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# Editorial

*by Daniel Young*

Welcome to our fifteenth issue and thanks for your subscription or single-issue purchase—it means a lot to us that the journal is still selling and readers are still engaging with the content over three years after we started. If you like what we're doing, or if you'd like us to improve or change our focus in certain areas, please don't hesitate to get in touch by emailing [editor@tincture-journal.com](mailto:editor@tincture-journal.com). And please do help us continue paying our contributors by spreading the word and increasing our readership!

This issue begins with the third and final instalment of Megan McGrath's column that's been tackling the question of literary jealousy and how it impacts the psyche of emerging writers. Having spoken to Dave Burton and Anna Spargo-Ryan in previous columns, this time Megan has interviewed her friend and colleague Ellen van Neerven, author of *Heat and Light* and *Comfort Food*, both published by UQP. I hope you've enjoyed Megan's column this year, and if you have an idea for a new column series, 3-4 instalments of around 600-800 words, why not send me a pitch?

The rest of the issue is, as always, a selection of the best poetry, creative non-fiction and fiction that's found its way into our Submittable portal over the past few months. Our poetry editor Stuart Barnes has delivered an eclectic mix as always, including poems by S. K. Kelen, Susan Bradley Smith, SB Wright, David Adès, Ramon Loyola, Anthony Lawrence, and more. Speaking of Stuart, by the time this is published, his 2015 Thomas Shapcott Prize winning collection *Glasshouses* will be launched and available. Please join me in congratulating Stuart's poetic goal-kicking and help support his work by buying a copy of this magnificent collection.

In prose land, we have return contributor Elisabeth Murray alongside a diverse bunch of new contributors from Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia, the Phillipines, the US and the UK. Without further ado: bring it on!

# Making Noise: Part Three

*by Megan McGrath*

About the same time as I'm finishing the draft of my manuscript, my dear friend Ellen van Neerven is launching her second book. *Comfort Food* is a poetry collection, in her words, "about the real stuff, you know, family, love, connection to land, our culture and our freedoms". I read the new book on the night of her Brisbane launch and tell her what I think of it. She says I make her uncomfortable because she's never experienced "such ongoing and chronic praise from a peer".

Ellen isn't just a friend, she's also my colleague and I adore her. We share a pod, and a passion for good books and better writing. Often, I wake up to Facebook telling me Ellen has another story being published, or she's won a poetry award for new work, or co-won a major writing prize for *Heat and Light*. For someone like me with self-confessed envy issues, it's not easy to front up to her success four days a week when I go to my desk job. And sometimes, usually when I'm struggling under the weight of my own projects and uncertainty, I'm like, *enough already*.

I let Twitter tell her I've finished the draft of my manuscript because for some reason I think saying it out loud will scare my 75,000 words away. When I was in the middle of it, she wrote to me, "Long things are hard. I write short fiction and poetry for a reason. I've never been able to hold my breath under water, or blow a balloon up. That's what I feel like writing a novel is like for me. You seem like you'd be good at this type of breathing. I think we both have to keep reminding ourselves why we're doing it and find new motivations." I'm in awe of her when she says this—I *am* good at holding my breath underwater, and it does give me new motivation to keep going.

As I celebrate the release of *Comfort Food* with Ellen, I find the difference between envy and admiration. I'm not jealous of Ellen's work. We write very different things, in very different ways. Sure, I wasted some years being envious of her outcomes, and of her well-earned success, but after chatting to Burton and Spargo-Ryan, and almost daily with Ellen, I think I'm well on my way to being cured of my professional jealousy.

This realisation comes at the same time that industry talk of envy among writers seems to be increasing, proving I am not, nor have I ever been, alone with my envy. I almost laugh when the Emerging Writers' Festival hosts the session, *It's Not Easy Being Green* in June, and Katherine Gillespie writes an article in *Vice* titled 'Why Are Writers So Prone to Jealousy?' It's like being jealous is currently trending. In 2015 Khalid Warsame tweeted to much praise, "Being a writer means that you spend 5% of your time writing, and the rest of your time being consumed by jealousy". Should I be redirecting my jealousy to people who make more noise about being jealous than me?

On envy, Ellen says, "I have definitely had times when my heart's been momentarily broken by missing out on things. I have had many writers around me produce the kind of work I feel is genius, and unattainable for me, like I'll never write at that level."

When Ellen is touring *Comfort Food* in Sydney, I'm preparing my handouts for a short story writing workshop in the rural Queensland town of Beaudesert. I always use Ellen's story 'The Wheel' from her collection *Heat and Light* when I teach. On my handouts she is in the company of my favourite writers: J.G. Ballard, Cate Kennedy, and Jhumpa Lahiri. I am not jealous of them or their work, and nor should I be of Ellen, or any other debuting or emerging Australian writer. We are all holding our breath for our own projects, in our own way. And besides, if I was truly jealous, I could just delete Ellen from my word document. But I know I won't.

Read more:

<http://www.furiousvaginas.com/2016/05/ellen-van-neerven-comfort-food-and.html>

[http://www.vice.com/en\\_au/read/jealous-young-writers-emerging-writers-festival-2016](http://www.vice.com/en_au/read/jealous-young-writers-emerging-writers-festival-2016)

<http://www.emergingwritersfestival.org.au/event/not-easy-green/>

*Megan McGrath is the author of the novella, Whale Station, and winner of the 2015 Queensland Literary Awards Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. Her acclaimed short work is published in literary journals and anthologies including Griffith REVIEW, Meanjin, Seizure, Tracks, Writing Queensland and Tincture Journal, among others. Follow Megan on Twitter @megansfictions or visit her website megansfictions.com.*

# Saving Daniel

*by Lucie Britsch*

What's so funny?

This girl

Huh?

So I was looking at getting this make-up

You don't need make-up

Ha ha

Anyway, so I was looking at this make-up and looking at the reviews and it went great, great, then an OK, another great, a love love love this stuff, a marvellous

Do people still say marvellous?

Apparently so

Marvellous

So then another great, one girl really really liked how it made her eyes pop and you know how I feel about the whole eye-popping thing

You like yours staying where they should be

Exactly

Who doesn't?

This girl

Right

Anyway, so we have a lot of greats, an OK and an awesome then this girl says it should be banned

She shows him the screen

*Makeyourselfpretty 24 hour party ready perfecting foundation*

★☆☆☆☆ *Review by SarahLouise81*

*5/30/2015 4:39:00 AM*

*This make-up should be banned!!!*

*I wore this to work and after 2 hours it was literally sliding off my face and caused me to break out! Sophie from Accounting said it didn't look that bad but she is a liar! I am supposed to be going to a party tonight. This make up has ruined my life.*

*I have given it one star because the packaging is really cute.*

They were both laughing now

So anyway I started to worry about this SarahLousie81 so I looked at some of her other reviews

I like where you're going with this

Good. Pull up a chair

Check out her review on TripAdvisor

She shows him the screen

*Sea Breeze Hotel*

★☆☆☆☆ *Review by SarahLouise81*

*7/23/2015 2:28:00 AM*

*DO NOT STAY HERE!*

*This hotel ruined my life! We ended up here after it turned out Daniel forgot to make a reservation for us at the hotel like he said he would and this was the only place with any rooms. Now I know why. I have never seen anything more disgusting in my life. Daniel didn't think it was that bad but I've seen his apartment. I almost walked straight out and threatened to sleep on a bench. I honestly cannot say one good thing about this place. The bathroom was filthy, the bedding had a funny stain on it, there were holes in the wall, and it smelt funny. I mean the shower looked unsafe! Daniel says there was only one hole in the wall but how many do you need? Daniel also says the kettle worked OK but I was asleep by then, in my clothes I add, just to get the night over with. The one star is for the kettle then. I would have given it zero stars but Daniel says I was looking for things to complain about and he's stayed in worse places.*

*I repeat DO NOT STAY HERE unless you want to get robbed or raped. Daniel says I can't say that because I did not get robbed or raped and the kettle was OK.*

Holy shit

I know! I think I love this girl

I'm worried for Daniel

You should be

Check this out

She shows him the screen

*Cosmopolis by Don DeLillo*

*1 of 1 people found the following review helpful*

*★★★★★ Don't waste your time!*

*By Sarahlouis81 on June 22, 2015*

*Format: Paperback*

*I did NOT enjoy this book. I wanted to but I just didn't. Daniel said I would love it but he clearly does not know me at all. He said I wasn't trying but I was. It would have been easier to concentrate on his precious book if he hadn't of been clipping his toe nails on the coffee table or flicking channels because he can't just sit through the ad breaks like normal people because he has self-diagnosed adhd but his mother and I just think he's jealous his brother Sam has just been diagnosed with actual dyslexia and he feels left out. So I tried. Mostly to shut to him up obviously because I could not live another day with him going on about how amazing this book was and how it would change my life. I knew him before he read it and as far as I can tell his life has not changed. This book will not change your life! Don't waste your money. Whenever I recommend a book he just laughs like my college degree is in nail art or some shit and I'm not even literate. I know it's because of the whole Eat Pray Love incident but how was I to know it would get made into a movie and that he had a strong Julia Roberts aversion. Most people's is mild. I mean how was I to know? And I did not say it would change his life I just said it might be better than nothing seeing as we were stuck in that lift and I only had it in my bag because Marcy forced it on me and he knows I can't say no. Which is a whole other problem which we're not allowed to talk about.*

*So I did NOT enjoy this book. I tried. I really did. I would see a movie of it maybe but only if it's showing at that nice movie theatre with the freshly baked cookies and not that grotty one where the seats are always sticky. People are disgusting.*

At least she helped one person not read the best book ever

Let's hope that one person was Daniel and it was helpful because he realised he needed to get the hell out of there

She might be really pretty

She broke out remember

Oh yeah

So what now?

Now I have to do some real work and maybe start thinking about dinner and pick my ears but not necessarily in that order but I'll be thinking about Daniel the whole time

What if we fool around?

I'll still be thinking about Daniel

Me too

It's the next day

I think your girl's on the news!

What?

Look! Some girl called Sarah Louise is having a meltdown at some coffee shop downtown

Holy shit

I know!

From what I can make out her coffee was too hot and she was not happy

She's doing the full Michael Douglas thing!

*Liberace?*

What? No, *Falling Down*

I didn't see that

He goes nuts in Burger King

Sounds like an excellent premise for a film

It was

Look! In the background!

Could that be him?

I don't know any Daniels but it might be him

Should we go down there?

Yes! Let's do this. Let's go save Daniel

High five

Nope

Not even this once?

Nope

They plan on running downtown but in reality he can't find his other trainer and she has to stop to pet a dog but eventually they get to the coffee shop

Daniel!

Err yes. Hello. Do I know you?

Oh right, no

We're here to save you!

What?

What he said

Cool. Can I bring my brother?

The dyslexic!

What?

Yeah, fine, let's just get out of here

Ten minutes later they are back at the apartment

So what now

TV?

Yeah, sure just no internet

She'll find me you know

She won't, just don't go on Tinder or anything stupid

Hey guys, look, she just put a review of jail on Yelp

Seriously?

Seriously and she's not the only one

Ha ha

And she met some dude!

Really?

She says he's a known felon but he had nice shoes!

Good for her

Good for her

But what about Daniel?

Can I just stay here a while?

Sure

So they had saved Daniel

And had a small adventure

And she got to pet a dog and he found his other trainer and that's just how it is sometimes

But wait, did you decide about the make-up?

Oh right, yes, no, I decided not to get it, thanks to Sarah Louise

I miss her

Me too

*British born with Germanic roots (very different from Jamaican roots in the fun stakes) she fears her writing career peaked too soon when she won a poopscoop slogan contest as a child. Her writing has since appeared in Barrelhouse, Vol. 1 Brooklyn, This is Pinball, The Millions and Catapult Story and she has gained an honourable mention in Glimmer Train. She says she is working on some books but is mostly reading other people's and realising hers is rubbish in comparison.*

# Slingshot

*by David Adès*

David without it  
and Goliath a behemoth,

the ground shaking  
and half the sky  
dark with Goliath's intent,  
dark with thunderclouds.

David knowing fear,  
Goliath invulnerability.

David knowing adrenalin,  
knowing speed, evasion,  
thinking as fast as his heart's beat,  
his legs' frantic pound,

ducking the brute swing  
of Goliath's arm, circling,

turning Goliath around  
to the sky's other half,  
the sun's blinding light,  
glint of sword in Goliath's eyes,

slice of it through air, into flesh,  
Goliath toppling,  
unable to bear his own weight,  
the weight of legend,

David become his own slingshot.

*David Adès is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet now living in Sydney after living in Pittsburgh since 2011. He has been a member of Friendly Street Poets since 1979. He is the author of Mapping the World (Friendly Street Poets / Wakefield Press), which was commended for the Anne Elder Award 2008, and the chapbook Only the Questions Are Eternal (Garron Publishing). He was a volunteer editor of the Australian Poetry Members Anthology, Metabolism. His poems have appeared widely in Australia and the US in publications including over 20 of the Friendly Street Readers, and numerous literary magazines. In 2014 David was awarded the inaugural University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize and was also shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize. In 2016 he was a finalist in the Dora and Alexander Raynes Poetry Prize.*

# I Dream of Marie

*Non-fiction by Christina Tang-Bernas*

I dream of Marie.

Not as the famous scientist, but as the pensive black-and-white woman in the photographs. She's soft and tired, with lines around her eyes. Her frizzy hair is loose on one side. Her knuckles are red and white and worn, bones brittle beneath thin skin.

§

Water consists of two hydrogen atoms combined with one oxygen atom, two gaseous elements transmuting into life. A glass of water contains approximately two hundred grams of water, or six point six nine times ten to the twenty-fourth power water molecules. The total mass of the hydrosphere is approximately seven times ten to the twenty-first power glasses of water. So every glass of water I've swallowed could hold molecules from every single other glass of water ever swallowed.

How many glasses of water have I drunk in a lifetime?

Uncountable, the molecules passing through my throat to soak into my cells, back into the Earth and sky to fall upon us once again. Uncountable, the molecules passing through Marie, through her lips, through her heart, through her tears, that now touch my tongue. I drink her life in, drink in the lives of everyone and everything who ever lived, who ever needed water to make it through one more day.

§

I dream of Marie, obscured. Black miasma coats her innards. Her profound depression reflects my own, so thick and choking; it's easier to stay in place, to fall, to bury ourselves deep into the ground. "What's wrong?" people ask, and it's everything and nothing. It's inexpressible, because I haven't learned the right words yet, or they've yet to be invented. And I'm not smart enough to make up words that others will understand.

People whisper, "It's all in your head." I know. It's in the electrical impulses

streaking through my neurons, in the potent chemical mix my body produces telling it to do the opposite of what it's meant to do: to live. And I wish I could hand someone a knife, tell them to chop it out and throw it squirming into the trash. But I don't know where it dwells.

All I know is that it feels like I'm dying, or already dead, and my body's just waiting for permission to follow. A stillborn baby of a consciousness. And knowing all the facts in the world doesn't change anything or make it better. It is. And I am. And I wish I weren't.

Poof. Gone. Not disappeared. Never existing.

But the law of the conservation of energy and matter commands otherwise.

It doesn't matter anyways.

Because I'm strong (or so I lie to myself). Strong enough to force my body to live for one more second.

One more second.

One more second.

Until seconds become minutes become hours become days, and one day I look up to find I've made it through the worst.

This time.

§

The lung capacity of an average woman is four point two litres. What's an 'average woman'? Have I ever met her? I'm not sure what she thought of me. What is it like, to be normal? Does normal even understand? Does normal know how abnormal it is?

The average lung capacity of a woman is four point two litres. And each lungful of air is as different as the woman breathing it, as different as each of the three hundred to five hundred million alveoli clustered inside of us. The short fast stuttering breaths of grief and fear. The long deep fulfilling breaths of wonder and arousal. The choking hot

gasps of panic.

I breathe in the complex mixture of oxygen tangled up with nitrogen gas, with the scent molecules that trigger the sharp-sweet memories of fresh-cut grass and laughter and sunshine, with pollen and skin-flakes dissolved into shimmering motes of dust. I hold it in, thinking of the Marie-infused dust trapped inside of me, of me trapped inside of me, until my lungs ache and burn. Breathing out, I watch the white cloud float before me before dissipating to mix with a billion upon billion other breaths, ready to be sucked in by another set of lungs.

§

I dream of Marie, cut through with light. And I don't know whether it's the light of her intellect, the light of her fierce dedication, or the light of the radioactivity that shrivelled her up into nothingness. Perhaps she glows brighter through the constant friction she endured, as she fought to be seen as equal and worthy. Even just to herself.

The way I struggle.

The way any human desires in the regard of other humans. Because everyone is a Me and everyone else is a You, but every one of You thinks you're a Me, and Me equals Me equals Me.

§

Polonium-210 has a half life of one hundred thirty-eight point three eight days. Radium-226 has a half life of one thousand six hundred one years.

There's nothing left of Marie anymore, except her ashes, a few photographs, and the consequences of her actions. Marie, herself, is gone. The feel of the cobblestones beneath her feet. The expanding emotions pushing against her sternum at the sight of her partners, of her daughters. The thoughts she could never express aloud out of fear or love or simply because some thoughts aren't meant to be released into the air. Because some thoughts are oxidised on contact with the outside, and it's never quite the same.

All lost in a fleeting moment.

But not the radioactivity infused into her ashes, clinging to her papers. In the year

three thousand five hundred thirty-five, half the radium present at the time of her death will still wrap around the remnants of her bones. A half of a half in the year five thousand one hundred thirty-six. Will there be a remnant lingering on long enough to undergo a second cremation when the sun expands to a red dwarf, to be sucked into our star's final white-dwarf incarnation along with my remains and the layer-cake of human history piling up in the Earth's crust?

§

I dream of Marie, solemn serious Marie who stares back at me, and I don't know if I'm looking in a mirror instead. If I'm her, my hair and skin and eyes bleached away by the jar of radium placed beside my pillow, burning dream-impressions into the folds and lobes of my brain. Or if she's me. If she's inside of me, the building blocks of the person I am.

I don't know how much of me is really me and not the remnants of everyone else lingering in my lungs, my bowels, my very cells.

I only know how to live for one more second.

One more second.

And I hope someday, someone dreams of me.

*Christina Tang-Bernas lives in California with her extroverted husband and introverted cat. Her work has appeared in Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Still Points Arts Quarterly, WomenArts Quarterly Journal, and Kansas City Voices. Find out more at <http://www.christinatangbernas.com>.*

# Fragment: Tuesday Evening, Waitan

*by Ella Jeffery*

Just looking, I say  
to the man selling cups and cutlery  
from a pushcart parked  
by the Huangpu.  
He says it back: just looking,  
rolls out the vowels like a spare mattress,  
a foreigner's hazy phrase.  
We haggle over prices  
and I take the two cups I chose  
for their colour. Behind us,  
white light scrapes the river  
where a coal boat  
murmurs to the coast  
like a child with half  
her face in the water.

*Ella Jeffery is writer and editor from northern NSW, currently based in Brisbane and completing a PhD in contemporary Australian poetry at Queensland University of Technology. Her poems and short fiction have appeared in Best Australian Poems 2013, Cordite, Mascara Literary Review and elsewhere.*

# Whale Song

*by Ben Armstrong*

- The person, who was now dead, had been playing whale song at the time of the collision. They said the driver of the truck must have been devastated. They also said that speed was likely to be a factor.
- The dead driver had never listened to whale song before and had purchased the CD from a gift store only a day before the crash and her death. One of the paramedics reached over her corpse to stop the CD. The truck driver and the various emergency workers and motorists all heard the whale song but none of them thought for a second that it could be considered poignant or fitting or hauntingly lonely because there were fumes and the sight of blood to contend with and most of them were primarily concerned with their role in the unfolding situation: concerned with whether they were doing enough or getting in the way or feeling too little emotion or too much.
- The dead person did not consider whether the whale song would still be playing after she had died.
- Her family was assaulted with grief. This was the worst thing that had ever happened to them as a collective unit.
- When she was alive she was worried about how others perceived her. She was aware that most people share this concern but it still felt intensely unique and intensely, painfully isolating. She found herself amused by and even laughing at things that were not meant to be amusing at all. She found herself inventing opinions on the spot just so she could keep up. She was scared this would one day be discovered and made known. She found it confusing and troubling that others could believe so absolutely in the things they said, and thought that this was perhaps the source of the fundamental disconnect between herself and everyone else who seemed to exist so securely in their talking, interacting, failing human bodies.
- She purchased the CD before she had made the commitment to kill herself.

*Ben Armstrong is a bushwalking guide and occasional student from Hobart. His work has been published in Picton Grange Quarterly Review and Tasmanian Geographic. He doesn't intend to leave Tasmania.*

# Bonbon

*by Joe Baumann*

Herbert Shilling was surprised to open his freezer one morning and find a tiny man cleaning out his ice chest.

“Hi there,” the man said, pausing in his work. He was well-proportioned, but very small, maybe a foot tall, and had to hunch over just so at the waist to fit in the freezer so that his body took on the shape of an opened straight-razor. His black hair glistened like a helmet, pomaded against his skull, and he wore a striped, candy cane white-and-red tie cinched tight against the neck of a somehow wrinkle-free navy blue button-down shirt. “I’m almost done here. Then we’ll tackle the fridge.” He tapped an accusatory finger against one of Herbert’s frozen pizzas. “We’re going to start with your diet.” Grunting with effort, he hoisted up the pizza box in a way that defied the laws of physics, gripping it on one side with his tiny hands and lifting it up off the freezer floor. He looked like a track and field athlete hoisting a discus the size of a patio umbrella.

“Give me a hand here, would you?”

Herbert took up the pizza.

“Straight in the trash, please.”

Unsure of what else to do and confused into silence, Herbert threw the pizza into the garbage can under the sink.

The doll-sized man patted his hands against olive canvas jeans. Herbert couldn’t decide if the array of colours matched or not, whether they were bold or an eyesore. “Name’s Trag Bonheim. People call me Bonbon on account of me being bite-sized. Your ex-wife hired me.” When Herbert said nothing, Trag rapped his knuckles against Herbert’s temple. “Your ex-wife? Marybeth? Hello? She’s worried about you, thinks you need to get back out there but that your lifestyle isn’t conducive to such things yet.” Trag turned from Herbert and poked a tub of Breyer’s ice cream. “This won’t help. But I will. That’s why I’m here. Questions?”

“What is going on?”

“Good. I’m glad you asked. This whole process requires communication, and that doesn’t just mean me talking to you or barking out orders, although to be honest I’ll certainly be doing that. I can be a bit pushy, but as long as you remember that it’s all for your own good, we should get along no problem.”

“I don’t understand.”

Trag sighed and shuffled forward to the edge of the freezer and sat down, the heels of his thick loafers rumping against the refrigerator door as his legs swayed forward and back like lazy pendulums. His weight made the whole thing creak.

“Marybeth hired me. I’m your new life coach.”

“Life coach.”

“Life coach.” Trag stood up, suddenly energetic. “I am here to get you in shape and out into the world again.”

“Oh?”

“Look, you and Marybeth may not be married anymore, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t still care about you.”

“Oh.”

“You still care about her, right?”

Herbert thought for a minute and shrugged. Of course he still cared about Marybeth; the divorce had been amicable, a clean break. She took the house, he took everything in it. They split their savings fifty-fifty. She’d offered him a hug when they left his attorney’s office, and he’d accepted it willingly, taking in the smell of her lavender shampoo one last time, pressing his hand against her strong back that he knew she would have lotioned with butterscotch-scented moisturiser, something he had done for her in the early days of their marriage. She’d been a rower in college and she’d kept rowing. He’d been a runner but had stopped running. For a long time she had, through no fault of her own, made Herbert feel soft, overly aware of the downward slouch of his skin and the

shortness of breath that overcame him when he climbed too many stairs.

“Sure I care about her. But I still don’t understand.”

“Help me outta here, would ya?” Trag held out a small hand.

“Uh.”

“Don’t worry. No need to be gentle. Just pick me up. Think of me as a sack of potatoes. Your sack of potatoes. A very helpful, motivating sack of potatoes.”

