold fear as time passed on. I felt alone in my terror, no one else seemed to share this burning disquietude of what I kept experiencing night after night.

Such a phobia that I have is commonly thought of as a fear of the supernatural, those that only come out at night, fantastic creatures that will massacre or torture any being that crosses their path. But the reason for my revulsion of the witching hours is highly separated from this cognition. Neither tales of ghouls and their frightful doings, nor stories of spirits and their chilling hauntings, inspire trepidation in my soul; no physical monster or folktale can aptly explain my cowardice.

For it is the dark, not what may lurk in the dark.

The void that fills every corner of the world when the sun goes down is the monster. I do not fear the ineffable beings that may call this void their home; I fear the home itself. I fear the feeling of not being able to trust my own sight, and not being able to understand and look upon the world around me. Such a fate seems worse than death in its own right, being blind to the scenery around oneself. After all, what more can we depend on than our very own flesh and blood? But this seemingly self-evident statement evaporates under the complacent smirk of darkness. Akin to lycanthrope, in terms of psychological transformation, the rough hands of nightfall obscure all of the senses and leave one inept and maladroit, blinded to any possible circumstances. Right or wrong, I firmly held this perception in my belief, that the night sky only seeks to mentally asphyxiate and remove my body from the physical realm, allowing only my crucified thoughts and conscience to stay. My life ends and begins in the birth and death of the sun on the horizon, and so my thoughts have been always been dictated in such a fashion.

The lights above waned. Anxiety poured over my mind, akin to a fresh torrent of poison, as I silently urged the lightpost to stay alive for just a while longer.

I held the deed to neither home nor hovel that could protect me from this danger, and if I were left to the machinations of the dark, I would arrive to the sunrise a thoroughly fragmented and defective human. But the wishes and pleas of a single individual in an infinite world of possibilities are null and void. And so under the context of this knowledge, the lights departed from the area, a collective retreat of phosphorescent hope.

The despicable dark rushed in quickly, like vultures to a body. My heart dropped into my stomach, and my bones turned into rubber. In an instant, I was surrounded by the choking shadows, and I fell to my knees. I began to feel weightless and cold, like the blackness was attempting to exsanguinate my body for its own vile purposes. I could see nothing. Light was gone and had been replaced by an acute aberration of previous comforts. I curled up into a ball, assuming the foetal position due to the intense nausea and panic that was slowly overwhelming me.

Oh, cruel god!

Burn me alive until my skin has melted into my bone, drown me until no bubbles reach the surface, and stone my body until I am more bruise than I am man! But not this! Such a re-enactment of one's purest and deepest nightmares should be reserved for the truly wretched denizens of society, not for me. I tried to scream, but I couldn't. The reprehensible gloom was all around me, and I couldn't pretend it wasn't there. I began to carve my arms up with my fingernails, trying so hard to make the physical pain override my abhorrent feelings, but it was all in vain. Such profound emotional consternation will not be defeated by a bit of spilled sanguine, and it was asinine to think otherwise.

I stood up, trembling with dread and shame. Blood leaked down to the ground, and ribbons of skin hung grotesquely on my fingernails. A lurid scene of grisly crimson decorated the stone at my feet, and the smell of metal roughly permeated the air.

The lights! How could they have been off? I couldn't see and I couldn't think and I couldn't breathe. I could feel the malevolent cachinnations of the stars above, enjoying the debacle beneath them. Insane thoughts peppered my defeated mind as the moments ticked by on a seemingly stuck clock. The night seemed everlasting in its existence, and my will appeared to be the antithesis of such a characteristic. And now, shoved into the cause of my sovereign neurosis, my suffering magnified a hundredfold, leaving me a broken shell of a man that was cracked to begin with.

And so I ran blindly into the night, trying to escape the blinding presence of the shadowy material that covered me.

My phobias took no heed to my extreme effort to escape it, so it continued to degrade its host.

But, as I turned my head, a single pinprick of infectious joy stood eye level with me.

A light!

A light in a window!

It couldn't be. Feverish dreams must have imposed themselves on my reality, but it seemed these dreams were all I had right now and so onwards I walked to the light. It stood on the windowsill, as if it was Rapunzel and I her saviour. It was an old and likely abandoned house, evident from the overgrowths of weeds and mould that had taken the porch as their own. I cautiously traversed the grassy walkway up to the door and let myself into the decaying home. As the door creaked open, I could already see the delicate shadows that the light had crafted. My eyes were still heavily impaired from my previous experiences, and I found it difficult to manoeuvre these lit surroundings. But in time I located the shining object, sitting on a table that looked like it had been created far before my time. It was a white, smooth candle, with a dot of fire dancing on its tip, and it was held upright with a golden stand that had intricately carved designs on its surface. Surrounding the flame were bottles and bottles of what appeared to be strong alcohol. I breathed in the air, and the stench of such slapped me in the face. It must have been young teenagers who carelessly set this fire going, but it was their handiwork that has soothed my soul and heart.

