

Tincture Journal

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Editorial

by *Daniel Young*

As *Tincture Journal* enters its second year, I'm more excited than ever to be bringing together a quarterly collection of writing, and it's encouraging to see people from all over the world submitting their work to us. When we initially launched, with the tagline "quality writing from Australia and the world", I was conscious of the potential for a digital publication to gain a global audience that an Australian print journal may not be able to reach, but also curious about how the mix of writers would vary from issue to issue. Much of the longer fiction in this issue comes from the US, and this reflects the quality of fiction submissions we receive from there, but as always there are a number of Australian writers: one from the Adelaide Hills, three from Queensland, three from Western Australia and one from Tasmania. Alongside this we have a story by Gargi Mehra, from India and one by Shane Mac Donnchaidh, originally from Northern Ireland but currently living in Thailand.

Our poetry editor Stuart Barnes does an excellent job of sourcing local poetry, so the majority of poets in this issue are from all over Australia, with the exception of Sarah Taylor-Fergusson from England and Hao Guang Tse from Singapore (currently living in Chicago). Stuart has also put together an in-depth interview with poet David Lumsden, which appears in this issue alongside two of his poems. This is our first interview published in the journal, but you can expect to see more of this in future. We hope this interview series will provide some nourishing insights into the poets and their practice.

Meg Henry is back for 2014, and the fifth "Inferior Bedrooms" is inspired by James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*. We have one creative non-fiction piece by Elen Cox, who is from New Zealand but now lives in Washington DC. And just a reminder, we do also consider script submissions, so if you have a short play that works well on the page, don't hesitate to submit it to us. The journal also finishes this time around with two special pieces that were winning entries in the 18-23 year-old category of the Young Writers Festival in Western Australia. Congratulations to Ellie Kiosses and Murdock Grewar.

I hope this first collection of 2014 will prove both enjoyable and thought-provoking. So, without further ado...

Inferior Bedrooms

Regular Column by Meg Henry

I am moulding myself from the past, just for the day. As I walk into the courtyard in the winter lunchtime sun I see my image as others may see it. I am long-limbed in dark denim with a halo of blonde. For me, it's like coming out of the theatre and into a world I've forgotten. I'm with The Reader and KM and we're intent on drinking up change. Without them, though, there's no anchor to this world. Or to the next.

For a month I've been made of wood. Ready to start seductions with no desire to make them real. One night I'm told to believe is to make real. And for me, make-believe is easy. I start to chalk them up, the younger men, the perpetually available, and notice I have an instinct for it. But I also have a taste for blood. Rebounding is boring when I've long lost the assassin's joy.

It's the cheap sex that brings us together. But it's an accident, really, that we're there at all. I'd rescued The Reader from the southern suburbs and when we got to his place, he handed me a Tupperware full of change. Payment, he tells me. A thank you for the ride. Beer, I tell him in reply, and within the hour we're pouring jugs in the crowded courtyard where the beer is as foul tasting and regrettable as a night with a whore.

Cheers to cheap sex, we say as we count out the coins. But we're losing our elbow room as the band starts to play. And when I scout for somewhere new to sit, I see him. I watch as he speaks and I know he's interested by the way he won't look over. Maybe it's then that I realise: yes, it will be him. I'm circling like a shark.

We settle at his table, introductions are made. He is not right for me, I realise. He's too polite. He's a gentleman. It's all classic lines until the barkeep tire of us and our silver and we have to move on. He asks for my number in the usual way. But when I get home that night, after dancing with Breakaway, it's his message, not the booze, that keeps me awake.

He writes, *Cheap sex isn't the same without you*, and I know I've found A Sport and a Pastime.

Meg Henry reads and drinks in excess. Often at the same time. When not causing trouble at bars, or in hearts, around Brisbane, she pours out literary observations and bad dating advice at her blog inferiorbedrooms.com. Follow her exploits in real-time [@TheMegHenry](https://twitter.com/TheMegHenry).

“Emotional Truth,” said the parrot

by Ashley Borodin

“Emotional truth,” said the parrot. Now that he was out of his cage there was no stopping him. It’s not that we let him out of the cage on purpose. It just sort of collapsed around him one day. No one saw it coming. I mean, it was an old cage but I’ve never seen one give up the ghost like that before. Somehow the cage became aware of itself. I could see the strain for days, maybe weeks before it happened.

I must admit I was a little callous. I didn’t see the true peril the cage was in. Sometimes as I muddled about watering the plants I would see it struggling to contain the parrot. It was shaking and making a fool of itself. “All this effort is so unnecessary,” I told the cage. “Stop trying to be a cage and just be a cage!” I said, not once but over and over. The cage was in too much turmoil to reply.

Over time the cage grew smaller, the way people do when they have hold of something important and are determined not to let it out. I saw the cage grow withered, hunched and old, cowering over its quarry, determined not to let the parrot escape. The parrot was quite afraid. He didn’t know what was happening, but he could see the cage was in trouble. The cage was his security against the world. What would happen when he broke free?

To the parrot’s great relief, when the cage finally did collapse he discovered that the outside world was full of corners in which to hide.

Born in 1978, Ashley Borodin is a Tasmanian author who writes about identity and alienation. He can be interrogated further via his website: <http://ashleyborodin.weebly.com>.

The Man Who Is Passing Through

by *Michel Ge*

I seem to recognise this place, although I cannot have ever been here before. The oak tree still stands beside the church and the graveyard, filtering through sprawling branches the dreamy, blinding glow of twilight, only now there is some kind of barbeque going on beneath it. Cars are whooshing by on their way to the highway, leaving brown, acrid air in their wake, which I step off the sidewalk to the grass to avoid. While I am there I go up to the black plastic fence and put my hand against it. I hear laughter and I look up to see two red-faced girls clutching their bellies, something spilled and fizzing on the ground. I walk around the perimeter until I find the gate and I enter.

“Good evening,” I say to the girls. “I’m looking for my house. I can’t seem to find it. Can you help me?”

They are still bubbling with giggles. “What does it look like?” one of them asks me. She has freckles and brown hair and green eyes that crinkle as she holds back a smile.

“I think it was red,” I say, but I remember nothing red. “It was red and white, yes. Do you know where I can find it?”

“It sounds like a farmhouse,” the other one says, long blond hair tumbling down past her neck.

“Oh, I’m sure it isn’t,” I say. “A farmhouse never would suit my tastes. It is a decent one, I assure you.”

She tosses back the hair. “You could try Jefferson Street,” she says. “There are a lot of red houses there.”

“Jefferson Street,” I repeat. I smile. “Thank you,” I say. I offer a hand to shake, but they are already turned away and back to laughing.

Now that I am walking again I am certain that my house is on Jefferson Street. Past the church is a dense cluster of tall buildings, a city, the glass half-covered in shadow and half-covered in soft yellow light that gleams sharply in the occasional glass. I pass a group of teenagers, who are joking with each other but quiet down when they see me. They nod deeply and smile when they pass me. “Evening, sir,” they say.

I am tired, but I know I will be able to relax when I find my house. It’s only a few blocks away. I’ll make some tea, flip through pages of a book, maybe switch on the radio, and go to bed

early. Then in the morning I'll have pancakes with cold cereal and it'll be real silent, one of those mornings where sunlight splashes gently against the walls and floor, igniting little white specks of dust that drift lazily across the room.

I begin to hum as I walk. *It really is a nice evening*, I think, and part of me wants to stay outside and walk a bit more. The streets are snug, not narrow to the point of discomfort, but not so wide that one feels isolated and adrift. I look at little trees growing on the smooth stone sidewalks, and a welcoming man in an apron standing outside a fancy-looking restaurant, and a warmly lit ice-cream shop on a street corner with glass as its walls, and, further down, a chess club beckoning to me with mounted television sets broadcasting live games of blitz, the pieces moving slow and silent in their own little universe. The streets are buzzing with people, mostly men and women (and girls and boys) sitting together or across from each other at little tables or with arms linked, walking. Sometimes a car tries to traverse the streets, stopping every few seconds to allow somebody to dash past in front of it. I pause to let one go by in front of me, and suddenly I realise that I am as alone as a leaf caught by creek water, with nobody to claim as a friend or partner. I walk by a table filled with women and some of them catch my eye and smile; I look away quickly, and behind me I hear laughter and somebody calling. I smell chicken roasting from the open windows of some restaurant, but I have no money with me and besides, I think I'd better wait until home. I tell this to the woman who offers me a menu, but all she does is smile and say that there are free samples if I want to try one.

She's just gone inside to bring one out to me when a man standing outside a hotel nearby walks over and says, "Hello, sir, are you looking for something?" and I frown at him; but the frown fades when I see that his hotel is just a little bit further ahead of me.

"Jefferson Street," I tell him.

"Oh, that?" he says. He grabs my arm and pulls me towards the hotel. I open my mouth to speak, but he bowls right over me. "That can't be far," he says. "No, certainly not. It might even be right around the corner there. Why don't you wait for me in the lobby while I check it on the computer?"

"Ah, well, certainly," I say, finding myself suddenly sitting on a dark brown couch in a room lit dimly by candles. There's a shady fountain in the middle of the lobby making a steady sound of rippling water that gurgles every now and then. I go over to the coffee machine to fill myself a cup, and while I am there, I happen to see through the windows a street right past the shopping district where there are little houses with peaceful lawns, one after the other. I set down the half-filled cup and decide that the man might be right: Jefferson Street is right there.

I glance back at the room where the man disappeared to, but he doesn't show, so I stare at the

old grandfather clock against the wall and wait. The clerks behind the desk type slowly at their keyboards and eye me. I sigh and take a seat on the couch again. The hotel lobby is soothing, with the dim candles, the sound of trickling water and, somewhere buried deep, some kind of orchestra playing a symphony. This is a quieter sound that I do not hear until I focus on it, but once I do focus I am sure that I hear violins and at least one cello drawing out a melody from their bows. My eyes begin to drift shut; the lobby is pleasantly warm and the man does not show, so I begin to sink further and further into the soft leather of the couch—some kind of poison spreads through me and the next thing I know the symphony ends, dragging with it the refreshing water sound, all noise plummeting into silence. For a nameless amount of time I brush against the unspeakable, feel its cold fingers stroking against me. I feel myself falling sharply downwards, drifting into the otherworld, and at once I jerk my eyes open and sit forward. My heart barely thuds. I look around the room—the desk clerks do not look at me but one of them clears his throat delicately—and then I look at the clock, which tells me that twenty minutes have passed. I feel like I have opened my eyes to a different place. Sleep had not taken me, but I am certain, absolutely certain, that had I waited a moment longer it would have had me. I shiver and glance outside, where evening shadows are lengthening. It is time for me to go, I realise.

I stand up, walk unsteadily to the counter with the clerks, and ask them where that man went. The clerk who responds indulges in a gooey smile, and tells me that he does not know who I am talking about.

“The one who brought me in,” I say. “He said he was going to look up Jefferson Street.”

The clerk stares at me for a moment and then blinks. *Oh, that man*, his eyes seem to say. “He will be here momentarily,” says the clerk, showing again his pink gums in a wide, wide smile.

I walk back to the window and look again at the nearby street. I decide that at the very least I need to get up and move my legs. I’ll go over across the street, I decide, and if I’m wrong I’ll head back and wait for the man. He will know where Jefferson Street is, for sure.

I exit the lobby and cross the street to the neighbourhood. The sidewalk is wider here, enough for two or three people to walk abreast. The ground is speckled with branch and leaf shadows that soon fade away into one uniform colour as night falls, and they make a faint rushing sound at the stirring of the wind.

I stop an old couple. “Excuse me, is this Jefferson Street?” I ask.

“Jefferson Street?” says the man, removing his spectacles and squinting at me. “Never heard of it. This is Hazel Road.”

“I must not be there yet,” I say aloud. I smile at the man and continue on my way. He walks

on with his wife, his hunched head slightly bobbing as he goes.

The trees, which have progressed in size as I walked through the city and are now as large as they would be in the country, are no longer lit by bright orange light of sun but by the sombre orange light of streetlamps. Intrigued, I venture a little further, just to see what else is hiding in the night darkness. There are sections of the sidewalk mysteriously in shadow and there is a soft roaring at the edge of my hearing, which must be from the highway.

I sigh and imagine again my house, the fresh grass and the flowers. I'll spend afternoons sitting on the porch. When it's raining I'll light a fire in the living room, make some soup and sip it while watching the sparks. I could even call up a friend or two, and we could drink wine together while playing chess and discussing politics or philosophy.

I smell dinner but I know it's only my imagination. *Almost there*, I think. One step after the other; all I have to do is imagine that the next step is the last, and the next step is the last, and so on, and I can continue walking into infinity, but of course I'll stop at my house. I think about kids trick-or-treating on Halloween and Thanksgiving feasts and Christmas morning, the world covered in white. The thought relaxes me. Tea sounds good now, a warm raspberry perhaps, with a squeeze of lemon and some cookies.

I stop, letting myself breathe in that smell on the wind. It's not really there and the more I sniff the less of it I smell, but still the lingering memory of it is pleasant.

I find that my eyes have drifted closed and I open them. Shocked, I see an empty highway to my right, lone bright lights barely getting larger in the distance. Also in the distance are little lanterns, orange and white and blue, some of them blinking. These are immobile. In front of me lies a wide expanse of black night, the only sign of civilisation being little clusters of buildings far away.

"Strange," I say. "I must have passed it." I had been walking that whole time, but the things around me had melted away and had been replaced by something else. I figure that I just hadn't paid enough attention.

A feeling of unease worms its way to the top of my belly and I push it back down. Jefferson Street must be in the next suburb, past the city. That's right. I remember now.

I stop to ask for directions in a gas station. "I'm looking for Jefferson Street," I tell the lady behind the counter.

"Hmm," she says. "I know a Jefferson City. That where you're headed?"

"Come to think of it, that's right," I say. "I misheard somebody." I chuckle, and feel suddenly

relieved. “Jefferson City. Where is that, now?”

She frowns and points down the highway. “East,” she says. “You been ‘round these parts, before?”

“No.”

“Jefferson City’s far away,” she says. “It’ll take hours by car.”

I cock my head to the side. “Well, of course,” I say. “A man can’t expect everything to be right next to him, can he?”

“It’s miles away,” she says. She picks up a coin and fingers it. “You alright, sir? You want to stay somewhere for the night and travel tomorrow?”

The thought horrifies me. “Goodness, no!” I exclaim. “I will be leaving promptly. I must find my house,” I explain. “Thank you.” Smiling, I turn to the door.

“Wait,” she says.

I stop.

She pulls out a piece of paper and scrawls a series of numbers on it. “Here,” she says, handing it to me, her hand twitching back as if she were reaching out to pet a fierce looking animal. “Call this if you get lost. It’s supposed to rain tonight.”

“Oh,” I say. I take the paper, thank her again, and leave. She does not say anything as she watches me, but I think that the paper might come in handy, should I get caught in this rain she speaks of on my way to Jefferson City.

The gas station’s roof bathes the concrete floor and empty filling stations in a pure white light, almost blinding. I set down the paper on top of a filling station and walk away from it some ways into the night, letting my eyes adjust to see what lies before me. *Perhaps I need to ask the lady for some provisions before I head out*, I think—best to take a look and come back.

I see a flat highway, even emptier than it had been moments before, black shapes of hills and land in the chill gloom of night. The sky is dotted with stars so dim they seem fake, and the pale moon is obscured by a thick cloud that moves east, trailing an even larger cloud. It looks like the lady is right. I look again at the sweeping black hills I now face, and for the first time I feel an inexplicable terror at walking the rest of the way in darkness: I am gripped by a longing to stay. I slow down, uncertain, and then stop. I scratch my head. I can’t remember why it is that I want to head back to that city, something about mysterious colours and wind and light. The rolling unease

returns, warning me against my walk home. I can't shake the feeling that things would be so much nicer in the city with the chess club.

I begin to turn around, and for a second my legs even twitch towards the unthinkable before I stop them. I seriously consider the city. It's my choice, I realise. There is nobody who is going to stop me. I won't be in trouble for anything if I stop in the city, just for a few hours, a day, maybe a week. *Nobody is watching me*, I think. But the night sings to me, and, looking forward again, I suddenly realise what a lovely thing my house is, and how I should miss it if I stop, and how there really isn't any reason for me to stay here in that city, anyways.

Michel Ge is a student living in Missouri who's trying to figure what to do with his life. In the meantime, he writes about literature and philosophy at too-young-to-think.blogspot.com and aspires to publish his first novel sometime between now and the time he dies.

The Demographic Decides

by David Lumsden

Hit thirty and you'd better start
looking for another job—out of the demo
and so much waste of floorspace.

Change is so heavy on us now
sixteen-year-olds are baffled by kid brothers,
and nostalgia has set in for last summer's
uncomplicated technologies.

Hear still the carpeted tread
down corridors clad with partitions.
Under our corporate obligato
of fingers at keyboards
each day's lesson is how to suspect
the world is not meant for us.

The Next Turn in the Maze

by David Lumsden

He used to hide out in the foodhall,
reading to get a break from all
the noise back home.
Supermarket bags stuffed under a chair,
ice-cream going soft,
he'd grab a quiet half hour
with cigarettes and cappuccino.
That was two years ago.

Pub lunches, drinks after work,
getting drunk and staying drunk,
not going home. When he slept
with someone else she threw him out.

Now there's lots of time for him to read,
from when this one leaves for uni
until he meets her tram at six,
but the room is stacked with boxes
packed with books, still unopened.

An Interview with David Lumsden

by *Stuart Barnes and David Lumsden*

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

I started writing poetry in the last couple of years of high school, although the memories go further back: memorising A. A. Milne poems when I was five; really enjoying writing verse in Grade Three classes when I was eight. In Year Eleven I borrowed, from the local library, *Poet in the Making[: The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas]*, which presented in annotated form the contents of the four exercise books Thomas kept between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Thomas is quoted on the first page of the introduction: “my [work] method is this: I write a poem on innumerable sheets of scrap paper, write it on both sides of the paper, often upside down and crisscross ways unpunctuated, surrounded by drawings of lamp posts and boiled eggs, in a very dirty mess, bit by bit I copy out the slowly developing poem into an exercise book; and when it is complete, I type it out”.

As a teenager I of course emulated this, without the lamp posts and boiled eggs, but certainly the scraps, the exercise books, and the typing. I had an ancient Remington typewriter from the 1920s or before; a sticker on it read “To save time is to lengthen life”. I got good at an improvised form of six-finger typing, which later served me well for years as a computer programmer.

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

Overland Extra, which was a large format folded sheet included in *Overland* magazine. I was twenty-seven.

The poem was called “Storm Warning”; it was basically a single extended metaphor using the lexicon of meteorology and shipping to describe a relationship in trouble. The ending was: “The bureau forecasts gale-force distress: / we batten down our lives / and do not talk.”

3. *How and where do your poems take shape?*

There is no pattern or regularity. Quite often isolated phrases, which seem to succinctly encapsulate some interesting image or metaphor, some minor micro-scale insight, will come to mind. Certain phrases might seem to want to “go together”, or sometimes there will be some ill-defined matter or theme which seems to carry some as yet unclear significance; when this happens the working out of the poem is a sort of investigation. Sometimes an individual word will seem

worth noting down; you can look at a poem as though it were a collector's box of words. Sometimes a poem starts with a larger but vague sense of its music: its stanzaic structure, rhythm, and form; sometimes it starts with the trajectory of a narrative. Quite often the best ideas come late in the process.

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

What art forms influence your poetry?

I have written a handful of poems centred around one particular painting or another, and in general the structures of baroque and classical music have provided ideas for the shaping of thought, and for the forms of poems, but far and away the strongest influence comes from other poems.

Every good poem, after the event, has solved its own unique problem. The problem has multiple constraints: sound, music, rhythm, counterpointing of quantity and stress, repetition, variation, meaning, narrative, syntax, lexicon, vividness, wit, freshness, memorability, resonance, reference, balance, proportion, closure, and coherence. I don't imagine for a moment that poets work with all or any of these objectives in mind, but when the thing is finished you'll find that simply at the technical level many of these aspects will have been addressed in wonderfully surprising and successful ways.

5. *Tell me about your poems in this issue of Tincture Journal: “The Demographic Decides” and “The Next Turn in the Maze”.*

“The Demographic Decides” has a corporate setting, like several of my poems. The language used touches various registers: organisational jargon (“floorspace”), North American everyday (“kid brothers”), and the Old World culture of classical music (“obligato”). Through all this runs the idea of a rapid pace of change and the rapid onset of irrelevance: we are quickly disenfranchised.

“The Next Turn in the Maze” attempts to present a narrative in condensed form. To some extent its successes and failures are bound to be the successes and failures of prose: how telling really is the supposedly telling detail? Small domestic narratives have interested me at various times; early influences included the poems of Douglas Dunn and Hugo Williams. I think I might have been reading Raymond Carver short stories around the time I wrote “The Next Turn in the Maze”.

In [*Nocturnal Submissions*], the magazine I edited, we published “Domestic Suburban Vignette”, a Stephen J. Williams poem. If I remember correctly, the title came from a rejection note Stephen received from some other editor as an apparently damning categorisation of the poems submitted. Stephen’s work was always more sophisticated than that, but I doubt if mine is: “The Next Turn in the Maze” surely falls squarely into the abovementioned circle of critical Hell.

6. *How has your poetry been influenced by others’? By working “with the design of large computer systems”?*

The poems of others have had the greatest influence. When I was much younger I was lucky enough to get a lot of helpful feedback and criticism from several poets: Chris Wallace Crabbe, Peter Porter, John Forbes, and Alan Wearne. At different times all have given me a great deal of detailed (sometimes—I suspect—despairing) comments on many specific poems. Their advice and of course the example of their work have influenced me significantly.

Amongst the illustrious dead and the celebrated living, the influences are legion: my early Dylan Thomas phase was soon enough superseded by [T.S.] Eliot and [Ezra] Pound, and there were numerous such “phases”: [Thomas] Hardy, [W. B.] Yeats, and [Philip] Larkin; the “Group” poets: Peter Porter, Ian Hamilton, Alan Brownjohn. While still at school I collected, usually at two dollars each, the whole twenty-seven volume original series of Penguin Modern Poets from second-hand bookshops. Then there were [John] Berryman and [Robert] Lowell. Lawrence Durrell’s verse was a major influence at one point. I lived in Warsaw for five years and read a lot of Polish poetry in the original: Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska would be the main influences there; I have boxes of translations in various stages of completion, but to publish them you’d have to deal with the estates and all that, so in this case it really is writing for the desk drawer, which—given the Eastern European context—is quite appropriate.

There are probably very few direct influences from my job in computer software design, but I do think the two activities—poetry and software design—use many of the same mental faculties.

There are a number of activities, including not only designing software and writing poems, but also doing mathematics or physics, and writing essays, which rely on two crucial mental approaches: seeing the essence of something (and naming it accurately); and seeing that two distinct things are in some important sense the same.

Seeing the essence of something leads you to using the right word in a poem, or the best name for an object or method or function in a piece of computer code.

Seeing that two distinct things are in some respect the same is the vital insight of abstraction, which allows you to make metaphors, write reusable software components, devise mathematical

theorems, and make scientific breakthroughs. “My love is like a red, red rose” is the same sort of equation as [Sir Isaac] Newton’s realisation that the force that pulls a falling apple is the same force that guides the orbiting moon (that is, the discovery of gravity united the hitherto separate domains of terrestrial and celestial mechanics). Seeing that two distinct things are in some important way the same is the key ability of the human brain, and—in very basic terms—must be what allows us to learn from experience. As no two moments are alike in all details—as Heraclitus said, “No person ever steps in the same river twice”—we need that crucial power of abstraction to be able to see that the current situation is in some way the same as previous remembered experience. We need a fast, reliable memory, and dreams to train the pattern-matching neural networks, to support this essential metaphor-making ability. Mathematics and poetry are the highest expressions of that same basic evolutionarily-determined skill.

*7. Tell me about editing *Nocturnal Submissions*, the literary magazine you founded in 1991, which published some of the world’s finest writers including Peter Bakowski, Billy Collins, Nicki Greenberg, M.J. [Maria] Hyland, Jill Jones and Alan Wearne.*

It was an exciting time and a great privilege to be able to publish work by all those writers you mentioned, and many others besides.

I started the magazine when I was twenty-six or so, I think out of a sense of isolation and wanting to connect with the literary community, and of course having for a long time read about Eliot and Pound and all those early modernists and all their little magazines. For a couple of years in my early twenties it seemed as though the only stuff I read was either early modernist poetry or biographies of early modernist poets.