Herbert picked Trag up like a sack of potatoes, or really a baby whose face was covered in snot or throw-up: Herbert’s hands under the tiny man’s armpits, thumbs hooked up toward Trag’s shoulders, arms outstretched to keep Trag away from Herbert’s own body should he soil himself or lash out or something.

“Now what?”

“Maybe set me down how about?”

“OK. Where?”

“Let’s go with the floor.”

“Oh. Right.”

Even though Herbert’s hands were clean Trag, who seemed even smaller when standing on the same level as Herbert, brushed his shirt off when Herbert let go of him, as if he’d been rolled in dust. He flattened the fabric like his hand was an iron, straightened the candy cane tie, and clapped twice. It was then that Herbert was overwhelmed by the smell of chocolate, as if he was surrounded by mounds of Hershey bars.

“Are you wearing weird cologne?” Herbert said.

Trag blinked twice and said nothing. Herbert did the same until Trag clapped his hands again.

“OK, first this refrigerator door. And don’t think I’ve forgotten about the ice cream.”

Trag poked a finger against the beige fridge door and pulled down on one of the low-hanging take-out menus, stretching and standing on his tippy toes to reach the flapping paper: the Thai place down the street that used armloads of MSG. The magnet holding the menu in place clattered to the ground like a broken dish. “These have got to go.”

“Why?”

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘you are what you eat’? Cliché, I know. But some clichés are true.” Trag looked Herbert up and down, his nose crinkling like he’d caught a whiff of something rancid. “This—” he flourished his hands in a spastic wave toward Herbert’s body, “—can only be fixed by removing this.” Flourish toward the fridge, which was covered in similar menus, all dangling from magnets shaped like farm animals. They had been Marybeth’s trinkets, taking up her refrigerator before she and Herbert had ever met, many of them stuck to the door for the sake of being there, with nothing to hold up. Herbert hadn’t asked to take them; she’d snuck them into one of the packed boxes the day he moved out. He’d never really figured out why Marybeth had gifted them to him; he couldn’t remember any declarations he’d made of care for or interest in them. Sure, he’d fondled them a few times while staring absently at their closed fridge while he debated whether he wanted crackers for a snack or something from the freezer. He wasn’t even sure he did care about them. The only reason he still had the magnets, he told himself, was that he didn’t want to go out and buy new ones when there were perfectly usable ones here already.

“Help me out here, would ya? I’m going to have some trouble with the high ones.”

After they’d plucked down the menus, tossing them on the kitchen counter in a dishevelled stack of tri-folded papers, Trag directed Herbert to start opening the cabinets for inspection.

“We’re going to have to open every cabinet, every drawer.”

“All of them?”

“Look, you should know this about me: I go all-in. You can’t hide anything from me. We’re going to go through all of it. These cabinets, your bathroom, your closet, your DVDs, your nightstand.”

“My nightstand?” Herbert felt a wave of bile in his throat.

“Yes. And don’t worry.” Trag held up a hand as if to stop Herbert in his tracks even though he wasn’t moving. “I’ve seen everything. And I mean everything. Sex toys, dirty tapes, gross underwear, you name it I’ve seen it. I cannot be shocked.”

“OK.”

“And you should not feel embarrassed. I am not here to judge you. I am here to help you.”

“What if I don’t want to be helped?”

Trag scowled for the first time. He’d been smiling, a real shit-eating grin that seemed to stretch across the sides of his face like he was a reflection in a funhouse mirror. But now his cheeks were full of gloom, his forehead a storm cloud. Herbert liked it, a little. He wanted to smack the grin off Trag’s face, but turning that grin upside down would do for now.

“Look, I’ll level with you. Marybeth already paid my retainer and six months’ worth of coaching up front, and I am not cheap. It would be unethical of me not to give, and irresponsible of you not to take, my help. That’s why I’m here.”

“You said that already.” Herbert stared down at Trag, who met his gaze, staring up so that Herbert could see his well-manicured nose hairs. The little man’s shoes glistened with fresh wax. His chocolatey scent seemed to intensify as the grin grew. Herbert’s stomach growled.

When Trag said nothing, Herbert sighed. “Fine, whatever.”

“Good. That’s the spirit. Well, OK, you could use a bit more spirit, but we’ll work on that. Baby steps. We’re gonna take things slow, do them right. No cutting corners for us. Now, let’s throw away that mountain of take-out boxes, shall we?”

Herbert had to admit that the styrofoam containers had gotten out of control, taking up a corner of the counter in a cluster like they were some gang of hoodlums that no self-respecting, cowering man like Herbert would ever go near. When he didn’t move,

Herbert felt Trag prodding the side of his knee with a strong finger—much too strong, Herbert thought, for a man Trag’s size—and the sensation was much less painful than deemed by his reaction—a high-pitched groan, his right leg pitching and collapsing, Herbert having to grip the edge of the sink—mostly because he’d never been assaulted in that particular spot in that particular way before.

“Jesus,” Herbert said with a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. “I’m going, I’m going. Let me get a trash bag. Cripes.”

“Another cliché for you, pal: ‘he who hesitates is lost’, or something of that ilk. That’ll come up again when we get into the portion about getting out there and meeting people, you know, talking to women or whatever you happen to be into.”

“I’m into women,” Herbert grunted.

“But it’s apt here. These kinds of rip-the-band-aid-off gestures gotta be quick, you know?”

“They’re just to-go boxes.”

“They are not. Just. To-go boxes.” Trag put his hands on his hips, his fists the size of tiny Christmas ornaments. “These things represent an entire lifestyle. And I’m not just talking bad nutrition—but believe you me that’s something we’re fixing right away, pal—but the laziness of letting someone prepare your food for you that often.”

“Uh huh.” Herbert fanned out a plastic trash bag, letting it snap open like a parachute with a bright popping noise. “You got all that from some empty pizza boxes?”

“They’re Chinese containers and Subway wrappers, Herbert, but that’s not the point. Yes, I did get all that. And more. You know what kind of person eats out that often? Someone lacking the confidence to get out in the world. Someone lacking the confidence to fend for themselves. You need someone else to cook your food because you don’t think you can do it right.” The small man’s voice had grown high, like a teapot’s whistle. Herbert thought steam might come shooting out of Trag’s ears.

“You’re doing a really good job of being inspirational right now,” Herbert said, shoving the last of the boxes into the black bag, which looked like a misshapen sack of

Christmas presents, sharp edges jutting out against the stretchy material every which way.

“Part of being a good coach is not sugar-coating things,” Trag said. “And don’t think that just because my nickname is a sweet little delight that I will be the same way.” He frowned and tapped his foot. “It really is a terrible nickname, isn’t it?” He shook his head. “Anywho, that’s neither here nor there. While you get that tossed in the dumpster outside, I’ll get started on a grocery list.”

“How did you get in here, anyway?”

Trag shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Industry secrets, my friend.” He winked, and Herbert was sure he saw a glimmer of light like in old cartoons. “We all have them. Even me.”

## §

After ravaging Herbert’s fridge and writing down a shopping list that looked like it was half-written in another language (“What is quinoa?” Herbert had said, squinting at Trag’s tiny, blocky, and, of course, perfect handwriting, pronouncing it with three syllables: quin-oh-uh; Trag had sighed and tucked the list into his pocket), they moved on to Herbert’s bedroom. Trag first waddled to Herbert’s nightstand. Herbert hadn’t really noticed it in the kitchen, but Trag walked like he was a penguin, or someone suffering from slight vertigo, perhaps due to a slight unevenness in the length of his legs? He’d read somewhere, hadn’t he, that tiny people often had that kind of problem? Was it PC to call them tiny people? What else? Dwarves? Midgets? Trag was smaller than both.

For example, Trag had to struggle to reach the handle to the drawer in Herbert’s nightstand. He cleared his throat and glanced back at Herbert between tries, his little fingers slipping against the metal.

Herbert shrugged. “Self-reliance and do-it-yourself, right?”

“Also knowing when to ask for help, so please help.”

Herbert flung open the nightstand and stepped back. Trag was too short to see into the nightstand, so he snapped his fingers and pointed back at Herbert, who hoisted Trag

up onto the bed, plopping him down like he was a stuffed animal.

“Good! Look, we’re already learning to communicate without words. Fast work. Good adaptation. That’s a checkmark in the positive column for you.”

“Well howdy-dooody,” Herbert said, ignoring the sharp glance Trag gave him.

Trag peered into the nightstand.

“Nothing that out of the ordinary. Don’t know what had you so riled up.”

“I wasn’t riled up.”

“Yes you were. I can always tell, Herbert. You thought there was something I shouldn’t see.” Trag shut the nightstand. “It was the box of condoms, wasn’t it?”

“Well.”

“Those are a good sign! The kind of thing I like to see, you know?”

“Why?”

“Only someone who thinks he might get laid is going to keep a box of condoms in his nightstand. And someone who thinks he’s going to get laid has some amount of confidence, somewhere deep down. Look, Herbert, you’re still in the prime of your life. You look like you’re in your mid-twenties still.”

“Yeah, right.”

“OK, maybe you look like your mid-twenties are buried under a few too many Krispie Kremes and a sedentary lifestyle, but that’s what I’m here for. Marybeth did tell me she loved that you’d look like you were twenty-five until you were sixty.”

“She said that?”

“Well.” Herbert thought he saw a flash of rosiness start to splash onto Trag’s cheeks, but his gargantuan grin swallowed up his skin in its creases. “She said you were youthful, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

“Well, she’s right. I can see that; with a few weeks in the gym, you’ll have a sharp jaw line, and goddamn if you don’t have the strongest hairline I’ve seen on anyone besides myself in a very long time. So see, you’ve got a lot going for you.”

“I think the condoms are expired. I may have bought them when Marybeth and I were still dating.”

Trag sighed, his shoulders slumping like he was a deflating balloon. “You’re breaking my balls, Herbert. But hey, honesty, right? At least you’re learning that much.”

## §

Herbert hated to admit it, but after a month with Trag his life did, in fact, seem better. He felt better. After insisting that he get a gym membership, Trag followed Herbert there every morning before work, waking Herbert by clanging two steel pots together until Herbert got into the habit of rousing himself from his bed before Trag arrived, sometimes yanking off the covers before the sun had risen. Trag said nothing about this, but his grin did grow even bigger, lips stretching so far across his face that Herbert expected his whole head to unzip into two halves, jaw hinging apart like his head was a plastic Easter egg.

At the gym, while Herbert ran on the treadmill, Trag sat on the edge of an unused machine smelling like a bakery. Some days it was the cloudy smell of powdered sugar, others baked bread. Whenever Herbert said anything, Trag acted as though he didn’t know what Herbert was talking about, just shaking his head and returning his attention to whatever magazine he’d brought along. One day it was *Cosmo*, the next *The Atlantic*. Once, Trag even had an old issue of *Nintendo Power*, its edges frayed and the colour faded and worn. Trag would read things aloud while Herbert huffed and puffed, shirt and hair drenched with dark whorls of sweat.

“You know the Konami code, right?” Trag would ask while Herbert did push-ups. As they got easier, Trag started sitting on Herbert’s back to increase the burn. “I always got it all tied up, my fingers knotted, pressing B when I needed to hit A.” Or, “So that’s how you beat that boss. Never could get past that one.” Trag always wore the same dark colours, switching between navy blue and black shirts. He only had two traditional ties,

but sometimes he wore a bolo, the leather strings flapping as he waddled next to Herbert. No matter the weather, he was stitched up in fabric, his tie in a Windsor knot so tight Herbert thought that Trag should have been choking to death or constantly sweating, plucking at his suffocating collar with a scythe-curved finger, but the small man never showed any signs of discomfort. His shoes thumped against the rubber of the treadmill like a bass drum, keeping time. As the intensity of Herbert's workouts increased, so did the strength of Trag's sweet smells. At first they had mocked Herbert, left him salivating for a cruller or a muffin, but Trag would shake his head and tssk at these off-the-cuff comments, saying that eating sweets is what makes our body want them more, and the longer Herbert went without the less he'd have the desire to pig out.

In their second month together, they went shopping for new clothes for Herbert when he'd shed enough belly fat that his pants kept slipping down even with a belt cinched tight around his waist.

"No more pleated pants, Herbert. We don't want people thinking you're in your fifties."

"I'm close enough, don't you think?"

"No, Herbert, I do not think that thirty-six is 'close enough' to your fifties to wear pleated pants."

Herbert hated shopping, but Trag was all about it. He would stop Herbert, tugging at his pants, whenever he saw something Herbert needed to try on. By the time he reached the fitting rooms Herbert resembled a deformed Sesame Street puppet, shoulders and arms piled with shirts and pants and blazers and athletic shorts Trag insisted he try on one at a time, flourishing himself in the full-length mirror and then in front of Trag.

"I feel like I'm in some B-rated fashion show," he said through the changing cubby's door, halfway surprised that Trag hadn't insisted on sitting on the bench while Herbert swapped outfits.

"You look great, Herbert. Here, I found some new underwear."

"Do I need to try those on for you too?"

“Har har.”

§

The first day Trag didn't show up for their appointment at the gym Herbert felt a pastiche of relief, comfort, and worry. Tiny Trag had never been so much as ten seconds late, much less completely absent. Herbert wondered if it was a test of some kind, that maybe Trag was hunched down in the bushes outside Herbert's apartment, waiting to see if his client would traipse to the gym of his own accord. Which Herbert did, as much to his surprise as it would have been to anyone else who knew him. He was tense walking out the front door, looking every which way to see if he could catch Trag lurking, if perhaps the aromatics of cocoa powder would give him away, but the petite life coach never appeared. The air smelled only of the grass cut the previous day. Herbert made it through his entire morning workout, shower, and breakfast—he didn't even cheat and have a donut on the way to the office—and came home for dinner without any sign of Trag.

He scrounged through his junk drawer, where he'd stuffed Trag's business card after deciding he'd never need it because Trag was always there without requiring beck or call. Herbert parted a sea of blanched coupons, rusting scissors, a smattering of paperclips, to find the card, still pristine and crisp, the cardstock smooth. He dialled the number under Trag's name, a foreign area code that Herbert didn't recognise. The phone rang a dozen times, a strange crackling static between rings, and Herbert thought about hanging up more than once, but finally a voice he didn't recognise, thick and scratchy and laden with years of cigarette smoking, answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Is this—” Herbert looked down at the card and recited the number, wondering if he'd misdialled.

“Yeah.”

“I'm trying to reach Trag? Trag Bonheim?”

“Bonbon isn’t here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So.” The voice, though deeply scratchy, was that of a woman.

“Do you know when he’ll be in or where he is?”

“Can’t say.”

“Does that mean you’re not allowed to say or that you don’t know?”

“Huh?”

“Nevermind. Look, this is Herbert Schilling.” He waited, expecting recognition to dawn on the other end. A moment of silence, then:

“Who?”

“I’m his client.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know where he is? He didn’t show up today.”

“He’s busy. Downtown somewhere.”

“But I thought you said—”

“I’ll take a message. How do you spell your name?”

Herbert spelled his name. Then, before he could say another word, the smoked frog voice on the other end hung up, the dial tone bleating out a sad, slumped noise in his ear.

## §

Trag’s disappearance happened during the latter half of their third month together. Herbert tried calling his phone number a few more times, but the smoke-voiced woman answered every time, enigmatically telling Herbert that Trag was busy, not available, and that she didn’t know when would be a good time to catch him. He was always

‘downtown’, but when Herbert finally asked *where* downtown, she said that he wouldn’t be able to find the place. Herbert inquired about his messages and whether Trag was getting them, but was met with a sigh and a tired yes that Herbert thought was as real as a leprechaun’s pot of gold. He considered calling up Marybeth to tell her that her money seemed to be going to waste, that she’d been cheated by a short-statured charlatan, but even with his new attitude and all-round energy, Herbert couldn’t bring himself to get in touch with her.

But he did have a new attitude, a self-confidence that he couldn’t deny Trag had instilled in him. When Carla, the tall woman next door with California beach looks and a Carolina voice, crossed his path in the elevator, he said hello and smiled instead of looking down and tapping his foot in silence. Herbert even asked her where she’d bought the draft guard she had under her door and took the time once to kneel down and pet her dog Katie as Carla took her out for her morning walk. Carla started smiling at him, waving when they saw one another, even letting her hand linger on his wrist when she thanked him for not throwing away the important piece of mail that was accidentally put in his mailbox instead of hers. He saw her struggling to balance three overstuffed paper grocery bags and, jogging up to her and extending his arms before he even spoke, Herbert asked if she could use a hand. When she said yes, Herbert realised he was about to walk into another woman’s home for the first time since Marybeth had invited him up for tea after their fourth date and he hadn’t left until morning, the sun pregnant and pink in the sky, the same rosy colour that highlighted his tingling cheeks that day as the piquant morning air curled over his skin and Herbert knew he was in love.

## §

The morning after his second date with Carla, which had ended with a kiss goodnight in the space between their apartment doors in the hallway, Herbert woke to find Trag sitting on the sofa.

“You look terrible,” Herbert said. “Did you get in a bar fight on your way over here?”

Trag’s hair was mussed, flapping bunches sproinging out from his scalp in every direction as though he’d just gotten out of bed. His tie was askew, the knot loose, shirt collar flapping open at Trag’s throat. Even his pants were wrinkled and bunched around

his knees, as if Trag had pulled them out of the washer and let them air dry in a snaky pile on the floor before putting them on.

“God, you reek of cigarettes. I can smell you from here.”

Trag stood and paced, bobbing from one end of the couch to the other like he was a poodle attached to a dog run.

“You going to say something or just run laps? How did you get in here?”

Trag shot an arrow glare at Herbert and kept pacing. “How are things with your lady friend?”

His voice was almost unrecognisable. Trag’s voice had always been smooth, a little high, but confident and milky, if sometimes screechy. This new sound reminded Herbert of the dragon woman he’d spoken with on the phone—which, he realised as he watched Trag stomp around, he hadn’t done in a few weeks—a wrinkly, discomfited voice that dropped in and out. Trag sounded hung-over, desperately in need of fluids.

“How’d you know about Carla?”

“Herbert, haven’t we been over this? I know about everything.”

“Then you know I’m still going to the gym every day, even though you haven’t been there.”

“I do, Herbert, and that’s good stuff. Independence is important. Why do you think I disappeared for so long?”

“What?”

“You don’t think I was really missing work or playing hookie for three weeks?”

“It was four weeks and what? I tried to call you more than a dozen times.”

“I know that, Herbert.”

“And what about that weird woman who wouldn’t ever tell me where you were?”

Trag blinked his bloodshot eyes. “My secretary, of course.”

“Your secretary.”

“My secretary.”

Herbert squinted. “Well, what about this?” He gave the same flourish in Trag’s direction that the short man had made toward Herbert the day they first met. Herbert tried to inveigh the trill of his fingers with all the judgement he’d felt from Trag’s that morning, all the poo-pooing of his slouch, his unwashed hair, his plaid pyjama pants (those, too, had been thrown out; “Virile men wear underwear and no shirt to bed, Herbert”).

“What the hell happened to you? And what’s downtown that’s so important?”

Trag waved Herbert’s scowl away. “Nothing. Not important. Another client.”

“I thought I was all yours.”

“You’re right, Herbert, you were. *Were*. For the first three months, you’re all mine, but then there’s a stepping-back process. You have to be able to do this on your own eventually.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you can. A little faster than I’d expected, actually.” Trag’s voice was a grumble, tumbling out in a garbled mess toward the end.

“Oh?”

“There’s something I need to show you, Herbert.” Trag reached into his pocket and produced a crinkled pack of cigarettes. When Herbert raised an eyebrow, Trag shook his head. “Not this. Come outside.”

§

She’d dyed her hair from blond to brown, and her face was slightly rounder—perhaps she’d stopped rowing, just when Herbert had started running again—but Herbert recognised Marybeth right away. She was on the far side of the lot, leaning against the

hood of her car, a blue station-wagony something, picking at her fingernails, when Herbert pushed open the front door of his building. He stopped straight away, no warning, so Trag, who was following, smashed into him, the short man's nose crumpling against the back of Herbert's leg.

"Oh, fucksakes," Trag mumbled. "That was my last cig, too."

"What the hell is going on?" Herbert spun, still aware of Marybeth's presence on the other side of the lot. "Trag?"

"OK, so I may have not been entirely honest from the get-go."

"About what?"

"Why don't we go over there and talk to Marybeth?"

"Maybe let's not do that quite yet, huh?" Herbert reached down and pushed Trag back through the still-open building door, using all of his willpower to resist the urge to glance around toward Marybeth. She could be approaching for all he knew, but he was certain that if he looked at her again, he wouldn't be able to stop. Although amicable, the divorce had been her doing. She'd handed him the papers, she'd found the listing for the admittedly very nice apartment he still lived in, heck, she'd even hired his attorney for him, a good one who got him more than he expected, anticipated, or wanted, when they finally severed ties. She'd packed his boxes and changed his mailing address. The whole process had been faster than he imagined it could be, and his memories of it were, well, blank. For a very long time Herbert had felt as if he'd been standing in the middle of their living room the whole time, with Marybeth bustling around him, chirping reminders and to do lists at him as though they were going on vacation rather than peeling apart their marriage.

That feeling was coming back now, with Trag waving for Herbert to calm down, Marybeth probably stiffening and marching toward him to explain whatever the hell it was she needed to explain about being here. And then there was Carla, upstairs somewhere, probably getting ready for the brunch date they had planned. Everything Trag had created in Herbert over the last few months felt like it was draining away, and all Herbert could do was let his feet sink into the cement under him and feel his body

turn into the stony thing it had been for so long.

“Look, Herbert, I can tell you’re mad.”

“Oh can you.”

“Just let me explain, OK? OK. Good. Let’s not freak out. Marybeth is here to talk to you.”

“About what? What in the hell is going on, Trag? Is that even your name?”

For the first time, Herbert was actually disturbed by just how short Trag—Bonbon—Bonheim was. It was unnatural. It was, he hated to say, grotesque. He was stubby, and tiny, and clearly some kind of liar. Herbert inhaled deeply and was assaulted by a new smell: Trag’s smoky scent, like he’d spent hours in a dive bar, wrapped itself in Herbert’s nose, and he coughed, suddenly missing and yearning for the sweetness Trag had carried around for so long.

“Yes, that is my name, and Bonbon really is my nickname. But I’m not exactly a life coach.”

“Then what are you?”

“A matchmaker.”

“What?”

“Well, OK, there’s not really a name for what I do, but matchmaker is the closest, you see.”

“Some matchmaker. That’s my ex-wife. A bit lazy of you, don’t you think?”

“Hang on, hang on.” Trag straightened and stiffened his tie, cleared his throat, pushed back his shoulders. “I match people up with the people they’ve lost.”

Herbert felt himself starting to sweat. Not the satisfactory sweat of hard work, the kind of sweat he’d forgotten about but Trag had brought back to him. It wasn’t the sweet and sour sweat of heavy breathing from sprints or sex. Herbert instead felt clammy and

cold, the Saran wrap sweat that pours down one's forehead in moments of nervousness and nausea. The sweat that, when you realise you are marinating in it, only intensifies. Heat-lamp sweat, he'd called it once, because so many eyes were on you your skin felt like it was being cooked.

"Marybeth called me," Trag was saying, "because she wanted you back. Not the you that found me cleaning out your freezer, but the you that was buried inside of that you. I know this is confusing, just give me a second to explain, OK? Look, I work specifically with people who have lost their drive or edge or whatever and help them become the best versions of themselves again. I turn back the clock. And I do it because someone else wants it done."

"That seems incredibly skeevy."

"Why's that, Herbert? You were in a bad place. You were lazy and in bad shape, bad health, had a bad attitude. You can't deny that you're a happier person now."

"Well, I—"

"You know I'm right, Herbert. It's why I do what I do and get paid well to do it. I get hired by people who want someone back, but they want an old someone back. You know, '*I want the old Herbert back,*'" he said in a sing-song Marybeth impression that made Herbert cringe. "Marybeth wanted you back, but she didn't want the man she'd divorced. She wanted the man she fell in love with. I made him. I made you."

"That's incredibly disturbing, Trag."

"And why's that?"

"You lied to me."