I crouched over the flame, feeling more alive than I had felt in quite a while.

Giddiness washed over me like a warm stream of water as I stared at the fire, bobbing and weaving in the night air. The pain of my still bleeding scratches all but disappeared, and the inky blackness was held at bay from swallowing me up yet again. I playfully waved my hands over the flame, feeling the heat swarm over my digits.

The fire was near its end, however; the wax was furiously piling up onto the stand at a rate that worried me. The candle's death would weigh heavily on my soul and life, so I set my mind to the task of propagating my saviour. If this liberator were to fall, the consequences would be severe and swift. After a moment of contemplation, a solution unveiled itself to my eyes.

I confidently picked up the candle and put the dying flame to the edge of the table. For just a second, the flame appeared to fizzle out of existence. Then, abruptly, the table began to share the candle's loathing of the night and it too, turned itself over to the creation of light. Its antique nature only served to further its new purpose, as the excessively dry wood cracked under the weight of glimmering flares.

But what a sight to behold! The pyre threw out small embers like confetti at an arrival parade, and the flames disabled the crawling dark even further. Soon, the room was absent of anything injurious; the vibrant yellow and red colours consumed the floor, walls, and ceilings. The disgusting and abhorrent dark had fled the room, and rightly so, for it had no purpose here. I stood in front of the bonfire and a smile imprinted itself on my face as the heavenly warmth and light covered my vision entirely. The flames began to climb up the walls like a convoluted snake, and I felt a rush flow through my body. Let it grow, let it grow, and this mass blaze shall become a statue of fear for all that remains aphotic.

The simmering air was filled with burning bits of ancient wood, but I paid no heed to these glowing remains. I slowly backed away from the scorching colours as the heat became coarser, but my eyes never left the sight of my creation. From the light of a candle arose a magnificent creature of this size and potential.

Sirens disrupted the peaceful air, so I scuttled up a friendly-looking staircase with great haste to avoid being pulled from my destiny. And as I reached the top of the still untouched second floor, water poured in through the windows to bring back my worst nightmares.

But it was in vain, for no amount of inundation could ever stop this beautiful roar of heat and light.

The fires began to consume the entire bottom floor, and the landscape was alive with commotion. I gingerly opened a window on the top floor, and down on the ground were dozens of people who seemed to covet this flame. They gestured towards it wildly and fiercely, with screams pouring from their scarred throats. The men who attempted to wash the flames away yelled at me to jump down, but I was unwilling to return to a life of fear and paranoia, so I refused their ardent plea.

The flames began to grasp the areas of the floor I was on, and the house wavered underneath its own weight. The heat began to make my skin and eyes perspire, but I was awash in the endless glow.

I looked at the burning bits of wood and paper that flowed around the air and walked closer to the fire. The sun has crashed down to the earth, and I had been caught in the crossfire. A perpetual sea of ashy substances flowed over my skin as the conflagration reached its pinnacle.

Jump!

Jump!

These words wailed by the men, women, and children that lay on the tumour of a lawn were nonsensical to me and I tuned them out of my auditory perception. The firemen still attempted to drench the fire, but it was already too late for me to refuse the touch of destiny. My heart began to pump faster and faster as the blood on my arms began to turn back into a liquid from the vaporising heat around me.

Come for me! The pyre was but an ends to a means, a means that I had accomplished with this flaring element, and a means that I will not give up so easily. I screamed back to the people on the ground that where I was, I was safe. I was free from the choking hatred of the dark, and I was free from needing to run from something that was omnipresent in the absence of the sun. The house creaked and cracked, but my determination did not.

Soon, the wooden structure beneath me could not bear its own existence any longer, and relinquished itself to the earth that lay underneath it. I fell into the abyss with it, and I would have had it no other way. The fires too, were heavily weakened by the fall of its host, and became all but absent from the remaining corpse of the domicile. Broken and burnt sticks of lumbar lay strewn around my frame, and floating angels of soot and cinders fell on my hair, as if it was mid-winter and unexpected flurries had graced our skin. Everyone was howling to find me, to ensure that I would not leave this atrocious world that was heaven half the day, and hell the rest.

I looked to my side and saw the first pinpricks of the sun beginning to pour from the horizon. It steadily crawled up, drawing the darkness back into its vile corners and erasing the stars from the infinite sky. A tear left my eye as I watched the daylight blossom like a flower, as the rays of yellow light coaxed the morning dew out. My thoughts ran to a standstill while I was engrossed in the elegance and delicacy of this slow performance, feeling nothing but wonderment flow through my mutilated body.

I took a deep breath, felt the hot gravel on the ground, and stared at the celestial sun one last time. One of the

firemen had found my bloodied body and called the others over to pick me up. But it simply could not be done; I was too far gone in my own fantasies and could not be saved.

As I was gently pulled out of the fiery carnage, and held in the arms of the one who found me, I found the strength to pour a single phrase out of my scorched and blistered throat, before I lost the energy to continue my forlorn survival.

“Don’t put me back in the dark.”

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