So starting a little literary magazine seemed the natural thing to do if I was going to continue to take the idea of “being a poet” seriously. Very quickly I met people who wanted to be involved one way or another. That was how I met Maria Hyland, and she and I soon became a couple, lived together for several years, and continued to be co-editors for a while after that. Justine Fitzgerald, one of Maria’s friends at uni (both were studying law at the time), was the third editor, and the most organised of all of us.

Maria knew Ian McBryde, who did the covers for the first couple of issues and contributed some wonderful poems. Ian introduced me to Peter Bakowski and that friendship has lasted ever since.

There were many great opportunities that arose from the magazine, such as spending a day with August Kleinzahler when he was out here one year for the Melbourne Writers Festival, going from bar to bar working on an interview, which I think turned out very well and could probably

stand alongside those wonderful *Paris Review* interviews.

I used to read lots of little mags from all over, and that's how I spotted several new voices before they were properly established: Billy Collins was one of those.

There are regrets as well: I had read a few Lynda Hull poems and wanted to ask her to contribute. I was busy with other things, and even when I eventually found out where she was, I didn't get around to writing to her. Then one day I found out that she had died in a car crash.

There was the time I was at a sort of music/poetry gig where Steve Kilbey read a story that came across very well and I said to him afterwards that I'd like to publish it. "OK," he said and—always the showman—right there tore the handwritten pages out of the old exercise book from which he had read the story, and handed them to me as his submission.

In the end I found I had less and less time for editing; also, I was starting to feel that I needed to change my reading "diet": more and ever more submissions and not enough of the great work that had originally inspired me to write; I felt as though I needed a break. Maria took over the running of the magazine from that point and did a great job.

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

My house is full of books, journals and lit mags, and I love the physicality and quick random access this provides, but I realise that the durability of the printed medium is somewhat illusory. And the random access feature proves to not be scalable given the physical constraints of a house. Clive James somewhere writes: "I have just been checking up in my copy of Clausewitz—I had to buy another copy, because my original copy is somewhere in my bookshelves, which means that it might as well be on Mars." I know the feeling.

Digital publication—when properly archived and indexed by central, generally accessible databases—offers a sort of permanence and searchability that cannot be matched by conventional means.

I think there are still potential gaps around accessibility of purchase-only digital material, and the inheritance and transfer of digital rights.

Cost and logistics of production and distribution were definitely a major inhibitor in the development of *Nocturnal Submissions*. I see that digital publication offers a new Renaissance with the possibility of unprecedented levels of publication, and new models of publication which allow for more involvement from readers and critics, and more active exchange between writers.

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

Naming favourites is like an Academy Award acceptance speech: it's either going to go on far too long, or leave someone out.

If I think about poets I keep coming back to, Peter Porter would have to be high on the list. And if I think about poets whose next book I am always on the lookout for, August Kleinzahler would be near the top.

Three poets I do find myself returning to for very different reasons are Hall, Hill and Hull: Donald Hall, for his meticulousness in language, the stance of his voice, and inclusiveness of the real contemporary environment; Geoffrey Hill, for the durability and density of his language, and the pitch and difficulty of his thought; and Lynda Hull for the pure lyrical intensity of her work and the way in which her vision of situations and details quite transfigures the world. There is something uncanny and resistant to analysis in this transfiguration—in prose you might find similar effects in [Charles] Dickens or [F.] Scott Fitzgerald—an inexplicably evocative recreation of a world—something that gets in under your conscious analytical radar like a perfume or a taste suddenly remembered, Proust-like, from childhood, or the polyphonic complexities of a Bach oratorio or a passage from a Chopin Ballade. The simple word for it is “talent”.

I read a large amount of poetry from earlier centuries. One poet I have been reading a lot over the past year or two is George Crabbe; Edwin Arlington Robinson praised his “plain excellence and stubborn skill” and [Lord] Byron asserted that Crabbe, along with [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, was the first in that period in terms of power and genius. For me, there is something about Crabbe's plainness, his direct relationship to the real world in which he lived, his attention to detail, and his novelist-like scope that seems both quite rare and particularly relevant to the present moment in poetry.

I also spend time reading in the sort of buried tradition of quantitative and syllabic poetry, which can be seen to run from [Geoffrey] Chaucer through [John] Milton and into Robert Bridges and Coventry Patmore, and on to F.T. Prince.

I realise I am going on like that bad Oscar speech, so before the orchestra starts up I'll quickly mention that I have recently been reading a lot of Robert Graves and John Crowe Ransom, each of whom demonstrates how straightforward technical skill and craft can “lift” a poem's language onto a higher level of resonance. A remark by [Theodor W.] Adorno comes to mind. I searched in vain for half an hour for my copy of his *Minima Moralia*[: Reflections From Damaged Life], so I had to resort to the internet for the details: “No improvement is too small or piddling to be carried out. Out of a hundred changes, a single one may appear trifling and pedantic; together they can raise the text to a new level.”

David Lumsden works with the design of large computer systems, used to edit a literary magazine called Nocturnal Submissions, and has had poems published in various journals.

The Salesman

by Austin DeGroot

I stood at the end of what an archaeologist might struggle to identify as a sidewalk that led to a squat green house. The walls may have been painted in a cucumber hue but had long since pickled. The rattle of metal that came from my roller box filled with cases of knives as it bounced over the fragmented walkway seemed to be an alarm warning me that I should run before it was too late. It was only inertia and laziness that kept me on course. I climbed the front porch stairs, the middle one groaning like a perturbed cow. For lack of a doorbell in the small hole where one should have been, I knocked on the metal screen in front of the door. Dull thuds and clangs came from the house as if I had unexpectedly roused it from a pleasant nap. When the front door opened, a shapeless shadow peered out at me from behind the screen.

“Eh?” the shadow demanded with a squeak like a rusty faucet.

“Good afternoon, my name is Kyle Dauber and I’m here to talk to you about an incredible offer from AmeriCo knives. Do you have a moment to experience these great savings?” I asked, quoting the only part of the script that I’d managed to get past anyone before having a door slammed in my face. The shadow resolved into a man that drew nearer to the screen door. His outline was hunched as though carrying a heavy burden on just one shoulder. He pushed open the reluctant door with a long creak that sounded like a car engine dying for the last time, maybe like the truck that was decaying in the tall grass next to the house.

“What’s that?” the old man asked, and I repeated my spiel. He looked at me, narrowed eyes frowning over a grey and tangled beard that could have once belonged to a competitive beardsman, the kind who mould their beards into intricate shapes for sport, though his current entry could at best be described as abstract expressionism. As he leaned past me, searching the empty street up and down, he gave off an unappealing odour of cheese and bourbon. The man’s eyes surveyed Franklin Street, seeing nothing more than the usual sparse collection of houses that jutted up here and there like an old drunk’s few remaining teeth.

He shook his head like he was trying to clear water from his ears. “That’s the best ya got?” he asked in a slow voice that gave little regard to where one word ended and the next began. “Come on, kid, try not to embarrass yourself here.” I had no illusions about my remarkably poor salesmanship, but I felt that was a little harsh. He must have seen something in my eyes, because in spite of his stern demeanour he spoke more easily. “Just, you know, stand up straight. Take some pride in yourself.”

I stood up straight and imitated pride in myself. It must have been just enough, because he

shrugged a little and nodded for me to follow him inside. His black tennis shoes squeaked away with him down the short hall and around a corner. I did not know how to react to a positive response, such as it was, but I hefted my box into the house and winced when the screen door clanged hard behind me. The hall was unlit, the lamp above the door was missing its bulb. Shelves along one wall sagged against each other as if struggling to appear sober. Books and cups and clothes and trinkets and all manner of unexplainable things filled the shelves. The other wall was bare, with paintings (hotel-room quality reprints) and pictures (a young family) leaned against it on the floor, covered in dust and waiting to be hung. I followed the man down the hallway, the hard plastic of the roller box's wheels drawing lines on the dirty wood floor.

I came into a living room. Mould was apparent on the walls and ceiling in splotches, and a pair of flies chased themselves through the air over a bowl of browned fruit. The man was in the kitchen, visible over a half-wall, stooped in the refrigerator.

“Something to drink?” he drawled.

“Sure, water,” I said, remembering the training guides that instructed us to always accept such offers.

“Mmhmm. Have a seat, son,” he said and came up with a pitcher. A couch branded Royal Furniture ruled the living room, though this misshapen model appeared to suffer from generations of royal couch inbreeding with its uneven legs, asymmetry, and general uncomfortableness. I cleared some space on the cluttered coffee table and set my demonstration kit on it while I tried to ignore the smell that hinted of a carton of eggs forgotten somewhere in the room.

“Are you familiar with our products at AmeriCo, Mr...?” I asked as the man returned with a water and a beer. He left the water on the table and then took a trust fall into the recliner opposite me. His pant legs pulled up to reveal socks that still held traces of the white that they had once been.

“Phil'll do.” I paused while my brain caught up to my ears and translated his speech.

“Uh, right, Phil. Thanks for having me.” I searched for the opening line I'd repeated so many times in training, but finding it was like spotting a clean bit of floor in the living room. “How are you today?”

He shrugged with his beer and took another sip from it.

“Great,” I choked out. He seemed content to let me flail about. I picked up one of the largest of the knives and hoped I appeared composed enough to not come across as a slasher of the elderly. “Our knives are like way sharper than anybody else's. Here, watch.” With just a few

swipes I turned a tin can into two half cans. Shockingly, Phil did not seem to see the utility in this.

“Do you cook much?” I asked him.

“Can’t say I do. Mostly microwave.” Jesus, this wasn’t going to be easy. I felt like a lost sinner with no saviour in sight. He sighed. “Kyle, you made a sale yet?”

“Is it that obvious? No. Well, one. My dad. But he was pretty clear that it was nepotism and he’s never going to use the things. Called me an idiot, actually.”

“Fathers can be that way.”

“Some warning that I’d need to raise my own tuition money would have been nice. Maybe then I’d have had the chance to develop some remotely useful skills.”

“Your father, he’s a wealthy man?” he guessed and I nodded. “Fathers, they want to provide, but they don’t want to overdo it. Sometimes it’s a tricky line to walk. He wants you to learn to work for it.”

“How am I doing?”

“Iffy,” he laughed. “But you got potential. You need to really hit your opening harder and work on those transitions.”

“You sound like a salesman yourself.”

“Once, a long time ago,” he said in a way that discouraged further discussion. I looked around uncomfortably. Above the fireplace, a picture stuck out by virtue of being the only thing without something else piled on top of it. Colourless, it captured a group of young men smiling around a massive artillery gun. Phil followed my eyes.

“Took that in ‘51,” he said, sounding eager to change the subject.

“You were in Korea?” I asked.

“Germany. Never made it down there.”

“What was that like?”

Phil finished his beer and used the recliner to spring himself back up to his feet. He returned with a beer for each of us and sank back into his chair. He drank half of his in one go and picked at a brown stain on his wrinkled shirt.

“Drinking. A lot of drinking. I remember that much. It was funny though. We were all waiting

to go war in a country that was still bombed to hell from the last one. Us with these giant guns and they had us helping to rebuild there to, I don't know, pass the time until we would go to destroy some other place far away. Drinking all night not to think about it but can't think of nothing else. Not when the bar you're in is next door to a pile of rubble and signs looking for missing people on the walls instead of pictures. Didn't make no sense to me. But, hey, that's where I met Anna, so it weren't all for nothing I suppose."

"Anna?"

"My wife. When the war ended and my time was up, we'd been going steady for a while there, and I had to get her back with me. We didn't have hardly any warning. Got married and ran the paperwork through all in a day. Barely made it." He rose again and walked to the shelf above the fireplace to pick up the picture of his old Army buddies. Behind it was the smiling image of a beautiful woman. Phil took the photo of her down and handed it to me. "Haven't looked at her in... God, I don't know how long," he mumbled. The woman in the frame couldn't have been more than forty when the picture was taken. I wanted to ask what happened, but a look at Phil's face and I didn't think he would even hear me.

"She was so excited about everything," he finally said. "All the time. She'd laugh at everything about us she didn't understand. I took her to the Grand Canyon once, and the way she cried..." Phil finished his beer and went to get another two. Somehow I'd emptied my own. "She had three older brothers, all lost in the Big One," he said when he returned and sat back in his chair. "She wanted a big family, and I wanted her to be happy. She was a great mother. Perfect with the kids. Six of 'em. Lots of mouths to feed. So I took the only job I could get and hit the road selling... don't remember. The travel was always hard on them. They didn't understand why I had to go. I had no other way of providing for them.

"I never liked being away," he said to me as if I needed to be convinced. "It was always for them. I was just a man trying to take care of his family. But I guess I couldn't. And when she... when the accident happened, I wasn't there. I'd forget to call sometimes, out on the road. Drink too much after a long day and just forget. She was gone three days before I picked up the phone. They never forgave me that. Can't say I blame them too much." A tear fell from his bowed head and dripped down the beer bottle until it became lost in the condensation. "I stayed home after that. But I was a mess. The kids drifted off one by one. Some call on the holidays, if they happen to remember, but they don't come around no more."

When he finished, he looked as if either he had shrunk or his chair had grown. As I tried to think of something to say, which would certainly be insufficient if not downright idiotic, he floated to his feet and went into the kitchen again. He came back with a bent chequebook.

“Phil, no, it’s okay, you don’t have to,” I said. He waved away my protests.

“Thanks for listening, kid. Been a while.” He scrawled out a blank cheque with a trembling hand and slid it across the table. I put him down for the cheapest package and set it aside. Phil stood looking at the photograph of Anna while I packed up my demo kit. He nodded at me without looking and I headed for the door.

Before I reached the hallway to leave, I stopped. I couldn’t just leave it there. I spoke before I even knew what I was saying. “Phil, you know, we have a special deal going on right now,” I said, inventing some fictional promotion. “Yeah, right, I forgot to tell you. Since you made a purchase, I can come back tomorrow and show you how to use your new knives, how to sharpen them and stuff.”

He looked up from the photo at me. “Yeah?” He smiled, just a little. “Sure, son. That’d be great.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said, and left him holding his wife.

§

When I stood on the porch the next day, my knocks on the door went unanswered. Phil was old, and I thought maybe he couldn’t hear me, so I tried the door and found it unlocked. It swung open and the sun spread across the front hall like a fan. The floor reflected the light with a fresh gleam, all the dirt wiped away. I called out for Phil and stuck my head inside, smelling a clean odour of cherry and lemon. The pictures that had leaned against one wall now hung from it in a perfectly straight row. For a moment I wasn’t sure I was in the right house. I called out again and my voice drifted away into the hall. I followed it past shelves that had been dusted and reorganised.

I found him sitting in his chair waiting for me with the knives he’d purchased laid out on the coffee table in shining rows. He’d tamed his wild mane and dressed in a clean sweater and slacks. I sat down on the couch across from him. He looked years younger.

After a while, I managed to make the call and the operator told me someone would be out to get the body in roughly thirty minutes and could I please stay with him. I said I would and wiped my eyes. I sat back on the couch for a moment, looking around the transformed house. The picture of Anna now rested on the centre of the mantle. The loose junk had all been put away.

Picking up the first knife, I slowly said, “Well, Phil, this is a paring knife...

Austin DeGroot is a veteran of five years in the US Navy and is now, at twenty-four, beginning his collegiate and writing career. This is his first published story.

Something to Carry

Non-fiction by Elen Cox

I used to own a backpack: it was brick red and black with a white North Face logo sewn into the front, which looked normal among all the rich kids at my liberal arts college, but when you got up close it was obvious that the stitching was crooked and the O in “North” was a little too small. The knock-off belonged, on the surface, but not when you looked, like really looked. An inside joke. An attempt at being different. But not too different.

I threw the backpack away in April. I was moving from New Zealand to the US and I needed to cull the non-essentials or pay the \$160 excess baggage fee. The backpack—a non-essential—was donated to the City Mission. Months later, I wanted it back.

“It smelled like rotten oranges,” my boyfriend reminded me. “It was sticky inside.”

“I could have washed it.” Also, he was the one leaving oranges in there, which maybe didn’t invalidate his point but weakened it. Just a little.

“You did wash it,” he reminded me. “It still smelled awful.”

“But I could have washed it again. With better soap.”

He just blinked at me. “How about you buy a new backpack?”

I still haven’t bought a new backpack; the thought of that makes me twitch. If I can’t have that red and black pack then I at least want to cling to its absence. I am clinging to its absence.

There was nothing special about the bag. I bought it for six dollars in Hanoi, at the tail end of a university semester abroad. I bought it to carry home all my souvenirs, the things that I wanted to keep forever as triggers for memories: that pretty, patchwork blanket bought in the north country; those cheap beaded bracelets sold by the street kids living across from our university; the breakable conical hat that seemed like an important thing to hang on the wall of my dorm in New York.

Those trinkets signifying completed events and remember-whens were scattered around my room to be admired on occasion. They were functionless, aside from their role as memory-keepers, but that’s what souvenirs are: tangible memories. Fun and inert.

I used the backpack. I used it daily through the rest of uni: packed it with library books and pens on weekdays, bottles of illegally purchased vodka and thrift store sweatshirts on weekends. After graduation, I moved it to my parents’ basement while I adopted a grown up life that didn’t require a book bag. I didn’t keep much else in their basement. We moved a lot when I was

growing up, and packing is a monumental drag. I was lazy, or I was a teenager, which is possibly the same thing. It was so much easier just to pull out a garbage bag and throw everything away: birthday presents, movie posters, candles bought from craft fairs, the first Valentine's day card that ever mattered. It was easy to justify: I was a child and I owned nothing of value. Now I'm an adult and I own nothing.

I revisited the basement just before I moved to New Zealand. I was going to graduate school and a backpack seemed useful. I dug it out, leaving behind all the souvenirs of college-era memories that had lost their potency (why did I need that conical hat again?). I took the backpack to New Zealand.

I lent the pack on a semi-permanent basis to my boyfriend, who wanted it to carry his schoolbooks. It was fine, since I had taken to carrying schoolbooks in tote bags that were bad for my posture but better for my outfits. I wasn't using the backpack. Still, it was there, sitting in the corner of the room, spilling over with someone else's biology articles and snacks. And then we got rid of it. It really shouldn't matter so much.

The backpack was not a souvenir. It didn't commemorate a single time or place or event. It's just a thing I used to own for seven years, using on and off whenever it was convenient. But maybe its pervasive banality is what made it so difficult to lose. It was there for nothing special, but it was part of everything else.

I wore it on a Monday morning once, when I was traipsing up a snowy hill in upstate New York, hung-over and self-hating, partly because of the weekday hangover and partly because I didn't understand the reading for that stupidly dense political theory class and I knew I was going to get called on; another time, it was curled like a comma on my ex-boyfriend's floor while I curled up in the bed and did crossword puzzles (the ex-boyfriend is notably absent in this memory. Where was he? I don't remember. This isn't about him anyway—it's about how warm his blankets were); and I used it on my twenty-fifth birthday when I needed a daypack for a hike. August is lambing season in New Zealand and there were tiny sheep gamboling all around the trail, which made for a more whimsical and sweet birthday than those of my childhood. The backpack was there for that.

I don't remember those days clearly or, probably, truthfully. I don't remember what happened or who was there, can't transcribe dialogue or remember whether my nose was running or if my shoes were comfortable. But I remember how it felt right there at that time and how it felt to be the kind of person doing the kinds of things that included that knock-off North Face backpack.

I don't have that kind of recall for my childhood and those gaps alarm me. I don't remember what lives in those black holes, what kind of ghosts are going to fly out on a cold night and scare the living shit out of me. I wish I knew. I wish I had a field guide of dark moods and resentments

and old anxieties. I want to know what shirt I used to wear when I was feeling ugly, or what books I read when I was lonely. Any memory I might have of those things has been wallpapered over by other shirts, other books. Tracking those moments is like finding a needle in a stack of needles.

What we discard, what we keep, all of it contains little pieces of our past selves: what you were thinking when you first touched it, what you were feeling, what you hoped for, what you were ashamed of, who you were. I need something to help me remember myself during that December when I was back from a semester abroad, trying to be different but not too different. That's why I'm writing this: I'm going to buy a new backpack soon. I'm going to wallpaper over the old one and I'm afraid of losing it entirely.

Elen Cox is a New Zealander/American writer, currently living in Washington, DC. Her fiction has been published in various literary journals, including Takahe Magazine and Vine Leaves.

Hoary

by Michele Seminara

Fifteen thousand years I have slumbered
In my icy casket, a hoary
Princess waiting
Not to be kissed, but punctured
By the pick of a prying scientist.

My blood, dark as a fairy tale
Leached insidiously into the Siberian snow,
And my flesh flared red and fresh
Enough to eat.

My lower limbs devoured
By a lusty pack of ancient wolves;
My torso still fantastically intact.

What a prize: my anti-cryogenic
Strength has preserved the code
To conjure my kind back.

Exhumed from earth's wet memory
(Who dares re-awaken me?)
Entombed in glass and sold for obscene show—
What they may unleash they do not know.

Synopsis

I have a strange fascination for mammoths. These huge, extinct creatures which emerge, often perfectly preserved, from the ice, appear to me to be like some unconscious, repressed memory of the earth, reluctantly resurfacing. As global warming speeds up the melting of the planet's ice, more and more of these monstrous snow whites, suspended in their frozen graves, are being discovered. Recently, a sixty year old female mammoth, her body still so fresh that her blood was flowing, was unearthed—leading scientists to believe that they may have found enough viable genetic material to produce a clone...

Michele Seminara lives in Sydney, Australia, with her husband and three children. She has been practising and teaching yoga, Buddhism and meditation for fifteen years. Her writing has been published in several online and

print journals, and she was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her passions are emptiness (the Buddhist kind) and poetry. She blogs at <http://micheleseminara.wordpress.com/> and is on Twitter [@SeminaraMichele](https://twitter.com/SeminaraMichele).

Pearls Mean Tears

by Gargi Mehra

The heat of the afternoon sun scorched the lilies decorating the front yard of House No. 43, Chittaranjan Park. Inside the bungalow, the seven women who gathered for tea wore their best ethnic finery, expensive baubles hanging from their lobes and around their necks. The chill of the air-conditioning did nothing to quench the envy that rose in their breasts when the owner of the bungalow laid out her latest acquisition for her friends' expert judgement.

Mrs Anjana Sen set the jewel pouch made of maroon velvet on the glass-topped table. She loved how this pouch resembled an envelope. She lifted one flap at a time, until the jewel lay exposed to their curious eyes. An expectation of diamonds or rubies hung in the air, but the ornament resting on the velvet did not live up to it. The ladies found themselves ogling an insipid necklace, strung together from asymmetrically-shaped pearls.

"It is beautiful," Mrs Roy said.

"Gorgeous!" Mrs Das exclaimed.

"Is it really made of pearls?" Mrs Mukherjee asked, furrowing her brows to mask her vexation.

Mrs Sen's blush-imbued lips parted in a smile. "Yes, of course, it is fashioned from Tahitian pearls."

"This must be very expensive," Mrs Das hinted, her sunken eyes boring into Mrs Sen's kohl-lined ones.

Mrs Sen paused. "Six lakh rupees."

A sharp intake of breath followed this statement.

Mrs Das smiled. "Maybe if I sold my Maruti Esteem, I could buy this necklace!"

Silvery laughter echoed around the room.

"It will suit you perfectly," Mrs Roy said, rubbing her glasses against her bosom before setting them on her squat nose.

"Yes, how nicely it will match with your *lal par shada saree*," Mrs Mukherjee said, gritting her teeth.

The other women muttered their consent.

“Mr Sen is always buying little gems like this for me,” Mrs Sen said. “This time, when he flew to Sun City—in South Africa you know—he passed by a jewellery store and this magnificent piece just caught his eye. He bought it immediately for our thirtieth wedding anniversary.”

“Mr Sen is so romantic. I cannot imagine Mr Mukherjee even setting foot inside a jewellery store by himself. He doesn’t even know what brand of tea I drink!” Mrs Mukherjee said.

Mrs Sen smacked a hennaed hand on her forehead. “Oh! Where is the tea and refreshments? I must keep an eye on these servants. You know how they laze around all the time.”

In the kitchen, she found her cook and caretaker engaged in animated conversation.

“What are you doing? Do I pay you just to sit around and chitchat?” Mrs Sen waved a finely manicured hand in the air.

The patter braked to an abrupt halt. The caretaker swung down from his seat and rushed out. The cook jumped from his chair and started laying out cocktail sandwiches on a plate.

Mrs Sen wandered back down the passage. A burst of uproarious laughter shattered the stillness that she imagined had descended on the living room after her departure. She lingered outside the half-open door, craning her neck just enough to hear Anushka Roy’s nasal tone.

“...and Anjana thinks having an expensive pearl set makes up for the joy of hearing the pitter-patter of little feet around the house!”