"So?" Trag's face was blank when he said this, and Herbert felt his jaw working up and down. He tried to muster up some argument, something salient, wicked, incisive. Trag's voice had smoothed out again, his tiny shoulders pinched back in a nasty swagger and, of course, his grin had returned, pulsing to an oversized shape. The smell of smoke was gone, and the room now held the hints of apple pie and Christmas trees, but it was a gaudy odour, like air freshener from an aerosol can.

“I’m seeing someone,” Herbert said, his voice cracking.

Trag rubbed his chin and tapped his foot. “Yes, Carla. I will admit that I didn’t see that coming. I knew you were making good progress but I didn’t expect that much progress. Hmm.”

“Hmm? That’s all you have to say? Hmm.”

“I guess you’ll have to choose. Carla, or her.” Trag pointed past Herbert.

He finally broke and turned to look in Marybeth’s direction. She’d moved closer to the door but was standing in the middle of the parking lot, clutching the straps of her purse with both hands, looking sheepish. It was a stance—shoulders down, lips curled into a shy smile, averted darting eyes—that Herbert hadn’t ever seen on her. She looked like a scolded school girl. Herbert wasn’t sure what he expected to feel, but it certainly wasn’t the sudden pity he felt for his ex-wife, standing like a pale obelisk in the midst of a dusty, half-empty parking lot on a blustery morning. Her hair cut across her mouth and she lifted a hand slowly to peel it away. He remembered those hands, which had once cupped his chin every morning as she pulled him to her for a goodbye kiss before work. They had always been warm and smooth, inviting, even in the end.

“She still loves you, Herbert.”

“This is really unfair, Trag,” Herbert said, still staring at his wife, who wouldn’t look straight at him.

“Life is really unfair.”

“Another cliché, huh?”

“Another truth, my friend.” Trag’s voice was like hot tea.

Herbert felt Trag lay a hand on the back of his knee. It was not a prodding gesture, a push toward anything. This was gentle, a sweetness Herbert had never heard or seen or felt from him. He turned his head and glanced down at the small man who, despite this crater-sized lie he’d told, had changed Herbert’s life.

Trag smiled, but this time it was a sad smile. He nodded. Herbert nodded back.

Herbert took a deep breath. He looked at Marybeth for a moment, standing in the parking lot, twenty feet and the double glass doors of his apartment building between them. He felt the tingling pressure of the steel doors of the elevator, which led back up to his home and Carla, who was probably wondering what was taking him so long. Had it been so long? Herbert felt like he'd been standing in the small, airless lobby for hours now, even though it had probably been no more than two or three minutes. Marybeth had that effect on him, slowing his senses and draining time from him. It had been a visceral, phantasmagorical experience in their early days, a tingling excitement that would bubble and gurgle in his neck from the moment he kissed her good night at the end of one date until he hugged her hello at the start of the next one.

He'd felt that about Carla, too.

And now he wasn't sure who he was feeling it for: the woman standing in front of him, sheared out of his life for several years and suddenly inserting herself back into it via the short man still pressing his hand against Herbert's leg, or the woman upstairs whose smile was the whitest, teeth the straightest, he'd ever seen. Her eyes lit up in his presence, and her laugh was like sunlight when he heard it.

Herbert didn't know what to do except stand there, frozen in that concrete cube, waiting for someone to make a choice for him.

"What should I do, Trag?" Herbert said. "Please."

The weight of Trag's hand vanished from Herbert's leg, but the small man didn't say anything. Herbert turned to ask again, but when he did he was faced with nothing but the blank, reflective grey of the elevator door. He spun a few times, catching glimpses of Marybeth slowly inching toward him beyond the glass. Trag was gone. His smell was gone, replaced by the stale sweat of the building's concrete, and Herbert felt weak in the knees, unsure if he'd ever leave that lobby again.

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# Chiang Mai

*by S. K. Kelen*

Night Zoo Safari  
giraffe purple tongue  
saliva licks.

Noodle-fed dragons  
and happy buddhas  
hold up the sky.

The temple roofs  
are rockets launching  
the houses float.

Traffic kicks along  
(a firm Thai massage)  
hot but not too humid,

air cleaner than Bangkok  
the southern nightlife arrived  
red-light bars and the boys, girls

and ladyboys line up in the streets.  
There are trees in the city and  
on top of the mountain, Doi Suthep,

the remains of mighty forest surrounding  
the wat with famous views, gibbons' ghosts  
swing from branch to branch

(they used to live here),

there's a poem or aphorism  
pinned to every tree.

Wild forests are for the distance  
or the long gone. The minibus will  
take you back to town in time for the night

markets near the river, you will embrace  
amorphous ambiguity, smile no,  
say zero times nothing equals, so

cling tight to your certainties,  
and beware the market salad.  
There is more water in the air

now than there used to be  
say, thirty years ago, more  
soft spots in reality.

*S.K. Kelen's most recent book was Island Earth: New and Selected poems.*

# Too Big to Hold in Your Heart

*by Rachel Watts*

The kangaroo paws reach into the spring sky, grasping and murderous red. The white concrete brings out the greens of the native plants, standing at attention in rows outside the aged care home. There is nothing natural about the garden outside Ursula's window. She craves a weed. A climber grown astray. Not for the first time, Ursula craves wildness.

The title 'aged care home' is a misnomer, though. The fastidious professionalism, from the director to the women who empty the rubbish bin in Ursula's room once a week, doesn't imply care. It's workaday, the daily grind, nine-to-five stuff, this business of ageing. And the pristine garden, the plastic and stainless steel hospital beds, they aren't a home. The lino and the Ikea armchairs in the day room, the cheap magazines on the coffee table, already creased by tens of thumbs before yours, the whole facility is a big waiting room. What doesn't kill you just hasn't finished yet.

Ursula has a plan, though. She keeps it close to her chest, holds it tight with a secret smile. She bides her time like the other residents, but she's not waiting for death. She's waiting for an opportunity.

The days unfold with aching regularity. Rosters are drawn for feeding the lonely goldfish; bridge tournaments are started and abandoned. Jigsaw puzzles lay unfinished on side tables, crucial pieces missing. Pieces are missing from the residents, too. Richard Harper stares at a romance novel, nonplussed. Dorothy Baseldon thumbs remote control buttons experimentally as consternation erupts in front of the television. Ursula grinds her teeth savagely.

She's been plotting for months. Since her family last visited. They were going on an overseas trip they said, off to Bangkok, yearning to use wi-fi in foreign climates, to stay in hotels where everyone speaks their language. People don't know how to escape these days. But Ursula does. Ursula will run free, until she reaches the ocean. She will hold its timeless heart in hers, with her feet in the surf.

That visit was in August. Now, October, they've forgotten her. Never mind. Ursula is busy.

It's a beautiful day and Ursula is up early, heading for the cards listing each resident's prescription behind the door in the little office. Twice daily with food, one four-hourly, not to be taken orally, the runes and rhythms of deceptions for death and decay. Quietly, quickly, she will swap the prescriptions. While chaos reigns as the staff sort out the mess, Ursula will walk right down the hallway and out the door into the fresh spring air.

But now there's a glitch in her plan. The system has been—she dreads the word—*automated*. Each patient's medication regimen locked in the unknowable heart of the computer; before breakfast, after food, before retiring, on the hour, twice daily, four times hourly, never during a full moon. Ursula watches as the computer system sends the staff scurrying; three times daily, four times hourly, at low tide, never while sleeping. No sooner has the morning round been completed than the staff must start on the afternoon round. The influx of managers and impatient IT experts overseeing the new system blocks Ursula's path to freedom.

She has all but given up hope when Mrs Metcalf dies. Mrs Metcalf had lived at the home for what seemed like forever. The home misses a beat when she passes, and by the time it shakes itself and carries on, Ursula has slipped out of her cardigan and into the leather jacket that replaced the medication cards behind the door in the little office. She swipes a security card from the office desk and a bunch of flowers from Mrs Metcalf's bedside. Finally, she ambles around the side corridor and uses the card to slip into to the day care centre, where elderly outpatients come to be confused by entertainers and crafts.

"Aunt Mary!" she cries, handing the flowers to a withered-looking biddy. "I came to wish you happy birthday." She beams at the woman, whose confusion is mingled with joy. A short conversation later, the woman is convinced she is indeed Ursula's Aunt Mary, as are the day shift staff. Ursula graciously declines the invitation to stay for morning tea, and walks out the door.

She knows exactly where she's going. She walks as quickly as her unsteady legs allow, offering a gleeful farewell to the murderous kangaroo paws. She climbs aboard a

bus and pays the bus driver with a handful of five cent pieces, gleaned from last year's Melbourne Cup sweep, when Geraldine went around collecting bits of silver coins, buttons and empty spools of thread in the bowl of a sunhat.

On the bus, Ursula sinks gingerly into a seat by the window. The world is bright and sparkling and made just for her. She lets freedom fill her lungs. Her cheeks ache from grinning.

When she arrives at the beach it's quiet, somnolent. The sea breeze is fresh and wet off the sparkling water, carrying stories of foreign shores. Ursula walks along the sea wall, breathing in the world. This is what the life is for: for breathing and walking, for singing.

At the skate park young men throw themselves about without a care. One rockets down the ramp and falls to the concrete. Ursula's gasp slips out before she can catch it. But the boy leaps up laughing, walking to join his friends in the shade with a languid stride. They are subject to a different form of gravity than Ursula. They must be. They move with a strange grace. Believing themselves indestructible.

Ursula knows she isn't indestructible, but her heart yearns for wildness. Before she knows what she's doing, she's walking over to the young men.

"I don't expect one of you would let me borrow a skateboard?" she says. Her voice sounds so old and small. The group freezes. Men too young to fear death. Old enough to go to war.

"I mean," Ursula tries again, puffing her voice up in her lungs. "Maybe I could give it a go?"

One of the boys steps out of the silence and smiles. He's tall and wears undisguised curiosity under the brim of his cap. Looking at him, Ursula is filled with the memory of youth, the taste of salt on the tip of her tongue, sun and long careless afternoons.

"I'll hold your hand, if ya want." The boy beams. Ursula's heart is, ever so gently, wrapped up in the blanket of his simple confidence.

He puts the skateboard flat on the concrete surface where it sits looking innocuous.

Ursula can barely bring herself to step onto it. But the boy extends a hand out to her, nodding his head, as if skateboarding is the most natural thing in the world for an eighty-four-year-old woman on the run from the Department of Aged Care. His face, so open and bright, belongs in this world of clear skies and vast blue oceans. She takes both his hands firmly. The world stops moving. The group of young men, the seagulls in the air, the waves roaring up to shore, they all freeze as she plants her trembling weight, one foot at a time, tentatively on the board.

The skateboard slips out from underneath her and shoots forward; reality races to get up to speed all at once, and the young man catches her with a neat hop. A wordless cry escapes her as her stomach lurches, and she meets his eyes.

“Whoops!” he cries, as though she were a toddler learning to walk. She catches a glimpse of the man he will be, the father he will become, a decade or so from now. “Not bad for a first shot, though.”

He leaves her quivering, fetches the skateboard and sets her up for another try.

Half an hour later, Ursula is cruising around the skate park slowly, still holding his hand, balancing perilously on the board. Eventually she thanks the boy, blinking away the happy flecks of salt water that leak from her eyes.

“Nah, you’re right,” the boy says. “You did good.” He walks away with that leggy stride and rejoins his fellows.

The sun follows its resolute path across the sky and gradually the shadows grow long and distorted. The young men at the skate park disappear and a group of school children replace them and eventually they leave too. The beach holds the ebb and flow of humanity, seeking sun, seeking the wildness of a body of water too huge to look at all at once. Too big to hold in your heart.

Ursula sits on the sand, wearing a cheerfully blooming sunburn, slurping a child-sized scoop of rum and raisin ice-cream. In front of her the Indian Ocean opens its arms full of promise. Adventure beckons.

She slips off her canvas shoes and steps into the surf. The wet sand is cool and hard under her toes, and when the water comes in she feels the little eddies of grit and sea life

brush past her and back out, into depths too big for memory. The ocean pulls like an inhalation and holds her, as strong as that boy's arms, deeper than age. Timeless.

*Rachel Watts is a writer from Perth, Western Australia. She has been published in Island, Kill Your Darlings, The Big Issue and elsewhere. She reviews books and writes commentary at [www.leatherboundpounds.com](http://www.leatherboundpounds.com).*

# Carnival Flesh

*by Elisabeth Murray*

We are a crush of bodies, but the calmest kind of crowd. Smoke and sweat is everywhere. I am far from everyone I've known in my life but this crowd knows me more intimately than the earth does when you're dead, without any skin to put up a barrier.

I am standing in front of the speaker but I am standing everywhere, I am the light that smashes through blue to yellow, I am the night coming through the back of the tent, through the gaps between people, so there's no space anymore. My body takes the force of the music like the ocean when you use none of your muscles against it. There is the cold metal railing against my arms and my skin is good now, no longer a barrier, and my eyes are shut and the strength of the earth is inside me, all the time it has lived in my bones.

I open my eyes to a girl so close she seems part of my own strength. Her hair is like ochre and she is wearing a skirt the colour of the centre of the continent viewed from so high it is more like the idea of red.

She is yelling something, her mouth hardly real. But it's all real, just a kind of real I've never known before. We are jumping with the rest of the crowd, and on stage everyone wears a smile like the girl, they are jumping with us, cajón, guitar, bass, flute, djembe stronger than an ocean.

When the end comes we are shivering, coming out of the waves, a moment of panic, not sure if we can face the bare sand. My head spins then I have hold of the girl's hand and our sweat is the same.

"I'm not locked up anymore!" she cries and I turn, smiling at her.

"I was just thinking that," I say, because our energy is the same, whether thought energy or sweat energy.

“Why don’t you say it?” she cries, and we are moving fast out of the tent, as if we need to get somewhere, bumping into people who are not irritated because there is no space between us anyway.

“I’m not locked up no more!” I say, feeling my skin get cold without fear as we reach the night at the back of the tent.

Now the chaos of the festival is not the same as the tent and I am gripping her hand to keep me from it, from the smoke and beer and laughter and clanging guitars and the swells of people without purpose, only various tempers and urges. I am feeling the barriers of my skin as fragile as a sheet thrown over furniture to fix crime in place. The grease of big pans and kebabs, pasta, waffles, steak, doughnuts, gelato, mud, whiskey and coke, grass diced by bare feet, I feel it moving through my sinuses, the swamp of people treading the same place over and over, hotdogs, quinoa, bacon, spinach burgers, I am feeling the way I felt in another life, the chaos of a crowd that is unified but discrete, none of it caring for you, abandoning you yet still trying to erode you. I am gripping her, feeling the strength in my blood as if I am witness to this crowd and held inside it at once.

Past the gates the night is purple with smoke. Black feet and glittering eyes. We pass a car park silent as a disused mine, steel and chrome like things dug out of the earth and found to be useless. Through the main gates where the highway rushes like something distant, a creek behind a hill. I can’t remember where I slept last night and I have been told things like this should worry me but it only feels like a dream that goes missing when you wake, though it stays in your body as a hole you finger occasionally to make sure it is still empty. When our hands drop I feel her sweat in my palms, slipping in the ridges.

After a long time we come to the beach. The sea is dark under the bluish sky like a collection of blood. The sand holds the indentations of a crowd, footprints up the dunes. We breathe in the salt as if we are breathing each other’s breath. I feel a deep sadness, but a healing salty one, knowing now that all those days when I was detached from the earth and my people an artificial barrier was erected using my skin that should have been subtle, not hard, and that they only erected it because it suited them even though it would never heal me. I want to tell her this but it’s something that makes my skin tingle

rather than thoughts that could be words. We lie in the sand resting on each other. After a while she jumps up waving her arms.

A group of four comes into view, dressed in bright colours, barefoot. One by one they hug her and she introduces me as “the crazy girl I was dancing with at the most epic show you’ve ever seen, all this crazy sacred energy like you’ve never felt before.” Then we are watching the waves come in, dark and slick then white and crumbled, and I see that everything is matter and energy at once though I didn’t know it when I was alone in my hard skin watching the sun through the sugar glass.

A boy offers me a piece of Easter egg that a girl has smashed against the sand then opened like the petals of a red aluminium flower. The chocolate takes over my mouth. I eat it under his gaze because I’m not aware of the barriers between me and other people, between looking and feeling. We are all watching each other from inside the wildness, the same energy.

“You eat in such a crazy way,” he says opening his mouth as if he cannot help but want to try it himself.

“She *is* crazy!” says a girl with a yellow woollen shawl and white chattering teeth.

I laugh, my mouth full of chocolate. I am feeling the tiniest strangeness in my chest.

“Do you know the song ‘Moonglow’?” says the boy watching me eat. “Billie Holiday sings it.”

“No,” I say, but I remember there was an old lady in the adjacent room who used to listen to Billie Holiday on her CD player.

“It’s a crazy song,” he says and reaches across me for another piece of chocolate so I feel the softness of his arm which is an unnatural white in the darkness.

Another boy is wearing a purple shirt with ‘Heaven’ across it. He is smiling as if everyone is admiring it and nothing can bother him. There is a girl in overalls the colour of electronic light.

“You know,” she says, “all I can think about is this is such an Instamoment. But

there's nothing I can do about it.”

“Why?” I say.

“Because I told myself I'd hitchhike across the country without a phone, no technologies, only iPod, because it'd just be stupid for me to do it without an iPod.”

“Have you made it now?” I ask.

“Made what?”

“Made it across the country. We're on the coast now.”

She turns her head as if the place is one of those moving panoramas that Victorian people found full of suspense.

“No. I'm just starting.”

There is tiredness in my bones as if they are feeling her future. “How will you charge your iPod?” I ask.

“Cars, hostels. There's power on the road.” She pushes her hand into the sand and it vanishes. “I'm going to listen to all the Indigo Girls' albums over and over.”

The boy who was watching me eat asks, “Live albums too?”

“And *Rarities*,” she says. “I want to relive those decades. Even though I never really lived them to start with. I mean actually I was born when the first album came out. I mean the major label ten-song release, not the eleven-song independent. I was thinking Frente! but then I thought, it doesn't matter about the country the music's from, it more matters about how it speaks to me, you know? The Indigo Girls just have my energy, or I have their energy, I guess. Plus Frente! only have two LPs, the rest are EPs. It'd be a lot of repetition.” She moves her hand around under the sand.

“Yeah,” I say. “It matters more about the energy.”

“Right!” she shouts. Her voice travels far across the beach. “Hey,” she whispers. “You could come with me. I'd let you have one earbud.”

The red girl turns. “She’s coming with us,” she says.

“We could all three go,” says the girl who has very green eyes I notice now, though nothing like the colour of her overalls.

“I can’t,” I say. “It’d be my dream to do that, but I’ve travelled really far, I don’t even know where I am now or where I’m going next, and I need one place to look after me.”

“That seems really true,” says the girl in overalls, nodding. She takes her hand out of the sand and lies back with her head on her pack and her hands on her stomach.

I lean against her knees and the boy who was watching me eat rests his head on my stomach. I feel the softness of his hair through my shirt. We are tangled on the sand like a new or ancient creature beached. I am so tired everything happens in a new syntax, slow and fluid. The warmth moves from the others to me and out of me to the others, with the waves, the breath of people, the rustling of sand, the wind that in the half-dark seems not part of the beach but something stray and searching.

As soon as the sun comes it spreads heat. I am strung out thinly like the yarn of foam left on the sand. I am strung up between the depths of dream and the world here that I can touch. I press my skin to be sure it’s not a dream, blurred the way it was so many times or, at other times, indestructible, so I would try to break my limbs to see the bone slip out of the skin.

In the steady pinking of the beach that sits on my eyes as if I’m wearing a crazy pair of sunnies, I’m not sure if I’m bounded or sealed. Everyone sits up and stretches and rubs their eyes to make the world they see the true one. The tangle is individual. Everything is pink and orange.

For a moment I am taken over by longing to be in the white safety of somebody else’s care, where I don’t have to worry if my skin has boundaries or if I’m nothing but wax. Then the sun is here and everybody looks different, they might have new personalities in the light. The boy who was watching me eat has hair the colour of butter and his skin is rougher and less white. She is not so red and her lips are pink and she seems smaller.

The others are in the sand smoking a joint and looking less bright but still sparkling where their clothes finish.

“We’re going to hitchhike,” says the red girl. “Come along if you will.”

“It’s the will of the universe,” says the boy in the ‘Heaven’ shirt, holding the smoothed Easter egg wrapper up to the sun and looking through a hole.

“I’m going alone,” says the girl in overalls. “If I see you on the road I’ll see you on the road!”

“Do you feel that?” says the girl in the yellow shawl, breathing out a great gust and not looking cold anymore.

As soon as we leave I’m not sure I don’t want to be back there with them, not sure which path might lead me back to the sickness without warning.

“I knew you were crazy all along,” says the red girl, her voice deeper from tiredness.

“I am,” I say. “But now it’s a kind of crazy that lets me walk across a beach without being afraid.”

The boy catches my hand. Our sweat is the same. The girl catches my other.

“The world is so slow and ringing,” she says.

“I’m so tired all the syntax is warped,” I say. “My body is ringing from the music last night.”

“I want to eat a burger with fake cheese and a coke,” says the boy.

“Me too,” I say. “And I want to find the back of a truck to nap in.”

We yawn into the sun, waiting to sleep on top of the rumbling of the road, something like healing.

*Elisabeth Murray is a writer from Sydney who is interested in all things feminist, queer, and mental health-related. Her work has been published in Verity La, Fields Magazine, Tincture Journal (Issue Seven), Contrapasso, Voiceworks, dotdotdash magazine, and several University of Sydney anthologies. Her novella, The Loud Earth,*

*was published by Hologram in 2014.*

# The Wild West

*by Anthony Lawrence*

1

Having tired of the knockabout life  
I jumped ship when the prawn trawler  
pulled in for repairs on the Capricorn Coast.  
If the captain was a brute and brawler,  
given to fits of fury and raw lust  
then you should have seen his wife.

She could wrestle the arm away  
from an oyster shucker and slam  
down twenty tequila slammers  
and still be upright when the alarm  
went off for work. A spanner  
crab in one hand, a fresh bouquet

of bladderwrack in the other  
she could swig Jamaican rum  
and put everyone under the table.  
The night I slipped and cut my arm  
she applied a poultice of fur seal  
fat to the wound as a lover

would attend to a fever. Weeks later  
I got news she'd been taken by men  
in grey suits on some offshore reef.  
I can see her there, confronting them  
staring past the bandsaws of their teeth  
as they moved in to cloud the water

with her blood. I've heard some wag  
raised a giant fibreglass prawn memorial  
on Dorre Island, the one Jonathan Swift  
nicked from Dirk Hartog's maps to fuel  
or quell debate as to which  
was Lilliput and which Brobdingnag.

Sunburnt, burning with a new desire  
to leave the West and make it as far  
as the Blue Mountains or at least a decent  
elevation, somewhere from whose star-  
mad skies I could reflect, review, repent  
or just get my shit together, I conspired

with myself to hang a thumb  
over the edge of the National Highway  
as I walked from one life and into  
the change room of another. The day  
was hot and dry. The sky Prussian blue.  
While the head was willing, the heart was numb.

I'd fallen in love, overboard,  
prey to booze and lines of snow inhaled  
from cutting boards in calm weather.  
I'd fallen victim to myself and baled  
when I should have squared my shoulders  
and made light and dark of thought and word.

Trucks bent the air around me, and where  
the road narrowed they spat gravel  
into my legs. I walked until the sky  
flared with last light, then stopped to unroll  
my swag in a cutting. What the mind tries  
to refuse the body can welcome, and there

under stars that raced and gave out  
under a dome strung with dead and dying lights  
I sang Lou Reed's 'Satellite of Love'  
in his memory. Dawn arrived like  
a paint bleed over the desert, and to prove  
my accuracy with stones, I set

tin cans, bottles and takeaway  
cartons along the verge and knocked them down.  
I'd always been handy with whatever  
I could find in times of idle need. I'd known  
since childhood that to deliver  
a stone with speed and accuracy

takes more than grace, good balance and poise—  
it means tracking the parabolic curve  
in the eye before each stone  
leaves the hand, its shape given leave  
and wings. So many years alone,  
I'd become my own man, not one of the boys.