“And what a nondescript pearl set it is, too! At least she should have asked Mr Sen to buy something that looks worth its price!” said Mrs Mukherjee.

“Ah! You cannot blame her for that—her mind is so preoccupied with Nivedita that she can hardly make out which pearl is from the sea and which is from the gutter. You know, for a long time now, Nivedita has worried me—she is too stubborn for her own good...” Mrs Ghosh chimed in.

Mrs Sen withdrew, and tiptoed to the room adjacent to the kitchen.

Poor, dear Nivedita! Mrs Sen’s only daughter drove her far too often to the astrologer and the blood pressure pills, but did she deserve such censure for her unorthodox behaviour? How appalling that Anushka Roy gauged her mental state with such razor-sharp precision.

Nivdhi, as loving uncles and aunts called her, had proved a sad trial to her mother. Three years had passed since she had tied the nuptial knot, but the next-generation Sen still hadn’t made

an appearance. Even if Mrs Sen did become a grandmother, it wouldn't be because Nivedita had nourished a foetus for nine months and then heaved it out. As she wrote in an email to her mother, she "did not wish to put herself through the laborious process of giving birth."

She had scandalised her parents once before. Five years earlier, she cornered her mother at the *puja mandap* on *ashtami*, and showed her a cell-phone picture of her boyfriend Karan Bhatia. Mrs Sen's heart fluttered with joy—her daughter would finally wear the bridal red sari, albeit at the ripe age of thirty. She flew back down to earth when Nivedita said, "No need to prepare for a wedding, I am going to move in with him." Mrs Sen sunk down on to the nearest chair. When this news reached Mr Sen, he cracked his knuckles and summoned his future son-in-law. In less time than the bearer took to serve them tea, he unearthed two vital facts. One, the idea of "living in" stemmed from his headstrong daughter. Two, his future *jamaai* harboured no objections to donning a turban and circling the holy fire while a priest chanted mantras.

The joint efforts of her fiancé and her parents prevailed upon Nivedita, and she surrendered to the demands of a traditional Hindu marriage. A fond cousin, under instruction from the Sens, hovered by the *mandap*, ready to tow the bride back to the sacred fire if she staged a walkout from the ceremony. Mrs Sen mopped her brow and muttered a prayer of thanks when she bid the bride and groom a teary farewell.

After succumbing to family pressures during the wedding, Nivedita had resolved to strike her own path when it came to bearing children.

Mrs Sen's face screwed up in anguish. Tears fell unchecked onto her lap. She wiped them using the edges of her sari. Her reflection in the mirror alarmed her. Her cheeks had turned red, and the tip of her nose resembled a well-grown cherry. Mrs Sen patted just so much powder to her face that would cover her recent exploits.

On the way to the living room, she peeked at the full-length hall mirror. The same reflection that she had seen at her father's funeral stared back at her.

She steeled herself and turned the golden knob of the door. The discussion had diverted to pleasant topics. Mrs Sen forced a smile.

"I have just arranged for some refreshments."

As if on cue, the cook carried in a large tray holding a teapot, seven cups and saucers. He asked the ladies their preferences for milk and sugar. As he poured out the tea, Mrs Mukherjee vented about the stiffness in all her joints. When the cook shuffled out the door, Mrs Sen steered the conversation to the good old standby of malicious gossip.

That evening, Mr Sen suggested a weeklong holiday in Shimla.

Mrs Sen looked at him askance. “Is something wrong? You never feel like visiting romantic hill-stations like Shimla! What made you think of it now?”

“Why do you have to investigate matters like a detective? Just tell me, you want to come or not?” Mr Sen said.

Mrs Sen hesitated.

“It seems like a good idea. After all, we have only been there once since our honeymoon. Perhaps we could visit the Calcutta Lodge this time?”

“I have told Pandey to book our tickets and hotel stay. Oh, and remember to pack some good saris. The Minister’s annual get-together will be held at the Shimla Residency this year.”

Mrs Sen sighed. Her husband never invited her anywhere without an agenda lurking in the background.

As she stood by her cupboard wondering which of her expensive saris deserved the honour of travelling in her suitcase, Nivedita called.

“I have good news, Ma,” she said, sounding unusually chirpy.

Mrs Sen sucked in her breath. Hope rose in her breast, but she willed her heart to remain calm. Conversations with Nivedita usually tumbled down the rabbit-hole of negativity.

“Yes, baba, tell me,” she said.

“I got a promotion at work, my second year in a row!”

A slight pause as Mrs Sen exhaled. “Oh!”

“Yes. It’s pretty good of them, considering I might need leave later—”

“Leave? For what?”

“Oh... to visit you, no?”

Had Mrs Sen imagined that tiny pause?

“Well, congratulations, darling. I always knew you were brilliant.” Mrs Sen cocked her head to one side, jamming the cordless handset between her ear and shoulder. She used her free hands to

pick out petticoats and blouses from the mahogany cupboard, and tossed them in the suitcase.

“C’mon, Ma, you don’t sound so excited.”

“No, no, *beta*, I am! Really.”

“Did you think... are you still after the baby stuff?”

Mrs Sen hesitated. “You know, Mrs Chatterjee’s daughter-in-law is expecting her third child this year, and she’s younger than you.’

“Ma, they can all become baby-producing machines for all I care. I am *not* living their lives and they are not living mine. Haven’t you learnt that by now?”

Mrs Sen sighed. “Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes, *beta*.”

“Great line. Where did you hear it?”

“I... don’t remember. Nivdhi, can you please just think about it? I am not telling you to produce a cricket team tomorrow.”

“Cricket team? You won’t even get a single tennis player out of me!”

“Nivdhi, please.”

“Okay, Ma, I’ll think about it.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She must have caved in just to stop her mother from ranting any more. Mrs Sen sighed and flung the cordless on the soft mattress. She punched in the code for the safe that housed her jewellery. Four sets of diamond-cut bangles, three gold necklace-and-earring sets and their matching rings made the cut. She drew out the velvet case that contained her “nondescript pearl set”, and un-wrapped it. The pearls winked at her, as if to say “Wear us, Mrs Sen. You won’t regret it.”

Her favourite sky-blue chiffon sari, together with its matching blouse and petticoat found pride of place in her baggage. She stuffed the velvet case containing her pearls in the folds of her sari, just as her mother had taught her.

Mrs Sen pictured herself dazzling the minister’s residence.

The Sens pulled up in their white Mercedes outside the company guesthouse, in time for a late-afternoon cup of tea. As Mr Sen stirred his sugar into his cup, Mrs Sen gazed out of the window. The patio leading out of their bedroom suite afforded a breath-taking view of the valley. White flakes of snow blanketed the beautiful hilly landscape. A thrill ran through Mrs Sen—even nature concurred with her idea of wearing pearls.

“Let us walk up to Scandal Point,” Mr Sen said, with a twinkle in his eye. He set down his teacup.

Mrs Sen dithered, though she knew why he had suggested that particular spot. “I am tired, and we have to get ready for the evening party.”

“Oh, come, it will not exhaust you as much as you think.” He patted her affectionately on the knee.

They traipsed along the Mall road, hunting down the statue that served as the backdrop of their first honeymoon photograph together. They paid their respects at the Kali temple, and sampled so-called Pashmina shawls in one of the shops on the way back. An hour later, as they climbed up the hill of Jaku Peak, the caretaker of the guesthouse huffed down the slope towards them.

“Mr Sen! Some burglars broke into the rooms when I was out and robbed our things.”

Mrs Sen turned wide-eyed to her husband. His face remained passive. “Has anything been taken?”

“The police have come. Only you will know what is missing.”

Two police officers waited for them in the lawns. One of them stepped forward to talk to Mr Sen, and drew him aside. His wife rushed past them into their room. Her suitcase lay on the floor, its insides ripped open, even the pocket. Her chiffon sari lay spread out on the bed. She unfurled it and flattened the folds. No velvet case tumbled out. No gleaming pearls winked at her.

She burst into tears.

Mr Sen and the inspector entered the room.

“How much did you lose, madam?”

“Everything,” she said, “everything.”

She overturned the pillows and flung the quilts onto the carpeted floor.

“Madam, we need to dust the room for fingerprints.”

Mr Sen raised a hand to stop him. He put his arm around his wife.

“Anjana, stop crying. I will get you another one. Right now it’s important we don’t make a scene.”

She tried and failed to hold in her tears. He would sort things out, she knew.

Mr Sen’s mobile rang. He stepped out of the room to answer it.

Mrs Sen crumpled to her knees. She knelt before her suitcase, and dug her hand into its cavernous depths for any sign of her precious pearls.

“It’s Nivdhi,” said Mr Sen. He towered above her, holding his mobile phone close to her ear. “She wants to talk to you,” he said, in a gruff whisper. “I told her what happened but she insisted.”

Mrs Sen took the phone from him.

“Hello, Ma?” said a honeyed voice.

“Yes, *beta*,” Mrs Sen croaked.

“Ma, I have to tell you something,” Nivedita said. Even through her tears, Mrs Sen caught the tone of urgency in her voice.

“Tell me, *beta*.”

“Ma, I’m pregnant.”

Mrs Sen lifted her gaze to the window. A light snowfall has started once more. Tears stung her eyes. “Very good, *beta*.”

“Are you ok? You sound distracted. Baba said you lost something. I thought this news would cheer you up.”

“It has. I am very happy,” she said, sniffing. “Really.”

“Ok, I’ll talk to you later then.”

Mrs Sen hauled herself up, grabbing the edge of the bed for support.

Her husband entered the room. “They’ve left. They will keep us posted.”

He put a gentle arm around her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, the corners of her lips twitching upwards in just a hint of a smile.

“Yes,” Mrs Sen said. “Let us get ready for the party.”

Gargi Mehra writes fiction and humour in a determined effort to unite the two sides of the brain in cerebral harmony. Her fiction has appeared in Vine Leaves Literary Journal, GlassFire and Bartleby Snopes among other online avenues. She blogs at <http://gargimehra.wordpress.com/>.

Animals

by Alyson Miller

A foal collapses out of its mother and takes a mouthful of dry earth, thick dirt scratching its teeth. The mare backs into the shade of ghost gums, drags an ear against the chalky bark as though trying to erase it. The suffocating thrum of crickets, scavengers buried in paddocks beaten flat by blackberries and sunken fence lines. In the afternoon sun, the foal is autumn coloured, blushed with patches of something that reveal the science has not sparked true. In the evening, under a low potato moon, the shadow of a man falls across the grass, a metre of pipe held tight against his side. Locusts spray out with each footfall, darting away like dark electricity. The screaming of horses cracks open the night.

Alyson Miller is a lecturer in literary studies at Deakin University, Australia. Her short stories and poetry have been published in both national and international publications, and she has recently published a book of literary criticism, Haunted by Words: Scandalous Texts (Peter Lang).

Diary of a Tree-Sitter

by S. G. Larner

1/1/08

The first tree I ever saved was my dad.

3/1/08

Last night there was a storm so fierce I thought it would blow me out of the tree. In the dark I huddled on the platform, trusting in the ropes that secured me, drenched by rain flung sideways by the wind. I didn't sleep until it blew itself out in the early morning. All night I thought about my first tree-sit, when I was fourteen. I think Dad would be proud of me.

4/1/08

I'm going to write it down. The sun is rising over the valley, bathing the world in the most amazing light I've ever seen. Below me the fog turns golden, and I breathe in the forest's vitality. It smells of life. And I know it's time to write it down.

5/1/08

Today I had a visit from Mum. She didn't tell me she was coming. She cooked me lasagne and sent it up, and I cried when I ate it. It was the best thing I've ever tasted. She'll be here for a week, she said, then she's going back to Brisbane. I'm not sure if I will show her what I write.

6/1/08

It seems fitting to start today. Because it all started on the sixth of January, 1989. The day my uncle died.

We got the phone call while we were visiting Auntie Sue. The visit cut short, Mum drove home. As we got out of the car Dad staggered and leaned on the huge jacaranda in our front yard. He put his hands and head to the rough grey bark and just stood there. Mum ushered us into the

house, Sarah and I dragging our feet, wanting to run to Dad. Before the heavy door shut behind us I saw Dad with the tree and I couldn't tell where he ended and the tree began.

Over winter the bare skeleton of the jacaranda was unremarkable. In October the purple flourish called to me.

“Sarah,” I said to my little sister. “Is the tree different?”

She chewed on her thumb and shrugged.

When the fallen blossoms formed a purple carpet I figured it out. There was a little hollow where Dad had leaned his head. Each year the tree bent around the hollow just a little more until there was a noticeable kink in the trunk. Mum told me I was full of imagination.

7/1/08

I think I'm getting sick. I hope it's just a cold. Mum brought me pumpkin soup.

In 1994 I was fourteen, and my parents let us stay up to see in the New Year. The adults were drinking out the back, raucous and irreverent. The smell of burnt sausages and cigarette smoke drifted across the neighbourhood. Sarah and I snuck out the front and climbed the jacaranda to watch the fireworks at midnight.

“I bet Dad and Uncle Mike did this when they were kids,” Sarah said.

“The tree would have been a lot smaller then. Nanna planted it when they were born.” I poked Sarah with my big toe. “She wanted to bury their placenta with a tree. They only had one placenta between them. Miracle babies.”

“Why didn't Mum bury our placentas?”

“We're not miracle babies? Anyway, I asked Mum and she said the hospital just burnt the placentas. They're a bit gross.”

We slapped mozzies and stared up at the fiery crackers.

“I'd miss you if you died,” Sarah said.

10/1/08

I spent the last few days shivering and feverish. I think the worst is over. When I get sick I get

worried I'll have to leave the tree. I'm afraid of coming down. Up here, my life has meaning. I'm above the world's problems—literally. I'm on a life raft floating across an ocean of trees. When I come down I'll get sucked back into the petty shit: rent, bills, taxes, other people's problems. Easier up here.

Back in 1994, the New Year brought hope and a tiny sense that this year was for big things. I would be fifteen in May. The world stretched before me.

The night of the sixth of January I woke with a jolt. Footsteps thundered across the roof. Even as my head said "possum" my gut screamed "scary man coming to get you!" My heart hammered inside me, trying to run away. Sarah slept peacefully across the room from me. I tiptoed to the bedroom window and looked out over the front yard.

My limbs went floppy and weak. Nothing came out of my mouth, though I tried to yell. The clouds shifted and the moonlight unveiled the dark figure moving across the yard. Dad. An orange light glowed as he sucked on a cigarette.

At the tree he stopped and leaned in, just as he had all those years before. The tree leaned forward, strained to embrace him.

I pressed my nose and forehead against the flyscreen and breathed in the dust that clogged the mesh. Dad stepped away from the tree and came back inside. Minutes slid by. With a glance at Sarah I crept out of the room and padded down the stairs on bare feet.

The screen door squealed on its hinges. I grimaced, but the house remained silent. I crossed the dew-coated lawn, my feet welcoming the cool wetness even as the humidity suffocated my skin.

The scent of freshly-mown grass tickled my nostrils. A dog barked a few houses down. I put my arms around the trunk of the jacaranda. My head snuggled into the tree just below the bend. I closed my eyes.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

My eyes opened wide and I pulled my head away from the trunk, loose strands of hair catching in the rough bark.

"Hello?" I said before placing my ear back to the tree.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

The sound of a beating heart thudded through me. In my mind I saw Uncle Mike's face—

Dad's face, but younger and unlined—and smelled his musky aftershave.

“Is that you, Uncle Mike?” My whisper seeped into the bark. Sweat stuck my hair to the back of my neck; I shivered. The tree swayed a little in the still air.

“Dad really misses you. We all do. But why are you in the tree? Is it because of the placenta?”

The thudding skipped a beat. I pushed myself away, leaving two fingers feather-light on the bark, arm outstretched. Then I let my hand drop and turned back to the house.

11/1/08

I had a fling before I came up this tree. A dreadlocked protester named Bodhi who seemed pretty turned on by my impending tree-sit. I've never had a proper relationship. People are complicated. Trees aren't.

After seeing Dad hug the jacaranda I argued with myself for days. I'd imagined it. People aren't in trees, placenta or not. I compared Dad before the accident with Dad after the accident. One man was quick to laugh and full of life, the other was moody and absent. He'd started smoking; all Mum had said was *not in the house*. Did he think Uncle Mike was in the tree? Had he heard the heartbeat?

I thought about talking to Mum but I knew how stupid it sounded. I drew a tree with a placenta in the roots and a person in the leaves in Art class and wished that I had a placenta tree. *Oh to be a tree, and watch the world go by*, I wrote in English class.

On the way home from school I put one foot in front of the other and avoided Sarah's attempts at conversation. Finally she gave up, telling me, “You're as bad as Dad!”

The wispy clouds held no wisdom for me. The footpath was similarly mute, though the cracks in the pavement made me think of Mum and Dad.

Yelling stopped us in our tracks as we crossed the front yard. The jacaranda crouched in majestic misery over the house. I started moving; Sarah put her hand on my arm and her finger against her lips. We crept closer.

“Even when you're here, you're not here!” Mum's voice shrilled out the front door.

“Why would I want to be here? There's nothing for me, is there?”

“How dare you?” After a pause her voice was quieter, tired. “I've tried to help you. Ever

since Mike died... you're different. I just can't do this anymore. Go get help, or get out."

"This is my house. Mine. You can't kick me out. I grew up here!"

"Don't you want your children to grow up here? Would you prefer they were homeless?"

Silence followed. I glanced at Sarah; her eyes were wide and worried. We nodded at each other and opened the front door, movements small and timid. The house reeked of cigarette smoke. Mum was sitting at the table with her head buried in her hands. Curly brown tendrils clung to her fingers. She looked up at the screech of the door, face ghostly pale, make-up smeared.

"You heard all that?"

We nodded.

She sagged, her eyes creasing as she blinked back tears.

"Your father's leaving."

I grabbed hold of Sarah's hand and squeezed. Mum pushed the chair back and stood, swept us up in a big hug. "We deserve more," she said.

Over her shoulder I saw Dad enter the room clutching an overnight bag. He looked at me, and I tried to put everything I was feeling into my eyes. Mum let go; he slipped back out of the room before she saw him.

I went outside and climbed the jacaranda, snuggling against the trunk and talking to Uncle Mike until the mosquitoes drove me back inside.

12/1/08

Mum came to say goodbye today. She sent me up some chocolates and a final meal: ravioli with creamy sauce. Maybe when I come down I'll go back to Brisbane for a bit, stay with Mum and see Sarah and the kids.

15/1/08

I admit I've been procrastinating. I don't want to write this next bit. But I've been reliving it over and over in my head, so I'm just going to get it all out.

The next morning, after Dad left, I blinked, sitting up in bed. The grey light told me it was

near sunrise, too early to be awake. Sarah frowned at me in confusion.

“What *is* that noise?” she asked.

“I dunno.” I climbed out of bed and went to the window. Sarah joined me. My heart went *da-dum* in slow motion. I turned, saw my horror reflected in her face.

Time blurred and warped as we raced down the stairs, shrieking.

By the time we reached the tree our neighbour had gotten a ladder. I clung to Sarah, sobbing as she wailed. Mum was on her knees in the grass, looking up at Dad’s swinging form. The cry that had woken us was replaced by a barely-coherent monologue. “*Depressed, all my fault, pushed him away, pushed him too far...*”

Other neighbours helped cut him down. His head flopped as they manhandled him; the rope left a grim mark when they removed it.

“I’m sorry,” someone said. “We’ve called an ambulance, but...”

Mum stared at the still form lying broken on the grass before her. “My fault.”

I draped myself over her back. My tears marred the shoulder of her shirt. Sarah crawled into her lap, and Mum’s arms automatically cradled her. My lips beside Mum’s ear, I whispered, “Dad’s with Uncle Mike now. He’s happy.” I wiped the tears from my face, trying to ignore the aching hollow inside me. What if I’d said something? Would he still be alive?

Mum turned her face to mine, her face a blank mask of ruined mascara and hopes.

She didn’t understand.

Morning faded to night. When the adults were distracted—Mum talking to the police, telling them Dad was depressed, that he was mentally ill, trying to justify it—I crept out the front door into the darkness.

The tree hunched over its bent trunk, stretching toward the house, branches like arms straining to reach inside. At the base I looked up into the shadows.

Dad had climbed up, tied the rope, knotted a noose.

I ran my hands over the ridged bark, bent down and kissed the surface. Then I climbed as high as I could.

I wrapped my arms around the branch and lay with my cheek against the bark.

He'd slipped it over his head. Did he lie there talking to Uncle Mike before he jumped?

"Are you there, Dad?"

A breeze ruffled my hair, bats squabbled nearby. The leaves danced above my head.

Th-thud, th-thud. Th-thud, th-thud.

I sat up. Vertigo seized me and I grabbed hold of the tree to stop my fall. "Two!" I whispered. I crawled back along the branch, straddled it and wrapped my arms around the main trunk. My ear ached; I pressed it against the tree hard, trying to melt into the bark. "Dad, I hear you."

The double thud of twin heartbeats echoed through the tree and into me. I squeezed, hugging the tree with fervour. "I love you." The tree softened against me. I dozed, cradled by the limbs of the tree.

16/1/08

I think I'm getting RSI from writing this all longhand. It would be easier to type it up on the laptop, but I try to keep that for work. The little solar generator provides a bit of electricity, but I don't want to waste it. Besides, this is cathartic.

So, my first tree-sit. The front door banged, it was still dark. I peered through the foliage. The light from the house spilled out onto the lawn, illuminating Mum. She staggered forward, a bottle in one hand, the wood-axe in the other. She threw the bottle on the ground and assumed a solid stance. The eldest of four girls in a farming family, Mum knew how to wield an axe. She swung it back and grunted with the effort of sending it forth to bite the wood.

"Mum!" I scrambled down, almost falling in my haste. "Stop!"

She paused. I jumped off the lowest branch, clawing my hair out of my face and panting.

"You can't! Dad's in the tree with Uncle Mike! You can't cut it down!"

"That bloody tree... I'll not stand to see it anymore! Get out of my way." Her breath stunk of rum and she hefted the axe again.

"No!"

She hissed. "You're a silly girl with an overactive imagination," she said, the words filled with spite. "Go to bed."

“No,” I said again. Then I scaled the tree, going higher than I thought I could. Mum called out to me, swearing, then pleading. Her words turned to tears that floated up to me in my lofty perch. I clung to the branches and vowed not to leave.

Sarah took my side—keeping watch so I could climb down to pee in the bushes, bringing me food and drinks. Mum called the fire brigade but they couldn’t get high enough. After three days and a summer storm that had me gripping the tree in pig-headed determination while lightning stabbed the skies around us and Mum screamed that I’d get pneumonia and die, she finally promised not to cut the tree down.

18/1/08

Mum made me see a psychologist. He said I was perfectly normal, just “intense” and a bit “obsessive”. When I was sixteen I read about tree-sitters in Tasmania. I worked as a kitchen-hand for two years to save money so I could come to Tasmania. The first time I ascended a tree under threat of logging, I put my cheek to its irregular bark and listened. All I heard was the sound of the blood rushing through my veins and the wind in the leaves.

19/1/08

Every night I stroke my *eucalyptus delegatensis*, put my ear to the trunk, and kiss it goodnight. It might not have a heartbeat but I’m going to save it anyway.

S. G. Larner is a denizen of sunny Brisbane, where she wrangles three children and several chickens. She revels in exploring the dark underbelly of the world in her works. You can find her at <http://foregoreality.wordpress.com> and on Twitter @StaceySarasvati.

Strong

by Sarah Taylor-Fergusson

School defines your terms, your children's, those
Taught, sees you mark days in a house of
Red, with sheds that stand and fall, the broad
Oak tree stronger than you, than me, yet
No brace for a love that begged for life, in the
Greeting of our afternoons bled into night.

Sarah Taylor-Fergusson read Fine Art at Oxford University. She lives in Cheshire, England, and when she is not working as a fiction editor for a raft of publishing houses, she enjoys drinking coffee and wandering the borderlands of the Welsh Marches.

The Emilies

by Robin Dunn

There were two Emilies. The name Emily is related to the verb “emulate” and means “rival”. Often in my life I’ve noted that words and names can determine character.

I was in my thirties and a student again, after a stint in the mental institution, studying theatre at community college. Need is so important in life—needing something keeps you alive. Being needed comes later, if you’re lucky.

She turned around and looked at me, Emily Baldwin, nineteen and blonde. Her eyes were dark. The class was introductory acting, and I had opened my mouth to speak, and she turned around to look. It was a damaged look in her eyes, and more beautiful for it. Like a beauty mark cut into her mind. Having been hurt, she wanted more, on some level (all this I thought later).

Wide eyes signal something, either innocence (or its counterfeit), or longing, or confusion, and in her case it was all three. Perhaps longing is confusion, or a form of it.

Being inside the institution made me watchful, like a felon, and so I was quiet that semester, having finally found myself, after years and years, suddenly tall, dark and silent. What women never mention in their fantasies of men of this sort is that to become so means that you must be a stranger, even in your own city—for it is the stranger that attracts. You can never be at home.

“How old are you?” she asked, in the plaza.

“Thirty-three. I’m the senior citizen here.”

She laughed, making a sardonic face. She was from the San Fernando Valley, and had a dancer’s poise, and the studied nonchalance and careful boredom of young women throughout human history.

The other Emily, Emily Whitt, was twenty, rail thin and beautiful, a Southern Belle from Tennessee. She was off the heroin, and discovering herself as an actress, with eyes even darker than Emily B’s, hungrier, and more dangerous.

Her poise had the *noblesse oblige* of Southern gentility about it, asking about my people.

“Do you have children?” Emily W asked.

“No.”

“People do, you know.”

In the morning, we had voice class, and Guenevere Roundtree’s hypnotic sing-song urged us forward, for, as it turned out, voice class was mostly yoga. We stretched upon the mats, and became the downward-facing dog, and then down into child’s pose, with Guenevere’s beautiful voice falling over us. We were all of us in love with her immediately, an old-fashioned hippy of a kind it’s difficult to find now, totally committed, demanding unquestioned loyalty, filled with her Eastern wisdom.

I had not made love to a woman for five years.

§

It was Emily B I asked out first, considering her the more beautiful, and more difficult to get, and thus wanting to strike while the iron seemed hot. Of course, I was a fool.

Community college was uncomfortably like high school, and even had lockers in the hallway, so actors could store their clothing when they put on their costumes.

I hurried down the hall and caught her at the sliding door that opened automatically when you were near it; as we spoke, it continually threatened to crush her, moving back and forth on its rubber wheels.

“I’d like to take you to a late night theatre show, it’s around the corner, it’s any Wednesday, starting at 9...”

“That’s too late,” she said, smiling politely. “My parents want me home.” And she scurried off, filled with the energy of her youth, and of the city, a city that rewards youth even more than most, Los Angeles.

The iron may have been hot (she certainly was), but I’d missed the anvil entirely.

I bought a Coke from the machine outside and stood in the heat, watching her walk down to the train.

§

Theatre training is a punishing experience; it was exactly what I needed. I have always been a kind of emotional masochist, and theatre training is perfect for this, as it is designed to be boot camp. Boot camp locates all the ways in which you’re wanting and exploits them, a well-rounded soldier being the desired product.

Perhaps theatre training is even more exhaustive, in a way, since your personality as well as

your body comes under the microscope. Everything that you are, the way you lean, the way you pause, the way you pronounce your vowels, the way you move your eyes, all of it is wrong, and must be corrected.

Leslie Smith corrected everything, or tried to. One after another, we piled up onto the stage to recite the simplest of lines:

“Hello, I’m Robert Donne, I’m thirty-three, I was born in Texas.”

Name, rank, and serial number, put your right leg first as you climb the stairs, against the wall, it is more beautiful, it makes you appear balanced; never close yourself off from the audience.

And Leslie responds: “Don’t look down.”

“Hello, I’m Robert Donne, I’m thirty-three—”

“You looked down.”

And repeat.

§

My only friend in the class was a short man from New York in his mid-twenties named Michael; he was so overjoyed to be in Los Angeles it was almost embarrassing, but charming too. He was guileless, unusually so for an actor, and this was what I found endearing. He was, I thought, too honest for LA. We talked about the girls we liked and drank our coffee and watched the students pass by. Part of me still could not believe that I was outside. That I did not have to wait in line to get my medication.

Our first assignment in acting class was to write and perform what was called an “auto-drama”, an autobiographical on-stage rendition of your own life. I decided to go balls-out, as it were, and tell the whole of my brush with madness, my nervous breakdown, and record a series of voiceovers to use on stage, along with sound effects. In a previous life I was a film editor and had learned a few tricks, so I put together a passable soundtrack over which I would perform my otherwise silent piece.

I knelt on the stage. The ocean sounds came up. We had to pick a metaphor to centre the piece around and mine was “Rough Edges”. I was a stone in the surf, being rubbed smooth, and I rolled, and I realised later that the rock in my pocket cut huge bruises into my right leg as I rolled across the stage.

One wave, two, three, each wave naming a US state I had lived in (all seventeen of them).

It's strange, because the recording was in my own voice, and it's giving orders: "sit down", and so I'm being ordered around as though by an exterior aspect of my own personality. I did what the recording told me to, pretending to be five years old again, scribbling on my paper with a crayon.

Afterwards, I was suddenly a mild celebrity, or what passed for one in the theatre program; people looked at me in a different way, some with pity, some with fascination. Everyone was impressed.

I think now it was wrong for me to do it, if my goal had only been to get into Emily's panties—who, after all, would want a madman? But I suppose my objective was even more selfish than that; I wanted absolution.

But even if a magic priest were to utter the magic phrase, *ego te absolvo*, and waive the censer over my head, it would not have been enough.

§

I found the cheapest apartment I could; scraping by on unemployment cheques for as long as possible. The place was in Koreatown, and I had a tiny room in a three-bedroom apartment with Mr Kim, the landlord, who actually slept in the living room, behind a curtain, to save on money by making another room available to rent. There was no escaping Mr Kim; he saw all.

"You find nice Korean girl!" he told me, giving me the business card of an officer in the LAPD, where he insisted I should find work. "You go to Korea!" I nodded and smiled.

At a party two weeks later I pressed my meagre suit, such as it was, cornering Emily B on the couch at a house party, asking her when she'd come with me to the late-night play.

Her response was infuriating: she just stared at her knees with a shy smile, and said nothing until a girlfriend came over to rescue her.

I left the party early, drunker than I'd intended to be. I couldn't sleep.

§

Of course a dozen ironies emerge at once in studying the theatre as an actor—every act becomes something for an audience, even if no one is watching. As I attended to each finer detail of my scene partners' responses, I had to learn where my own bad habits came from.

For years I'd had a bit of a slouch (very common in tall men, Leslie told us), and had to constantly correct it. And I found myself wondering, why had I slouched? And I learned why: the more erect I held myself, the more attention I attracted. The slouch was a wallflower's pose;

designed to slip away under the eye, and thus avoid both censure and praise.

On the stage of life we feed ourselves the right lines, and the right backstory, and the right motivations for the right moments, the best that we can do, to remain afloat, and I the senior citizen of our introductory acting class needed a lot to stay afloat, rapidly deluded as I was into seeing a woman as my salvation, the simplest and the most destructive mistake a man can make.

Each slant of her eyes became fascinating, every roll of her shoulders. Theatre class was designed to force the actors into close quarters and to remove boundaries, so I had no room from which to hide from the forced intimacy, more intimate than an office, more intimate than a college classroom, more intimate even than a long backpacking hike or road trip (and I had been on several). The stage forced me to spill my guts and rewrite myself, painfully and slow. I looked into Emily Baldwin's eyes and she saw my growing desperation and so avoided talking to me, making the problem worse.

§

Although I know the logic of "to he who has, more is given", it has never been any consolation when I have been on the other end of that equation.

I listened to one of the young "players", who had several LA girlfriends, give advice about women to my friend Michael, and though I knew the advice was subtly wrong I found myself unable to argue with it. Having chosen my position (strong, tall, silent) I was forced to stick with it.

As the weeks passed, I found myself watching the other Emily instead, and in the way that the brain works, carefully overlaying a series of perceptions to make what was previously found wanting into a new ideal, I watched myself grow newly enamoured with her, watching her flexible body as she stretched (a sign, I knew, of high estrogen levels and thus of fertility), her torso curling down like a fruit, dropping down onto her legs impossibly graceful and slow, her beauty quiet and effortless. She was a brunette, the "type" I had always preferred.

I suppose it must seem cowardly, or strange, that Emily B's silent refusal to answer, staring at her knees at the party, had derailed my pursuit so easily. But I had seen in her careful modesty and shyness all that I despised about her youth, her simple suburban privilege, her innocence and her presumption (not unusual of course) that all would be provided for her, that the world was her oyster, and only the best things in life were fore-ordained to have been sent her way.

And, of course, I found it simultaneously fascinating that she had not said no, she had not refused me, she had merely dodged. But I wanted no part of it.

§

That night I got home late; I'd been at the café, staring moodily at my laptop for too long. I put a frozen pizza in the oven and was confronted, moments later, by Mr Kim. I have never done especially well with authority figures; it is a failing of mine.

“You make stink!” he shouted. He was in nothing but his boxer shorts and his eyes blazed.

“You are stinking the oven! I call police!” Incredibly, he raised his fist and advanced on me, and I stepped back and raised my own and we stood there silently, for a moment, an unlikely tableau. *He's an insane person*, I thought. But he was the landlord, sane or not.

“I call them!” he shouted. And he did.

“I am Korean!” he shouted, into the phone, once the police answered. “You come now!”

Having made the call, he was calmer, and he walked outside onto the driveway to await the officers and I joined him, smoking a cigarette, silent, awaiting the law.

They came and Mr Kim explained his nonsense to them and the Korean translator they had sent. I stood in the doorway of my room, carefully saying nothing, carefully not meeting the officers' eyes so they could not see the full force of my rage. I wanted to kill the man.

“Did he pay his rent?” they asked. I had. “You can evict him with thirty days' notice, Mr Kim, but until then he has the right to stay here.”

The police were right, but Mr Kim had gotten what he wanted; I did not get my dinner that night. And after that I had to spend more of my rapidly dwindling funds on eating out, as Mr Kim had declared the kitchen essentially off-limits.

§

Regardless of what happened later, I am thankful to both the Emilies; without them I know I could not have been healed in the same way. Even when a woman is cruel, even when she is heartless, her presence can be enough. It's strange that it should be so, perhaps, but not really so surprising. Like a soldier returning from war, I needed re-socialising, and it was in their arms that I remembered I was a human being, and a man.

§

Perhaps you are curious how I ended up in the loony bin—it is a simple, if ridiculous story. Too much marijuana was the reason. I've since given it up. It's not your 1970s pot no more, no matter where you live.

§

In theatre we used “grey block furniture”, simple blocks and chairs we pretended were the fine furnishings of the scenes we played. I began to enjoy helping Emily W put back the blocks after the scenes were done for the day, standing next to her for a moment after a day’s hard work, and the moments of jealousy I got from Emily B, the other Emily, her rival.

Though I’ve had several careers both before and after my stint in the theatre, there is nothing that can compare to the simplicity and completeness of its—what I can only call—mind control. The cliché is of course that actors are stupid, but I think part of this is the nature of the beast. While I consider myself a reasonably intelligent man, I know I grew stupider through the influence of theatre acting, simply because it was what was required. Again, like a good jarhead, I was encouraged to have no thoughts of my own. A perfect actor, it was said, could be anyone, and so should not have too many preconceived ideas of his own. (Easier for a man of eighteen, of course, than thirty-three).

Emily W became ill, and our little unit felt her loss; like a platoon squadron without our best sniper, we became sullen. We soldiered on through our “celebrities” (I chose a creditable impression of David Byrne from *The Talking Heads*), seeing the end of the semester in sight.

“You seem to be a loner,” Leslie said to me, at our mid-semester review. “We want you to be more mixed in. Don’t stand so apart.”

“You think I could really be an actor here in LA?” I asked him.

“Sure. You could make a good cop.”

I would never have dreamed of myself as a cop in a million years. It gave me a new appreciation for men of the law, that perhaps they really were men like me, some of them, tall and quiet and solemn, watching and watching and watching and watching...

§

Though I’ve learned, partly from community college’s somewhat subliminal instruction, and partly simply through the influence of Los Angeles, a city whose influence is legion, unknowably vast even today—though I’ve learned to be less political, I still feel obligated to record here my one relevant observation about LA politics, which I thought of more broadly then, in the sense of the whole *polis*, rather than the more narrow mayoral race and such.

I cannot say whether LA’s fundamental obsession—*being seen*—is any different whatsoever from our simian heritage, our genetic predisposition to be popular in our ape group. But even if it is not different in kind it is certainly different in degree, and while I cannot pass judgment on the rumour mill or the “body mill” of LA fashion that churns out so many identical young ladies, having indulged myself in both mills, I do judge the mindset that results from them. Theatre should

be about sharing: we are all on stage together. But in LA it usually degraded into one-up-manship, since this was the ticket to Hollywood success, screen-time being a zero-sum game, after all: either the camera sees you, or it doesn't.

I know I do not have the wisdom to situate this poor habit of my city in some larger context where I can explain it to people who might matter, who might be able to change it; there is still too much of the outsider about me, even today.

But I do know that this gamesmanship affected me as well, and that I became less of a gentleman with the Emilies because of it.

§

The semester was drawing to a close, and we had to choose our final scene partners; we were all excited. Leslie, always clever, had the following method: we would each list secretly on paper our ranked choices of partners, one through five, and he would then be able to partner everyone with someone that they wanted. Emily B was my first, and Emily W my second choice. I got Emily W.

She had been sick for two weeks with the flu. Her boyfriend, who worked as a stage manager for a rock band, had been traveling, and she'd been holed up alone, fighting off the bug. I sat on a bench outside the theatre building, washed in the LA sunlight, and called her.

“Emily?”

“Robert?”

“I just wanted to tell you, Leslie has put us as scene partners for our final scene.”

“Oh, that's wonderful!”

She got better right away. Writing this now I can see some of the logic of it, her desire and her confusion combining into her strong will, to force herself onto stage and into my arms, despite everything that told her not to, a hundred things.

We chose our scene, from “Old Times” by Harold Pinter. Pinter is a master of theatrical pauses, and often much of the storyline is delivered in them, the characters looking into each other's eyes, saying nothing, fighting for dominance, understanding, forgiveness, love.

She picked me up in the shiny silver car her mother had just bought her, and drove me to the park to rehearse our scene, beers and scripts tucked into the synthetic mini-ice chest with blue shoulder strap, Dutch beer in cans, blood lipstick on her lips.

In the scene, Deeley looms over his wife's friend, who is visiting, his hand creeping up her

thigh as he delivers a blowhard narrative of his professional success, a real asshole, and I loved those words coming out of my mouth, as I slipped my hand under her skirt, and up over her knee, staring into her dark eyes.

I stopped my hand two inches from her panties, and I kissed her.

§

We rehearsed the next day on stage, in front of the class, with Leslie Smith's sharp eyes on us both. At the end of the scene I leant in for the kiss and she drew back and shouted:

“That's not what we rehearsed!” And the class laughed. I was ashamed; I had not expected to be refused in front of everyone. I watched my class for their reactions, and saw Emily B's burning, mocking eyes.

We re-rehearsed the scene sans kissing, and it became a gloomier affair, less erotic but perhaps better for it in some ways. It received good marks from our professors at our end-of-term performance, where I also staged my auto-drama again, having been chosen as having had the best of my class (a colourful life story always helps).

My mother came up to visit, and was suitably impressed, which cheered me up. She photographed me and Emily W together, scene partners, our first semester in the can, and I felt that I belonged, if only peripherally, I felt that I had arrived somewhere that made sense, after so much that had not.

§

I escaped the clutches of Mr Kim, for which I am still grateful even today, and found a tiny bachelor unit with a shared bathroom that was also closer to school. As summer came, I sat outside, counting my last unemployment dollars, and looking through acting postings in Backstage magazine, so many of them unpaid. You had to be rich to be an actor in this city, it seemed.

I e-mailed my headshot around and received some polite thanks/no-thanks.

I called Emily W and invited her to the movies but things were wrong, she only talked about her boyfriend, and things stayed cool between us, we did not talk for a month after that until at last, in early July, she called and invited me to a musical event, hosted by a friend of ours from class.

She arrived in the same silver car, wearing a white dress, the same that she had worn on stage, playing the part of the princess that she loved, and I got in, tie around my neck, and we sucked vodka from her plastic bottle that she kept hidden under her seat before driving off.

The event was at some kind of fancy boutique clothing store; like so many happenings in LA, the entrance was like an old-fashioned speakeasy, totally unmarked, with an inquiring hostess placed at the right place, slightly out of reach, in this case, lurking in a red dress behind a gate, the musicians visible in the distance, down the alley.

Emily felt good on my arm, and I smiled at the woman in red, who asked:

“If you could have anything in the world, what would it be: more sex, more money, or more time to travel?”

“Time to travel,” I said, and her eyes glowed wide, and she announced: “correct!” and opened the gate for us, I leading Emily Whitt in her white and her heels on through, towards the violins.

Suddenly the alleyway became full of people, thronging out from the fancy dress shop where they’d finished the fashion competition and were desperate for cigarettes and booze, but Emily snuck in to see the dresses, leaving me by the musicians, who crossed off one item on their set list and lit into the next, keeping great time, the acoustics of the alley surprisingly effective, the saxophonist lurching up and down, flirting with the ladies as he blew his horn.

I smoked too many cigarettes and enjoyed the feeling I had not had in years, of having come in with a woman, being a man who was desired.

But Emily was cool, and moody, saying nothing, fiddling with her camera she had brought, exclaiming at how easily she had broken it, and then in the next breath bragging that she had been wise to buy insurance.

I felt, somehow, still desperate, trying to inure myself to these obnoxious habits, but reminding myself she was so young, so untried.

“Just leave it alone, listen to the music,” I said, but she pouted and kept fiddling with it, sitting in the one chair in the alley, crossing her slim white legs, and poking at the screen.

I felt she’d spoiled the evening and suggested that we go and she agreed, pouting, working her damndest on her southern flair, luxuriating in her rights as a young woman, strutting on ahead, scarf around her neck, pumping her legs as she charged into the night, back to her car.

She put on a CD she liked and threw the vodka at me when I got in.

“Finish it,” she said, and I did.

Los Angeles is a magical town, its instantiation of the American nuclear suburban dream entirely complete in some ways; each couple secluded in their car, each car arranged upon a road

with lights to light the way, each road leading home. Along Sunset Boulevard we drove east, listening to the band she liked, the music a dream, rich and fragrant with the expensive speakers in her car, us floating in the car's strong suspension, west in the summer Los Angeles night.

What I felt then was an illusion but no less powerful for all that, that dream of the perfect couple, arranged and allotted, ensconced together in their position, attractive complementary and inoffensive, clean and mostly sober, together, if only for a minute.

She pulled up to the curb outside my apartment.

"Well, Robert..." she said, and I took her hand, and looked into her dark eyes, and said:

"You're one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Will you be my wife?"

She blushed but her eyes were filled with a strange mixture of greed and shame; she already had a boyfriend after all, though we both knew she'd been looking to cheat.

"You really think I'm attractive?" her voice squeaked.

"Yes, I do."

"Aren't you supposed to give me a ring?"

"I'm too broke to give you a ring yet. If you say yes, you get a ring," I said, and she laughed.

"I'm not saying yes, and I'm not saying no, but what a woman wants, it's security, and Johnny makes \$3600 a month..."

"What do you really want, Emily? It's the character of the man that counts more than anything. I've seen men homeless with their families, but they stuck by them, through thick and thin. What do you really want?"

"I know, I know, life's not fair, life's not fair! I'm not saying yes, and I'm not saying no, okay? I want you to read my father's blog. He's closer to me than anyone. When you go home I want you to read it, and don't call me till you've read it all, okay?"

She leaned towards me in the car, and put on the car's blinkers with her left hand.

"You promise?" she said.

"I promise."

And she kissed me, slowly, tasting my lips. And with her right hand she unzipped my pants, watching my face, and then lowered her head, and I ran my fingers through her hair. Later I leant

back in the chair and she finished me off, greedy, then swiftly sat back up in her seat, wiping her mouth.

I went home and read her father's blog.

Thinking back now, there was nothing remarkable about it. But at the time, smitten with the man's daughter, I found myself smitten intellectually with the father too, appreciating his insights as my future in-law, so much so that I promptly e-mailed him, and told him of my proposal to his daughter.

§

In the morning she called.

“You fucked me!”

“What did he say?”

“He said you were a lunatic! He wants me to go back to Tennessee! Never call me again!”

§

Who am I to say I went about it the wrong way? In a way I was calling her bluff; I knew that she liked having me “on the side”, however peripherally, and because she loved calling herself a “daddy's girl,” part of me wanted that daddy to know just what his daughter had been up to.

In any case, I spent the next six weeks bumming around for work and managed to find something part-time at the café, nothing elaborate but it would keep me off the streets.

§

In the Fall, our little tribe, only slightly diminished in numbers, went once again into the breach, now under the tutelage of Frederick Fjet, fundamentalist Christian and living institution of our college, a short wiry man who had taught us stage movement the previous semester, a glorified form of tumbling. Now he would take over our acting instruction. Emily W was nowhere to be seen.

Unusual for a theatre instructor in some ways, Frederick loved to lecture.

“You know at my house, with my wife, we've got students like you and they work hard. They live with us, they go to school down the street. Don't forget: work works. Houses house. Artists make art. These students of mine, I think of them as my students although of course their lives are their own, though being a devout household we of course tell them that any sinning they may be doing should happen elsewhere, I'm sure you can understand that, but every morning, I

hear her play the piano. She plays the piano very badly. But still she plays it. She plays it because that is her job. Because she is a music major. Because she understands that work works. She plays guitar beautifully, but with the piano she is terrible and yet she persists because this is her mission: to improve herself. Can you improve yourselves?"

Frederick's favourite phrase was by far "work works" and in the halls of the theatre academy the students used it as a kind of mantra, almost as a replacement for "hello". "Good morning!" "Work works!" Although Frederick was beloved, chiefly for his work as an administrator in prior years, when he allowed broke students to sleep in the building if they needed to, he was now half-retired and more curmudgeonly, and I quickly developed a passionate hatred of him.

I spent the mornings hating Fred Fjet, and the afternoons loving Emily Baldwin, still somewhat surprised to find myself in Los Angeles at all.

It was rumoured that Emily W was having money problems (who wasn't?) and she showed up a week into the semester, parents in tow, avoiding my eyes, and came to just one of Fred's classes.

That day we were each put through our paces like nervous horses, pacing the stage one by one with Fred taking notes, evaluating our stride. When Emily W got up and introduced herself in the middle of the stage, her dark eyes burned through me, and I knew that I would be unable to forget her, or her me.

§

I suppose I was eager to avoid more rejection from my first crush there in our little tribe, and so I spent the first six weeks or so hitting on every other woman who seemed available in the department, and though I did manage one date with an innocent little blonde from Idaho, I missed Emily's dark eyes, and her selfish moods, and her fundamental prepossession, the lighter side of that entitlement syndrome, the simple poise, part presence part idea part bird, kingfisher one-legged in the reeds.

Halfway through the semester we were assigned a scene together, Edward Albee's "The Goat, or, Who is Sylvia?" a hilarious dark comedy about a man who cheats on his wife with a goat. And that was when I fell in love.

It's not exactly fair, the human heart, we all know that, but it is rather funny how easily it is manipulated, and part of me sees how the Don Juans of the world can be so successful, if you brush inconvenient morals aside. All the heart needs is the right inputs; they don't even have to be sincere. In this way, it is inevitable that actors are always falling in and out of love, and in and out of bed, because the human body is designed this way.

Mix pheromones and intimate working conditions, a little stage kissing and undressing in each other's presence, and you're most of the way already smitten (assuming there's one drop of chemistry in there somewhere).

We rehearsed in an empty classroom.

"You're fucking a goat!" she shouted into my face, breasts heaving.

"I love you, Sylvia," I replied with a snarl.

We fought over and over, circling each other like dogs. And then I grabbed and kissed her and she kissed me back and I tasted the sweat on her skin. My hand on her waist transmitted to me reams of information that hands know in a moment, here the curve of the waist (estrogen again), the softness of the skin, the emotional character of her poise (submissive, darkly), the way she leans in slow but bites.

She broke away and said, her voice remarkably controlled, "We need to keep rehearsing."

§

Los Angeles is a cruel city for a thousand reasons, Hollywood the chief one of course, but there are many others too. All ports are cruel, too, in this way, and LA is a major port. Ports bring so many different people into the mixing pot, it is what makes them strong, but it is also what makes people feel lost, like they don't belong, whether they're fresh off the boat or living there for generations. No one is ever quite at home in Los Angeles, drunk on the yellow light and palm trees and highways, the American Dream, having fulfilled the still-living promise of the Wild West (remake yourself, anew), people find that they miss their old selves, and cannot get them back.

Theatre academy assisted me in this, and the other students, the jettisoning of our old identities, to become actors who could have a reasonable chance of working, good and loyal jarheads, who do not question, who hit their mark and smile.

I walked Emily B to the train, watching her ass sway in her jeans, trying to keep up a meaningless patter of conversation. Her eyes watched me carefully, evaluating, evaluating.