I reached Katoomba four weeks later  
after sharing cabs with truckers  
ripped awake on smoke, caffeine  
and fistfuls of uppers.

One told me, soberly, that he'd been  
on the run with his partner

after trying to crash their Jeep  
into an automatic teller in Perth.

We got toiletries and parts of dolls  
from the shop next door. Gave the machine a wide berth.  
Too drunk for robbery. What a steal!

When he stopped for a piss I bolted. The creep

had a tire iron that nosed out from under  
his seat and lay there, its cleft palate  
and cold, ribbed neck tight  
against my shoe. I checked my pulse and wallet  
then ran to where the roadhouse lights  
were glazing the wet cement with colours

you see in oil spills, neon signs.

The next driver had me in stitches  
for hours—he had a story and advice  
for everything, including patches  
for nicotine addiction made from Old Spice  
and the powdered cones from pines,

how to fix a busted heart  
with 1970s porn, and oyster shooters  
with more Tabasco  
than tomato juice and vodka.

He left me sleepless, enlightened, and slow  
to make a fresh start.

*Anthony Lawrence has published sixteen books of poems, the most recent being Headwaters (Pitt Street Poetry, 2016). He teaches Writing Poetry and Creative Writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast, and lives on the far north coast of NSW. This poem is the first section from Anthony's verse novel, The Wild West.*

# Seventeen Ruminations About Bottles and Other Matters, Some Weighty, Some Frivolous

*Non-fiction by David Murcott*

## **i. past tense**

Of all the things you can control in this world, the name given to you at birth is not one of them.

There is power in a name; ask any Pharaoh or shaman. I thought I might be the first of my line to make a new name for myself, to choose my own name rather than having it bestowed. It worked for Norma Jean and Charles Dodgson, why not me? That must be such a magical moment, that moment when you choose the exact right perfect name, when you say it aloud for the first time. Which name, out of all the names, would it possibly be? What was my true and actual name, not the one I was born with, but was rather born to become?

I never found out. Having never done anything to make myself famous or noteworthy, I felt I did not deserve the honour of a self-bestowed name. I, like all the rest of my family, lived out my entire life with the one name, just the one name, the entire way through. But I never stopped wondering what my real name was supposed to be, and why I had remained unable to find a way for it to find its way to me.

One possible reason: I drank. That's kind of all I did. Oh, sometimes I smoked weed or guzzled pills or had a few hits on the pipe, but I always came back to drinking, like someone returning to a lover who hurts them but who they are unable to leave. Finding some kind of peace, even the damaging kind, was all that mattered. Peace was peace. I could deal with tomorrow tomorrow. And still I wondered what my name was supposed to be, even as I drank myself into oblivion. Even as I drank my name away.

I cursed myself, then blamed the devil for cursing me. I destroyed my life, then

railed against God because it was destroyed. I gazed up at the stars, beseeching them for a sign which they refused to reveal.

When all's said and done though, I suppose I mustn't resent the stars for their silence. Perhaps if I lived for millions of years I'd keep my secrets locked up as well.

## **ii. the first bottle**

At first you drink because you like the feeling. There is the social aspect, which, although it never seems to entirely dissipate, eventually ceases to be a requirement for some of us. At a certain point you drink because it is preferable to the alternative, the horrible state known as Not Drinking. You drink because you can't stand something about yourself or your life or what happened to you or what should have happened but didn't. Then you just drink because you drink. You don't need any more excuses. The Rubicon has been crossed: the part of your brain responsible for rationalisation runs on autopilot.

*Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff.* Do you know what book that's from? It's the Bible, albeit one of the more eccentric translations. Nice turn of phrase, though regardless of word choice the sentiment eventually becomes the only one that can sustain dominance. I assume the non-wine drinkers have their equivalents. You strive mightily against your own mind only to return to where you began, exhausted and still at the starting line, gulping down more of the red red stuff as your reward even as it torments you. After a while the fighting becomes harder, and then too hard. Even the best boxer punches himself out eventually. It might take five, ten (or in the old days thirty) rounds, but no one can keep swinging their arms forever.

## **iii. things that come in bottles**

It is not just wine which comes in bottles. some other things that do include:

water	milk	iodine
messages	cough medicine	champagne

ships

pills

olive oil &

brandy

perfume

mountain air (for sale in polluted regions)

I almost said genies, but then I remembered they are typically trapped inside lamps, not bottles, despite the refrain of the pop song. Feelings can also be bottled up, though this is not generally recommended. Fruit should be bottled, and wine, but never feelings.

Conversely, there are many things which are unlikely to be found in bottles, metaphorical or otherwise. Coins do not come in bottles, nor do mouths or skies or halibuts or jump ropes or playing cards. Coins are kept in wallets, mouths are kept on faces, halibuts are kept in rivers, jump ropes are kept in cupboards, and playing cards are kept in decks. A sky is not kept anywhere. It just is.

#### **iv. (untitled)**

I will make myself pure  
once purity has been attained I will keep myself pure  
once I am able to maintain a state of pureness I will lead others to purity  
but first I must make myself pure

#### **v. facts about bottles**

Bottles are facts, and there are facts about bottles. There are also facts about beetles, battles and butlers (who buttle, to use the correct term), but this is not about any of that. Just as butter is not batter, this is about bottles, not battles, even though people have probably battled over a bottle on more than one occasion in human history. It's unlikely anyone has ever battled over a beetle, although anything is possible.

#### **vi. a polite suggestion to would-be publishers**

*(please insert lots of interesting facts about bottles at this point, like over such-and-*

*such millions of bottles are produced worldwide every year, and if all the plastic bottles of soft drink produced in the last year alone were stacked into a tower it would reach all the way to the moon or Saturn or Pluto, and if all the glass bottles produced throughout the same period were placed end to end they would stretch around the world x times, and include some illustrative graphs and charts and maybe a little box saying what type of sand is used to make glass, and so on)*

## **vii. DCLXVI**

The 666<sup>th</sup> word of this work, including the title, is ‘I’. Excluding the title it is ‘genies’.

## **viii. dipsomania by any other name**

Beer goggles is an expression, but not wine or whiskey goggles. Is that because beer sounds more common? Perhaps the wine drinker’s equivalent is those binoculars on a stick sophisticated people used to use at the opera, but I’m sure the results are largely the same. Giggles, gaggles, goggles: I wonder who invented all these words, and why we all have to use them the same way, spell them the same way, pronounce them the same way. Language makes conformists out of all of us! I know I should rebel, go on strike and refuse to use any more words until this issue is addressed, but it is late and I have work in the morning. Anyway, there is something about strictures that slowly becomes soothing as one gets older. You can’t fight forever: boxers and their arms getting tired and all that. I think I’m starting to understand it now.

## **ix. painbirds**

“I can’t stand you,” she said.

“I can’t stand you either,” I replied, but it was more out of defensiveness than genuine conviction. I didn’t want to be the only one not hating anybody. Though I suppose if you count self-hatred there was always someone I despised.

## **x. borken pome**

The bottles are broken, the stars are broken, all the pretty horses are broken, their wagons broken too, the sky is cracked and demented and thoroughly broken, the plates are all smashed (broken), every time I open my mouth something broken comes out, my words are like shattered crockery, stupid plate-coloured shards of things.

On the heel of my foot, a blister appears. Even the act of walking has become broken.

### **xi. a thoroughly half-formed man**

I went to rehab for a week in 2014, having spent most of the previous year taking amphetamines daily after getting myself diagnosed with ADHD. That was a simple matter of lying to a doctor about my imaginary symptoms and history of inattentiveness, then embellishing further to a psychiatrist I had heard was passionate about the prescription of dexamphetamine, the substance I preferred on this earth over all other substances. For some reason I couldn't get high when I smoked ice but I could get high for days on dexamphetamine, the medication used in Australia for treating attention-deficit disorder. My drug-taking friends found me something of an anomaly in this regard, though in hindsight it was probably a blessing that 'dex' was the thing that got me high as opposed to meth. Most of the people I met in rehab were there for methamphetamine addiction, the majority of them court-ordered; it was either that or go to prison.

I brought with me a canvas grocery bag full of books, a basketball, two dumbbells, my own pillow and bedsheets, a large suitcase full of clothes, my iPod speakers, a folder full of DVDs, two ornate hardcover notebooks for writing in, five kinds of vitamins, two kinds of facial cleanser, a vanity case and a plastic shopping bag full of additional shower and shaving products, a framed picture of a bird that a friend had painted, and a half dozen or so sturdy wooden coat hangers packed into their own small sports bag. It took three people to remove my belongings to the office for the sniffer dogs and three people, including me, to later install them in my room. In my defence, I was told I could be spending up to six months there. I was also told it was the most stuff they'd ever seen anyone arrive with. I have never been one to travel light.

I left after six days because I didn't need to be there. I'd detoxed for a week

beforehand and I wasn't addicted to anything or abusing anything anymore. I think I just wanted to make sure.

## **xii. some thoughts (free)**

I wonder if cicadas have circadian rhythms? Then I wonder why wondering about such things isn't a full time occupation. Being a florist is a full time job, and so is being a flautist. Working in a call centre is a full time job. Owning a restaurant is a full time job. Being a stuntman or a bartender or a mortician is a full time job.

Wondering about things though, that is not a job. That is something you must do in your own time, gratis. If I could charge millions of dollars for my thinking, I would do it. I consider my thoughts to be a quantitatively modest but not insignificant contribution to the collective thought-total of the human race.

## **xiii. middling expectations**

The average life expectancy in Australia is eight-three, only a year lower than in Japan, the world leader in longevity. Eighty-three years equates to 30,295 days. I think that's why I have such a problem with the expression 'live each day like it's your last'— statistically speaking it is only one of 30,000-odd other days, and if it *was* my last day and I knew it I would go fucking mental. I'd drive my car on the wrong side of the road, I'd steal anything I wanted, I'd hunt down everyone who had ever hurt me and punch them on the nose or run them through with skewers. Either that or I'd sit quietly in a comfortable armchair, with a good book and a bottle of single malt whiskey beside me, texting all the people I care about to say goodbye.

## **xiv. a shortlist, followed by a slightly longer one**

Contenders for the book in the above scenario, with which my final hours will be spent:

*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

*Ask the Dust* by John Fante

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje

*Maiden Voyage* by Denton Welch

That is my shortlist. If I was making a longlist I would add *Pale Fire*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *Darkness Moves*, *The Book of Disquiet*, *Gould's Book of Fish* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. I thought that book was really romantic. There are other books I cherish, like *The Pillowman* or *Perfume* or *A Clockwork Orange*, but I wouldn't want them to be the last thing I read before dying. For some reason I wouldn't want a biography or a non-fiction work either, even though there are many I adore and have read over and over. If I was going to choose a biography it would be *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* by Louis Fischer, but I think you'd need fiction on your final day. You'd need something that takes you into another world, before you got taken into another world for real.

#### **xv. expressions about bottles**

1. to lose one's bottle
2. to keep something bottled up
3. to catch lightning in a bottle
4. to be fond of the bottle
5. hit the bottle
6. crack a bottle
7. let the genie out of the bottle
8. put the genie back into the bottle
9. hit the bottle
10. spin the bottle
11. can't put old wine in new bottles?

that's all I can think of right now

## **xvi. interlude (the perfect crime)**

If I was going to be anybody in a criminal enterprise, I would be the guy that comes up with the foolproof plan. I think my plans would be so foolproof that I wouldn't even have to take part in them. I think the other gangsters would just go "you know what, that is such a good plan that you can just wait here and we'll still give you your share, just for coming up with such an amazing plan". Like, say my plan was for a robbery, it would have the best route all mapped out, and probably a second route just in case there was something unexpected like roadworks or a blocked-off street that made the first route undesirable. Everything would be timed so that the car arrived at exactly the right moment, and there would be a decoy getaway car and possibly a third car stashed at certain prearranged destinations, so that no one could ever track the car back to the crime. The robbers would know exactly what they had to do and how much time they had to do it; they would wear gloves and instead of masks or balaclavas their features would be disguised in some clever way, like using makeup to change their complexions and having realistic-looking false beards and moustaches and coloured contact lenses so even if there were witnesses they wouldn't be able to identify any of the people they'd seen once the disguises had been removed. The clothes would be cheap so they could be discarded afterwards and that would further perplex the cops when they couldn't find any forensic evidence and none of the descriptions matched. There are a lot of logistics involved and quite a lot of initial outlay required to cover the multiple getaway cars and the realistic-looking false beards and the cosmetics and so on, but I think if you are going to commit a crime you should do it in such a way that the risk of getting caught is minimised to the greatest extent possible. I think this is where a lot of criminals let themselves down, like they get all tweaked out then think it'll be a great idea to ram-raid a jewellery store or tie an ATM to the back of their Commodore and hope the bumper doesn't just give way, which it inevitably does. My crimes, should I ever choose to commit them, will be WELL THOUGHT OUT. I'll be like Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*, only I won't wear a blue neckerchief and I won't slap a woman at her own father's funeral in front of all the other attendees. I have given all of this way too much thought. I even dream about it sometimes, about the perfect crime that goes off without a hitch. Everything always goes so flawlessly in my head.

## xvii. outerrude

I just finished watching *Mad Max: Fury Road*. It's set in a dystopian future where the earth is barren and water is a precious commodity. Ince in a while when he was feeling generous the leader of this cult pushed a lever, and huge torrents of water would gush out the side of a mountain onto his parched followers below, who would do their best to gather up as much as they could before the pipelines were once again stoppered.

Now I'm all for suspension of disbelief, in fact I've spent most of my life suspending it in various ways, but for one thing most people were clamouring at the base of the mountain with just a small bowl or a rusty old tin can to try and catch the water in. That isn't going to do it. If you live in a cruel dystopia where water is severely rationed and you don't know whether you're even going to have access to any from one day to the next, on the rare occasions when you know the geysers will be opened don't bring a bowl, bring a *barrel*, or if you need to keep with the steampunk aesthetic at least bring an old tin drum with the lid sawn off. You could even collectivise, and have a system in place whereby a predetermined number of barrels were placed in the most strategically important locations, which could be determined either through trial and error or a few simple calculations, assuming people's maths in the future is better than mine. Then you could simply divide the water fairly afterwards, instead of everyone just looking after themselves and many people going without due to the tumult and clamour.

Another way in which the system seemed hugely inefficient: the water had to fall at least a hundred feet before it reached the people below, and a lot of it was just cascading straight onto the dusty ground (where presumably it was ruined) or was spilled in the resultant chaos. If I was that cruel despot in the skull mask I would bottle the water, then just carry it round door to door with the help of his underlings.

"It's not much," he'd say apologetically, handing over a bottle or two, "but it's the best I can do. At least it's a lot better than the old system where I just pushed that lever and all the water came gushing out and went everywhere. Remember that? I don't know what I was thinking. Anyway, have a nice day."

If anyone gave him any shit about the new system he could be all like, "Look, lady. I've got this weird breathing apparatus on the back of my head. One of my sons looks like a giant baby, and it's all dusty and I want to go home. Life is no picnic for me either,

you know. Jesus. Do you want the fucking water or not?” and they would say sorry and just take it.

*David Murcott has had work published in Voiceworks, Eureka Street, Wet Ink, Brag Magazine, Page Seventeen and The Cannon's Mouth (UK).*

# Ethic

*by Chris Lynch and a rawlings*

*a mandelbrot*

I am a self, selfish, shellfish, an elf, fish, -ish, ash  
indefinite, pre-, suf-,  
-fused vertebrae, I heard, but anyway have you  
descended the column pearl by pearl  
an ama (海女) in a dream of a fisherman's wife, or  
have you dreamt, pearl by vertebra, of  
the prepositional matrix, an 'o'

I tuck you into apostrophes, stick-  
hybridity under the tongue, sadly  
o, o, 'o', o, you  
I'm sorry I'm crying it's, 'just', 'that', "I"  
manufacture right from the -cide.

## *Synopsis*

This is a collaboration between Chris Lynch and a rawlings. A mandelbrot starts with an offer of a single word; the poets take turns writing the next line using one word from the preceding line as a starting point, circling around and back to the title. The form seems to be about finding a sweet spot between coherence and incoherence; writing a mandelbrot is a bit like going on a pub crawl with someone and ending up in a great bar neither of you had ever heard of.

*Chris Lynch grew up in Papua New Guinea and is now based in Melbourne. His poetry has appeared in Cordite, Apex Magazine, Blackmail Press, Islet, Peril Magazine, SpeedPoets, Stars Like Sand: Australian speculative poetry, and the 2015 Poetry & Place Anthology, among others. Currently working on his first collection of poetry, he blogs occasionally at [www.chrislynch.com.au](http://www.chrislynch.com.au).*

*a rawlings champions environmental stewardship through acoustic ecology, counter-mapping, and geopoetics.*

*As a writer-activist, her literary output includes Wide slumber for lepidopterists (Coach House Books, 2006) and o w n (CUE BOOKS, 2015). Wide slumber received an Alcuin Award for Design; the book was adapted for stage production by VaVaVoom, Bedroom Community, and Valgeir Sigurðsson in 2014. She has also penned libretti for Davíð Brynjar Franzson (Longitude) and Gabrielle Herbst (Bodiless). Her music group Moss Moss Not Moss (with Rebecca Bruton) made its debut at the 2016 Glasgow Tectonics Music Festival.*

# The Lollipop Lady Who Liked Order and Balance

*by Martine Kropkowski*

I'd like to tell you about the lollipop lady who believed in order. She believed you must wait for the second whistle before you step out from the curb, she believed you must always dismount from your bike on approach to the crossing and she believed, above all else, that you should never—never—run across the road.

The lollipop lady was diligent at enforcing these rules. On Monday, she scolded a mother for crossing her child a bewildering fifty metres from the safety and propriety of the school crossing. On Tuesday, she reproached a father for the unrestrictive scooting of his pre-schooler across the well-defined walking space, and just now, not five minutes ago, she told Xavier of class 4B to keep his toes behind the yellow line until such time as she blew the whistle, twice.

But it wasn't only the walkers the lollipop lady needed to counsel. She had three traffic areas under her supervision. She watched the much-abused two-minute drop-off zone, and took note of the speeders who thought their daily commute more important than the safety of her subjects. But most importantly were the lines—both of them—white and solid with importance, an uncompromising instruction for drivers to perch their cars behind—and not on—while waiting for her to instruct otherwise. The lollipop lady was not above standing in the middle of the road long after her subjects had crossed, her stop sign tall and unmoving in its decision, while she pulled a notebook out of her pocket to record each detail of an offender's number plate. At the end of each shift, the lollipop lady would promptly send a list of plates, along with offences, to the local police station, a copy of which she would also send to the school principal and local councillor.

Because the lollipop lady believed in order.

But the lollipop lady also believed in balance.

She understood that what goes up must come down and she did not wish to send her good deeds out into the world for some ghastly deviant to counter. So, despite risk of great personal detriment, she took it upon herself, when not in the employ of the primary school, to put the balance right.

It was three crossings after young Xavier's reprimanding that the lollipop lady decided on her next course of restoring balance to the universe. A short but sufficient jolt of joy passed through her when she realised her actions would directly offend the Schuester family. Mrs Schuester, petite and pastel, crossed each day, morning and afternoon. The mother of three young children—the boy in sixth grade, the girl in the same class as the erroneous Xavier, and a young pre-schooler, three at the most—always took the time to ensure the children did not place a foot over the yellow line when they waited for the lollipop lady's instruction. When she crossed, Mrs Schuester always gave some greeting such as 'Good morning' or 'Thank you' or another comment drawn at random about the weather or an impending school event. One morning, when the youngest Schuester's walk was bordering on a run, the lollipop lady had no sooner drawn breath when she was delighted to hear Mrs Schuester herself, already in the process of educating the young girl about the importance of walking in such circumstances. So, when the lollipop lady realised she would be wronging such a salubrious character, she knew the balance achieved from her mischievous deeds would be ever more strong.

Unbeknownst to Mrs Schuester, before the lollipop lady had stopped the traffic in aid of the families' journey to school, the lollipop lady had overheard a conversation between Mrs Schuester and the beastly Mrs Gumton. The lollipop lady was already formulating a plan with the information from said conversation when the families enjoyed safe passage across her crossing. Given that Mrs Schuester was a happy, seemingly well-adjusted individual, the lollipop lady did not believe her deception would impinge too much on the enduring prosperity of the woman.

Let's skip now to later on that night, well after the stop sign and fluorescent bib had been stacked neatly and locked away in the cupboard underneath F block. Well after the three Schuester children had been kissed and tucked into bed, the little one clutching her Wish Bear in her chunky grip. After young Xavier had dropped his game console to his chest and surrendered to the irresistible and inevitable pull of sleep.

When the birds had handed over to the possums and the light gave way to the reaching fingers of dark.

When the lollipop lady switched from righting the world to wronging it.

I think that's clear enough now, so I will hustle to the climax of the story.

The lollipop lady, slick like a panther, stalked from her car. She pulled the black hood of her jumper over her head as she had done many times before and, hands in pockets, slipped into the undergrowth before any other soul had laid eyes on her.

The night was thick with humidity and mosquitoes and the lollipop lady nodded approvingly at herself, recalling the sufficient layer of insect repellent she'd applied before leaving home. Frogs rattled like two-strokes around her as she crunched her way through glowing white paperbarks towards the water. The path was a few metres to her left, close enough for her to find if she became disoriented, but far enough to hide from should any delinquents be travelling along it tonight.

“Just north of the jetty,” Mrs Schuester had said. “Tucked behind a bush. Such a great hiding spot. Impossible to find.”

The frogs stopped, charging the air with disquieting silence. The lollipop lady heard a thwack in the near distance and crouched in the dark at the sight of a small flame. Two figures appeared on the track, moving from the river towards the road. She saw the flame being sucked into the end of a cigarette as the two figures continued in silence along the path. Delinquents, thought the lollipop lady as she remained crouched nearby in the bush, waiting for the imposition to pass.

After what the lollipop lady determined was a sufficient amount of time, she creaked back to a stand and oriented herself back towards the river and the object of her own seemingly delinquent but actually righteous mission.

When the lollipop lady found that the path had swung around from her left side to its current position tracking straight across her course of travel, she paused and listened. The frogs were yet to recommence their cacophony. She swatted a sand fly on her leg and harrumphed at the ability of her insect repellent. Should she carry out another mission by the river, she would invest in a repellent with a higher level of DEET.

Clearly twenty per cent DEET was not strong enough for these sand flies. She would obtain a bottle of calamine lotion from the twenty-four hour chemist on her way home.

Still, the mission.

She determined the path was clear and again like a panther, stalked across it without even a nocturnal beast as her witness.

When she reached the catamaran she was immediately disappointed with Mrs Schuester's lack of prowess in matters of concealment. Standing behind her at the crossing earlier that day, Mrs Schuester had spoken—nay, bragged—about her hiding of the small boat. “It's impossible to find,” she'd said. And yet here it was, slightly disguised by the knobbly knees of a mangrove, its white shell glowing in the moonlight, silver boom shining like a beacon. The lollipop lady's impression of Mrs Schuester lowered despite her immaculate crossing record, and the lollipop lady immediately calculated the drop in balance that would occur in her current wrongdoing. It would still be enough though, for now.

The lollipop lady grabbed hold of the catamaran and wrenched it out from behind the mangrove. It gave a little and she rested, glancing towards the river where she would stage the final part of her devious plan. She bent from the waist and with an almighty yank, tugged the boat again.

But it snagged.

Upon inspection of the offending snagger, the lollipop lady found, to her horror, that the catamaran had been chained to the trunk of a paperbark tree, partly concealed by the mangrove. After a sigh and a brief moment of defeat, the lollipop lady gathered her thoughts and adopted the positive state of mind more fitting to her usual demeanour.

I will again call on the black-panther-in-the-night metaphor to describe the way in which the lollipop lady slinked back to her car to obtain the oft-used bolt cutters from her car boot before slinking all the way back to her original spot near the small, restrained catamaran.