"You should come up to the Valley," she said.

"Maybe this weekend."

"Call me."

I did and she never answered. After three tries I left it alone.

Three nights later she showed up to see Leslie Smith's new play, with an older man in tow, I suppose no older than me, but he appeared older, more successful, a polished and inconvenient asshole.

Emily Baldwin fluttered around, the little princess, enjoying every moment of my jealousy, talking the poor man's ear off as we waited in line, the perfect little socialite. I behaved myself, and found myself thinking less of her for it, the man clearly had few redeeming qualities, just wanted to fuck her. I suppose that was all she wanted, to have someone on her arm that night, to show off, to not be seen as single, but I still found it gauche. And who uses that word anymore, "gauche?" Who really knows any more what is and isn't acceptable?

I watched her in the first row during the play, sitting there by her date. She was perfectly erect, she hardly laughed throughout the play, so young and nervous. After the show I overheard our mutual friend Allie teasing her, asking if she'd bring the man home with her.

"It's our first date, Allie!" she cried, scandalised, loving the attention.

I went to the after-party and got drunk on homemade tequila that a tender soul poured into my cup from his thermos. I watched the young actors parade in the narrow downtown loft, acting out the lines and dance moves from the play we had just seen.

In Los Angeles it is never safe to be only one person; you must be many. It is never safe to be alone; you must be in the platoon, you must be in-country, you must follow orders, follow orders.

The dance leader from Leslie's play was a veteran, back from Iraq, the older brother of another student in the program. He was also a former meth-head, his eyes insane, with an addict's skinny body. He shook his naked torso, standing on top of a chair, shouting the changes at the dancers, who spun for him, in time, spinning, in time, Los Angeles.

Emily B did not show up but I hardly thought of her, watching myself watching the actors and their friends, I among them, becoming a strange version of the cop Leslie saw inside me. I danced like the eccentric that I am, my own drummer, pivoting around the group, not following orders, enjoying the music, and the heat.

We stood next to one another, staring out into the lights. Say your name, pivot on your heel, three point turn, back to your starting position, Robert.

I sit down and say my line, watching her eyes. She is nervous, and beautiful, the angry wife in

her silk dress, waiting for her cue to rip into me.

She watches, waiting, and stands, her footwork better than mine, angled just right, her pale skin rouged and her eyes glowing, expostulating her holy rage, horrified at my abomination, my carnal knowledge of the goat.

I plead with her and she marches around our living room, the chair just like the table just like the couch, wooden without upholstery or cushions, in grey paint, black curtains on the windows.

Albee in our mouths and Fjet in our feet I watch her, I am begging for our marriage, and she fights so well. What is it to be here in Los Angeles? If I am to be this LA jarhead my jar must be made well, ready to be boiled, preserved and boiled like in a sod house somewhere in Kansas for winter, fragile but something of the people, and this is what I like about Emily B, the same thing I loved about my family, who also grew up in the much-maligned San Fernando Valley, is this populist sentiment, built on the lies of the water barons of the Great Depression, using this fantastic lie to build a bigger one, the American Dream of Equal Opportunity, something that never quite made it to the *noblesse oblige* woods of Tennessee...

I plead for her love, I try to explain, I love the goat, and I love her too, I do not know what it means, nor what it means that she would not look at me, when she refused, only at her knees—only politeness?

She storms off the stage, a fantastic exit, and Fjet is in my neck as I do not bow, but let my head drop slowly to indicate the end of the scene, and the audience applauds.

The work works and it is hard and Fjet is unforgiving, the Polish blood in him and his cruel eyes and his modulated voice, his unending religious feeling, and though his temple is Christ ours is merely the unending boards, the stage.

I go outside for a cigarette, and then watch the rest of my class and their scenes.

§

I sit across from Fjet, his short squat body endlessly polite, his voice careful and warm, his eyes pure selfishness.

“Welcome, Robert.”

“Frederick.”

“Let’s look at your marks.”

He reads the remarks of all the professors for our final work. Then he says:

“You’re being exited.”

I should have praised Jesus along with the bastard; I was not sufficiently jarheaded. Stubbornness, while it has worked for me with women on occasion, failed me in the theatre department.

I felt the metaphor break down, that our class had never been a platoon; it was only pretend. A real platoon would have a bond, but we are only play actors, and my absence will not startle or put my class out; the senior citizen is merely being retired.

I went to San Diego for Christmas dinner and hugged my relatives, saying little, having my wine and turkey, watching the California sunlight, too wistful by far, thinking of Emily Baldwin.

§

In January I called her, and she answered.

“Emily.”

“Robert.”

“Meet me in Echo Park. I need to see you.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“In an hour.”

“Okay.”

§

Having learned my lesson (for better or for worse) regarding impromptu marriage proposals, I vowed not to spring any on Emily B, as I waited for her at the park by the lake.

I saw her then, walking across the grass, in her summer dress; it was a warm January that year.

“You look nice,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“Would you like to walk?”

“Okay.”

We moved slowly by the water, watching the ducks.

“What will you do now?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

“Look for work?”

“Yes.”

“I’m thinking of going to Japan. I love Japan. My choir group might be going.”

“That would be fun.”

She watched me for a reaction, and I watched her.

“I’m too old for you,” I said, after some moments.

“That’s not it,” she said.

“Too broke.”

She sighed. “It would be nice if you were employed, now that you’re out of school. I think you could manage that much.”

“Yes.”

“Will you rehearse with me?” she asked, her dark eyes pleading, and then we were screaming our lines there by the lake, attracting looks from the other park-goers, pivoting on the boardwalk, gesticulating wildly, a camp performance, and then she was in my arms.

§

Love is so fragile; though it binds the world together that is only in the aggregate, each little strand is so tiny, and so delicate.

I held her in my bed, wondering what was to become of us.

§

She got a part, a good one, the Lady Valentine in *Brooks March East*, an experimental work performed out of doors, at dusk, twice a month, incredibly bizarre but well-funded. She was arrayed atop a ladder in blood red silks, the orator, her strong theatre-trained voice ringing out over

the peons below, it was the return of the Middle Ages in the City of Angels, and the gods walked the earth (or at least stood up on ladders).

She glowed.

§

Improbably, I got work as an assistant party organiser. Though I have never been a social butterfly I find it is work that I enjoy, talking on the phone, meeting people, choosing decorations, wine, crackers, musicians, fitting the scene to the occasion.

For Emily Baldwin it is a kind of god-send, for though she is a beautiful young woman, there's more than one in Hollywood, and my job allows her to show up once a month in her best clothes, practicing the age-old habit of the aspiring nobility, working the room, smiling, smiling, smiling, smiling, nodding and then smiling, and smiling some more, and she has a good smile, even mostly honest, still with the haunted look in her eyes that will never go away, a look that for me becomes the look of all Los Angeles, a beautiful city that is haunted with pain, ten million unexculpated pains, shimmering forever on its false and beautiful stage, to hide away from itself, from what it was, and what it might become.

“Where did you come from?” she asks me.

“Texas.”

“Thank God.”

§

Los Angeles is changing; the whole country is. Since Henry James and before Americans looked across the Atlantic for their culture, not only the arts but the spooky wisdom of the millennia that rest on the stones of Europe's cities, the restfulness of middle age, while America was still young and stupid and full of vinegar and dreams.

As we approach middle age, and grow our paunch, I keep my woman close as I can, in my heart, waiting to see what our new heartaches will be, not invasion but disillusion, and the malaises that come with it, emotional violence of a thousand flavours, including ones we're asked to perform on stage and on screen, to prepare the country for what is coming.

Slowly her parents grow, if not fond, then tolerant of me and my eccentricities. I will marry a Valley girl.

§

We're sitting in the café; she's on in ninety minutes.

"What will you do tonight?" she asks me.

"Watch you."

"Will you applaud?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Do you think I'm doing well?"

"I think you're doing fantastic."

"You really think so?"

"Yes."

"I think the part is so strange... I'm so high up, on that ladder, I can see everyone, like I'm one of the angels, floating down to deliver the city away, to take it even further West, and I don't want to do it, but it's what I have to do ... it's my mission."

"Yes."

"Where will we go?"

"Down. West means down. We'll go down. You'll come down off the ladder, and you'll come down into the pit, and I'll come down there with you, in between the music stands, and I'll make love to you on Sunset Boulevard, the luckiest man in Los Angeles."

She gets up to go, and blows me a kiss.

Los Angeles will not die but only change. In this city I feel its weight on my shoulders, anchoring me to earth, assuring that I will not abjure its ancient heresies, that I will not diminish its strange flames, or waver in its promised deliverances, the Wild West yet still alive.

Love has grown me sane.

Robin Wyatt Dunn lives in Los Angeles and is the author of three novels. A member of the Horror Writers Association, he is proud to have been born in the Carter Administration. You can find him at www.robindunn.com.

Entropy

by *Fleur Brown-Beeby*

Is that one? The water recedes and I stoop to inspect it, holding my lower back to stop the pain caused by repetition. My bare feet are hot from the sun and the water rushing over them feels like relief in every cell, but it doesn't stop the voice, the anxious urge. Maybe this will. Pale grey, smooth, approximately 2 cm in diameter, half-buried among the disorder of shells. I dig it out with a finger. Elongated on one side like someone has sat on it with a hard bum. Inconsiderate. Damn it.

It's becoming harder to find symmetry. Some days I come home with nothing to add to the pebbles. Not today though; I won't let it happen, I won't. A family *oohs* and *aahs*, pointing at the water. They've probably spotted a... a dolphin, plunging through the waves, but I can't afford to look—not when I spot a flash of white in the sand ahead.

I remember pi to 10 decimal places: 3.1415926535. I remember the laws of thermodynamics, the stupid jokes we used to throw around: *entropy means you can't turn sausages back into a pig. So have a barbecue!* I remember way back, steering the bumpy four-wheel drive on an outback track on the way to Queensland, Pearl by my side, and Charlotte and Luke, no, not Luke, that's Sam's boy, Charlotte and Sam in the back with wet towels draped over them to cool down. The towels would dry out in a few minutes and Pearl would—ah, what would she do?—she'd dip them in a bucket of water, yes, and pass them back over the seat.

Chipped, the white curve is destroyed by a chink in the stone, as though it's been dropped thoughtlessly for something newer and shinier. I toss it into the ocean. The wet sand sinks a little as I walk. Mildly thixotropic. I pass a man with two kids; one is burying the other's legs. The father is taking a photo. He's wearing glasses with a safety cord, balding on the top of his head. They look familiar, maybe. They smile at me. What is that look in their eyes?

I remember being third in the class roll at primary school: *Archibald. Ashmore. Boyd.* I remember when I started working at the laboratory.

Mr Boyd, what are you doing?

I'm sweeping the floor, boss.

No you're not, you're spreading bacteria from one side of the room to the other.

Of course, he was right. Porous—not ideal—dark grey. Slimy underneath, ugh, it smells something rotten. I drop it and wash my skin in the shallows. The water clings to the back of my hand in circles and rivulets. How have I never noticed the way water clings to the back of my

hand? Have I wasted my time? I pause, waiting for the moisture to evaporate before I continue. 4 cm. A pointed edge, like a little toe. My daughter has the same shaped toes as me. Hers are prettier though, her nails splashed with pink. Aren't they? I try to follow the thought, but it's blurry and I can't see where I'm going. Why can't I? God damn it, why can't I find any bloody pebbles?

I remember explaining symmetry and conservation laws. Meetings, conferences, year after year. I knew how to capture attention. *Noether's theorem*, I'd say, *states that finding a certain type of symmetry in the mathematics of a system equates to a new conservation law*. I'd be drinking some kind of awful coffee with two sugars in my brown mug, I remember that. They'd listen to everything I said, even if they knew the basics, and then they'd come and shake my hand because I was going to be groundbreaking. *Take energy*, I'd tell them. *We all know that energy is conserved; it cannot be created or destroyed, but can only change forms. I'm going to prove the same thing, but for something entirely different. I'm going to find a new conservation law*.

For what? What does that even mean? It used to make so much sense. Now it's just words, words. *I'm going to leave my mark on physics*, I used to say. *The Boyd theorem*. Maybe I still can, if I could just remember what I'm looking for...

I walk back past the kids in the sand. The sun is getting lower now; the shadows are stretching. She'll be home soon, cooking something with... oh, that food I don't like. Young people's food. She won't make enough for me anyway. She won't even look at me. I'll have to clean fingerprints off the lamp. No, the lamp broke. She'll have moved the lounge at the wrong angle towards the television and then—beige! Jagged, no good—and then, towards... we headed towards Queensland? In the four-wheel drive, on an outback track. Pearl was by my side, her blouse sticking with sweat to the soft hollow between her ribs. I think she knew, even then. I could see it in her eyes, dull with hurt, the life tucked away. She'd heard a phone call, found a receipt, something. But didn't she know that I still loved her too? We could have worked it out, come to an arrangement. I would have been a success if I'd had Pearl by my side. She would never have betrayed me like Cordelia did. I was behind the wheel trying to think of ways to tell her when we drove past a huge field of Sturt's Desert Pea, growing out of arid nothing, blood red with thousands of black eyes that knew.

I remember that, and what happened after. Cordelia was a fickle young thing, all smoke and coloured shawls and disregard. But there's so much confusion now. I can feel it spreading from one side of my brain to the other. I can't make it stop and just get on with it because I'm losing—is that one? No; another chip, another crack. I walk back past the kids in the sand. What are they still doing here? Where is their father? What *is* that look in their eyes?

Ron will be here tomorrow. Not Ron, Ron's gone. Ray. He'll ask if I want to play Frisbee again. Do I still have the Frisbee? He'll want to hound me. *You can't keep making the same*

mistakes. She's taking advantage. She's trying to keep you from your family. She says you're an ugly old man. What sort of partner says that? Ah, bloody Ron. He doesn't know her like I do. What would he do, just throw her on the street? She needs me! He's jealous, that's what it is. I'm going to tell Pearl, but I'll wait until we get to Queensland. In the meantime he should just bugger off and mind his own—is that one?

Brown, 3.5 cm in diameter, round. I rotate it 360 degrees. I pass it from one hand to the other. It's cool and heavy in my palm. It's perfect.

Fleur Brown-Beeby lives in the Adelaide hills and studies Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. She works with prose and poetry to explore diversity of experience and mind. Fleur loves yoga and collecting periwinkles.

The Insomniac

by Jameson Rader

She told him to sleep on it, his phobia of sleeping, then rolled over and went to bed.

But being already in bed, she fell asleep.

Trying to sleep, the insomniac gets anxious, and the anxiety keeps him up. He rolls onto his left shoulder, sleeping with the down-and-feather pillow between his legs instead of congruently under his head, then rolls onto his right, and feeling a lot like a dreidel, settles back on his left, vis-à-vis with the back of his wife's head. The quilt covers her breasts but is tucked beneath her arm. His foot is restlessly tapping, and five of his ten toes curl, uncurl, and recurl. Keratin constantly sort of exfoliating, a rigid and continuous sheet emerging everlasting from the mound of a toe, like a rainbow handkerchief from the mouth of a clown. Deciduous.

Trying to sleep: a paradox. The consciously active intent of dormancy; dormancy demands that nothing be consciously active.

Sleep. Sleep, dammit.

An imperative sort of moan.

Sleep is a lot like death, really. Almost the same thing. Like a non-lexical anagram, if such a thing exists. Except the one is temporary and the other forever. Everyone briefly dies for a night. He thinks this: a routine thought. He changes his mind:

Don't sleep. Don't fall asleep.

Well, everyone else. That is, everyone else briefly dies for a night.

He chews his nails. Both now and in general. He does so when experiencing anxiety. It bothers him, having exposed the tender, naked pink nail beds of his fingers, that he is not flexible enough to chew any of his toenails except for those of his two biggest toes. Having once woken his wife by chewing her toenails, he has since acquired more of a handle on the habit.

Occasionally, he accidentally swallows a nail—a fingernail, toenail: either/or. That was OK though, since keratin certainly qualified as a raw food. And he was on a strict raw foods diet.

He intends to remove himself from the bed, get out of it. His stomach muscles flex as he sits up, but he immediately lies back down. He reiterates the action a second and third time, a second and third sit-up, really, all slowly, to simultaneously elaborate the exercise and not wake his wife,

who lies there as conscious as a corpse. After a few dozen sit-ups, he rests in the seated position. He turns to the side, slides his feet toenails first, that is, all those toenails except those of his two biggest toes, into slippers, and soon finds himself in front of himself: the bathroom's medicine cabinet. He opens it, then the bottle of Nytol-brand diphenhydramine sleeping pills, applying pressure first down, then torque, to bypass the child-resistant safety cap.

He does this after every trip to the Smith's pharmacy. The sleeping pill routine. The un-encapsulation and re-encapsulation. He removes a butter knife from the bottom shelf of the medicine cabinet and smuggles out a few gelatinous-capsuled pills between the dull ends of his fingers. On the rim of the sink's enamel-coated basin, he fixes the two-piece hard starch capsule between fingers and positions the butter knife between the two coloured coral and white ends. He presses firmly down, to sever one end from the other and to avoid bending the malleable gelatin. A little white powder spills out from the centre and is quickly sopped up into a solvent by a stray splotch of water. The cylindrical capsule has been flatted at the opening, where the two ends split, now as elliptical as a horseracing track. He empties out the powder from the coral and white ends into the bottom of the basin like conjuring salt from a saltshaker, then rolls each of the coloured ends between his palms in turn, as if trying to warm himself, until they are once again round.

He repeats the process for four weeks' worth, or fifty-six gelatinous capsules.

With 112 half-capsule ends in his hands, cupped as if bearing water, fifty-six coral ends in the left and fifty-six white ends in the right, he creeps quietly away from the medicine cabinet so as to not wake his wife, sliding his slippers slowly over the tile, and carries himself into the kitchen.

His hands flounder between the shelves in the pantry, feeling vacantly for flour.

Fuck.

The flour hits the veneers of the flooring, the bulky, idio-rectangular bag, bottom first and volcanically erupts a cloud a third of a metre up. He bats his hands as if each granule were a fly, then picks the bag up by the corner, between his thumb and index finger.

On the kitchen counter, beside the kitchen sink, he measures out a small handful of flour and sifts the load onto parchment paper through extended, radial fingers. He manipulates one of the coral bits, scooping up a portion of flour he imagines roughly mimics the quantity of white powder he had previously shaken out. He does this so that his wife, when later handling his sleeping pills, which she sometimes did, would not have her suspicions aroused by a hollow, oddly light feeling.

He removes from the fridge a shallow sauce bowl maybe three inches in diameter, topped with saran wrap. Inside: a white pool of see-through liquid, which rolls over itself in slow-moving waves when the glass bowl tilts. He lifts the saran wrap from the bowl's edges, compacts it into a tight

ball and sets it aside.

He fingers the coral bit again, reattaching its oval end to the white oval end by a forced finagling, then lets it drop. The re-encapsulated capsule plops into the sauce bowl, getting dowsed in translucent, homemade, edible glue. He removes it with his fingers like tongs, and then places the capsule on wax paper for the newly viscous capsule to harden.

He repeats the process fifty-six times, by which time roughly half of the capsules' glue has already hardened. He smuggles these vasectomized capsules back into the empty bottle of Nytol-brand diphenhydramine sleeping pills, removes two to swallow, and swallows them.

He opens the garage and puts the Toyota hybrid in neutral. He pushes it into the street by hand, like a linebacker in training, with his forearms against the hood. This way the grungy but muted roar of the engine doesn't wake the insomniac's wife and, more importantly, she doesn't suspect some sort of romantic affair, though he wouldn't mind allotting her the discomfort. He drives to the local 24-Hour Fitness, where he pumps enough iron to construct the framework of a small house. He exhausts his quads and midriff, then jogs enough laps to permit twenty-two mp3 tracks. Fatigued and figuratively out of gas, he drives home and pushes the hybrid by hand into the garage, but by the time he arrives he has had enough time to recuperate. He wonders if he should not drive back.

Instead, he plies the remaining dried capsules from the wax paper and refills the sleeping pill bottle, then passes away into the living room. He lies down on the carpet in the anticipatory sit-up position and watches *Friends*.

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This extreme healthiness—it isn't *healthy*, his wife tells him after he told her it hurt to pee. Keeping a bench press in your office, she says, that's obsessive-compulsive. Taking forty-two vitamins a day: that's psychopath shit! You're going to die, she says. I'm going to die. She points to the television. That fucker on the TV [Billy Mays], he's already dead!

Worrying that his active aversion to death was in fact killing him, he agrees to a check-up. He says so.

When she gets off work later that day, they drive to the UMC Quick Care next to the Summerlin hospital in the Toyota hybrid, he and she—she still in her Windmill Public Library-mandated polo. And they wonder why only the standard number of handicap parking places are featured there, around the vicinity of the hospital, where you'd expect handicapped people to frequently congregate.

A UMC receptionist with a loose face that droops down from her jawbone like long sheets of

filo dough hands the insomniac a general-purpose form attached to a generic cardboard-coloured clipboard to fill out after he writes down his name on a chronologically ordered list.

DoB: 10/06/1973

Gender: M

Have you, the patient, or anyone in your family ever had any of the following? If “yes,” please explain in the space provided.

Haemophilia: NO

Cystic Fibrosis: NO

Diabetes: NO

Neurofibromatosis: NO

Previous Heart Attack(s): NO

Kidney Disease: NO

Sickle Cell Anemia: NO

Insomnia: NO

Etc.: NO

Etc., Etc.: NO

Honey—what are you talking about? You suffer from insomnia. It’s like you’re on constant uppers for Christ’s sake. You’re an insomniac if there ever was one. *Are you on uppers?* she asks.

God, of course not. That stuff can knock you dead.

Simply, he had not wanted to be treated for something he did not consider a problem. He doesn’t say this, but she plucks the pen from his hand.

Insomnia: ~~NO~~ YES

There, she says. There you go. Pay more attention.

They sit in the waiting room, waiting for when they will be called back and placed into a smaller, private room, with that long sort of bed-looking mass with the paper roll forming a white stripe through the centre, so that they could continue waiting.

They are called up, ushered from one waiting room to the next, as if from a foyer to a lobby. In the room with the white-striped medical bed, they read and reread a series of informative posters: the stages of pregnancy, a diagram of the heart, a bullet-point discourse on the importance of washing one’s hands.

The doctor’s assistant comes in and issues the standard Q&A, then gives the insomniac a cup to urinate in and conducts him to the restroom. After he has filled and heated the cup with his

urine, he places it into a lock-less vault embedded in the restroom wall.

In the office, the assistant says the doctor will be in shortly and leaves.

Shortly, the doctor comes in. He (the doctor) sits on the swivel stool and makes use of his stethoscope on the insomniac's bare chest, takes note with an ominous *Hmm*, then shines a light into his (the insomniac's) ears.

Well, the doctor begins, from the urine sample it looks like you have a UTI. But I'm more interested in your ticker. Your heart. The beat is laboured. I'd recommend a Calcium Scoring. It's a simple test. You lie down on an exam table and we hook you up to a CT scanner. We're checking for something called atherosclerotic plaque, basically just something that clogs arteries. We'll attach a few electrodes to your chest for the EKG. Then you slide into a tube—you're not claustrophobic, are you?—and you just hold your breath for a few seconds. Easy. The test is going to give us a number, between one and probably one thousand, that we can more or less interpret as the likelihood of a heart attack in the next ten years or so. If the number is low, which it usually is, you're healthy and good to go.

The doctor checks a series of boxes on a digital form, then presses a key and the form disappears on the LCD. The nurses will prepare the exam now, he says. But, to start, you said you suffer from insomnia but don't disclose any medication. How long does it take you to fall asleep at night?

A few hours, the insomniac responds. Some nights I don't sleep at all.

Must be miserable. And you haven't been and are not currently on any meds? A common effect of sleep inducers is to promote uneven heartbeat, to which we might be able to attribute your arrhythmia. So you're not on even, for example, antihistamines?

The insomniac had decided to be honest, reporting that he wasn't already on any medication, since gelatinous-covered flour capsules didn't much count, not wanting to lie, lest they inappropriately prescribe him.

No, no medication.

The insomniac's wife glances around quickly. Like she has just woken up and is confused on her whereabouts. It's not true, she intervenes. You're on Nytol. She adjusts her whole body towards the doctor, pointing with both kneecaps, and answers for her husband as if he were her child: He's on Nytol.

Is that the case?

Well, yes. I was prescribed that a few months ago.

And how's that working for you? the doctor asks, more confused than suspicious. Are you experiencing any side effects: shortness of breath, mood swings, rashes? It's important to get insomnia resolved as soon as possible. Insomniacs run a higher risk of any number of health issues, from crashing cars to heart disease, which, with your irregular heartbeat, has me worried about your coronary artery.

You know, the insomniac lies, it can get my stomach sometimes, the Nytol. Sometimes I avoid taking it.

His wife looks taken back by the news, perhaps because she passes him the sleeping pills more often than not. Then watches him swallow. The insomniac sits beside her, radiating an intense irritation, indignation, marital dissatisfaction; and he wonders if she cannot sense it, the radiation, or if he must be closer, knuckles against cheek, for her to feel it.

I just don't think it's a good match, he says.

In that case, I would suggest you cease taking the med. I can set you up with another that shouldn't have any abdominal side effects. Zolpidem tartrate or eszopiclone.

The doctor leans over and signs his name onto a yellow prescription sheet while a nurse knocks on the door, opens it, and says: We're ready for you in the next room.

The insomniac follows the nurse two doors down, where he is given an exam gown to change into. Privately, he strips into his underwear and dresses in a little blue polka dot gown that flails around his thighs.

Soon, he is slowly absorbed into a dark tunnel, encapsulated like flour in a sleeping pill.

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You're so goddamn noisy at night, his wife says with her feet flailing to hook a quilt on the floor. Last night I woke up to another conversation about Jennifer Aniston's tits. I didn't throw out your Nytol. I took two of them. Take your new ones? Good. Now goodnight.

She rolls over and goes to bed.

He didn't think he'd have another prescription to un-encapsulate and re-encapsulate so soon. Another 112 pills to metaphorically vasectomise. And he was out of glue.

Rather than brew up some more, which requires use of the blender, he tosses two zolpidem tartrate pills into the neighbour's Abelia hedges as he pushes the Toyota hybrid out of the garage.

At the 24-Hour Fitness, he begins with bicep curls.

Curling 25 pound dumbbells wasn't necessarily curling 25 pounds. There was the weight of his forearm to consider, which must weigh at least three pounds. His gloves: that was another few ounces. He's curling at least 28 pounds, plus a few ounces. He performs enough reps to equate to a single curl of 3,000 pounds at 28 pounds and a few ounces per rep, which he estimates to be about 110 curls, and then performs a few more so that if he were only curling the first-glance observable minimum of 25 pounds, he would nonetheless satisfy the 3,000-pound criterion.

At the bench-press, he arranges weight of 175 pounds, factors in the weight of the solitary bar, then of his gloves, then of his very own forearms, biceps, and shoulders, and benches what would equate to a single rep of 6,000 pounds. Then discounts the weight of the bar, of his gloves, and of his arms, and executes a few more.

He wonders about the gravitational effects of the moon, and if it isn't easier to bench weights at night. He decides not to risk anything unwarranted; he finishes off an additional few.

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I woke up last night, the insomniac's wife tells him. You weren't here.

I was at the gym, he says. Couldn't sleep.

The insomniac's wife squints her eyes into the shape of two latitudinal, side-ways cat eyes. I bet you wouldn't risk the STDs, she says. For an affair. I don't think you would risk the STDs.

She swallows two faux Nytol-brand diphenhydramine sleeping pills. She asks: You're not sleeping—is the zolpidem tartrate not effective? I don't know how well these Nytol pills are working, she almost berates, displaying a handful of coral and white gelatinous material to him before pouring them again into the bottle and twisting back the child-resistant safety cap. But I was thinking—you know, if you have a heart condition, you shouldn't be working out so much. We don't know if you could have a heart attack. You could have a heart attack.

I couldn't have a heart attack, the insomniac responds with the same strained intonation he might use to explain how the sky was not corporeally opaque and definitive enough to literally fall. I take eight pro-coronary vitamins a day. I couldn't have a heart attack.

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Two days later, in the doctor's office, the insomniac decides he needs to start washing his hands both more thoroughly and with a higher frequency. Only around sixty-five percent of the adult population washes their hands routinely, despite it being the number one prevention method of both colds and the flu.

The insomniac's calcium scoring results are available. He's waiting, seated on the white stripe. His wife is seated in a chair by the door. Her soft form fills the rigid chair like a liquid, her spine curving up along the chair back, infinitely adjacent.

There are three nominal stages of pregnancy.

The calcium scoring results: almost as high as the insomniac's individual SATs.

You're experiencing severe coronary calcification, the doctor states. He (the doctor) knows the insomniac's body better than he (the insomniac) knows it himself, better than the insomniac's wife knows it, whom the insomniac has slept with and been unclothed around for six years of their eight-year marriage, plus another three years in pre-marital anticipation.

The human heart has four chambers.

The doctor says: 700 is not a good number in this case. That's a scary statistic. You're in need of some serious medication and lifestyle changes. You're on heart attack watch.

The insomniac isn't sure his wife looks sad enough. Worried: yes. Disgruntled: sure. But traumatised? She was a theatre major, and if she isn't traumatised, she should at least have the decency to act.

You'll be coming in monthly, at least at first, for us to keep current on your progression. In the meantime, little to no alcohol, no more red meat, and minimal-intensity exercise.

Minimal-intensity exercise? the insomniac asks.

Alcohol and red meat aren't a problem; he cut them out years ago, coincident with when he began amplifying the vehemence of his exercise.

Absolutely. We want you to exercise. You know: walk. Maybe half an hour a day. You don't need to go to the gym or anything. In fact, I'd advise against it. I explicitly advise against any weight lifting, as well as anything that requires that you go from horizontal to standing quickly. As a good rule of thumb, do nothing intense. And for good measure, I'm adjusting your prescription. Both diphenhydramine and zolpidem tartrate can be onerous on the heart, altering the beat. I'll get you off the latter, write you up for eszopiclone, trade-named Lunesta.

The insomniac had already coddled a new batch of glue, un-encapsulated and re-encapsulated 112 zolpidem tartrate sleeping pills.

It's imperative we get your insomnia resolved. For your life's sake. And remember: nothing

intense.

In the ninth week of pregnancy, the fetus starts to develop its keratin.

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The insomniac waits until he imagines his wife to be asleep. Her breathing oscillates regularly; her shoulder blades sway with her breathing, small mountains under the tarp of her skin. They look like her feet: small covered lumps at the foot of the bed, underneath the tarp of a quilt. She looks like a collection of lumps, of acute bones and various mounds, underneath the quilt, underneath her skin.

He sits up once; doesn't risk twice.

He slides his feet into slippers.

Stands.

The insomniac chances a look-back by the doorway and catches his eyes-wide wife peering introspectively, at him, seemingly looking both within herself and out from herself, as if the shrouded silhouette that is he, cast almost two-dimensionally in the doorway, is more nightmare than dream.

The insomniac can see thoughts and questions swarming below her surface, like tadpoles in a lagoon, and lunges for one, swift enough to leave the surface without a ripple.

I'm not having an affair, he says.

I don't think I care. She sits up so her scalp rests against the headboard, and her breasts slide pale and uncovered from beneath the quilt, like two silent but formal invitations. This isn't living, what you do every day. The absurd amount of exercise, the raw foods, the insomnia and constant exhaustion. What you do isn't living. You're not living. You spend all your days prolonging your own life, but you've never really lived, been alive. And I don't want to be a widow any longer.

The insomniac doesn't listen. If something called coronary calcification was in fact going to kill him, he'd derive more satisfaction spending his last days divorcing her than romanticising her.

In front of himself again, he grips the whole bottle of zolpidem tartrate and the new bottle of eszopiclone and empties them into the basin. With the water running, he massages the mucilaginous mass as if he were kneading a dough, until all the capsules are ruptured, the powder down the drain like a dealer's in a bust, until there is nothing left in the basin but a wet, contiguous collection of colour, somewhat resembling soggy tissue paper.

By the time he exits the restroom, his wife's head is down. She's not asleep, lying there, parallel with the earth. Her sideways, slit eyes now in the shape of longitudinal, traditional cat eyes. He and she, both boiling like a singing kettle with things to say, things to yell, each say nothing. He leaves to the next room while she continues there, with her head pressed congruently against the pillow.

Once more, like a linebacker, the insomniac pushes the hybrid from the garage.

Jameson Rader enjoys analysing massive accumulations of professional football data and gambling. Despite a propensity for being a poor sports fan and failing to watch the games, he maintains a profitable record. He is a native of Las Vegas, Nevada, and has fiction forthcoming in a number of other journals.

Break up

by *Vanessa Page*

the night we broke
we laid a blood-spiked substrate
of constellation shards
and domestic instruments

I found myself,
alone in a crowded quiet
on the kitchen floor
accepting gravity
and imperfection:
a slice of toast
gone cold in the slots,
the arrhythmic wheeze
of whitegoods

even the clock's tick—
an anvil-struck hurt

every space—too big
for an aftermath like this

Synopsis

“Break up” tells a story of loneliness, carved into a vivid backdrop: the sudden strangeness of a domestic setting after a trauma. I particularly enjoy pairing strong emotional content against domestic settings, looking for familiarity in the detail of the narrative. This poem is a little sketch of heartbreak, with relatable elements.

Vanessa Page is a Brisbane-based poet who hails from Toowoomba in Queensland. She is the author of two collections of poetry: Feeding Paper Tigers (ALS Press, 2012) and Confessional Box (Walleah Press, 2013). In 2011 and 2012 she was named runner-up in the Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Prize for an unpublished manuscript and in 2013 was shortlisted for the John Knight Memorial Manuscript Prize.

I'm Afraid of Bad Dreams

by J.C.G. Goelz

...Please leave a message at the beep. {beep}.

Ethan, this is Mimi. I wanted to talk to you. Are you there? Pick up if you're there... Are you alone? Crap. That doesn't matter. I'm sorry. That's not my business, anyway. Oh... this might be better. I'll be able to say what I need to say.

Not that it's anything too serious. I mean ... it matters to me, but...

Who am I kidding? I know I don't mean anything to you. Never meant anything to you.

Oh fuck, I didn't mean that. You've tried to be decent to me since... Shit, I know we never made any promises or anything.

It hurt though. Last week, when we ran into your mother and you told her I was "someone you've met recently", yeah, it kind of made me feel like I was...

Fuck. But, you had to know... It's been three months. I wanted to be more than someone you've met. I'm not saying I... but I did.

Why am I doing this? I can't believe I'm drunk-calling my boyfriend. I mean... my... someone I've met recently.

Don't think that I'm angry with you, I'm not. I just... wanted to talk.

Ethan, we need to talk.

Shit. I didn't mean... not that way. I'm not trying to break up with you. That is, if we were ever together.

Drunk breakup voicemail... how pathetic. I don't want to break up with you. I just want to say I needed more from you. When it's over, I want to have at least had a relationship. We haven't even gotten that far. Right now, we are just "people we've met recently". That's... I dunno. Do people that just met break up? Or do they just never get together?

Breakup voicemail. Ha! It could be worse. This could be the drunk "I'm pregnant" voice mail. That would be really pathetic. If I left a voicemail saying that the woman 'you've just met recently' was carrying your child.

Of course, it wouldn't be very responsible of me if I was pregnant and drunk. That's one thing

I try to do, I try to be responsible. You've never said you wanted kids. I'm only someone you've met recently. You wouldn't want to have a kid with me. That would be your worst nightmare, right?

Don't worry. I'm responsible. This could be the infamous "I aborted your child, I just thought you should know" speech. Wouldn't that be a trip? I wonder how you'd respond to that. Relief? Anger? ... No, I'm not kidding myself... it would be relief. After all, I'm just someone you met recently.

No, that's not why I'm calling. That's spilt milk. I'm just calling because I had too much to drink. I had a bottle of White Star I've been saving. For a special occasion. A celebration. It's pretty much all gone now. I had five martinis at O'Brien's. That's where we met, do you remember? Then I came home and opened the Champagne. I needed something to wash down the pills. First there was the Xanax, so I'm not anxious at all. Nope. Not one little bit.

Then I took the oxycodone. I won't be feeling any pain, that's for sure. I took all of my Prozac. Do I seem depressed? I'm as happy as a clam. You called my... I'm worried about the Ambien. Sometimes it gives me bad dreams.

I just wanted to talk.

J.C.G. Goelz has had four plays selected for production in competitions, published about 70 scientific papers, and has been an associate editor of a scientific journal. Submitting his narrative fiction is a rather recent endeavour.

Humbert

by *Cassandra Atherton*

I collect nymphets. Like butterflies. Carefully arranging them on the page and impaling them with a pin. I catch them in my net. It isn't hard. They are already caught in their own webs. I stroke their angel hair and search for their wings. Just because it helps me remember. The halcyon days. Of my youth. In the history department. My mistakes. My heartaches. I specifically collect my predecessors. After I find the ghosts of Humbert's past, I find their latest conquests. I was once them. They are perhaps me. I watch them become me. Fall from grace. Eve. I wait to hear the clinking of the chains. To see my doorknob morph into a grotesque face. But it doesn't happen. I think about tying a handkerchief around my jaw or putting a candle snuffer on my head to extinguish the light but instead I collect nymphets. To pass the time. There are no ghosts of Humbert's past, present and future. No shrouded Humbert beckons me towards my grave. Bah Humbert!

Cassandra Atherton is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing at Deakin University. She has published a book of poetry, After Lolita (Ahadada Press, 2010), a novel, The Man Jar (Printed Matter Press, 2010) and is the editor of the Victorian edition of the international journal Ekleksographia. She has also written a book of literary criticism, Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair: A Study of Gwen Harwood's Pseudonymous Poetry (Australian Scholarly Press, 2007). Her book of interviews with American public intellectuals is forthcoming from ASP.

Nothing New to Begin

by Jodi Cleghorn

The silence of the car trip followed them inside with the chill of night air. She paused in the doorway then backed away, staring at the queen-sized bed. “I’ll sleep in one of the other rooms.”

A single bed had less lonely space to fill.

“I wasn’t suggesting,” he said, and she forced a smile to stop him finishing the sentence.

“Are you okay?” The car trip haunted her. How the conversation had petered out with the suburbs, becoming polite inquiries about the next CD and the best rest stops once they hit the highway. If she’d known it would be like this, the melancholy clinging to them like the damp sea air, she’d have never suggested it.

“We should eat,” he said. “Something proper.”

She nodded and watched him put his bag down on the far side of the bed.

Thunder heaved and the first iron pings of rain began to fall. An overhanging tree branch clawed the guttering. The window lit up.

“A storm?” he said, looking surprised.

“Of course a storm,” she said and placed her bags carefully on the other side of the bed.

§

She watched the muted television through the lens of vodka-streaked tumblers on the coffee table. Music fed the room from an iPod dock in the kitchen. The burn of the alcohol washed through and melted the tension that had seized her the moment she’d seen him in Arrivals.

He moved and she went to lift her head from his lap.

“Don’t,” he said, redistributing his weight beneath her. “It’s fine.”

He clicked off the television, the afterglow holding the darkness at bay for a moment. She felt him put the remote down on the arm of the couch and wondered if he would touch her.

“Did you think it would be like this?” she asked.

“Plotting murder?”

His attempt to lighten the mood only tightened the knot in her stomach. “I knew from the start it would end this way.” The words were quiet, but filled the room. “I wish it didn’t.”

“You don’t regret coming?” he said.

“Do you?”

“I couldn’t have done this alone.”

“Me either,” she said, and turned to face him, her hand tucked between her cheek and the warm velvet of the cushion resting in his lap. “Thank you.”

She closed her eyes and let the metronome of his breath lull her to sleep.

§

The tea went cold beside the laptop. The collar of her flannelette shirt, soaked by her damp hair, became ice-cold lips pressed to the nape of her neck. She tried to ignore the hollow tap of her fingers by putting in earphones, but music didn’t stop her from feeling the rhythm or the message it rendered. Possessed by the notion that it had to be done before he woke, she typed faster, and once the final sentence had been committed, she left it; she didn’t fix the errors underlined in green and red, just turned the modem on and uploaded the document as the printer converted it to black and white.

The plumbing rattled and she squared the pages, left them beside the laptop and went to the bedroom. It smelt stale. Leached. She stripped off her clothes, climbed into the warm indent left by his body and tried not to think about what came next.

§

She woke to find him knelt beside the bed and knew it was over before he said, “It’s done.”

Despair poured in.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

She buried her face in the pillow. The tears, caught for so long in the base of her throat, moved upward and dissolved her.

“How long did you sit out there?” she finally croaked, looking up to see him red-eyed, but still kneeling beside her.

She remembered the bleak dawn and waking on the couch with the crushing realisation of what day it was. She remembered how she had forced herself to get up, shower, brew tea. How

she had made herself write, knowing each word brought her closer to the end. But closure fell to him and she ached, thinking of him sitting out there alone, having let her go.

He turned and rested his back against the bed, stared at the window outlined in a golden halo. “Did you know you sleep with your hand under your cheek?” he asked. “Just like her.”

“She was little bits of me. And little bits of you too.”

He sighed and bowed his head.

Outside, the overhanging branch battered the guttering in defiance of the sunlight and its suggestion of a warm, untroubled day.

“We need to say goodbye,” he said and stood up.

“Can you find a glass jar and some matches?” she said and sat, wiping away the tears.

§

The mountains rose in the distance, the ridgelines dark against the tangerine sky and the purple bruise of clouds; the honey glow of late afternoon fading into twilight.

The wind tore at her, trying to pry the pages from her hands. The thought of losing a single one made her frantic and she turned her back to the gale, gripping the manuscript to her chest. Behind the sand dunes he dug a hole and broke up the firelighters.

“We need some wood,” he said and disappeared.

She’d collapsed into a keening position without thinking. Hunched over, the paper pressed into her chest, knees buried in the frigid sand, she rocked back and forth. Her cheeks were icy when he returned with driftwood.

They watched the tiny orange dance eat the fire lighters, growing into hungry tongues that devoured the driftwood.

“It’s green,” she said.

“It’s the salt,” he said.

They watched it burn, the manuscript heavy, like the night air, between them.

“You saved it, didn’t you?” she asked, when the blustering gale shrank to a thin cutting wind and the fire burned hot.

“In three separate places. And burnt it onto a disc.”

She turned the ream over, flicked through the final pages, took three, and passed him the rest. His words, brave and beautiful, picked up where hers left off. The text blurred in the changeable firelight, through the sting of tears. At the final line of text, her chest seized and sobs drowned out the crash of the surf.

The character that had arrived in their lives eight months earlier was gone. The woman who brought them together, delighted and divided them, who they’d hated and loved in equal measures, was now dead by their hand.

The fire curled the corners of the first page, turning it sepia before eating through the middle. She fed it the second and then the third page, mouthing a silent goodbye. Together they fed the roaring flames, reducing the novel to hot ashes.

“I don’t think they’ll all fit in the jar,” he said, brushing the hair out of her face and leaning in to her.

“The sea will take it eventually,” she said, allowing herself to finally know the feel of his skin beneath her fingers.

“And us?”

“We came for an ending. Isn’t that enough, for now?” she asked, her hand pressed against his cold cheek, the salt and smoke between them.

Jodi Cleghorn is an author, editor, publisher and occasional poet with a penchant for the dark vein of humanity. Her short fiction has been published in Australia and abroad. She is the author of River of Bones, an Australian gothic novella and co-author, with Adam Byatt, of the epistolary serial Post Marked: Piper’s Reach. Her story “555” appeared in Issue Three of Tincture Journal.

The Dinner Party

by *Kelly Hulin*

A bruise isn't a big deal. When Harry left fingerprints on the hostess' arm, it was sort of shocking at first. Four semi-circles on the slender, pale arm and his thumb print on her inner wrist. The bright red faded to a dark indigo quicker than one would imagine. The marks themselves were small enough to almost be considered insignificant. If only the rest of the party hadn't seen her face! The bright red in her cheeks and the desperately wild glint in her wide eyes were more shocking than even the gasps of the onlookers.

Interfering busy-bodies! Surely a disagreement between two civilised people should remain between two people.

I've heard the whispers. "Alcohol," they say in harsh, hushed voices. They count on their fingers, heads cocked, as if they can recall everything that was served at dinner. They don't count their own. Drinks were served in the foyer on trays by uniformed staff.

Cocktails as a sundowner. They all carried fancy glasses of coloured liquid, slaking their thirst and hurrying towards the frivolity the night promised. Wine glasses at the table were refilled in a tremendous rush. The staff knew not to leave a glass unfilled or a guest left wanting. Only she can be blamed for the depletion of her cellar.

Who's to say who shouted first? Although it can't be seemly for a lady of her position to think she can raise her voice. Shouting is perhaps an overstatement anyway. At a heated table, fuelled by the fumes of an alcoholic fug, political discussions do get out of hand.

Harry has no love of women in politics and it's not a secret. The last election has left him in a temper. Anyone could see by his furrowed brow and narrowed brown eyes that he was terribly upset. It would have been wiser to change the subject. A good hostess would know that. I cannot fathom the inclination to pursue a dangerous topic.

The wreckage is still strewn around the dining room. Crystal pieces lay reflecting the light back upwards. Occasionally it catches the eye of one of the remaining guests and they glance away quickly. Dinner plates are cracked and shattered on the floor, with silver knives looking like so many miniature weapons of destruction. Overturned chairs are being slowly picked up by the waiters. They pick their way through the sharp shards of refuse and drag them back to the walls. One woman, apron at her waist and broom in hand, starts to surreptitiously sweep. She is clearly trying to avoid making noise, so as not to not disturb the questioning in the other room.

Harry had a headache. We almost didn't come. These maladies strike him more and more

often. Nobody makes a worse patient than a man. They have so many responsibilities nowadays. Have a career, help out at home, be sensitive, don't forget to be manly, raise good sons and well-adjusted daughters. He offered to stay at home. It was me that pushed, quietly suggesting that a gracious loser would attend the dinner. I didn't use the words "loser" or "failure". I didn't mention the numbers stacked up for the opposing side, or the comments that included words like "misogynist" or "iron-fisted". For all their bluster, men are sensitive creatures. Better that I should have nurtured him at home and pretended that nobody would notice his absence from the celebrations.

Uniformed officers walk past the doorway every so often. Detectives in plain clothes carry notebooks. It's an odd sight in this digital age. Do they take dictation with symbols and abbreviations only they can understand? They have spent at least two hours now talking to guests and comparing stories. The uniformed men have completed the practical duties.

There is tape around sections of the house and the exits are blocked. No one is allowed to leave yet, but it's an unnecessary precaution. Guests are standing in small clusters seeking comfort, their lives suspended in this alternate existence. The moment stretches on. Their shock is a palpable presence in the room.

I haven't spoken yet. I hardly know what to say. Defend Harry's actions? Why should I defend what everyone already knows? She has a husband. Marriage makes you a party to these things. I watched the horrific, slow motion of dinnerware flying as Harry tipped the table towards our hostess. I saw his colour rise to a purplish-red hue that covered his neck and face. I was there too when, pushing people out of his way, he pulled her to her feet by her wrist. The screams still ring in my ears. Not his, though. I don't recall whether he made a sound after roaring "misogynist" in echo of her poorly timed statement. Harry hated being defamed in a public setting.

If I close my eyes I think I can almost see the moment of clarity in my mind. A frozen moment in time started to thaw. My hand had moved involuntarily to block a blow that didn't come. This time I wasn't his victim. In that instant of realisation I leapt to my feet, my broken ribs hindering my breathing, but I followed his path. I can see the silver in my hand lodged in his neck. His skin was more resistant than I expected. Harry's blood sprayed in a most undignified manner and he fell sideways, his suit forever spoiled by his own gore.

Across the chasm our hostess held my gaze in her calm blue. She rubbed at her wrist and nodded. The screams around us were high-pitched and hysterical, but the relief blocked their outpouring of fear and confusion.

Opening my eyes, I can see it is now my turn. The detective has spoken to the hostess.

Apparently, I am still a victim. Harry would be displeased.

Kelly Hulin is a quirky, modern woman who is queen of the blog world, but secretly prefers her short fiction. It's hard to choose a genre, but that just makes her work original.

temple

by Ashley Capes

Pompeii rains. its grey sky is mutated in cobblestones and wagon ruts glisten in the quiet. its stray dogs are patient, waiting for pizza. your runners look out of place. synthetic. flexible. I follow you to the brothel, where stone beds lurk in shadow. our tour guide jokingly describes the frescoes as “menus”. the water has no memory. it is all in the earth. nothing is soft now.

filling with umbrellas
and jackets
temple ruins

Ashley is the author of four poetry collections. He teaches Media, Music Production and English in regional Victoria. He loves haiku and film, especially the animation of Studio Ghibli.

The Freezing Reality

by *Michael Mohr*

I was eight years old the day I left my best friend Clay. I never looked back. Even *after* the gun incident, I never thought of him as bad. He was my saviour.

Clay'd come over that afternoon. My dad was at work. He'd be gone another hour, maybe longer. Mom was passed out, asleep. It was warm, early November.