Only this time, on her journey back towards the leisure-craft, the lollipop lady heard a most unusual noise, a sort of scraping that vibrated through the bush, bouncing from

one tree to the next in a way that made her stop and perch like a meerkat.

She crouched to a crawl as she gained on the catamaran and was shocked at what she uncovered by that small section of the river, just north of the jetty, hidden in a place that was certainly not 'impossible to find'.

Upon slinking up to the catamaran, the lollipop lady came upon another figure, dressed similarly in black who appeared to be sawing the paperbark tree currently tethering the catamaran. But the next part of the discovery was the most shocking.

The shocking discovery was so shocking that the black panther turned into a kangaroo in headlights, paralysed by fear and shock, yes, a paralysing shock that rendered our lollipop lady momentarily useless.

For kneeling before her, saw in hand, was the beastly Mrs Gumtom. Frozen in her own crouch of fear, Mrs Gumtom was shining with perspiration. Her eyes grew wide with recognition and, slowly, the beastly Mrs Gumtom rose from where she was crouched, leaving the saw clenched in the gash of the tree.

Without thought (though later the lollipop lady would reason that she acted out of self-preservation and by extension, protection of the families of her crossing and the balance of the very universe itself) the lollipop lady swung the bolt cutters from her side, which met with a sickly clunk on the side of the beastly Mrs Gumtom's head. The woman fell to the soft mud beneath, her blonde hair splayed out against the dark soil.

The lollipop lady promptly switched back to black-panther mode after that. She finished the slicing job Mrs Gumtom had started on the tree until the top of it swung to the ground. The lollipop lady was then able to free the chain and therefore the suddenly-popular catamaran. Quick-as-a-wink, the lollipop lady slid the boom into the front of the small boat and dragged it to the water. When the mud became spongy under her feet, she jumped onto the now-floating vessel and released the sail. Upon reaching the river mouth and the ocean beyond, the lollipop lady simply tied off the sail, swollen with wind, before diving off the side of the vessel and into the water. Bobbing in the waves, bolt-cutters in hand, she watched as the vessel sailed off into the abyss. The perfect, senseless crime.

Now, thought the lollipop lady, to that calamine lotion.

The next morning at the crossing, the Schuester family seemed as happy and agreeable as ever. ‘Lovely morning’ was Mrs Schuester’s choice of greeting and the lollipop lady nodded, all the while eyeing the driver who was waiting perilously close to the white line. She gave him an I’m-watching-you kind of expression before letting him pass.

The lollipop lady thought of Mrs Gumton, right-angled on the mud, and wondered just how much she’d thrown the balance towards the negative end the previous night. A jolt of panic struck her as she imagined the extra amount of good deeds she’d need to embark upon to ensure the balance did not sway too far towards the dark end.

It was not long after this thought that the lollipop lady’s gaze came upon Mrs Gumton, waiting with her children on the far side of the crossing. Her hair was uncharacteristically tied up and she wore a red scarf around her head.

After the second whistle, Mrs Gumton and her children began their safely provided journey across the road. Mrs Gumton’s eyes met the lollipop lady’s in a mutual stare of secret knowing. As the lollipop lady watched the family make their final approach to the curb, she noticed the youngest Gumton child hop into a run.

“No running on the crossing,” she yelled after them, then allowed herself a small smile.

Order, she sighed, had been restored.

*Martine Kropkowski is a Brisbane-based writer, editor and playwright. Her play In the Bag was a finalist for the People’s Choice Award at Sydney’s 2009 Short+Sweet Festival. She enjoys writing in all its forms and has written non-fiction for various custom and lifestyle magazines, such as Style Magazine and Contact Magazine, as well as online for [thewritersbloc.net](http://thewritersbloc.net). Martine is working towards a Master of Arts in Writing, Editing and Publishing at The University of Queensland and spends her free hours reading submissions for a literary agent. This story is Martine’s first publication in a literary magazine. Find her on Twitter [@martine\\_krop](https://twitter.com/martine_krop).*

# Confusion and Showgirl Tunes

*by SB Wright*

On weekends our small band would head on bikes  
to that jut of bush in the wash of new developments.  
There were rocks, spinifex,  
resurrection ferns and a giant fig  
sprouting between a bouldered outcrop—  
a Mount Diogenes in miniature.

We'd run along weathered paths, play soldiers  
or capture the flag, 'til that summer we found  
a girlie mag left by some other gang of boys.  
You hooted and jeered—over the top. Embarrassed  
and flushed, all I remember was her lush  
permed hair—it was the Eighties. Then later

that night in your pool, I was confused  
and not only by your love of showgirl tunes.

*SB Wright 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 secondary school teacher. His work has been published in Tincture Journal, INDaily Adelaide, Eureka Street, Bluepepper, Writ Poetry Review and the anthologies The Stars Like Sand and Poetry & Place 2015.*

# What Happens in Indiana

*Non-fiction by Ellie White*

It's just after one o'clock in the afternoon on the day after Christmas. We're somewhere west of Indianapolis, and my sister, Erin, is having a mini-crisis. I'm hesitantly reaching towards her, and seriously regretting my big mouth, while she screams "Get it out! Get it out!" Hindsight being a bitch, it only now occurs to me that I should have just waited until we were in the car to tell her. It's not like the situation is life-threatening. As it is, we're sitting in a booth at Steak 'n Shake, and I've just told my thirty-one-year-old sister that she has a grey hair. It's her first one and she is, understandably, flipping the hell out. The demon strand is about one inch from her hairline, just to the left of her off-centre part.

Even with my detailed instructions, Erin couldn't find the hair to pull it out herself, and so I found myself in my current predicament. She leans forward across the beige tabletop. I carefully separate the offending hair from its light brown companions and give it a sharp tug. It's a resistant little sucker and slips through my fingers the first time. But on the second try, I get it. The hair is strangely coarse, very shiny, and very, very grey. The fluorescent light lends it an attractive shimmer, and I can't resist rolling it between my fingers a few times.

Holding my sister's hair in my hand, I'm reminded of this story Mom likes to tell. Like any good childhood story, it involves me doing something totally ridiculous and embarrassing. When I was little, I was the kind of kid who picked up every single thing I found on the floor. Not surprisingly, one thing I found a lot of was hair. Whenever I'd find a hair (or anything else) on the floor, I'd excitedly bring it to Mom and hold it up for her to see. Pretty much since birth, Erin has had the most hair of anyone in our family, so more often than not, Mom would say "Oh look! That's Erin's hair!" I'd then proceed to toddle through the house looking for my big sister. When I found her, I'd reach up and try to put the hair back on her head.

Erin is staring at me anxiously, and it's starting to gross me out to have another person's hair in my hand, so I carefully pass the little monstrosity over to her. "It's so

weird looking!” she says in a slightly fussy voice. “It’s way thicker than my other hairs. Do you think it’s a side effect of my new medication?” The medication she’s referring to is an antidepressant and unlikely to cause such a side effect. But I’m trying to be supportive here, so I say “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Erin despairingly holds the hair up to the light. I start glancing around the restaurant; it doesn’t seem like anyone’s noticed the dramatic scene that just took place at our table. But considering I had to wait ten minutes in line for the bathroom, and no less than two toddlers stuck their heads under the door while I was going, I’m not surprised. It’s a busy day at a cheap family restaurant, so everyone has their own shit to pay attention to (no pun intended). Aside from the scrawny teenager sitting at the end of a table of ten who’s sticking a red straw through one of his gauged-out ears, there isn’t anything interesting for me to look at. Just people in generic clothing talking and chasing kids around. Steak ’n Shakes are all alike: black and white tiled floors, red pleather seat cushions, and cheesy neon signs with things like ‘Takhomasak’ on them.

For people who didn’t grow up with them, the uniformity of chain restaurants like Steak ’n Shake tends to be horrifying. But for people like Erin and me, who spent a decent chunk of our childhood in the Midwest, some of these restaurants have sentimental value. Until they passed away in 2007, we spent every Christmas with our maternal grandparents at their house in Indianapolis. At some point during each visit, the whole family (aunts, uncles, cousins, and occasionally guests) would pile into two or three cars and go to Steak ’n Shake for lunch. Even after eight years, it just doesn’t feel right for Erin and me to pass through Indy and not eat here. Neither of us lives near a Steak ’n Shake at the moment. She’s lived in New York City since law school, and I’m in grad school in Virginia.

After thoroughly examining the silver-grey hair, Erin sets it down on the black part of her paper place mat and takes out her iPhone to snap a picture. Then, she starts looking for something in her purse to wrap the hair in so she can save it. I have no fucking clue why she wants to save it. It seems pretty disgusting, and besides, she has the picture. I almost want to ask her what she’s planning to do with the hair when she gets back to New York, but I decide against it. She’s still visibly upset and I don’t want to try her patience. Eventually she finds an unused front pocket to stash it in, and a few minutes later, our food arrives.

I have my usual grilled cheese and cheese fries, and Erin has some new spicy steak burger. We both take comfort food seriously, so we spend most of the meal in silence. In the absence of good people-watching or conversation, my thoughts keep drifting back to the hair. Most people hate everything to do with getting old: crow's feet, sagging skin, the whole nine yards. After all, getting old means eventually dying. Who wants to think about that shit? Much better to start planning your first sky dive (which you'll never go through with), or designing a new exercise plan (which you'll never follow), than to sit around facing the reality that your body isn't going to last forever.

Fear is probably what motivated Erin to scream at me to rip out the hair, despite the old adage that four or ten or however many more would grow in its place. But what separates Erin in this situation from the average person who doesn't want to die is that she chose to save the hair. Hell, she even took a picture. It weirded me out in the moment, but now, as I chew my synthetic bread and cheese sandwich, I think I'm starting to get it. Though she is by no means an old fart, my sister has lived long enough to know the danger of giving small things too much power, and the futility of fighting something as inexorable as time. Though she couldn't handle the hair being on her head, she wasn't willing to grant it the honour of total annihilation. It was something she wanted to hide from other people, but not something she needed to hide from herself. It was a thready little symbol of the future, not a remnant of some past mistake.

If it were me, though, the aforementioned mistake is why I'd probably leave the damn thing on my head. Erin's gray hair is a lot like the permanent creases I've noticed forming between my eyebrows, the ones I can't quite bring myself to hate, though I know it's the socially acceptable thing to do. I think I feel a certain affection for my future frown lines because, in my mind, death is part of the past, not part of the future. I actually find the idea of getting old comforting. Though I rarely think of myself as being grown up (there are always at least three kinds of candy on my nightstand), I honestly never planned to be around this long. I never planned to see my older sister get her first grey hair. I never even planned on turning eighteen. At fourteen years old, I sat in a Steak 'n Shake dipping shoestring fries in cheddar cheese sauce the exact same way I am right now, except I was surrounded by most of my extended family. It was the day after Christmas, and I was thinking about how I'd do it.

I'd tried slitting my wrists before, but I could never find anything sharp enough. Or

maybe I was just too much of a pain wimp to press that hard. Either way, opening a vein was out. Shooting myself would be simple, except I didn't know a single person who owned a gun, and even if I did, I didn't know how to use one. Asphyxiation just seemed like way too much fucking work. I would have to get into the attic of our house to find a strong enough beam to hang from, and then there was the whole matter of finding a rope or something that wouldn't snap. Driving off a cliff was out, too. I lived in one of the flattest places on earth. Plus, I was too young to drive. Pills seemed like the way to go. I'd read online that you could use any of the over-the-counter pain killers, as long you made sure to take enough.

Three years later, when I was seventeen, I took enough. I was alone in the house when I did it, and if I hadn't had a last-minute change of heart and called Erin, I would've died. Watching my sister eat a stray slice of jalapeño from her plate, I try to convince myself that after eleven years, she's surely forgiven me for it. I'm pretty sure I've forgiven myself. In any case, I'm here now. A server in black pants and a white button-up shirt—standard Steak 'n Shake garb—comes over with the two milkshakes we ordered forty-five minutes ago. The server is middle-aged, and looks about as miserable as most people who work in restaurants. She doesn't apologise for the shakes being late. She just strides away, her slightly over-processed blonde ponytail swinging.

As I poke a straw into my chocolate-covered strawberry malt, I wonder if checking myself into the psych ward voluntarily last month could be seen as a way of making amends. At the time, Erin was the only one who supported my choice to take such a drastic step. Mom had insisted on checking me out of the hospital as soon I'd had my stomach pumped when I was seventeen, and eleven years later, her opinion of hospitals still hadn't changed. But when I walked into the student counselling centre at Old Dominion University six days before Thanksgiving and told a crisis counsellor I wasn't sure I could keep myself alive anymore, I knew I was fresh out of other options.

I'd been on an emotional thrill ride since the year began. By November, I was terrified every second I was awake. Would it be a good day or a bad day? Would I feel like I was inside the music on my headphones or would I want to crawl out of my skin? Would I drink a whole bottle of wine tonight? Would I wake up with more cuts, more bruises? There was no way to protect myself from the self-destructive behaviours because I never knew what new, horrible thing was waiting to jump out at me. I fucking

hate drop rides, but it had reached the point where I would've jumped off the Tower of Terror just to make it stop.

That's why even if it can never make up for what I did at seventeen, I know checking myself into the hospital was the best choice I've ever made. After half a lifetime of unsuccessful treatment for major depressive disorder, I finally found out why nothing had ever worked. The supersonic thrill ride thing was called ultradian cycling, and it meant I was bipolar. They'd been treating me for the wrong disease the entire time. I think Erin might've seen this new diagnosis coming. I told her way more about my mood swings than anyone else, and she's a smart cookie. I didn't tell Mom anything until I was in the observation area waiting to be admitted. Mom's biological father, Charles, was bipolar, and he'd been involuntarily committed sometime in the late 70s or early 80s. The hospital had subjected him to electroshock therapy. I knew this was why Mom was so afraid of psychiatric hospitals, and I didn't want to freak her out by telling her I thought I was like Grandpa Charlie.

Erin and I have both finished our food. We're sipping our shakes in silence. She looks up at me, and I decide to leave the realm of cheerful memories for the moment and resume conversation.

"It is really fucking weird that you have a grey hair now."

"I know right? I'm not even that old."

"I mean Mom's almost sixty and she barely has any grey hair. Neither does Dad."

"Well, Dad doesn't really have that much hair to work with..."

"True. But we're not supposed to go grey. It doesn't run in the family."

"I know. It's really not fair. Why couldn't I have inherited the not-grey-hair gene instead of all this other shit?"

By 'other shit', she means our respective mental illnesses, and the disturbing pattern of binge drinking we've both struggled with. Erin is better at hiding her depression than I've ever been, but I know it's still there. She's also managed to live around the binge drinking in a way I never could, maybe because she's dealt with it off and on since she

started college. I'd never finished a bottle of wine by myself before this year. In any case, we both know we came by these problems honestly. Our list of mentally ill or addicted relatives is almost as long as our list of relatives, and for whatever reason, theirs are the genes that got passed on. Inheritance is, as Erin said, pretty fucking unfair.

Erin's done with her shake, so I give her my part of the check in cash, and she goes to pay with her card at the register. I stay at the table trying to slurp the last of my shake, but as usual, strawberries are getting stuck in the straw. I keep having to pick it up to pull the squashed berries out with my teeth. By the time Erin is back, I've pretty much wrestled all the chocolate syrup I'm going to get out of the bottom of my glass. We gather our coats and purses and head for the door. We need to get back on the road so we can get to our aunt and uncle's house in Illinois before it gets too dark. As I stop to hold open the door for a woman with a struggling toddler in her arms, an obligatory Midwestern smile possesses my face.

We parked along the far side of the parking lot, where the cars face the highway. SUVs and minivans are roaring by out there, mostly full of people heading home from wherever they spent the holiday. It's a warm day for December, but that means it's still pretty fucking cold out, and I'm not wearing my coat. I figured there was no point since I'd just have to take it off when we got back in the car. Once we're on the road, the heat required to keep the windshield from fogging always makes the car stifflingly hot. Such is winter travel.

A sudden gust of freezing wind comes up and blasts my face, penetrating straight through my jeans and sweater, and sending a shiver through my whole body. I used to hate weather like this, but I've recently had a something of a change of heart. It happened a few nights after I got out of the hospital. It was unusually chilly for Virginia, but I'd spent five straight days indoors at the hospital and still had cabin fever. I honestly didn't give a damn about the weather; I just needed to be outside. I walked the two blocks down to the river, and sat on the concrete steps that led into the water to have a cigarette.

The river's surface speckled with a few lights from houses on the opposite side. I stared at them and the red glow of my cigarette, which looked ghostly through the haze of my breath. It occurred to me right then that I might have finally won my battle with the self-destructive tendencies of my illogical brain. I'd recognised the signs that I was

losing control, and I'd done something about it. I'd done the right thing. With every drag, I repeated the words 'fuck death' in my mind. I even said it out loud a few times. Meanwhile, the freezing wind coming in off the water made my fingers ache.

Now, as I walk across the Steak 'n Shake parking lot with my sister, who is carrying a grey hair wrapped in a tissue in her purse, I feel a slight ache in my hands. This moment makes no sense. I'm walking into the icy wind outside a chain restaurant in a nowhere town near Indianapolis, but for some god unknown reason, every single step feels holy.

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# The Holy Foolishness of Punk

*by Susan Bradley Smith*

## *Midnight*

In these swindling times, I don't care that you are married. It is exciting to be bad and also right. We are in the middle of a miracle, away together for a weekend riffing on stolen time pilfered from real life like money from a mother's purse. Even though you look well-loved there are violet bruises beneath your eyes. You've been speaking in your sleep.

## *Brunch*

You take a call. I read the paper. Those Pussy Riot girls are licking salt in Soviet prisons just because of their band's faultless, unforgettable name and their splenetic racket and their unlicensed occupation of public places. Meanwhile, you sit there and persist with the theatre of your own concerns. You ask me to pay attention. When I look up you are so beautiful I can barely believe you exist let alone love me but you said it: I am your ground zero; you are my vanguard.

You pause. Today, without your bragging suit, you look like you did when we were young and stripped-down and our whole life only knew three chords. I might as well complain rain is wet as say please don't go, I think, as you take her call again. Some poseur is fighting another to run the

country. The mafia is at it again in the suburbs. Mainstream fashion is the new fringe. It all crackles at my touch. I listen to you talk, and read the paper, and although I am one of misery's best graduates, your news still shocks me. Just as I had stopped sliding clichés like thermometers into my declarations of love—*I am your ticket, you are my collector*—you tell me we're through.

In the café by the harbour we have the kind of conversation that happens to all lovers sooner or later—last line: it's over. I would have liked to have left the past alone, but as you talked about the failed philosophy of us my shock soured to a bitter glandular juice making quick work of all sentiment, like camphor on the mouth of memory. It's true, I'd been monothematic *this is not a love song* but before 'us' you were anhedonic, split in half from the very idea of who you once were. Are. Remember Hastings? The Sex Pistols gigography was once also ours. What can anyone possibly say anymore that is novel enough to warrant imprisonment?

### *Otherworld*

The seagulls are not my friends and their eyes marbling my toast are also yours. I am limp with terminality. At the table opposite a father is busy being humiliated by his wife who is documenting his failings in the presence of their son. How utterly cruel it seems. The café table is smiling at me with sun-kissed woodshine

and spilt sugar as gay as Christmas. I am  
spoiling the scene with my tight, peppered  
offence but my love will not quiet. It will  
not hurry like inspiration to the end just  
to suit you. Sluiced in sunshine or not,  
I remain a citizen in a closely beleaguered  
city and within the citadel of us things  
could still go either way.

*Utopia now*

We are so old, yet you have turned me  
into a pop song, into someone you used to  
love, a hangover that creeps up on you  
before you've even finished drinking.  
Marriage must be a first-rate thing  
for you to sing its tune despite your  
antidisestablishmentarianism blues but  
seriously: love as anthrax? No one really  
wants to catch that again. The knowledge  
of us is cream in my bones. Green, I am, and  
dreaming again of your strum. You wrote  
me love letters in invisible ink but they  
still hum. And hum and hum, like the  
soundtrack for a revolution.

*Later*

You walk away from me across the airport  
terminal, the floor glittering like a crushed  
disco, towards the record shop where all  
the songs of us are on sale. And machines  
to play us too. Before you make it home  
I will be arrested for collapsing hysterically  
in public places. The cause: no marrow.  
Only the concealed heroin of you, wrapped

in the bone of me. Outside it is a gutsy,  
sunlit day. Despite the lunatic soak of  
needing you, the creep of seizure, the  
godly rant of my blood, I turn away.  
I let you go. It's not my day.  
Any fool would say.

Hindsight will be Satan.

*Susan Bradley Smith began her professional writing life as a rock journalist but has also worked as a waitress and teacher. Her latest books are a novel-in-verse The Screaming Middle, the poetry collection Beds for all who come, and the memoir Friday Forever. An advocate for Arts and Health, Susan is the founder of the writing and wellbeing consultancy Milkwood Bibliotherapy, and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Curtin University. Her secret ambition is to swim every ocean pool in Australia without writing a book about it.*

# The Juniper Tree

*by Vivien Huang*

Marlene is cleaning out the junk in the spare room when she feels it.

She feels it like a stab in the oesophagus, the lungs, in each and every cell. She gasps aloud, she tries to scream for her husband, for anyone, but air struggles to move in or out of her body. Her heart pounds and bounds, she can hear it in her brain.

She's about to die.

It hurts so much, she wants to die.

Then it stops. The pain at least.

She breathes, savouring the air in her windpipe, and sighs in dazed relief. She feels every cell in her body grudgingly restart, like they're being forced to work overtime. As if that attack would finally signal their long-awaited vacation.

Marlene carries on cleaning.

It is the Chinese in her, to always keep going.

Her husband, Stu, a nice enough fellow, had been laughing at a reality show program while his wife was choking. He will never know she had the attack. She will never tell him.

In fact, no one will ever know about Marlene's near-death choking experience. Because in an hour she will have another attack, she will once again struggle to speak or scream, and she will quietly die, for real this time.

But if you listen, listen carefully, you may hear her story.

And that will be enough.

Stu will politely call for a beer, around an hour after that. When he doesn't hear a

response he will grab a beer from the fridge and then find her body amid the dust and old stuff. She will be sitting on their old couch, gripping an item he cannot see. Her black hair will be splayed against the musty cushions and he will whisper to no one that she is as precious as a doll.

He will think she is sleeping and leave her be. He will go to sleep too, TV still on, lying on the couch in the room next door.

When he wakes up at 5, dinner won't be ready. For the first time in their entire marriage.

He will go back to the spare room and move the hair from her face.

She will not open her eyes.

He will try to wake her up.

He will not be able to.

He will call the ambulance. By then it will be hours too late.

But neither of them knows all this yet.

So Marlene continues cleaning.

As she cleans she thinks. She doesn't think too much of course, just about dinner. Maybe a curry tonight, full of those spices he adores—the ones they brought back from their trip to India. Yes, that would make a perfect dinner.

Marlene makes dinner every night, on weekdays too, after coming home from her job at the aged care centre.

And it's just a few more moments she has to herself.

She looks again at the dusty spare room; weekend spring cleaning never looked so daunting. Marlene steps onto the old plaid couch to reach yet another dusty cardboard box. A small shoebox, untouched for years. Marlene's fingers leave trails along the sides; she draws a smile in the layer of dust. She gives it a small cynical smile in return.

She sits herself down on the old couch, grabs the scissors and cuts away the tape.

At first she doesn't recognise the objects inside. It takes her a few moments. But once she does, tears force their way out of their ducts and build homes in her eyes, down her face, in the scoop of her collarbone.

The dust is getting into my eyes, she thinks, and crying will make my eyelids baggy, Shirley has said so herself.

She laughs. When did she ever care about her eyelids? What thoughts have embedded themselves in my brain, these suburbs, these people. They're driving me nuts. Thinking about her 'friends' makes her want to laugh. She does, she laughs a quiet pitiful laugh, and then she laughs at how quiet and pitiful she has become.

All because of this shoebox.

God, she doesn't want to think.

But the brain never listens, does it?

There isn't much, just the two items, they sit in her hands, as still as the beads of her backbone—a pair of tiny shoes. She carefully wipes away the resting dust with the back of her hand and one by one she lets her fingertips run across each corner and each curve. They make Marlene want to cry, these things that look like ticklish laughter. She remembers buying these.