Placing my finger vertically against my tight red lips, I laughed silently and followed Clay, his eyes wild, crazed. Holding my hand, Clay directed us toward his house. As usual, we jumped over the brick wall separating my house from the Richardsons'. Before we knew it, we were at the bottom of Clay's driveway.

Staring up at the doctor's house—Clay's dad's—we rushed up the white hard gravel. Images of his father chasing us with hollowed-out wild boar heads he hunted fluttered through my mind. His dad was an avid hunter—from the mountains outside of San Bernardino to the lurid landscape of Alaska: the man was mad about ending nature's beauty.

Moving across the grass of their massive backyard, the same backyard where Clay's older brother had forced me to smoke a cigarette, I held onto his hand, small, sweaty, as we entered the dirt trail behind their house. So many nights we'd eaten dinner with his parents here, outside with wild raspberries and blueberries, a bowl of sugar—clean, pure, white.

Watching Clay's bouncing hair, the coiled black springs of greasy locks, I swallowed as we approached the barranca. I could see the pool a ways away, on the other side of the divide—the barranca—and I knew right away that's where we were going. It terrified me to pieces.

Only once did he glance back at me while we ran, and this moment, crossing the divide of the barranca, was it. Yanking his hand away from mine—as if I were an irritating parent trying to hold onto him forever—he turned, catching my eyes. For a sacred moment, we stared at one another.

Then he snapped out of it. This time, he ran without grabbing my hand. I'd need strength. I would have to summon some new kind of courage. Gulping, I ran down the wide, deep ditch of the barranca, kicking up a trail of dust behind me. He reached the other side. I struggled, nearly fell, bent at the knee. Seeing him standing ten feet above me now, I smiled for the first time and backed up then re-started, attacking the incline of the barranca wall.

As if this were a new, undiscovered world, I stood at the top of the ditch. Brushing myself off, I placed my hand on his shoulder. He looked solemn. Unsmiling, his eyes said that there was

important business to attend to. I nodded. There was a quiet, quick understanding.

He made it there first. Searching his pockets—his old Levi's coveralls—he located the black key. Inserting it, we heard the click. There we were, in the pool room as we called it; though really, it was an outdoor pool, not a room. We were always calling things what they weren't.

The pool cover was on; it looked cold—the water I mean. Or at least I imagined it was cold; we couldn't see the water, only the thick blue plastic cover.

Clay looked at me, nodded and pointed to the pool. I licked my lips—I did this when I got nervous—and placed my hands on my hips, as if I were a concerned adult.

We nodded at each other. Somehow I knew that this time, I would really do it; I'd risk the cold, wet water. The freezing reality. It was as if that pool water represented something bigger to us; something beyond what we could comprehend.

I started to take off my shoes. Clay walked over to me, wordless, and tapped my temple. He shook his head. Throwing my shoes back on, retying the laces, I got it finally. It was about going all the way: it was about being a man. I didn't know, really, what that meant: to be a man. But whatever it was, this had something to do with it.

Backing up until I felt the wire-mesh fence prickly against my back, I stared at the pool. I had running room. The key, we'd always thought, was to get as much space between you and the pool as possible, then run across the tarp-like cover as if a spider, delicate, spindly, lucid.

I closed my eyes. Upon opening them, I counted to ten. When I reached six, I thought I would explode I was so scared. Petrified. But Clay was watching. I remember feeling that maybe he was more scared than I was. He being always the braver one, I knew deep down, from the beginning, that he was more scared.

Ten. My heart pounding, time freezing, the blood in my veins warm, circulating, I ran at the pool.

For the first few feet, I glided like a duck on water—brilliant—like a creature from above. But then the horrible thing I'd feared happened: the cover began to converge into the centre—it began to sag downward. I was sinking and there was nothing I could do.

Looking at Clay, nervous, fearful, he watched as if a scientist testing a new chemical reaction. His head tilted, eyes squinting, he showed zero concern. I was on my own. The cover sank and sank. I tried my best to manoeuvre, to crawl to the other side on the sinking ship that was this blue tarp of a pool cover.

Water rushed at me from all sides. I went into the freezing reality. It was colder than I'd imagined. Panicking, I began hurling curses. Clay was laughing; I could hear him as if from afar. Able to keep my head above water, I slipped on the edge trying to pull myself up onto the concrete, and went underwater. So cold my brain hurt, like when you suck on a popsicle too fast and your head burns; it was like that but my whole body felt it.

Struggling, I came up like a whale for air and grabbed concrete, finally pulling myself up. Shivering, my arms were crossed over my skinny body. Clay ran over. He tapped my arm and jogged over to the shed. Inside, he grabbed an old towel. I threw it over me. The sun was still shining; the beauty of November in southern California.

Nodding, Clay walked through the gate. Locking it behind us, we made our way back to the house. It was like going from one extreme to another. From danger into safety.

But then it happened.

Walking through the back door, Clay told me to dry off. While I was doing this, he disappeared. I looked around at their giant kitchen, spotless, perfect. A doctor's kitchen. Wandering into the living room, I stared at the chimney and fireplace, so quaint, so warm-looking.

I felt a presence. I'd been sitting on the stone lip that leads to the fireplace. Just starting, at last, to dry.

I turned around. Clay was standing ten feet away, with a gun pointed at me. It wasn't a hunting rifle. It was a big, heavy-looking silver handgun.

Gulping, I stared at him. He seemed as if he were in a different place now, like he had told the other Clay to be a nice boy and wait upstairs. This Clay looked stark-raving mad.

I tried to say something but all that came out was this weird, effeminate squeak. Clay made no move, said no words. Neither did I. We sat facing each other that way for at least thirty seconds, maybe longer.

Clay took a step toward me. My heart did a back flip. He took another step, and then another. At last, he was only a few feet away.

"This is my dad's."

"I know."

"He doesn't know I know where he hides it."

I nodded.

Clay pulled the hammer back: a cocking sound ripped through the silence. My jaw flexed tight. Clay looked insane.

“Clay, put the gun down.”

He took a big step toward me. He was close, now. “Open your mouth.”

“Clay—”

“I said, open your mouth.”

I opened my mouth. I think my tongue wanted to cut itself off from my body and run away, across the grass, through the barranca ditch and into the pool.

My mouth open wide, heart beating, Clay opened the cylinder of the gun—showing me there were three silver bullet-butts in the chamber and three empty holes— and smiled crazily, pulling clanking metal out of his pockets. With a satisfied look, he filled the three empty holes. The cylinder was full. Clay whipped the cylinder back in place.

With a slow, sure movement, he stuck the barrel of the gun into my mouth. It rested for a moment on my lower lip. The taste of the pool water on my lips was suddenly alive; I was more aware of everything: how much I loved my parents, how much life I had ahead of me, how easy it would be to lose it all.

Clay looked deeply into my eyes. His hand began to shake slightly. The metal of the gun rested on my lower teeth. A weird rage seemed to be in his eyes. Maybe it was his parents’ divorce-in-progress. Maybe it was his dad, always working, never enough father/son time. Maybe it was his older brother, always beating up on him. Whatever it was, I got it right then that I was receiving the force of it, in this silent, sacred moment.

POW! Clay whipped the gun away from my mouth, somehow missing my teeth. He smiled, flipped the hammer back into place and switched the safety on. I prepared to escape. He told me he’d be back in a moment, and ran upstairs to empty the bullets and re-hide the gun. I ran like mad. Reaching home, three houses down, I hunkered in my bed, cried, and said a prayer—*If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

§

It was three months later that I saw Clay for the first time since then, and for the last time in my life. My parents had found a new place to live: we were moving to another town. My dad wanted to be closer to the school he taught at; my mom to raise me in the peace and solitude that this new,

smaller town could offer.

It was early February, still the 80s. A light rain was falling. The cars were packed, everything in order. Not expecting to say goodbye, to see any other friends before we left, I spotted Clay at the bottom of his driveway. My parents didn't know about the incident; I never told anyone.

Resting my hand on my dad's VW, I allowed my hand to slide down the royal blue metal, dust collecting on my skin. We met halfway, right in the centre, the heart of the cul-de-sac. Standing like little soldiers, we faced each other.

There were so many things I wanted to say. So many things. But I didn't say any of them. Instead, I looked into his eyes, searching. The pool between us was uncrossable, like the Atlantic.

Something unusual happened, maybe something unlikely: we rushed at each other and embraced. Hugging, then crying, we let it all flow freely. This was perhaps for all the times we'd hurt each other. For his older brother making me smoke. For his father, chasing us with those boar heads. For the pool. For the gun.

Or maybe we just loved each other.

After a minute, we pried apart, our cheeks red and dripping with tears. Clay wore those familiar coveralls.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Promise me you'll come back and find me when you're sixteen, old enough to drive."

I sniffled, wiping my arm across my nose, cheeks red and puffed, eyes throbbing.

"Promise me," he said. There was more drama in his tone now, more sadness. It was as if he was losing something forever, a piece of himself.

"I promise, Clay. When I'm sixteen, I'll return for you."

He tried to smile but it didn't hold. I landed my hand on his coveralled shoulder. "I'll see ya around."

"Yeah," he nodded.

I swivelled on my heel, turned, and walked to the VW. My mom got in her old, busted Buick, flipped the ignition, and within a minute was moving. I jumped into the VW next to my dad. His favourite car.

Releasing the clutch, Dad backed up the VW filled with as many personal belongings as it

could hold. Finally, he caught the angle he needed. Dad looked at me, nodded, pointed with his eyes to the house—the old house—the house I was born in; the house I grew up in. I lowered my head, understood. We'd never come back.

Moving down Palomares Street, I looked back one last time as we picked up speed. Clay was still in the exact same spot I'd left him, as if he was frozen in reality, stagnant, unable to budge a muscle. He was my best friend. I loved him. He knew all my secrets. Everything.

I never saw him again. And I always wondered what happened to him.

Michael Mohr is a published author living in the Bay Area. Formerly a literary agent's assistant with Kimberley Cameron & Associates, Michael is also a freelance editor. You can locate his non-fiction in Writer's Digest (as a guest blogger); The Kimberley Cameron & Associates Blog; The San Francisco Writers Conference Newsletter 2013. Michael's fiction can be found in: Flash: The International Short Short Story Magazine; The MacGuffin; Gothic City Press; [Alfie Dog Press](#); and more. Check out Michael's website at <http://michaelmohrwriter.com/>. You can also find Michael on Twitter [@Michael_Editor](#) as well as [Elance.com](#).

Question

by *Hao Guang Tse*

whose snow
homes? one's

old shoes
flipped round

or found
forerunner a

fox hole
for skipping

glaze to
ground

come flight
fall little

matters all
feet might

impress it
look! still

melt on
sight

Hao Guang is interested in form and formation, creativity and quotation, lyrics and line breaks. His work has appeared in various anthologies and literary journals both online and in print, and in a couple of art exhibitions. He has a chapbook [hyperlinkage](#) (Math Paper Press 2013) to his name. Having gone through the Mentor Access Project under the guidance of Alvin Pang, he is currently in the University of Chicago's Masters of Arts Program in the Humanities. He can be found either at vituperation.wordpress.com, or curled up against a good book.

Falling

by Shane Mac Donnchaidh

In the late morning she sat by Jarlath's bed shaving his grizzled, pallid face, ready for his afternoon visitor. A visitor that would not come. She rinsed the gelled blade in the tin bowl of lukewarm water. Gently, she drew the razor from the tip of his lock obliquely across his cheek to his chin. Jarlath had been brought in after suffering a coronary thrombosis. His wife had died six months previously from an extremely aggressive form of breast cancer. Nurse Marie suspected he would die soon of his broken heart. She had seen it several times in her career. His deep sorrow was tangible and impenetrable. He had that look she remembered seeing on her father's face after her mother died. They had both been at her bedside when she passed, holding a hand each in the dark hospice room. Two pairs of eyes caressed her face when whatever light that was her mother faded and died, pain and disease evicting her from her body. Though he survived her for another ten years it somehow felt like her father never left that little room on the fifth floor of St John of God's. She had only seen him cry once before that night, and she never saw him cry again after. The nurses had taken her away for a while and stayed with her until her aunt came. They had talked in soothing voices and rubbed her hands vigorously in theirs, a caring light in their eyes.

Doctor Hughes called her abruptly from the bed opposite. She patted Jarlath's face gently dry with a crisp white cloth and tidied his sheets. "I'll come by and see you later Jarlath. Try to get some rest now."

Jarlath slept. He breathed like a mouse. His straining lungs drew shallow wisps of oxygen through a nasal cannula. Nurse Marie checked for his weak pulse and picked up his chart to record the data. His heart rate had settled into a calmer rhythm than that induced by the terrors of consciousness. She liked the ward at night. Maybe she would ask to move to the night shift permanently, or at least long-term. The sleeping patients relieved of their fears and pains for a few hours. The continuous, fibrous tension that stretched across her station loosened for a few pathetic hours. Jarlath groaned in his sleep and his brows knitted in furrows. She liked him. He would be gone soon too. He had even joked that it would be a blessing to get away from Old Joe in the next bed over. Old Joe nattered incessantly. His anecdotes and vignettes from his teaching days were paper-thin exercises in ego; an attempt to exorcise whatever was eating the fading life-force within. His stories reminded her of the tales doctors began to tell before their promotions, and their ensuing remoteness. Old Joe's next promotion would surely bring its own remoteness. Nurse Marie wiped Jarlath's damp brow, took his limp hand in hers and sat a while.

A few too-brief hours later the incessant beeping of an alarm clock wrenched Nurse Marie from her sleep. Drowsily she knocked the clock from her bedside table, spilling a glass of water

over a paperback romance. Awakened to frustration. Determined that this must not set the tone for the day, she grimaced in a forced smile and sought vainly for a sliver of sunshine through the thin gap between the curtains. Positive thoughts, positive thoughts. Breathe in love and out negativity. She gave up on her irregular ritual, it just seemed to irritate her, like prodigal children at a parent's deathbed, too little too late. She pulled herself up out of bed and walked down the stairs into her empty kitchen. A kitchen haunted by the ghost of children never raised. Passing the mirror in the hall she caught a glimpse of her haggard reflection; she looked worse than some of her patients. A grey light dribbled through the blinds. She rinsed clean a mug and a single plate and prepared herself some toast and coffee. An overflowing laundry basket stood in the corner. No time and little energy. She would drop it off at the laundrette on the way to the hospital.

She negotiated the corridor's whirling industrial polishers like a waitress at a wedding and entered the ward. Jarlath's bed was empty. His few personal belongings already packed and gone. All traces of him swallowed up in a few hours of uneasy sleep. A crisp white-clad bed readied.

Marie spent most of her first weekend off in a month in a dreamless sleep. She awoke occasionally, feeling more tired than she had been before falling asleep. On Saturday night she climbed out of bed after almost twenty-four horizontal hours. Had it not been for her hunger she may well have stayed in bed until Sunday morning. After fixing herself a sandwich and a coffee she went into the living room and turned on the television. "Beaches" was on. She lay motionless throughout the movie and barely noticed as the final credits rolled up the screen.

The following morning she forced herself up out of bed and into the shower, almost before her mind caught up with her body. She scrubbed herself thoroughly. Lathering up suds into her hair and massaging them deeply into her scalp. She methodically sponged between her fingers and toes as much as for the physical exercise as for reasons of hygiene. After drying herself vigorously she felt refreshed. Determined to keep the momentum, she jogged downstairs and prepared herself a breakfast of yoghurt, scrambled eggs on toast and freshly-squeezed orange juice. While she ate she thought of her plans for the day. She had always enjoyed walking on the beach, particularly when she was at nursing college. The campus had been located on the rugged north-eastern coast. She had loved to go walking alone along the cliff path and climbing down between black slippery rocks to the strand below. The quiet roar of the sea ringing a muffled silence in her ears, like the fumbings of a stethoscope through polyester pyjamas. And then up from the shores and a walk through the town to the forest park at the foot of Slieve Donard. The grey blueness of the mountain a reflection of the sea below. When she had cleaned up after breakfast she went out, got into her car and drove the forty miles to the coast.

The beach was almost empty, spoiled only by the infrequent outline of solitary men walking dogs. Foamy waves crashed metronomic time on the shore and dark clouds hung low in the sky. Distant squalls tossed the sporadic seagulls. Marie walked down the concrete steps and took her

sandals off as she reached the bottom. She jumped barefoot onto the sand. The damp, gritty grains clung to her soles and fought their way into the crevices between nail and skin as she walked the length of the beach. She skipped in and out of the breaking waves, enjoying the sensation of the water washing her feet of the sand. Occasional stretches of shingle slowed her pace and here and there careless litter threatened to spoil the view, but for the stolid beauty of nature's indifference. At midday she headed up into the town, up past the mute out-of-season fairground and found a small café for lunch. She ordered a latte and two club sandwiches; one for lunch and one to take up to the forest park for an afternoon picnic. She sat outside overlooking a near empty promenade. It always impressed her how the town appeared to have completely different personalities between summer and winter. It seemed hard to conjure up the vibrancy of warm summer days, fairground music playing the length of the promenade while parents strolled the bunting-clad streets in lolling strides, their oblivious children by their sides wincing and smiling as they munched down too-sweet candy floss. Winter seemed to drain the colour from that world. Left you with a paralysing melancholy embroidered in the mute colours of clouds, mountains and sea. Marie crossed her legs and huddled down to pick at her sandwich and to shield a little from the wind. A ginger cat wearing little white socks miaowed from the windowsill to her left. It jumped onto the footpath by her feet and paced out into the street. It buried its nose in the gutter and began sniffing for scraps amid the debris of litter and discarded cigarette butts. She grabbed her sandwich and began her walk up to Tollymore Forest Park.

In the early wintry dusk she sat on a hill under an ancient sycamore and looked out over the monochrome Irish Sea. She lay back and looked up through the sepia-hued fingers of the tree, stretching out towards a dying sun. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the breeze. She thought on days she had spent here with friends while attending college, a dash of fleeting images garnished with half-recalled conversations.

She was trapped. There was no way she could get down from the tree and she had no idea how she had got up there in the first place. It was strange. Inexplicable even. She had not climbed a tree since she was nine years old, nor had she even thought about climbing one, but there she was, up high in the branches of this sturdy old sycamore. The sun had gone down but there was a silvery light of what must be a full moon ribboning down through the branches above. Through the leaves above. Leaves. The once bare branches now abundant with mottled, diseased leaves. In the depths of December? What was going on? She looked down through the leaves fanning glimpses of the ground below. She held tightly onto gnarly branches that oozed sticky sap. An icy gust blew over her face and shoulders. She was far out on a limb and it trembled with each new gust. She straddled the limb, pinching its length tightly between her knees and wrapped her arms tightly around in an embrace. Despite her best efforts, her grip was tenuous. Her own weight and the chilling winds swayed her back and forth in violent rhythms. With each swaying she felt closer to losing her grip and falling.

Her eyes scanned for the forest floor in the dimness. Surely soon someone would come along. The park closed at sunset, but there might be a trespassing camper or two. Teenagers sneaking a drink. The fire brigade would probably be called, and there would be embarrassing questions she could not answer from the police. Maybe even a brief report of a “bizarre incident in the park” in the Mourne Observer, but that would be okay as long as she could get out of the tree. She would need someone’s help to get out of this predicament; that much was certain. She wasn’t a nine-year-old anymore. She had not got the physical strength or flexibility to climb down out of the tree and, besides, she was too frightened. Falling out of a tree as a nine-year-old girl was an entirely different proposition than falling out of a tree as a thirty-two-year-old woman. Even if she survived, the injuries sustained would likely be more severe and would certainly take a lot longer to heal. Was she even the same person as when she was nine? If memory was the glue of personality and the bulk of those memories had faded, where was the continuity between the nine-year-old and the thirty-two-year-old? She needed help. She was in the park; a public place and nothing really bad could happen in public places. Cities pushed back the boundaries of the ghosts and superstitions of the countryside. Hospitals quelled the hexes and curses of the past. Someone would eventually have to pass by below. If she could see them and shout over the noise of the rising gale then all should be, would be, well. Again, she peered down through the branches of the tree.

Leaves and limbs crisscrossed in honeycombed glimpses of the forest floor below. She stared down through matrices, gazing intently, trying to penetrate through the obscuring shadows. Now and again she thought she could make out the silhouetted outline of a figure below. And raised human voices sometimes seemed to rise over the gusting of the wind. She strained her eyes and made out what seemed to be a man on the ground, a large man judging by the bulky borders of his outline. He flickered in and out of view. He appeared to be stretched out on the ground, face down. She could make out the outline of his broad, powerful-looking shoulders. As her vision improved, she could see long, lank tendrils of hair splaying over these shoulders, hanging down towards the ground. Knots of hair dancing and flailing as his body seemed to writhe, snake-like, on the forest floor to the rhythm of the rising and falling winds. It took a great effort for her to make out the scene. But as she focused her gaze further, penetrating the distance between them, as his strong body gyrated on the ground, details developed. The man’s trousers were pulled down around his ankles; his haunches were exposed to the elements. He moved with an increasing urgency, his motions more vigorous. As he began to toss his head from side to side she was afforded glimpses of something underneath him. At first, she could barely make it out, but there it was. A face. A female face. She stared intently. The features, shadowed and blurred, gradually coming into focus until she could see the face. She recognised the face. It was her own. How could that be? How could she be stuck up a tree looking down upon herself? She gazed again down through the gloom and up through the dancing shadows her own eyes gazed back. There was a pained expression etched onto her face—lines of anguish crinkled her brow, her eyes widened in

horror staring sightlessly up into herself. Her focus cleared. Details popped into her vision of below. The man's tree-trunk-sized forearm pressed harshly across her throat. She gripped tightly to the branches as she tried to scream out. No sound came. On the periphery of consciousness, she felt a crushing, grinding pressure forcing the air out of her and desperation into her. She desperately tried to draw breath through her nostrils, and she managed a little. The air seemed scented with whiskey and a musky animal smell. She stared down upon herself, pain invading her mind and body. There was an unbridgeable distance between her tree-bound self and the violated self below. Their eyes all that could meet, but no comfort there, only a shared mute desperation that increased their isolation. In the forest, divided from the outside world, she hung tight to the gnarly security of her perch as long as she could before finally succumbing to the irresistible pull of gravity, of the weight of herself, before plunging through the sap-ridden leaves and clawing twigs of her branched sanctuary, plummeting through the darkness and falling deep back down, deep into herself.

Shane Mac Donnchaidh is a mandolin-wielding, globe-trotting teacher originally from Newry, Co. Down. He has spent the last decade wandering through Asia and currently works as Principal at an international school in Bangkok, Thailand. He writes mainly short stories, most recently being publishing work in Per Contra journal.

The King

by SB Wright

Sun Wukong
was my first
superhero.

No journalist Jesus
with his undies
on the outside.

No dark defender
of the city's
status quo.

It was...

philosophy lite
on a weekday
afternoon.

Twirling
a broomstick
to a seventies
pop tune.

His journey
to the west
gave us cloud surfing
and Buddhism

...before Tenzin.

He was a larrikin
in yellow skin

before chip shop owners
and card playing
brought us to hating
those like

him.

It didn't matter
back then;
the colour of his skin.

He was irrepressible,
the King.

Synopsis

A piece that hopefully meshes nostalgia for ABC cult show *Monkey* with criticism of a certain Australian's hate or distrust of the Other.

SB Wright is a semi-retired school teacher who lives in a remote rural homestead in the South Australian outback—close to wheat fields, wildlife and the odd serial killing. He runs a speculative fiction review blog called [Adventures of a Bookonaut](#) and writes about poetry at [Words Poetical](#).

Lord of the Manor

by *Simon A. Smith*

The lot where Charlie was directed to park was a loose mixture of gravel, sand and dirt. His pickup raised plumes of grey dust as he rumbled into a spot facing the short row of red brick and metal-sided homes. A cloud of soot hung in the air before settling onto his windshield. It was hard to make out the overall grade and quality of each unit, but if uniform simplicity had been a priority it was safe to say that at least that aspect had been a success so far. Hanging above the main entrance was a lengthy plywood plaque that read: “Aspersions...” or wait... was it something else? Charlie didn’t know what that meant. He inched forward in his seat, swabbed a clear circle in front of the steering wheel with the elbow of his jacket. “Aspiration” it said, not Aspersions. It said “Aspiration Manor.”

To the north the plot was bordered by vacant patches of weeds and crooked fencing; to the east and west older wooden homes stood in various states of erosion and disrepair. Chicago’s accordion skyline fingered up in the distance—a murky map of shrunken towers. Charlie was familiar with these types of projects. Section Developments, they were called. He had watched as more and more of them appeared in his own neighbourhood. A few of his friends had recently moved into almost identical ones in the Austin district. It was strange to think he was about to help build a space that could soon house disgruntled, bitter men like Mel and Jerry. Things could be worse, he supposed, everything considered. He had a job. At any rate, this would be quick work, he thought.