She remembers finding them, soft cotton and the size of her curved palm. Baby feet grow, Stu would have said. Stu had always complained about things like that, even when they were just dating, her ability to buy things on such whims. But he never knew she had bought these, all those years ago.

## §

That morning, when Marlene was still in her twenties, had smelt sharp and fresh, full of hope.

Marlene had woken up, admired the new ring on her fourth finger, and ignored the new rings under her eyes. Then she made them both coffee and porridge, kissed her new

husband goodbye and checked the mail.

She felt a little thrill travel up her spine at seeing the letters in her hand. Her name. And there it was, beside her husband's.

Mr and Mrs Weiss. She loved how right it felt.

And in that moment, when she was looking at the front of the month's electricity bill, she decided that she would tell him. Tonight. After dinner. She'd wear the dark blue dress he liked, make his favourite (slow cooked pork ribs with mashed potato), and while they were eating they'd share a glass of white wine (she wouldn't drink any of it, of course), and she would tell him.

"I have some news," she would start.

"I—I haven't had my period in two months..." she would reveal with a small, chaste smile.

"Darling, I'm sure, I've already tried three different tests," she would say nervous but confident.

"I didn't expect it either," she would hold his hand.

"I know we weren't trying, we're both just so busy, but this will be exciting, right?" she would ask with a smile.

And when he looked at her his slow smile would inch across his face because he would be pleased, he had to be.

Marlene smiled to herself as she washed the breakfast dishes and packed her bag. It would be perfect.

She started the car. She no longer drove to college, she'd dropped out before they got married, it was too hard to study and work and be a wife, and she no longer loved numbers. Now when she thought of numbers she didn't think 'finances', she thought 'how much will the week's grocery budget buy'. If her parents found out she'd given up on study they would cry and shout. Her aunt, a smart, rich city woman, had been the one to send her here after all, when she was just a child. To get a 'proper' education, a *life*,

whatever that was.

But her shift at the aged care centre would start in two hours at 10 am. Plenty of time to do some shopping for tonight's dinner, she thought. It was going to be special.

Christmas sales were starting earlier every year, it was only October and signs were already drawing in customers like moths to a streetlight. She couldn't help herself popping into Target after finishing at the supermarket. She didn't quite know how she had ended up at the book section, but soon she had the *Birth Bible* in her shopping basket, and a nice shirt she'd seen on sale. A pretty blue blouse with a pattern of tiny birds, embroidered almost too small to notice.

"Marlene! Fancy bumping into you here!" Marlene turned her head slowly and saw Shirley, the wife of the vice-president of the local council.

"Shirley, how are you?"

"Good good, ah the Christmas sales are ridiculously early this year, don't you think?"

"They are."

"Ah yes, gives us no excuse to be late with the presents," Shirley chuckled, "the kids have already written such long Christmas lists."

"Oh, have they?"

Shirley didn't seem to sense Marlene's interest and awkwardness at the mentioning of her children. Marlene was slightly jealous, she wanted the stars in her eyes and twinkle in her laugh that Shirley had, talking about her two boys.

"Look at the time! I'll be heading to the cash register now," Shirley motioned at the pile of toys in her trolley, "It was great chatting with you! By the way, I love that blue shirt in your basket, it'll really compliment your colour."

Marlene smiles, "Thanks, see you later, Shirley."

And with that, Shirley flies past, all powder and red lips and staccato heels,

disappearing as abruptly as she had appeared. Marlene can only breathe a sigh of relief that the shirt had covered the baby book.

Marlene didn't want to bump into Shirley again at the cash register, and so decided to meander around for a few minutes. She soon found herself in a section of Target she had never walked through before. Baby clothes.

Now, she wasn't sure how many weeks she was in, maybe twelve or thirteen, but the pillow-soft outfits and palm-sized colourful photographs of beaming babies lured her in. She could already imagine her little girl playing in these clothes. She could already feel her little girl held against her hip as she made breakfast. She could already hear her little girl crying, her sleepless nights, and for some reason she was a little excited about that. She could already imagine her smiling into her baby's eyes and not saying a word. Just staring in awe at her miracle.

Then she saw the baby shoes.

She had never had baby shoes as a child. They weren't a necessity after all, instead of shoes she had garden flowers, tissue paper, steamed palm leaves, whatever her older brother could get his hands on. Marlene doubted her brother remembered. But the soft cotton shoes stirred something inside her that reminded her of innocence and pure joy.

And so she bought them. All fifty dollars of them.

And then she went to work.

§

*As much exercise as possible, at least thirty minutes a day,* she read as she stirred the sauce and ribs. She had propped the *Birth Bible* up against the toaster, as if it were a cookbook. And was flipping through the pages with a smile.

*Surround yourself with people that make you smile.* Marlene hasn't told her family yet, they were all still in China after all, she hadn't spoken to them in so long. But she would tell them soon. She couldn't wait to see her brother's reaction, there would be tears for sure.

But not tonight. No, not one tear. Tonight she was going to sit up straight as a cliff-

side and be the strong one for once. She was going to be the relaxed, reassured one. The one that knew what she was doing. There would be no tears from her.

Stu usually came home at 5 pm. Marlene glanced at the clock, only an hour left, and she still had to start the mashed potatoes. The beautiful white of the potato reminded her of home, she hadn't had rice in so long she couldn't remember what it tasted like, and just thinking about her childhood meals made her mouth water. The additional butter gave the mash an off-white colour. She dug a spoon in and tasted it; the potato clung to the roof of her mouth, foreign like the Chinese words she barely knew anymore. She didn't really like this food, though she cooked it every night. It's what Stu liked, and tonight was going to be for Stu after all.

## §

Dinner sat on an empty table.

Marlene retired to the couch in the lounge room and laid down across the seats with a patterned cushion underneath her neatly curled black hair. Her midnight dress folded her in like a blanket. (This is much the same position she will be in, years later. Except years later she'll be stone-cold dead.)

Her husband was late and she was hungry. She didn't want to look at the clock but she knew it was nearing their sleeping hour, 9 pm. She had a feeling he wasn't in any sort of trouble. She had been so prepared, but she hadn't considered him not being here for dinner. She felt lost. Where was he? But she had promised herself that she would not shed a tear tonight. She closed her eyes. He hadn't called, she thinks, he usually does if he's coming home late. And maybe he had called, and she was just too tired to notice. Too sleepy. Too dizzy.

In her sleep she is lying on a diamond stream, moving slowly and methodically, a leaf atop the water, a baby Moses drifting along the Nile. She feels a slight bump at her feet, hitting a tree. A juniper tree. Exactly like the small one that sits in the front yard of her childhood home. Looking up from the water, she gasps, because there stand her parents. And there, her brother and his new family! Why, she hadn't even known he was now married.

“Mai Lee,” laughs his children.

“Come home,” whispers her brother.

She had promised herself she would not cry. So she doesn't. She also doesn't want to look back up the stream, because she knows what she will see. She is going to see her house, her husband, her life. The water in the rice-paddy fields is what she wants right now.

Suddenly she is lifted from the water. She wants to scream, no, please, she wants to stay with her family, please, please, she tries to kick away but she cannot, she is disconnected from her body. She cannot feel. Whatever is lifting her into the sky releases her carefully. She blissfully falls back into the diamond river. But it is different. She can no longer see her family.

The water seems to circle the juniper tree, meandering at first, but soon it froths, bubbles, roughens. She can't move, immobilised, paralysed, dead. She feels a slight pang in her abdomen. And then her stomach is caving in on itself, eating the tissue and blood of her womb from the inside out. She is so dizzy. It hurts so much that she cannot tell if she is real or if just a dream anymore.

§

And then she woke up.

She turned her body onto its left side and stared at the vacant spot beside her on the double bed. Her back ached and she felt a cramp forming in her abdomen and when she felt his side of the bed it was cold. She wanted to chastise herself, falling asleep before he'd even come home, how silly.

But she was too tired.

Her stomach grumbled. She had missed dinner. Had he eaten dinner? He must have. But what about breakfast?

She sat up in bed. Had she slept in? Oh, how her back ached. And then suddenly—

Sledgehammers.

If her senses had still been intact she would have heard the clock chime for noon, but

her abdomen was rattling furiously. She could barely sit up straight, she grabbed onto the bedside table, in fear of falling. She was starting to see spots in her vision. All she could do was stumble into the bathroom.

For some reason she could not stop thinking about the leftover dinner and glass of wine, drained, that probably sat on the kitchen table right this moment. But it didn't matter anymore, because the thing inside her wanted to eat her insides and come out.

She thought, what nightmare have I gotten myself into? Wake up wake up wake up wake up.

But she couldn't.

All she could see was that empty wine glass on the back of her eyelids. Until she couldn't see any longer.

## §

Marlene didn't know how much time had passed but she found herself on the ground, crouched forward over her legs, as foetal as the thing that had been inside her. Her head sang at an unpleasant pitch. She had taken her underwear off. Staring at the blood and mess, she didn't know what to feel. She was so confused.

What is happening? She was numb, she couldn't move.

What just happened? She felt a tsunami of grief drown her.

Did I deserve this? For not wanting her enough? Oh god.

She couldn't stop thinking about her baby. How the little girl would cuddle against her, how the little girl would cry day and night, how her black hair would have tufted on the crown of her head.

Marlene wanted to bawl her eyes out.

But she had told herself she would not cry. Not last night. Not ever.

And besides, her tears had already dried out, there were only deserts left in her eyes.

Marlene was trembling as she stripped herself of the nice dress she had donned last night, when she was still happy and expectant and glowing. She bunched the dress and dropped it into the bin in disgust and lowered herself onto the toilet. And she sat there, naked, shaking, silent. She didn't know how long. But she sat there, head on knees, and let the blood and baby drip from her like it was drip feeding anaesthesia into her heart. And so she sat there and she dreamed of her baby.

§

Marlene sat on the toilet seat until her husband came home. Even after she felt the dripping stop, even after she wanted to run far, far away. She could hear him in the kitchen a few rooms away, clumsy and clattering like elephant feet.

Time didn't mean anything to her. She didn't care for time if it couldn't give her what she wanted, what she deserved. Time didn't matter. But her honour did. She was a Chinese woman, living and working, in Australia after all. She subconsciously knows that it was why he married her. He had called her, at the altar, "My china doll", and she hadn't turned back, hadn't walked out that church. Instead, she did what dolls do. She smiled back with her doll face.

"Darling, I'm home early from work, I was worried. Are you OK? You were a little feverish this morning," he called from the kitchen. He didn't mention last night. And she knew she wasn't going to either.

"Stu, I'm fine." Her voice was hoarse from lack of water, food, use.

"Are you sure? You sound ill."

She cleared her throat a little, stood up from the toilet seat and washed her hands at the sink. She could see her naked body in the mirror. She didn't want to look. But she couldn't help but feel its emptiness without its imagined bump. She drank from the tap deeply. "I'm fine, really, I am."

"Open the door, dear." He'd found her.

Marlene smiled at his concern, *no*, she said to herself, *never*. She was surprised at the intensity of her thoughts. She didn't want him to worry. She didn't want him to know

she'd failed, that she wasn't perfect.

She tried to make her voice smile, but in the mirror she could see her insides stripped bare. "I can't right now, in a minute. I really am fine, there's no need to worry."

Stu paused. "OK, I believe you." Stu paused again, "I'll be in the kitchen when you're done."

"Yes, thank you." Marlene could see the tracks her invisible tears left on her face. And the marks they left on her bloodied hands.

She used the scrap of her dress, lying on the ground like a dark bruise, to bleach the bathroom floor. She never wanted to see the dress again anyway. Then she showered, let the water become her tears, and let all the hurt wash away.

Marlene stepped out of their en suite and put on a floral dress, tied her wet hair back and slipped on a smile. She saw the Target bag near the end of their bed, almost hidden underneath. She picked it up, without wanting to, she could feel the hard book and soft shoes, and shoved it into her bedside drawer. She didn't want to look inside the bag.

"Hi," Marlene whispered, stepping into the kitchen.

Stu looked up from his blackened toast, "How're you feeling?"

"Better."

"That's good to hear," he looked genuinely happy that she did seem better, "Toast? I want you to eat something."

"Thanks," she took a nibble and he smiled in return. His stomach growled. Marlene breathed, "I'll make dinner, don't worry."

Stu walked over towards her, he looked as if he were going to give her a kiss. She didn't want that, not right now. But he came over slowly, as if not wanting to scare the lost creature, and he gave her a long, warm hug.

"Thanks, Mar," grinned Stu, pulling away.

Marlene gave a small smile at his endearment and nodded. “Does beef stew sound good?” She always kept some in the freezer for emergency dinners.

“Yes, I don’t mind,” Stu motioned his arm, this way and that, “Now, you would *not* believe the day I had.”

*And I don’t think you could begin to fathom my day*, shouted Marlene’s brain. But she didn’t dare say anything; after all, she was playing the lovely, near-perfect housewife. The only thing that would make her perfect would be lighter skin and no accent.

“What ever could have happened, darling?” she asked, injecting interest into her voice as she put a pot onto the stove.

And Marlene, for the life of her, could not remember what he said next, or what they ate with the stew, or what she felt that night. Or every night after.

## §

As Stu and herself tucked themselves into their bed and turned off the light, Marlene didn’t want to return to that numb darkness. She was scared of her dreams now. Time passed, silence broken by Stu’s soft snoring, until Marlene felt like she was the only alive thing in this world.

And then she felt something small, almost unnoticeable, shifting on the end of her bed. She sat up slowly. Cat-like, curled up, sitting as hunched and as tired as she felt. It was a young girl. The girl’s dark hair was tied into two abrupt pigtails, all she wore was a simple white dress, and her toothy smile shone in the dark.

Marlene checked her husband was asleep before she whispered, “Who are you?”

“You know who I am.”

Marlene could not, for her and her baby’s life, remember what she and the little girl talked about that night. But it didn’t matter, did it? Because over the course of a night, the love she felt for the girl gradually became the only sure thing in her life. Marlene had no idea the roles that time or her husband or her family or China played in her life. Or even what she loved about her life. Until now. Until this girl.

When Marlene closed her eyes, succumbing to the tide of sleep, she held the girl's last words close to her heart. "Sleep well, Mar, we'll meet again." And when the girl whispered 'Mar' it almost sounded like 'Ma'.

§

Whenever Marlene thinks about that day she tries to get her mind to stop. She has grown a forest between her heart and what happened, and she has never let anyone or anything venture in. They are shadows of thoughts that she does not shape aloud.

Marlene's fingers run along the cotton of the shoes, tracing the floral pattern around the shoes' edges. Each shoe only fits in two of her fingers. She thinks of why they never tried for another baby. He'd change the subject every time their friends asked, and after a while they stopped. Instead they stood contently, watching the children scramble among themselves. She hadn't been sure why he ignored this entirely new world of children, but she appreciated it. She didn't want to go through the pain. Not again.

A small thud makes Marlene jump. She listens for more, she hears nothing.

Marlene goes back to the shoes, the feet they never held. Outside the sun hides shyly behind clouds, the spare room gets a little darker and darker until the objects in her hands become outlines.

Suddenly she hears small footsteps. Feet pitter-pattering against the hard floor boards. The feet stop in front of her.

And when Marlene looks up *she's* there.

The young girl stands before her. Her dark hair is cut a sharp kind of short, and her eyes are as loud as orchestras.

Marlene isn't surprised by this little girl, she doesn't even skip a beat. Actually she feels a calm she hasn't felt in a long time as she pats the couch seat beside her. Nothing about the little girl surprises her. Not her missing front teeth, not her messy hair, not the smile she hasn't traced in decades. Not her aliveness.

"Oh, it's you again," says a smiling Marlene, "after so many years."

Marlene doesn't question how the little girl is still a little girl, un-aged, unchanged; even though her own hair is starting to see strands of grey. "Come, have a seat."

The small girl just smiles and laughs as she skips over to the couch. The dusty box beside Marlene still lies open. As Marlene looks at the shoes, she feels a story in her soul chirping, begging to be told.

"Would you like to hear a story, child?"

"What kind of story?" her voice is a young, curious whisper.

"Have you heard of the story about the juniper tree?"

"Yes! I have, Papa would read it to us when we were little," the little girl puffs her chest proudly.

"Well, then you must know all about it."

"I do, I do. It's about a little boy who gets *eaten* by his own father!" her voice is a dramatic whisper, "It's all the evil stepmother's fault. But don't worry, because he becomes a beautiful bird who sings a beautiful song, and everyone loves him. He banishes his evil stepmother, and turns back into a little boy, and the boy and his family are all very happy by the end!"

"You're very much right."

"I know it all by heart because it's my absolute favourite story."

"I see, so then I suppose you know the *whole* story?"

"The *whole* story?"

"It's simply a good story, better than the fairy tale." Marlene had always liked stories, she liked the feel of them as they hung heavy and enveloped you into another world, she liked the feel of them as they rolled around your tongue like cough drops, she liked the feel of them as they tended the fire inside you. In fact, there were so many stories bottled up inside of her that sparks and smoke sometimes escaped out of her mouth when she spoke.

“Better?! But that’s impossible.” The girl sits forward, she’s intrigued.

“Shh, it is, but if you want to hear it you must stay quiet, not one word.”

The girl nods her head, solemn as death. She understands.

And, as good story tellers always do, Marlene settles into the couch with a small self-satisfied smile and a woven string of words begging to be told. The girl does the same, fixing up her little white skirt and preparing herself for the new worlds that will come. And with that, Marlene’s voice, tender and soothing, opens the door and sets the scene.

## §

There once was a little girl who lived in a littler world, as small as one of those glass snow domes she liked to shake up. And inside this little girl was a little heart, tiny, barely breathing, almost nothing. She didn’t let many others share this world with her. Other than her beautiful white dress, which had been sent from heaven; her long dark hair, which her little sister always played with; and her small, pretty voice, the little girl treasured nothing else. Oh, except for her little sister.

And her name.

The little girl had a rather odd name, Jing-Wei it was. She was named after the mythical Chinese bird that was determined to fill the sea with stones, no matter how long it took. The little girl was sure that Jing-Wei was still going at it, filling the ocean.

Jing-Wei was proud of her name. It had been given to her before she had sprung full-blown from her mother’s imagination.

This little girl grew up in a grandly ordinary house with an ordinarily grand father. He was so grand, and spent so much, that the family never really got back up onto their feet once he’d lost his job. But anyway, the little girl was happy. Happy enough.

The truth was, she wasn’t meant to happen. Her mother lived in a heaven up north named ‘There’, while her father lived in ‘Here’. She was the remains of an old love, but she, as a child never knew that. And she never did get the chance to meet her mystery of a mother. The woman had disappeared before Jing-Wei had even gotten the chance to

open her tiny crescent eyes.

Jing-Wei never called that woman her mother. Why should she? In fact, she liked to say she had no mother, what was the use of them anyway? All they did was boss you around and tell you to be quiet. But she was told, time and time again, that the woman her father was married to, the one she grew up with, the one she lived with, with white blonde hair and pale blue eyes—*she* was her mother.

But this blonde-haired mother hated her.

She never let the hate show. The pinches and jabs and slaps she sent were all internal.

Now, her father loved his little princess. He showered her with gifts, and laughs and love. Her blue-eyed mother saw this and felt she needed her own princess, and so she made her own little girl, as pale as cream and as white-lipped as broken egg shells. She became Jing-Wei's sister.

Their father loved both his daughters dearly. Every night he would read to them. He read them many stories, picture books, folk tales, poetry, classics, but their favourite story was the story of 'The Juniper Tree'.

On her first day of school, Jing-Wei was called up in class.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"M-My name is Jing-Wei, Miss."

As soon as she opened her mouth everyone started giggling. She didn't know if it was her accent, or her nervous stutter, or her skin colour. And so she never spoke again. Not once. Instead, when family or friends came over, or if she was alone, she would sing shyly. People said she was part bird, the way she could sing a melody, all delicate and full at the same time.

She now asked to be called J. And as the little girl grew taller she also grew more beautiful. Her beauty shone through her skin and collected in the crooks of her elbows, so that when she smiled at you or hugged you or even looked at you, it was like she was

giving you the world. And maybe because of that, as she grew, her world got smaller. Her heart was simply getting too large for it. Her head now pressed against domed glass walls, walls that were placed everywhere she went. But she didn't want a dome to constrain her. No, she wanted the air.

She wanted to fly.

J wanted to break through the glass walls, she wanted to finally unfold her wings. She wanted so much more than her world could possibly give. And as she pressed herself against the glass she could see strange people walk by, people that looked like her, saw like her, felt like her. Even people who had the same, real mouth as hers. Their mouths were unafraid to speak up.

But when she looked back, inside her snow-dome world, she saw her family, her sister, and she chose to stay. And so she would turn around, and climb the grand juniper tree with her blonde princess sister. And they would nest in the branches' bends like two little lost birds.

Now, as each day passed J became more of a mystery. What was she thinking? What did she do? Everyone was entranced by her secrets as much as her face. They wanted to share her little pearly secrets.

She could have any boy she wanted, but she chose a girl.

The two girls had been friends, they talked and laughed and cried together. Then it became more. They kept it hidden for a few months. But one day J's sister found them together, nose on cheek and cheek on nose, two sleeping commas curled on the couch.

Her sister never meant to tell, honestly, it was all an accident. But she did and J's world was shaken, as small snow domes tend to be.

## §

Marlene pauses, she has become one with the story. She feels wings quivering, taking off, soaring in her skull. She has to prepare herself for what is to come. The little girl sits next to her quietly, Marlene hasn't realised that she's been gripping onto the girl's hand. The little girl is looking up at her with wide eyes. Eyes that look too old on her

face.

“Whatever happened next?”

“Well, everything went everywhere.”

Marlene has to prepare herself before she goes on.

§

The town went crazy. J’s world went crazy. Her mother went crazier.

“What is wrong with you!?” she would shout, her blue eyes flashing, “I have not raised you for you to *choose this*.”

When J would reply with silence, her mother gave up. “What do I care, you’re not mine, you’re not one of us. You shouldn’t have even been born.”

The first string cut.

Their father loved both his wife and his daughter dearly, and maybe if he hadn’t been too busy being lost in his reading he wouldn’t have been so easily persuaded. Because when his wife fed him lies, and accusations, and J’s broken heart, he looked over at his daughter and then looked away.

The second string snapped.

J’s girlfriend, or whatever she was to her, was born to stay in the town, in that world, J had known that. She hoped that the friend would live a happy life in this small dome.

The third string, left to rot and crumble.

But J’s little sister wouldn’t let her leave, she screamed and kicked until she couldn’t let go, she thought it was all her fault. For days and nights her sister held onto her, she would not cease her grip. J’s clothes were so wet with tears, and so wrinkled with her sister’s furious guilt that J couldn’t think to run. But little girls can’t stay awake forever, and one night her blonde princess sister fell asleep. Her little hand, so used to being clenched into a tight little fist, was still clamped onto J’s dress, like a baby’s

crescent fingers relentlessly grabbing onto her mother's finger. And so J slipped her dress off like an old skin, picked up her rucksack, and took her sister with her. Almost tiny in her pocket. A small folded picture. As good as the real thing.

The fourth string stretched thin.

Finally she was free as a bird.

As free as the little bird in 'The Juniper Tree'.

But the blonde, princess sister never heard from J again, no matter how many times she checked the post or wrote to the sky. All the sister had were the memories, the stories, and the grand juniper tree.

Sometimes, secretly, the sister would talk to the song birds that perched on the branches of the juniper tree. And she would imagine that they sang about J's adventures, her travels, her freedom. And J's beautiful, blonde, princess sister would look at her own clipped wings and feel, for a brief moment, happy for her flying sister.

And as far as Marlene knows, unlike the bird from 'The Juniper Tree', J never plans on going back.

## §

Marlene feels empty after telling this story. She had not known it but this story had been weighing on her all this time. She had wanted to tell it for so long. And now she is weightless. She is soaring among the clouds, she is circling the trees, she is flying and finding her way.

Marlene opens her eyes after telling her story. She hadn't realised she'd closed them.

She looks around, dazed, the room is near dark, she can barely outline the shapes of the boxes, the curves of her fingers. She can't move her fingers. She isn't sure why.

Something's missing, she thinks. Then she realises.

Where is the little girl? The one with the dark hair and moon eyes?

“I’m here, don’t you worry.”

Marlene breathes a sigh of relief. If she closes her eyes she can see a faint shadow sitting opposite her, “I don’t want you to go.”

“I won’t go, not this time, I’ll stay with you for as long as you want.”

Marlene hears the voice all around her, coming from everywhere and inside her all at once. And instead of feeling stifled Marlene feels some kind of release. A love she has hardly ever felt before. Certainly not with Stu. And as Marlene drifts off she’s beginning to forget who Stu is, who the girl is, who she is.

*“Would you like to fly?”*

There is only one answer.

“Then all you have to do is shut your eyes.”

Marlene nods and obediently closes her eyes, lowering herself slowly. This story has made me tired, she thinks, I’ll just rest my eyes for a moment.

And she is where she was, all those years ago. The same couch, the same position, the same thoughts.

I’ve so much left to do, Marlene thinks, so much left to say.

Marlene lies down.

This time she doesn’t get up.

Because she can’t breathe, she can’t open her mouth, she can’t speak. It’s a feeling she knows too well.

She’d stopped fighting, all those years ago. But she’s not done yet.

None of us are, are we?

*Fly free, like the bird from the Juniper tree, the voice says.*

Even now, if you listen closely, you can still hear her, singing her story.

And I hope you will listen.

*Vivien Huang is a student who reads by day and writes by night. She enjoys exploring the magic of stories, minds and felines. She is currently studying in Sydney.*

# When I Meet the Zhou Family

*by Mindy Gill*

I spoon discs of lace-thin lotus root  
into bone broth, thankful  
for a home-cooked meal.

My hosts smile at me through mouthfuls: *eat! eat!*  
pointing to dishes of bok choy in garlic,  
steamed pork and cabbage dumplings.

Their three-year-old son ignores his plain white rice,  
slides green tea biscuits and packets of dried beef  
across the table.

I cannot understand when he speaks to me:  
*Wo bu hui shuo zhong wen, ni hui shuo ying wen?*  
I don't speak Mandarin, do you speak English?

He whispers to his mother and she turns to me,  
“He says you say you do not speak  
Mandarin, but you speak Mandarin.”

His grandmother murmurs over steaming herbal tea  
—*Xinan Guanhua*—Guizhou dialect,  
unfamiliar southwest-mountain tongue.

She slips between Shanghainese and *Putonghua*,  
is patient as I try to understand.

She lifts boiled pork into my soup, offers me a fork  
in place of chopsticks. I decline but she brings

one anyway.

She smiles—*easier for you*—refills  
my tea, mimes eating rice with the fork  
as I take it.

To thank her I raise my bowl  
to my mouth the way I was taught,  
thumb on top, and slurp.

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# Roadrunner

by *Liam Lowth*

Earlier tonight while I restocked the cereal aisle at Coles, a kid with a bowl cut tugged at my skirt. “Tell the woman what it is you want,” his mother encouraged. And maybe it was the way she called me a woman, or her silent child with no words between two red cheeks—shit, maybe it was because they wanted Fruit Loops from the top shelf. At any rate it got me thinking back on memories I’d thought forgotten. Ages ago when I was just a little girl, there was a death on our street. And I can’t say why that small encounter at Coles triggered all these thoughts to start flowing back through a cracked mental spillway. All I know is that moments like those follow you your whole life, as shadow to body does under the light of a hot sun.

In those days Laura, Luke and I would jump around on the hot bitumen so it wouldn’t scorch the pads of our feet. It didn’t occur to us that shoes might be an alternative. We realised soon after though, once our ten toes were scorched and we had to dance across brown buffalo grass to get home. We all lived in a quiet suburb of Bundaberg, a rural town that came to seem small as we grew up. I remember houses that backed onto each other like too many teeth in a child’s smile, which is a far cry from the pearlescent white apartment complexes that dot out the sun these days. But those were different times. Privacy and space seemed to grow in popularity with us and the internet. Anonymity was nothing more than a hard word to spell in grade three, and space was just the darkness that held up the stars at night.

On one side of my house lived Laura, she was (and still is) my best friend. Having Laura ten steps away at all times was nice considering I didn’t have any brothers or sisters to play with. Our favourite game was *I’m the Princess*, which is just as complex and multilayered as it sounds. Laura was always willing to play servant, which worked for me considering I had a penchant for adoration. Maybe that stemmed from being an only child. I can understand these things now that I’m older. On the other side of the house lived Luke, my childhood sweetheart. He once said that his parents were divorced and never spoke, but I didn’t understand what that meant at the time. His mother had these red-stained teeth that flashed out whenever she yelled, but I never minded her. I

always thought she would have been a nice mother. My Dad was alone too, but for different reasons. I had this dream that one day we'd all move in together; Dad, Luke's mum, Laura too, and we'd stay up late watching the stars from our house in the middle. Luke and I would talk of our future, marriage, kids, and life. Our wedding was to be a quiet ceremony at Disneyland with Santa as the reverend. Our AWOL parents were to be there in the front pews. And it made no sense, but you only understand those truths once you wait up late and realise no one's coming for Christmas. We were just children, doing childish things.

It happened later when the months got cold. It was one of those days that just seemed backwards to the rest, where for no good reason other than the turn of the world, life got hard for a while. Laura would often sleep over and we'd wake up to the crow of magpies, walk around in thick socks to protect our feet from the cold, and wear our duvets to breakfast like young aristocrats. I was Princess Georgina after all. It was one of those mornings that Dad went outside to feed the birds. Laura and I sat eating dry Fruit Loops at the kitchen table. We liked to arrange the colours so there was a sense of order to it all. Through the silence of this ritual rang out a piercing screech; a banshee howl. The door wailed its un-oiled arc and Dad's hulking frame came sprinting across the living room, until he smacked straight into the table. Our Fruit Loop display sprayed across the hardwood floor and we were really upset. There was no order to any of it anymore. "Get upstairs quickly," he growled, like a cornered dog. And it was strange hearing that tone coming from my gentle giant father. He ran out through the backyard and vaulted over Luke's back fence, splintering it under his weight. As he ran up to the house next door we peeked through the doggy door to see what was happening. There was only space for one, so as queen of the castle it was my right to look first. I elbowed Laura out of the way and relayed the events like the six o'clock news. "He's going through the door ... It's quiet ... Nothing's happening ... Stop grabbing my leg, you can look soon ... I didn't kick you, shut up ... OK shush, he's walking back out through the door ... Luke's there too in his arms ... He's holding him up like a baby ... He's covering his eyes ... He's coming back, quick, get upstairs."

We stumbled up the staircase. On all fours, for speed, like wild animals we staggered up and up then through the door. We drew the curtains and switched on the television to pretend we'd been upstairs the whole time. And in the dim light of the room, we tried to make sense of it all. Quietly in whispers, we sorted through what we'd

seen. We watched Looney Tunes while we waited, and the colours from the television spilled out vibrant hues across the darkness of the room; baby blues, pastel pinks, copper-coloured sunsets that filled the room and made me forget it was still morning. Time moves strangely when the sun goes down before it should.

“Luke will be staying with us tonight girls. Make him welcome.”

Then all was still. Dad left the room and Luke sat on the couch next to us. I could tell something was wrong, but I didn't have the means to figure it out. I had all the pieces of a puzzle with no surface to lay them on. So I didn't, and we all sat in silence. We watched the screen in front of us where the Looney Tunes played on. There was something comforting in how meaningless and simple it all was. Most mornings they played episode after episode. I hoped it would distract Luke from whatever he was going through.

My father did the same thing to me once. I was probably around six years old. They had played the five year anniversary for 9/11 on the six o'clock news, and at that stage I wasn't sure exactly what it all meant. They rolled the old footage and a TV anchor spoke of what she saw: “There's fire... Oh my god, people are jumping from the windows... people are jumping...” Bodies left the windows trailing smoke. Dad had lurched forward and changed the channel to the Looney Tunes. Wile E. Coyote fell, down to his doom. Dad smiled and encouraged me that this was much nicer. I encouraged Luke to watch the cartoon instead of thinking about whatever may have happened. And in that dim room, shades of that meaningless cartoon kept flickering against the three of us. In the space of that silence where colours collided and children sat still, the magpies from the front started to fly away. Outside there was a siren, flashing reds and blues, and on-screen Wile E. kept running. He hit the ground like a pancake, but then the next episode started and it all went back to normal.

## §

I'm fifteen now, sixteen tomorrow, and I know things I didn't back then; things about Luke and his mother's death. Shutter-clicks of memory remain—Single Parent of Divorce—Red-stained teeth—Dad taking Luke through the backyard—Red and blue police lights through a curtain. And it seems dumb when you think back on it, obvious even. She was a drunk on her way home from the tavern. She fell asleep on the road in

the middle of the cold night, where the heat from the day baked a warm surface into the rough. Then sometime in the night someone hit a speed bump, and she never woke up. I wish I never turned on that TV and watched stupid cartoons with Luke that day. That mindless lull—that coyote running on and on to nothing—never taught us much more than ignorance. I should have just seen the signs and asked what was wrong. He would have been upset, maybe cried, but sometimes it takes a little pain to understand things. Then you can look back, piece together a narrative and try to make sense of it all. Sometimes I wish things had turned out differently. As I walk out of Coles my shadow grows long underneath the overhead fluorescents, and follows every step I take out the door.

“Do you ever think back about stuff Dad?” He’s driving me home from work with the windows down. If there was hair on his head, it’d be blowing around through the open air—but there’s not. He’s older now and crow’s nest wrinkles line a path around his blue eyes. He thinks about my question for a moment. “Like, do you ever think about what point you became an adult?”

He nods, “I think about your mother all the time. I’d say I knew I was an adult when your little sister was born.”

I can see his broad shoulders sag a little and immediately regret asking.

“After the birth, well... I had to go tell your grandparents that mum and your new sister weren’t coming out of hospital.”

We pull into our street; it’s smaller now than it used to be. The paint flakes off most of the front facades and the grass grows long. “Were things different after that?” I ask, “Being an adult?”

He shakes his head, “I just asked myself why I didn’t realise earlier.”

## §

Back at home I’m doing my make-up in the mirror. “*Now apply the first layer, this is a natural foundation. People won’t be able to tell you from Kourtney Kardashian unless they’re right beside you.*” Dad and I are going to the movies together tonight, it’s a bit of a birthday tradition we’ve taken up the last few years. I can hear him downstairs watching sport while he waits. I know it’s NRL or UFC because every time I apply a

wing or contour, reverberated applause congratulates my efforts. I put on some red lipstick and wash my hands with Dettol before I switch off the lights to leave. Thinking back on what Dad said in the car about my mother stops me; a vague recollection of it all swirls round in my mind, but it's difficult given I was so young. All I remember is red blood on white sheets and the smell of sanitiser. My train of thought and make-up tutorial are interrupted by a bling.

*New Message: Laura: Party at 9. Just tell whoevrs at the door ur there with me. Brooke won't care.*

Laura and I stayed friends through the years. I want to hang out with her tonight, but she should know that Brooke doesn't like me and probably won't let me into her party. Girls remember things. The applause from the television below grows louder. It was years ago (maybe grade three) that I got the whole classroom riled up. They stood in a circle clapping and roaring me on. There was something about being in the middle of it all that made me smile, then and now. I took a huge swing and pegged a pomegranate I'd been given for lunch at a glass window. When it came time for questioning, the principal pulled me, Laura and Brooke in for a story. Laura and I sat outside the office and waited for Brooke to tell. And I'll never forget the moment Brooke walked out of the office with that look on her face. She had this little shake of the head, her pitch black hair bobbed side to side, a prance out the door and a look just begging us: "What? What did I do?" She knew exactly what she did, and we've never spoken since.

As I stand here looking at myself with the steady drone of applause from the TV below, I ask myself what I should do now that I'm old enough. Tonight's been full of memories I thought inconsequential, but maybe I should read the signs and follow where they point. My memory these days is a game of Chinese whispers where I'm the only player, and all I know for sure is what I know now. If Dad walked up the stairs at that moment jingling his keys, ready for the movies, he might have caught me mid-thought. We might have sat in the theatre and watched the Harry Potter double, shocked in the last scene that Voldemort was Professor Quirrell the whole time. We might have driven home, talked about the movie and seen the fluorescent dashboard clock click over to 12. Happy sixteenth birthday to me! Another year of akin thought stuck on endless repeat. But I know better than that. I know better than wizards and magic—cartoons of coyotes running again and again for no cause. I know it takes a little pain for progress. So I went

through the back quietly to the party, where Luke, Laura and Brooke would all be. I tiptoed through the tall grass that changed over time. Past a broken fence line and out onto the warm road—with shoes on.

§

FUCK BEING ON SOME CHILL SHIT, WE GO ZERO TO A HUNDRED REAL QUICK.

The crowd yells it out. Drake blasts out through the huge mansion and the group of us by the speakers are almost deafened at the bass lapping to our ears like a ferocious wave to shore. The makeshift dance floor in the living room is moving. Pastel shades strobe and flicker across the high ceilings and dim walls. Colours fill the dark spaces and flicker over my body. One girl dances by a mahogany cabinet like she's in the 'Hotline Bling' video but just falls over and spews up milky chunder across her heels. We all laugh. "Hurl you got me down you got me stressed out," I sing into Laura's ear, but she doesn't register. I'm surprised I actually made it in this party tonight given my relationship with Brooke. I bring my phone out and tap the Ask.fm app.

*Do you realise how selfish you are, YOU STUPID BITCH*

I shove the phone in front of Laura's face and it lights up the rims of her black glasses. She pushes them up the bridge of her nose (I've come to realise she does that when she's annoyed) and reads the message.

"Who said that?" she asks.

"Oh come on really?" I growl back. "Have one guess." It's an anonymous question board so you can never say for sure who's who, but I remember things and I'm sure Brooke does too.

I put the phone away and lean back into the leather sofa. I'm drunk and seeing stars; though it could just be the 14 carat chandelier above, which isn't exactly the family fantasy I had planned out in my childhood. Clumsily I explain my revelation to Laura and why I came here tonight. "I just want to love him. I need to speak with him."

She reels back a little from my stray spittle. "Are you drunk? You haven't said

anything to me about that before,” she says. I can feel my own stupidity spelled out in laconic vowels but blunder through the speech anyway. She turns away briefly and I bump her skinny shoulder for attention.

“I have to be there for him, like I always should have.” It’s like we’re kids again roughhousing but she reacts differently now—she looks annoyed.

“Let’s go find him then,” she sighs and pushes her glasses up her nose. As we walk to the kitchen to find Luke the DJ drops a remix of Thomas the Tank Engine and the bunched crowd goes crazy for it. It’s funny how a little throwback will burr people up.

In the kitchen, the table has been converted into a beer pong field. Across the granite countertops cards are strewn everywhere. The sinks are full of bile, or alcohol, or both, and the smell is a constant reminder of where we are, like pinching yourself in the middle of a bad dream. Boys in stringlets yell out the rules for drinking games with furious diction. “Fuck it’s an eleven, waterfall!” someone yells through the room. The circle responds accordingly, but this is exactly the moment they’ve been waiting for; an excuse to funnel vodka down Shelly’s, or Brooklyn’s or Chontelle’s throat until they’re one step ahead of a vegetable, ripe for the picking. All I see are children around the kitchen, doing their best to get back to the root of who they are: vomit-soaked mutes in the foetal position. And soon when it gets dark in the house and their moral auras, they’ll start rooting each other. And one of the guys in stringlets will say, “Chontelle, it’s OK I’ll pull out.” Then sixteen years later baby Declan will be in Myer picking out whatever shows off his deltoids more, then that night at some sluts party the snake eats its tail. It’s comical, cartoonish—endless. “You OK? You look kind of blank,” Laura stares me up and down. “Yeah sorry I zoned out for a second.”

As I’m surveying the room I spot Luke. He’s sitting on a staircase just outside the kitchen with a few other guys in Hawaiian shirts. I grab Laura and shake her frail frame. “He’s over there, you gotta tell him how I feel. Tell him!” I look back over to the boy I remember. From his Facebook I’ve seen a distant picture of his growth, and there are elements of a face I remember poking out from his new look. It’s loud in the room so Laura leans into me.

“I just don’t understand why this is so important all of a sudden, why now?”

I shrug at her question. “There’s stuff I’ve only realised recently.”

Laura begins to stride over to the Hawaiian shirt crew by the staircase. They’re those kind of guys who amp up the Australian. They drink XXXX ironically and enunciate in boar grunts. I can understand who they are immediately. Like the way a scar on a face tells a story, so too does an extended ‘Bloody oath’.

Luke looks up as he sees her approach. At the same moment a voice calls out through the room for a photo and every girl assembles in formation like a pre-rehearsed musical number. From the beer pong table, countertops, bathrooms and backyard they stream in and form a line with me stuck dead centre. I can see who called out. It’s Brooke, my grade three nemesis. She saunters into the middle of the frame right in front of me and leans down, forcing her skin tight dress to ride up her thighs. It’s the same washed-out black as her extensions. The guys in year eleven are crazy for her but I wouldn’t call it much of an achievement. Quasimodo’s arse would look ravishing to a fifteen-year-old boy provided it was squashed into a dress like a pomegranate in a tube sock.

Laura’s over by Luke as I stand frozen for the photo. Brooke’s bent over right in front of me doing her best to forget I even exist. I’m not a child anymore but if I was I’d put my size to use and push her across the room like I did to Laura accidentally sometimes as kids. Beside me, girls with waists like 2B pencils throw up peace signs and pout their lips. I’m drawn into the centre of the photo by an invisible vacuum. The girls all suck in their stomachs and someone with a ratty voice yells out for a smile, “Say cheese!” Laura taps Luke on the shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye she mouths the words, “She likes you...” and motions over to me. Brooke stays on her knees in front of me and the flash goes off. Once life fades back in, the crowd dissipates as quickly as it appeared. Luke is gone and Laura reappears by my side.

“Well? What did you say to him?”

She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “He said he’ll meet you upstairs in an hour.” She’s impartial to my excitement and just scrolls through her Instagram aimlessly until something catches her eye. It’s the photo that’s just been posted; the group shot Brooke just orchestrated. There’s me dead centre and the caption reads: *Sick night with these girlz*. Everyone’s been tagged bar me, and I must be visibly pissed judging by

Laura's look. It's not that I care about being tagged in Brooke's vanity project, it's that I'm being directly insulted through anonymity.

"Why don't you say something to her?" she asks. And she's right, I will. I'll really let her know how I feel. I log on to Ask.fm and navigate to Brooke's feed.

*Fuck You*

She replies almost immediately.

*JJJJJ*

*What? What did I do?* I'm thinking back to that same dumb face she pulled on me in grade three, when she told on me to the principal and walked past Laura and I like nothing had ever happened. It makes me angry thinking back and motivates me to ready up for my date with destiny. I pull up a chair at the Kings Cup table and nominate myself for double drinks. Double the confidence, I guess. The clock ticks round quicker and quicker with each shot and soon I'm ready. It hits 11.45 and I get up to go.

"Wish me luck girl," I say to Laura.

She looks up from the Kings Cup and shakes her head, "Do you realise there's still five minutes until he said to meet him? Do you realise that maybe this is a bad idea?"

I shake it off and take the first steps upstairs to Luke anyway. The staircase looks longer than before, and it pulsates like it's alive with my first foot forward. The wood door at the top of the stairs leans at an oblique angle like some Dali painting where the walls move and melt. I'm afraid I'll end up like Vomit Versace back in the living room because I've started to realise those double drinks I had have taken full effect with no warning. No matter. I get on all fours like an animal, for balance, for speed, and ascend the steps.

Halfway up there's claps and yells below, like the kids who cheered me on to throw a piece of fruit at the classroom window years back. But behind I see a group of four or five girls at the bottom of the stairs with their iPhones out filming. A girl with a jumpsuit too small for her thighs stands at the front of the crowd. She's got carpet burns on her knees and a loud voice that floats up to where I'm slowly crawling. Carpet burns speaks

to someone round the corner of the stairs, “What the fuck is she doing? Should you help her?” I keep crawling up and ignore the laughs from below. I reach out, closer and closer to the melting door. If I could see a clock it’d probably say 11.59. And the precise moment I open the door it’ll strike midnight. There’s a nice sense of order to the thought.

But when I open the door I can see the time. There’s a large grandfather clock by the back wall which reads quarter past twelve. It isn’t the way I’d really hoped things would turn out, but I guess I shouldn’t be too hung up on that, given in the glass reflection over the ticking hands I can see Brooke on her knees sucking Luke’s dick. There’s a quick moment like a camera shot, or a lost section of an old reel-to-reel movie that disappears from sight with a negative flash. And suddenly I’m on top of Brooke with no recollection of how I got there. But it doesn’t matter now. I’m punching her in the face, over and over again—Princess Georgina and her subservient. Luke’s just sitting there, roles reversed, mouth open with no words between his two red cheeks. Brooke gurgles a scream under my knuckles that rings out through the house, “HELP ME!!!” And that was probably the moment I realised it was too late to turn back. The gravity shifted in the room like a ball thrown in the air, suspended for a moment then pulled down by the weight of itself—I feel like I’m falling. I can hear footsteps hitting the stairs outside the door, and if I ran over to the window, launched myself out and hit some shrubs at the bottom of the house, the crowd from below might have seen a room with just Luke and a bloodied Brooke. I might have run all the way home, amped up on adrenaline, through the front door into the big arms of my father. He’d pick me up like a baby and walk me back into the house where I’d sleep a deep sleep. But that’s not what happened.

Twenty people spill in through the doorway and circle us like seagulls to a fry, iPhones outstretched. Laura’s in the crowd that just came in. She looks at what I’ve done and begins to cry. Why is she crying? Her glasses fog up with tears so she takes them off. Without them she looks like the little girl who used to play *I’m the Princess* with me, and it begins to hit me all at once without warning. And it seems dumb thinking back on it; obvious even. I’ve got Polaroid picture memory. Fragments of the night come back to me and point me in a direction I never considered. I close my eyes and remember.

*Laura kept pushing her glasses up through the night, she always does that when she’s annoyed—The girl with carpet burns at the bottom of the stairs spoke to someone round the corner, “Should you help her?” Who would she say that to other*

than Laura? I remember the photo we took earlier—*We didn't move, and out of the corner of my eye Laura mouthed, "She likes you," and motioned over.* But Brooke was bent over right in front of me. She must have pointed to Brooke. *Laura looked up from the Kings Cup table earlier and said, "Do you realise there's still five minutes until he said to meet him?"* I remember the Ask.fm message I got, the one I thought Brooke sent.

*Do you realise how selfish you are, YOU STUPID BITCH*

Brooke looks up at me once I stop punching her. She shakes her head as best she can and there's a look on face just begging me. *"What, What did I do?"* And that day in grade three floods back to mind, no stopping the flow of it all now; the floodgates have opened. *When it came time for questioning the principal called me, Laura and Brooke in for a story. Brooke had this stupid little head shake, "What? What did I do?" She knew exactly what she did. Except that's not what happened. Laura smiled beside me the whole time; she'd already given her side of the story.*

The clock's still ticking and I forget for a moment it's my birthday. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when the clock struck twelve. Maybe it was the moment I realised my childhood sweetheart didn't feel the same way about me as I did about him. And what about the rest of the people here, crowded in a circle with their iPhones out? When will adulthood hit them? Maybe for Brooke it was the moment a fist rammed her face. For Laura maybe it was when she realised teaching her friend a lesson in humility probably killed an innocent girl. Luke, when his mother died—Dad, when he gripped bloody white sheets and realised his wife and newborn weren't coming back. There's blood on my white shirt and I hope I haven't accidentally killed Brooke. It wasn't supposed to turn out like this.

I guess for the whole circle here, they'll look back one day and ask themselves how it came to this? Adulthood. That age when that dream they had of how it was all supposed to be flew away into the horizon, and they were stuck connecting the dots thinking, I should've realised things sooner; I should have known that moment in my life meant something. All I want right now is to be young again with my father and Laura watching television. I should have appreciated it while I could. We'd all sit down and the TV would lull us into a warm, meaningless embrace. Wile E. keeps running and running until he steps over the cliff. Then he looks down, back up, then down again and

his gravity shifts. But before he hits the ground like a pancake he sees that stupid blue bird he's been chasing the whole time flying away into the tungsten sun. Poor coyote.

*Liam Lowth is a film student from Brisbane.*

# Fullas

*by Ramon Loyola*

Mine is of a lighter shade.  
His colour is coarse and deep.  
Known to them as blackfulla,  
kin to my own brownfella.

He inhales steadily on a fag,  
puffs acrid smoke against my face.  
“Where you from, my brown brutha?” he asks.  
I answer with a hesitant shrug.

“We here’s been made redundant.  
We here’s gone for replantin’,  
replaced, shunned by whitefullas.”  
My nodding head casts shadows.

When he smiles, the fella is just that:  
the same ancient blood surely as mine,  
my ancestors from another land,  
the same history of broken men.

“But here,” I say, “you’re my kin.”  
“Brutha,” he says, “young fulla,  
we here’s both been diluted.  
The stars don’t lie like they do.”

Beyond that, we are both just transients,  
floating in a sea of fair fellas,  
unmistakable in our own skins.  
Undeniable. Unbelonging.

*Ramon Loyola is a writer of poems, fiction and non-fiction. He lives in inner-Sydney's Newtown.*

# My Boy Dalya

*Non-fiction by Jov Almero*

The minute we reached a small village in the Thar Desert, after a forty-five minute ride from the fort of Jaisalmer on a pick-up truck that blasted bouncy Hindi tunes, I began repeating to myself a mantra I had coined while on the journey: *you do not choose the camel; the camel chooses you*. This self-reminder was brought about by a burgeoning unease. What if I chose the wrong camel? What if I chose the slowest camel and got left behind? Or what if I chose the fastest camel and found myself deep in the desert, alone and undocumented?

I was chosen by the camel called Dalya.

Dalya was the last of the seven camels to stoop down and get ready for mounting. And he only did so after taking a long leak and a huge dump, and after insistent nudging from one of the guides. Dalya was unlike the other camels. He even had a green ribbon strung between his right front and hind legs.

Before mounting Dalya, I rehydrated from a plastic bottle and placed it inside my satchel. One of the guides took my satchel and coiled its strap around the saddle handle that protruded just above Dalya's neck, where the bulk of the bag rested.

In order for the camels to not veer off track, they all had ropes tied from a hook drilled into their nostrils to the saddle on the camel just in front of the line.

When we had all successfully mounted our respective camels, in two groups and with each group shepherd by a guide, we began the trek farther into the Thar Desert.

Saddled up on Dalya's back, the Thar Desert loomed before me like a promise of infinity. Sand dunes glistened in the sun, bouncing off the heat they cannot contain. Different species of fauna, from antelopes to peacocks, revealed themselves in what seemed like a choreographed series of entrances and exits, probably to keep the Thar stage interesting and its audience in awe. Here and there foliage was scattered, providing a sense of irony to an otherwise increasingly predictable landscape. The

bodies of the American couple, the English couple, the Dutch, and the Spanish, swayed almost in unison, like a dance set to the rhythm of their camels' graceful steps. Dalya and I—the Filipino guy—brought up the rear.

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About thirty minutes into the trek we reached an oasis. We stopped so the camels could rehydrate. Dalya was the first to sink his face into the water and the last to decide he'd had enough to drink. I was rather amused.

The trek resumed after Dalya finally had his fill.

When I too got thirsty I reached for the bottled water in my satchel. But before I could even unzip my bag Dalya jerked and galloped a couple of steps until his movement was impeded by the rope between his nose and the saddle on the camel in front. I almost fell off Dalya's back.

Our group's guide approached Dalya, shouted what might have been expletives, and rubbed his neck. After this, Dalya was again calm. I, on the other hand, turned into a nervous wreck, something I tried to hide from the rest of our desert crew. There was still an hour of trekking to go.

I tried to ignore my thirst for as long as I could. Unfortunately, in the desert, one cannot go for too long without having to rehydrate.

Again, I reached for the bottled water in my satchel resting on Dalya's neck. Dalya reacted as before and this time I understood: I was chosen by the one camel with anxiety disorder and god knows what else.

The guide untangled my satchel from the saddle handle so I could get my bottled water without Dalya going all bonkers. After rehydrating I put the bottled water back into my satchel and this time I slung the strap over my shoulder instead of reattaching it to the saddle handle, knowing how sensitive Dalya's neck could get.

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We reached the camp site after two hours of trekking. We dismounted our respective camels and by then I learned more about Dalya from our guides.

Dalya was the one camel prone to running away. This explained why the guides had to put the green rope—not a ribbon—between his right front and hind legs. The rope impeded any abrupt movements whenever Dalya felt the urge to run. Also, for the first time, I noticed the hole where a portion of Dalya’s nose should have been. It looked like someone had pulled too strongly on the rope attached to the hook drilled into his nose and in the process had yanked a considerable portion of flesh off of Dalya’s face.

I reached for Dalya’s neck while he was stooped down low. I wanted to give it a nice rub. I wanted to reassure him that despite what had happened awhile back, among all the other camels I would still have him choose me for the following morning’s ride back into the village.

Dalya would have none of it. He would pull away as soon as my hand was close to his skin. I knew better than to insist.

I wish Dalya and I had more time to get along. I wish he knew that I was just thirsty and didn’t mean harm those two times I reached for my bottled water, and that I respected how he tried to get his work done as quickly and painlessly as possible. But all the time we got was the trek to and from the camp where Dalya had to do his job and I had to be his burden. Between these two two-hour journeys in the Thar Desert, we had an entire night to camp under the stars, but during this time, Dalya had to be with his fellow camels and I, my fellow travellers.

## §

During dinner, and the lull between dinner and bedtime, while the guides sang old songs younger than the desert, I could not help but wonder: did Dalya’s anxiety stay even when he was left in the company of his fellow camels? Could his fellow camels sense Dalya’s anxiety? At some point, did Dalya finally feel at ease?

I do hope he did. I hope that Dalya eagerly shared how the grass they feasted on tasted way better than the last time they had fed there. I hope he enthusiastically agreed when one of his fellow camels brought up how the sole brown-skinned visitor looked ridiculous in his cowboy hat and Jack Purcells. I hope he sighed alongside the other camels when one of them reminded the rest of the next day’s long trek back to the village, but quickly volunteered they could at least look forward to rehydrating at that

nice little oasis.

§

That night, in the heart of the Thar Desert, lying on a thick comfy mattress, roofed with nothing but the evening sky, I could not get myself to sleep. My eyes were shut but my brain wandered elsewhere: all of the travellers Dalya had previously chosen and with whom I now share an anecdote; all of the sidewalk samosas I had eaten because they were chummy with my currency; all of the places I was not allowed to go.

At sunrise, when I heard the entire desert crew up and about, I opened my eyes and greeted Dalya and everyone else, Good morning.

The Spanish asked, Did you sleep well?

I said yes.

*Jov Almero lives in the Philippines and has had stories published in Barrelhouse, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, Plural, and Kritika Kultura. 'My Boy Dalya' is part of a project in progress: a collection of short travel stories titled Banana Pancake.*

# Morphology

*by Scott-Patrick Mitchell*

## I

Nathan sits at the desk in his room. On a blank piece of paper, he writes his name:

**Nathan Goodman**

He writes it again:

**Nathan John Goodman**

Nathan does not like his name, thinks it needs something else. More... sound. Nathan thinks it needs more syllables. He knows where to find them.

## II

Daniel is Nathan's younger brother by three years. Daniel sits at the desk in his room, drawing a picture of himself. In this picture, Daniel is a warrior. He is dressed in armour and is holding a sword above his head. Daniel is busy colouring in his picture when Nathan enters his room.

Daniel, shall we play our game? Nathan asks.

Daniel places his texta on the desk and looks out the window. It is summer. Everything is the colour of cloudless skies, brick houses and burning grass. A bottle-brush rustles in a neighbour's backyard.

Daniel turns to Nathan, says:

Yeah, alright. Bags I be the warrior.

Of course, Nathan replies, grinning.

### III

Nathan and Daniel race into the family room. There the walls are painted a light sandstone and French windows open onto a patioed backyard. Sometimes, at sunset, the room becomes golden and warm and shiny and it just glows. At these times, Mother complains that they need new curtains.

Nathan and Daniel open the chest in the family room. The chest is an old dented metal trunk their Father found in a second-hand shop. Nathan and Daniel use it to keep dress-up clothes in.

Am I going to be the chalker? Daniel asks.

No.

But I want to be the chalker!

You were the chalker last time.

Well, I want to be the chalker again!

Daniel, you're the counter this time. Besides, Mother says you have to practise your counting.

Daniel pouts. Nathan smiles.

### IV

Nathan and Daniel have scattered clothes all over the family room. Mother says:

I hope you are going to clean up this mess?!

Together Nathan and Daniel chime:

Yes Mother, we will.

Mother says:

You two sure look splendid today.

Together, Nathan and Daniel grin.

Mother says:

Gee, Daniel, in another year you will almost be as tall as your brother.

Nathan pouts. Daniel smiles.

## V

Nathan is a wizard. Or at least he looks like one.

Nathan wears, over long-skinny-jean-clad legs and a twelve-year-old's thin torso, a red satin dressing gown with Chinese blossoms printed on it. Nathan has tucked his unruly black oh-you-have-such-beautiful-curly-hair under an old red smoking hat, one that has a tassel hanging from the centre of it. In his hand Nathan carries a stick covered with knotted string and feathers, a stick he made himself back at the beginning of summer.

Nathan is a wizard. Nathan looks like an old man.

## VI

Daniel is a warrior. Daniel always looks like a warrior.

Daniel wears a grey waistcoat that almost fits and knee-pads over his new jeans. In his hand, Daniel carries a plastic toy-shop sword with a gold hilt.

Daniel looks at his broadening shoulders and thickening legs, his red-curly-mop-of-hair, and grins.

Daniel looks like a warrior. Daniel is always the warrior.

## VII

Now close your eyes and count to one hundred.

Daniel sighs and says under his breath:

But *I* wanted to be the chalker.

## VIII

Nathan runs into his bedroom. From beneath his bed Nathan pulls out a large stone. The stone is the colour of red mud with a black line running halfway across it. The stone is heavy, but doesn't look it. Nathan places the stone in his dressing gown pocket, and it pulls the fabric down toward the ground. The heavy stone makes Nathan slightly lopsided.

Grinning, Nathan runs slowly out the front door, picks up his blue bike and pedals into town.

## IX

One. Two... miss a few... Ninety-nine. One hundred.

Daniel opens his eyes, runs out the front door, picks up his red bike and pedals into town.

Make sure you're home by five!

Yes Mother, Daniel calls back.

## X

Nathan and Daniel live in a town they call Gramayre. Gramayre isn't the real name of the town. But on the maps Nathan and Daniel always draw on those it's-too-hot-to-play-outside afternoons, it is the name they give their town. Nathan read in a book that Gramayre means magic. The book was about Druids.

## **XI**

In Gramayre there are no cars, only horse-drawn carriages. In Gramayre there is no pub, only the Snot & Goblin Inn. In Gramayre there is no school, only caves where trolls and ogres pretend to be teachers.

Gramayre only exists on holidays, weekends and summer afternoons.

## **XII**

Nathan's bike is wobbling all over the road. The heavy stone in Nathan's pocket is making it hard for him to find his balance. Nathan considers hiding the stone in some bushes so he can come back for it later, but remembers that he needs it to cast his spells with.

Nathan stops and pulls some chalk from the other pocket of his dressing gown. He draws an arrow in the direction he is going. He starts pedalling again, starts wobbling from side to side.

## **XIII**

Daniel pedals hard. He is chasing white chalk arrows. Daniel has his head down, watching the ground.

Daniel!

Daniel ignores the familiar voice.

Daniel! Stop!

Daniel stops and turns around. Behind him, pedalling fast, is Penelope.

Penelope is six years old. Penelope has freckles and long blonde ponytailed hair. Penelope is a girl. Penelope is annoying.

What do you want? Daniel calls out.

Pant pant pant. Penelope stops next to Daniel and smiles. A tooth on her lower gum is missing. It has been missing for three weeks now. Penelope's parents are worried it might never grow back.

Boy, Daniel, you look nice today.

I'm a warrior. I'm never nice. I kill people. Especially girls.

No you don't.

Daniel sighs. He knows what is coming next.

Well? Penelope asks.

Daniel sighs, shrugs his broadening shoulders and through an I'm-only-saying-this-because-you-want-me-to-smile, says:

Why, Lady Penelope, you sure are looking splendid today. Are there any dragons you would like me to slay?

Oh, brave Sir Daniel, would you? There seems to be a nasty brute living under my bed again. Could you come up to my room and kill him?

No! Ask your dad. Now nick off, I'm playing a game.

Wait! No, Daniel, don't be mean.

But Sir Daniel can't hear her, because Sir Daniel is racing away as fast as his thick-legged thighs can pedal.

Penelope decides to follow him.

## XIV

Nathan pedals past the park. Last week, Nathan and Daniel had fought an old whiskered pointy-nosed witch in the park. Nathan had turned her into a big bottlebrush tree. He only had his wand then. He imagines the magic he can cast now he has the stone.

Hello there, mighty wizard!

The voice belongs to Mr Walker, an old man who spends his days drinking tea without milk on his verandah.

Mr Walker has no hair. He has brown spots on his hands. He used to be a teacher and Nathan thinks the brown spots are the last trace of troll in him. Mr Walker is Nathan's friend.

Hello Mr Walker. How are you?

Fine, fine. Off chasing that witch?

No, we caught her last week and I turned her into that tree using my wand.

Nathan points to the big bottlebrush in the park. Mr Walker chuckles.

Are you sure, young wizard? I swear I could have seen her pottering around at number fifteen.

I'm sorry Mr Walker, but I've got to go, or else my brother will catch me. And besides, I've got to prepare for the new spell I want to cast today.

Really? And what is this new spell?

Well, it involves making my name a few syllables longer, using this...

Nathan pulls the stone from his pocket, shows it to Mr Walker.

Looks heavy. You be careful with that.

I will.

And Nathan pedals off down the street, wobbling from side to side.

## **XV**

Mr Walker watches Nathan disappear and thinks to himself:

What a strange little boy he is.

Mr Walker takes a sip from his tea with no milk, and watches as Daniel races past on his red bike followed by the young Simpson girl on her green one.

Mr Walker thinks:

I wonder what Nathan meant by adding a few extra syllables to his name?

## XVI

Go away!

But Daniel, I want to play.

Daniel grips his brakes, screeches to a halt. Daniel throws his bike onto the ground. Penelope's eyes widen.

This game isn't for girls, Penelope. Now just go home and play with your dolls. I don't want you playing with me!

Daniel picks up his bike and continues down the road.

Penelope's bottom lip quivers.

## XVII

Nathan has drawn arrows all over Gramayre. Today, he has led Daniel past:

the library

the inn

the park

the caves of the trolls and ogres.

Now Nathan can see the crumbling church with its rusting fence. Behind the church,

he can see the long tombstone stretch of the graveyard, filled with stone angel weeping and marble and faded fake flowers and air cold with haunting.

Nathan padlocks his bike to the rusted fence at the front of the church. He shudders, creeps through the gate, heads toward the graveyard, the stone in his dressing gown pocket pulling the fabric down towards the dead, dead ground.

## **XVIII**

Daniel has followed the arrows all over town. Now he can see the church with Nathan's bike padlocked to the rusting fence.

As Daniel pulls to a stop, a zombie lurches out of the church's gate. It staggers and decays toward him, faded cloth rotting from its bones. Daniel sticks it with his plastic sword, cheers as it crumbles into zombie dust.

After padlocking his bike to the rusting fence, Daniel runs off through the gate toward the graveyard and all its death.

## **XIX**

Penelope watches Daniel kill the zombie and whispers:

My hero.

She places her bike next to Nathan and Daniel's and follows Daniel through the gate toward the long dark death that awaits one of the children.

## **XX**

Before entering the graveyard, Nathan pulls the stone from his pocket and casts a spell over the whole place, darkening some more the already long dark stretch of the graveyard.

Nathan scrambles through the tombstones, ducking and zigging and sagging, carrying

the stone under his arm.

Now the real fun begins, Nathan whispers to the cold air and the faded fake flowers, which rustles their sepia silk leaves back at him as if to agree.

## **XXI**

Standing at the entrance of the graveyard, Daniel suddenly feels afraid. Something is wrong. Something has punctured Daniel's skin, is stalking and slinking deep into his bones.

Daniel feels very scared. Daniel walks hesitantly into the graveyard.

## **XXII**

Penelope follows Daniel, watches as he pauses at the entrance.

Penelope stops where Daniel had stopped. A path leads into the graveyard. Beyond the tombstones, trees knit their branches together, create an interplay of shadow and light, one which stretches over the darkening graveyard. Penelope can't feel anything wrong.

But then, the spell wasn't cast for Penelope.

## **XXIII**

Daniel follows the path as it rolls further into the graveyard, clutches white-knuckled at his plastic sword. Daniel imagines more zombies hiding behind the weeping angels and cracking marble tombstones. Daniel imagines the zombies watching him with pus-filled eyes and seeping spittled jaws, giant rotting maws that chew at children's bones.

Daniel imagines achingly thin ghouls, gauze-bounded mummies and blacker-than-black robed shadows of wraiths. Daniel imagines a multitude of undead and demons and dark things following and watching him as he walks further into the cold air of the graveyard. Daniel's bladder pushes against his gut. Daniel is very very scared.

He thinks:

What are these monsters doing here?

Why are these monsters following me?

Where did all these monsters come from?

The air in the graveyard grows colder and tightens around him. Tear-stained and white-faced, Daniel runs and stumbles into the graveyard. His bottom lip is quivering, his eyes becoming wet with fear.

From behind the weeping angels and crumbling marble tombstones, the monsters chase him.

## **XXIV**

Nathan watches as his brother runs into the clearing at the back of the graveyard, a dead spot between the tombstones and the trees of the forest. Tears and fear shake Daniel's broadening shoulders. Nathan grins. The spell worked.

## **XXV**

Daniel sees Nathan, sees the sly grin on his brother's face, and charges at him with his plastic sword. Daniel charges and screams more out of fear, more out of a need to end a nightmare than a need to kill his brother.

Nathan picks up a long fallen branch and runs towards Daniel. Together, the two fight each other, blocking, attacking, parrying, whacking, hitting, bruising. It isn't long before they are fighting bare-handed, a whirl of red satin and red hair, tussling on the ground, punching and biting and pulling and pushing and shouting.

Daniel fights like a wild dog. Daniel is scared for his life.

## **XXVI**

Nathan pushes hard against Daniel's chest, pins him to the ground.

Calm down, little brother, calm down! You're fighting like a wild dog.

The monsters are coming!

There are no monsters.

Yes there are, and you brought them. You conjured them up. You're evil!

There are no monsters! You must've... imagined them!

No, I saw them. They came at me from behind the weeping angels and the crumbling marble tombstones. Nathan, I'm scared—I've never seen so many monsters!

Shhh, little brother, shhh.

Nathan cradles Daniel's head in his lap, strokes the sweaty red curls, heard Daniel sobbing.

Daniel, do you really think the monsters are coming?

Daniel bolts away from Nathan, picks up the plastic sword, looks left to right to up and around.

They'll be here any minute, Daniel whimpers.

How many were there?

I couldn't say. Lots? They were everywhere.

I have an idea...

Nathan stands up, walks over to a large tree and picks up something from the shadows. It is a stone the colour of red mud with a black strip halfway across it.

What is it, Nathan?

It's a magic stone.

How can it help us? Daniel asks, his voice soft, almost invisible.

We can use it to make doubles of ourselves, or even triples. We can make as many copies of ourselves as we need, so that when the monsters come we have an army to fight them with.

Daniel nods. Daniel looks at the stone. Daniel looks at Nathan through tear-sore eyes. Nathan reaches out his arm so the stone is closer toward his little brother. Daniel looks at the stone and says:

OK. What do we have to do?

Just touch it Daniel, and I'll cast the spell.

Daniel looks at the stone. His palm is sweating. Daniel can hear the monsters. Nathan holds the stone, his grip steady, his eyes calculated, waiting for Daniel's move.

Slowly, Daniel reaches out his hand. It shakes, drips droplets of sweat. Daniel moves his hand slowly through the air, millimetering closer and closer towards the red stone with the black stripe halfway across it.

Are you sure this will work?

Yes, Daniel, it will work. I know it will.

Daniel's hand hovers above the stone. The brothers look at each other. Daniel swallows hard and touches the stone.

Nothing happens. At first, Daniel only feels the coolness of the red stone with the black stripe halfway across it. Gradually, the stone grows warmer and warmer, and Daniel feels a strange pull. The warmth grows to heat, and the heat grows until the stone begins to boil. Daniel's hand begins to blister, and he screams, and Nathan watches him, and Daniel can not yank his hand away. The pull of the stone becomes stronger and stronger and stronger until

atoms

blink,

fold

in

on

themselves

and

disappear.

## XXVII

When Penelope arrives home, her ankles are swollen from walking. Penelope's parents ask where her beautiful new green bike is, but Penelope does not answer. Instead, she walks dry-eyed into her room and sits on her bed, not blinking, just staring. At nothing.

Penelope? What's wrong, her mother asks, nervously.

Seconds pass. Penelope opens and closes her mouth. No words come out, only the clicking of a dry mouth. Her parents call the doctor and the police and an ambulance, and run frantically around the house, sometimes shaking Penelope, sometimes screaming at her.

Penelope just sits on the bed, dry-eyed, unblinking, opening and closing her mouth, and continues to do so through the doctor's examination and the questioning of the police. She does the same in the ambulance, the hospital, and then the other hospital two months later, the other hospital where the windows have grills and the white-starched doctors and nurses shake their heads, hoping that one day Penelope will speak.

But she is speaking. Only, the words are mouthed, never formed, blinked out of existence like collapsing atoms who have swallowed themselves. And over and over, Penelope is mouthing:

My hero.

My hero.

My hero.

My hero...

## **XXVIII**

Where's Daniel?

Isn't he home yet?

No.

Guess I won then.

Nathan washes his hands and watches as reams of black dirt spiral around the basin and down the drain.

## **XXIX**

Nathan sits at the desk in his room. On a blank piece of paper, Nathan writes his name:

**Nathaniel Goodman**

He writes it again:

**Nathaniel John Goodman**

He grins. He has found the extra syllable or two. All he needed to do was put some words together.

## **XXX**

Inside the red stone with the black stripe halfway across it, which is buried beneath a

tree at the back of the darkening graveyard, Daniel weeps. Here, the monsters are real. Here, Daniel is not a warrior. Here, Daniel is a little boy, lost in the darkness.

*Scott-Patrick Mitchell is a Perth-based performance poet who has recently taken to writing fiction. His new performance work, THE 12 MINUTE MONOMYTH, debuts at Critical Animals this October. Visit [facebook.com/scottpatrickmitchellpoet](https://facebook.com/scottpatrickmitchellpoet) for more info.*

# The Gift of Books and the Night

*by Lachlan Brown*

This tender morning and the darkness  
where streetlights still maintain a silent watch.  
Last night I read too many words before sleep  
and so dreamt of more fantastic worlds.  
In one my father had written a book of poetry,  
splendid, resonant, a breathtaking volume.  
I read each poem wide-eyed and smiling,  
yet now most have slipped from my mind like glass.  
The best works were creative retellings  
of biblical stories that did not exist:  
Enoch piloting a ship through rough seas;  
Samuel holding fast to a city wall;  
and one other figure I cannot now recall  
attempting the remarkable, the impossible.

*Lachlan Brown teaches and researches at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. His first book, Limited Cities, was published by Giramondo in 2012 and was highly commended for the Dame Mary Gilmore Award. He is currently working on a poetry manuscript about his Chinese-Australian heritage (forthcoming) and he is also collaborating with the visual artist Tony Curran on an exhibition that will show at ACNA in 2017.*