Charlie edged his way out of the truck. His back was stiff and aching, kinked from a mixture of football with the kids and a meddling spring in their old mattress. The inspector was there waiting to greet him. The man was squat and lumpy with runty arms and legs. It was possible he was considered a dwarf or a little person, but his neck was too long maybe or his feet too large. Cruel, Charlie thought. He approached as if he meant to ram him, head bowed, thick brows furrowed, one arm cocked against his hip. Charlie found it hard to reconcile the almost comical features with the apparent seriousness he intended to convey. He sidled in close to Charlie, a clipboard propped against his slouching waist.

“I’m inspector Brian Folds,” he said. The tone, similar to his exaggerated gestures, was far too gallant and robust to be a true indicator of his natural voice. His handshake, at least, was moderate, normal.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Charlie. “I’m Charles Calchas.”

“They look the same to me,” Folds said, glancing down at his clipboard, “first and last. A lot

of Cs.” He ran a pencil over the paper on the board, marking an X in some field or other. He stepped back, taking in Charlie’s full stature from head to toe. Nodding, he said, “You’re a general contractor.” Again he turned his attention back to the papers below. “Says here you’re interested in fringe. Overtime, weekend and...” straining to make out the wording, “holiday pay.” His eyes rose, locking on Charlie’s, accusing him of something not yet revealed. “It’s October.”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie said. “I’ve been working construction for about twelve years, and I knew right away that I’d be perfect for the job. See, the Rock Aluminium Paper and Electric Company... well, really it works to my strong suits. See, those are my specialties really, all of them. No kidding. I figure I can do a little of everything. I was lucky to find you guys. I have a wife and two boys. The youngest has Interstitial Lung Disease. It’s fairly common, but hard to diagnose. See, it has almost the same symptoms as asthma or sometimes bronchitis, and it’s a mixed bag as far as causes, treatments, cures, and it’s very...”

“I see. Yes. You won’t find that Rock Aluminium Paper and Electric...” Folds cleared his throat. His eyebrows swooped so high on his forehead that Charlie was concerned they might take flight. “I apologise. You’re an *independent* contractor.”

“Oh, no. I mean, yes,” Charlie said. “I’m aware of that. I just mean I’ll be able to um, find something on my own... independently.” He was unsure if the clarification had been meant to blot out all of his requests or just the medical concerns. It didn’t seem to matter much. In any case, Folds appeared to appreciate the response.

“Sure thing,” he said, smiling.

There was more nodding as Folds scribbled on the clipboard. Every few seconds he looked up to scan more aspects of Charlie’s body. Was he taking measurements? Charlie wondered. Was he mentally recording his vital signs? Charlie felt like covering himself against the inspector’s gaze. He rubbed at one of his skinny elbows, smoothed the hand down his wiry arm and hid it in his pocket. With his free hand he cupped his mouth and chin, shielding the scraggly beard that had been growing wild there for the past two weeks. Charlie felt himself begin to bristle. He could just as easily stare at this man’s awkward attributes, he thought, turn this game of sizing and appraising back on him to deal with, but his fear would not allow it.

“Are you hungry?” Folds asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I said are you hungry?”

“Well, yeah. I’m just about starv... I could eat something, sure. Now that you mention it. I

didn't have breakfast.”

“That’s fine,” Folds said, nodding some more. “I have a feeling you are going to do very well. Lunch break is from twelve-thirty to one.”

Charlie looked down at his feet. A chill had worked its way inside of him. It was turning his flesh pink and pimply. If he started fidgeting again he might look weak. He sucked in a deep breath, stifling a shiver. He didn't know how much more of this he could take, the judgment and secrecy, but then Folds placed the board under his arm and waddled in tight against him. Their arms touched as Folds handed over the documents.

“This is your contract,” Folds said. “You’ll need to sign at the bottom of the final page. This basically states that you will work from eight until five each weekday, that you will do so in accordance with all the building codes and laws attributed to the state of Illinois, that you are aware I will be checking in on you from time to time and that you will receive your payment at the end of the week when all of your trim and finishing work is completed to our satisfaction. I’m sure you’ve come in contact with similar paperwork during your twelve years. Standard stuff.”

All this hardness and formality, Charlie thought; it felt as if he'd just been read his Miranda Rights. Charlie held the clipboard up for a closer look. The weight was substantial, more than he'd expected. There were no fewer than twenty pages, each printed in some of the smallest type he'd ever seen. At the top of the first sheet he saw the name of the company again, a logo consisting of an open palm surrounded by a closed loop of arrows, and the name of the founder Mr Howard Linem. He thumbed through the paper until he reached the end of the last page. Folds reached, pressed a pen into his hand.

“Have you ever met him before?” Charlie asked, pointing at Linem’s name with his finger.

“Howe?” Folds asked.

“I said have you met him before, Mr Linem I mean?”

“We call him Howe for short,” Folds said. “I haven’t, but I know people who have... they’ve... come close,” he said. “He likes to be called Howe, so we do.”

“Oh,” Charlie said. “You’ve never seen him?”

“Not personally,” Folds said. “He’s a private man. Holy, in a way.”

“Holy—like... private. I’ve heard that.”

“Yes,” Folds said.

He was rousing him with his eyes, Charlie noticed, hurrying him along with his insistent ogling. Then, before he knew what he was doing, his hand was moving, scraping the ink across the paper. The signature looked like someone else's.

Folds rushed the board away from him and wedged it under his arm again. "Very good," he said. "Do you want to see something?"

"Okay," Charlie said.

Folds put his arm around him. From his height the arm reached just above Charlie's belt. They walked across the crunchy gravel to the end of the homes. Folds removed his arm and used it to motion toward a dim point on the horizon.

"Do you see the golf course down there?" Folds asked.

Charlie squinted. He brought a hand up to his hairline. Most of what he saw was the factories in the valley pumping white smoke into the sky. When the wind changed he could see the vague outline of tall glass buildings peeking out from behind the misty swells. He thought he saw the Willis Tower and maybe the abbreviated pyramid of the Hancock building, but he couldn't be certain. There were no golf courses in sight, but with his eyes closed he could imagine what they looked like.

"I see it," Charlie said.

"Good, good. Me too," Folds said. He was relaxing now, Charlie could tell, softening his muscles, his posture.

Charlie opened his eyes when he sensed something moving close to him. He noticed Folds's hand drawing near, and for a moment he thought he was preparing to reach out and hold it.

"We could spit on it from here, huh?" Charlie said, closing his eyes again. "It's beautiful."

"Sure she is."

Their knuckles brushed and they swayed apart. "What about it?"

"They say he goes golfing there every Friday," Folds said. "He lives in one of those buildings by the lake. We've heard it's the one shaped like Mickey Mouse's head."

"I see it," Charlie said.

"Mr Linem is said to be very interested in how this development comes together. There's a good chance he'll come by and thank you personally."

Charlie still had his eyes closed. He couldn't quite picture what Linem's face might look like; he kept seeing the round blurry face and ears of Mickey Mouse.

"Anyway," Folds continued, "that's your backdrop. You can use it for inspiration as you nail and saw and whatnot."

Charlie cupped both hands over his eyes for a more complete darkness. He had no problem picturing the objects and structures, the waving red flag on the eighteenth green and the Trump Plaza swimming pool. What he couldn't do was conjure up images of the people nearby, at least not realistic ones. All the faces were distorted and fuzzy. Parts were missing. There were white holes where the eyes should be, flaps of skin where a mouth would open. His mind had been overtaken by similar premonitions of late. It was troubling, he had to admit, frightening. There was no warning, no indication as to what caused them to form or vanish, but each time they came back quicker and stayed longer than the time before. He was aware that there was no way to talk about it without sounding insane.

His mouth must have been doing funny things, rising and falling in a series of twitching frowns and smiles.

"That's the ticket!" Folds said. He smacked him so hard on the back that Charlie thought he might vomit. He wished he could. It might act to dislodge something. "Now let's go inside, and I'll show you around."

§

The plain, generic look and feel of the exterior was repeated on the inside. Instead of the flat, basic red paint, the interior featured varying shades of white and beige. There was an irregular island in the kitchen area shaped like an egg, a cheap rotating fan in the family room and two rusted radiators situated below the miniature windows in each of the bedrooms. The floors were made of soft laminate wood. Everything seemed standard and predictable except the ceiling level in the hallway. Charlie hadn't noticed it from outside. He stood in the centre of it, peering up at the sprawling expanse in disbelief. It must have been eighteen feet high.

"You like it don't you?" Folds asked. "It's to give the tenant a sense of growth and levity, something to reach for. Here they get a glimpse at great height." Charlie still had his eyes trained upward, trying to figure the dimensions. It must have been right where the roof crowned in the middle.

"I've never seen anything like it," Charlie said.

"It was Howe's idea."

Charlie ran his hand up the wall as far as he could stretch. “Mr Linem is something else,” he said.

“Yes, well,” Folds said, “speaking of Linem, I suppose now is as good a time as any to go over his instructions.” He led Charlie back into the family room where they had entered. In one corner were stacks of thin bleached lumber about three inches wide and fifteen feet long for the mouldings and baseboards. Along the opposite walls were his implements—hammer, nail gun, mitre saw and sanding unit. “All of this, as you have been informed, has come from our company. They are to be used exclusively.”

“Ours?”

“Linem’s.”

“I wasn’t aware Mr. Linem was involved with wood supplies,” Charlie said.

“You didn’t know? Interesting. It comes in tandem with the paper side of the business. They are one in the same. Paper, trees; trees, paper. It’s all together.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Charlie said. It was astonishing to think just how much of the world’s essential materials were produced and manufactured by Howard Linem. “And I shouldn’t bring any of my own tools?” he asked.

“Oh, no no no,” Folds said. He chopped the clipboard under his arm and marched over in front of Charlie, his jagged hairline a few inches below Charlie’s chin. “You won’t be desiring anything that has not already been furnished for you. I thought that was clear.”

“It was clear, sir,” Charlie said. “I was just making certain. Double-checking is all.”

“Linem supplies are the best in the industry and the least expensive, which, again, per our discussion on the phone earlier, will benefit you, as you will need to pay for them out of pocket. It’s partly out of kindness. We would like to think that you would have purchased your own Linem line of goods for the job anyway.” Folds tilted his head up to meet Charlie’s eyes. It was possible that he never blinked at all, and Charlie had the impulse to reach out and close the lids for him. On second look, it appeared that the pupils were pasty and drawn upward at a peculiar angle, almost as if he was trying to see the top of his own forehead.

“I understand,” Charlie said.

“It is imperative that you do,” Folds responded. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. It’s only that this job has already taken far too long—too many inconsistencies and discrepancies pertaining to and counter to the Linem Method. You are in receipt of the memo, I assume.”

“You e-mailed me all the plans, outlines and charts for the Method. I have them in the truck.” Charlie had received the documents two nights ago detailing the particulars of the Linem Method. From what he could tell, the Method amounted to using the Linem products, breaking the day into three structured timeframes called “pods”, maximising and repurposing resources, and meticulously tracking progress on a ledger sheet which was printed in triplicate.

“I would gather them promptly and use them to the letter. If experience serves... well, I won’t bother you with that. I trust the offices have been upfront with you about our past difficulties with our previous trim carpenters.”

“Not specifically,” Charlie said. “I know that we are behind schedule and that some of the workers before me were terminated. What happened exactly?”

“There were three,” Folds said, stepping back, leaving some much-needed air between them. He puffed his lungs full of breath and exhaled slowly, straightening his slouch. He opened his mouth to begin, then shut it again and started over. “I won’t go into detail on all of them.” Here he stopped again, almost wincing. “The last one had to be let go because he was absent maybe six days.”

“Why?” Charlie asked.

“Court dates,” Folds said. “Armed robbery.”

“No.”

“Yes, he had a story to go along. He kept begging me to ‘show him love’ or something like that.”

“You mean like...”

“Figuratively.”

“Oh?”

“Not literally. Money. He said he was short. Double meaning. He had a way with words.” Folds put his hands on his hips, arched his shoulders.

“That’s not good,” Charlie said.

“It was ugly. Perturbation, really. He just couldn’t be the bigger man.”

Charlie was having a hard time following him, but he didn’t want to chance asking too many questions.

“I mean,” Folds continued, “shit. What are we supposed to do with thieves and derelicts? This isn’t a charity,” he said. “Excuse my language.”

“It’s fine,” Charlie said.

“That’s why we’re in this pickle. He’ll no doubt go off and find another teet to suckle.” His nerves were tightening again, constricting. Charlie noticed his neck turning red. “Hot damn... sometimes, you know? Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I think I understand. Shit, I agree with...”

“Dropouts,” Folds said. “Flunkies. We foot the bill. Don’t we!”

“Oh, yes,” Charlie said. “Why should we have to pay for the lazy ways of bums and mooches? It’s their own fault. Right?”

“Hell yes! What ever happened to drive and ingenuity? Future Headquarters, Mars 2020.” He was opening up now. Charlie knew he should keep this going.

“I’ve heard that before,” Charlie said. “Where have I heard that?”

“It’s printed on a few benches and billboards downtown. Mr Linem’s words. They say he’s already working on trademarks and licensing.”

“Wow. That’s about the last untapped market, isn’t it? And we can breathe up there? Or... we’ll be able...”

“Adapt or perish,” Folds said. He clapped his hands together. “Well, I will leave you to your job. If you have any questions call the main offices. You’ll find the number on the Method papers you mentioned were in your truck. They’ll call the receptionist, she’ll give a note to one of my secretaries and somebody will reach me... or somebody there will reach someone who will. It’s a chain, naturally. In any case...”

Charlie shook his hand again. This time Folds used a heartier, more powerful grip. A warm, needling pain spread through the top of Charlie’s hand. He thought about returning a stronger squeeze, but he was afraid he might hurt him. Perhaps this was merely a show of newly-developed fondness and appreciation. He was smiling more, Charlie thought, but his eyes were still brazen and filmy and this made deciphering things harder than it should have been.

“If you can’t make them see the light, make them feel the heat,” Folds said as he let go. If he had been wearing a hat he would have tipped it, and then he began his pace toward the door.

There had been several times in his life when Charlie regretted not having a college education.

For example, when people proclaimed things so bluntly, assuming that whatever they said was true and apparent to all. Those were the moments when he felt ashamed that he had only made it to the tenth grade. If you were the type of person who never had the time or money to read and learn a significant amount about the world, people could sound like they were speaking in code.

As Folds was nearing the door he bumped into a wall. Ricocheting off he stumbled, kicking over a paint can. The clatter startled him and he righted himself. “Are you okay?” Charlie asked.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Never mind.”

Charlie watched as he put his hands in front of him, feeling aimlessly for the door knob until he found it and stepped out into the mounting daylight.

§

The next few days went more or less as planned. Charlie had long prided himself on his eye for detail, and trim carpentry catered to his abilities. He liked to think he had an artist’s touch about him. Nobody he knew could measure or fit wood the way he could. There was only one problem. The wood Folds had left for him was not really wood at all. Charlie wasn’t certain he had ever seen a substance quite like it before. When he cut into it with the saw it made a screeching noise, almost like it was crying out in pain. Instead of falling neatly to the floor like the wood he was familiar with, it snapped, leaving rough edges and sloppy lines. Whatever it was made out of was clear like plastic. The inside looked like some form of rubber cement. It wasn’t a huge deal. If that’s what they wanted, Charlie thought, he would use it. If they didn’t mind the crown mouldings being a little bevelled or the door trim a bit uneven, he supposed it was okay by him. He’d have preferred using a higher calibre of products, but he knew that was out of the question. In usual cases, he’d be concerned that his reputation was being sullied by the questionable craftsmanship, but this was different. Folds had made it evident that obedience was the number one thing they were looking for, not artistry.

He was actually ahead of schedule. The truth was, he could have gone even faster if he had not had to stop every twenty minutes and fill in the data about his activity and progress on the ledger sheet. It was tedious work, jotting down descriptions of pacing, exertion and outcomes. But this was what Linem and Folds had asked for, and he supposed that if there was something he was even better at than trim work, it was following orders. In the early grades at school, the teachers had often commented, “Calchas is a fast learner.” Once or twice he lied about some of the numbers and details, but he was pretty sure they wouldn’t know. What was the difference really, if it took him seven nails and eight strokes to secure a railing rather than nine? It couldn’t matter too much, he decided, and if he could pad his stats slightly and get away with it, it might pay off in the long run. After all, he was only giving them what they wanted.

On Wednesday, day three, Folds dropped by to see how he was doing. Charlie was in the middle of taking lunch. At first, when Folds entered, Charlie had an immediate attack of panic, knowing that he was idle when he could have been working, but as Folds glanced at his watch Charlie realised that he was perfectly on time for his break. His nerves began to relax. He inched his butt across the floor, letting his spine sink back against the wall where he had been crouched, and took a bite of his salami sandwich.

Folds smiled as he strode across the floor, his thick, pudgy legs swishing together. He moved very slowly, deliberately. “Enjoying your meal?” he asked.

“I am,” Charlie said, beaming. “Come to look around?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Folds said.

Charlie followed Folds’s movements as he walked from the kitchen to the family room and back again. A couple of times he tripped over something by his feet—a nail bag, some electrical cords, a T-square. He took a long time staring up at the tops of the doors and the ceilings where Charlie had fixed the accents. He stared for so long that Charlie began to worry he was noticing some of the errors caused by the unknown material he was supplied. Just as Charlie was about to get up and go over to explain his difficulties, Folds turned around and came toward him, shuffling dizzily and carefully like something out of a dream.

“You’ve done a magnificent job,” Folds said. He was standing about fifteen feet from where Charlie was sitting on the floor, addressing the wall some forty degrees to his right.

“Thank you,” Charlie said. A soothing sensation breezed through him.

“May I see your paperwork, the ledger?”

Charlie leaned to the side and grabbed the roll of papers he’d been tucking in his back pocket. Folds unfurled them, studied them for a short time. He seemed mildly disappointed that they were ruffled, but then, as if changing his mind, he stuffed them halfway down the front of his jeans; his belt and stomach acting as a weighted counter-press. It was a childish thing to do, Charlie thought, placing something like that in your crotch. It gave the whole process a petty, juvenile feel. Charlie didn’t like thinking about how he would slide it out and comb over it later, scrutinising every scrap of data for some hidden formula indicating either a passing or failing grade. What could all of it amount to in the end? They were numbers on sheets of paper, not sweat or blood.

Folds cleared his throat, hiked up his pants. “This, your job here, could mean a lot to me,” he said.

“Oh,” Charlie said, “how so?”

“Well, I was given a message by one of my colleagues today that I might be in line for a promotion. Rock Aluminium Paper and Electric is growing larger every day and that means more positions are being created.”

“Everyone knows *that’s* a good thing. Job creation. Well, good for you,” Charlie said. At the sound of Charlie’s elevated voice, Folds adjusted his location. He was now more centred and correct in his positioning.

“It’s been sixteen years,” Folds said.

“Wow.”

“Yes. Of near flawless service.”

“That’s a long time.”

“I was one of the original batch of men hired back in ‘96.”

“That means something, huh? How about that.”

“Indeed,” Folds said.

“And you’ve been cut in on some of the booming success in the last few years I’m sure,” Charlie said. “It must be nice to have gotten in on the ground floor.” This was a saying he had heard others use many times, “ground floor”, and he was happy to be able to share it here with this man who he knew would appreciate the reference.

Folds was silent for an awkward amount of time. Charlie took a bite of his sandwich again, chewed it until there was almost nothing left to swallow. “We’ve been patient,” Folds said. “When the economy took a hit, you know... well, like we discussed on Monday... folks leeching off the system. Most of Linem’s wealth goes to taxes, supporting loafers and ne’re-do-wells who don’t know their ass from a forklift. We’ve had employees, ingrates more like it, who have insisted upon... well, above and beyond all sorts of reason. A few people ruin things for the rest of us. Some want more than what they deserve.” He moved his blank gaze up higher on the wall again, beyond Charlie’s head. “You’re not the one living and dying at the whim of stockholders and investors. And then you want more of the pot? Get your own company, you derelict. See how that goes. It’s not easy.”

Charlie tried imagining Linem’s life but once again he could not manage it. What the hell did he know about stocks and bonds? Nothing. It was like hearing another language. Folds must have understood things about those words that he didn’t. At the moment, though, it didn’t seem like it.

These were somebody else's words, Charlie thought, like "perturbation" and "derelict". He could picture Folds's life without any problems, and he could picture his own of course. He and Folds had a lot more in common than he had first thought. They were both just trying to make it through life with a little bit of dignity. It was all a big complicated puzzle, a maze really, somebody else's idea of an obstacle course. It didn't matter what language you used, or maybe it did... anyway, regardless, when you really got down to it though, Charlie thought, the two of them could have stood to join forces. He wondered if Folds ever thought about it like that.

"Hey," Charlie said. "Maybe you'll be able to go golfing at that club soon."

Folds didn't say anything. He only nodded. Charlie noticed for the first time how old and tired he looked. If you took the time to peer closely, Folds could have been fifty or even sixty years old. His back and shoulders were stooped, his legs knobby and wobbly. And his eyes... when Charlie had first looked at him he hadn't realised how vacant they were.

"I'm coming back on Friday," Folds said. "Keep up the good work. If all goes well, and you help me bring home this raise, there might be a little something extra in it for you," he said. "You and I are no mooches. Isn't that what you called it, huh? Earlier. A mooch?" He smiled wide. His body shook faintly with laughter.

"I did, sir. And you're right. We aren't one of them," Charlie said.

Folds nodded. He made his usual flat-footed, clumsy exit, and as the door shut behind him, Charlie felt a sense of camaraderie and kinship wash over him. But there was also an awareness of sorrow and grief, as well as some uncertainty and confusion. Hadn't Bill and Cal, Mel and Jerry—hadn't they been like those men Folds had mocked for their desire to ask more of their bosses? Bill and Cal, Mel and Jerry—they were good men. They didn't deserve to be axed out and spoken of like some sort of spuds or jokers. That was the way they talked in Austin. Spuds and jokers. Mooches. No, they were not those things and neither was he. Maybe Folds wouldn't be such a bad guy if he knew any better, but Charlie was pretty sure he had the wrong idea. Maybe on Friday when the job was done he'd invite Folds out to have a few drinks with him over at The Water Hole.

Charlie stood up and threw away the trash left over from his lunch. He had glanced at the schedule a few minutes before breaking. From one-fifteen until two o'clock he knew he was supposed to be painting the bathroom. From two-fifteen until two-fifty five he was putting up the posts for the stairs out front.

§

Wednesday and Thursday had gone so smoothly that he hadn't even bothered to look at Friday's

schedule before leaving for the evening. He was in a mood to get home and spend time with his wife and two kids, Luke and Randall. They liked to rough-house, the boys, and although Charlie was often sore and weak from his job, he knew it was important to have contact and intimacy with them, and so he pushed through. Sometimes all three of them would collide trying to escape one another, and Charlie's wife, Brenda, would step outside on the porch and scold them for being too careless and aggressive. Brenda was a good, loving mother with endless patience and practical knowledge. Charlie hated to see her standing there in her worn sweater and jeans, looking wan and ragged from her long days helping finicky customers in the ladies section at Nordstroms. She was great at her job, a star saleswoman, but it bothered her that she could not afford to shop at her own place of business where she had worked for the past eleven years. It was that frustration and exhaustion that Charlie saw in her when she stood there watching her three reckless, muddied boys wrestling in the yard. It was the same expression and demeanour he recalled seeing on the face of his own mother growing up. It was the look of a kind woman too worried about the risk of injury without safeguards to enjoy the sheer vigour and freedom shared by the ones she adored.

Something was eating at Charlie. He felt he should be further along in his career by now, and for that he carried the burden of shame and guilt. They deserved a chance to be happy and unconcerned like everyone else. Charlie was not the kind of labourer who should be made to claw his way from gig to gig, grasping desperately for the mercy of strangers. He was a skilled and capable carpenter, an artist. They were not mooches. Nobody he knew was an ingrate. There was a hard and heavy resentment grinding at him. A cold brick had formed in the pit of his stomach, sharp and immovable. He could not let his family know about it. He waved to Brenda, blew her a kiss; then he grabbed both Luke and Randall around the waist in each arm and brought them together like a human sandwich. They tumbled to the ground, growling and laughing with glee.

§

Friday morning was cold and rainy. The driveway outside Aspiration Manor was a churning river of silt and debris. A wedged Coke can and a piece of tire rubber redirected the bubbling flow toward the sidewalk. It was a mini model for the landslide he'd seen on TV a few weeks before. It was in Cairo, Charlie remembered; a cavalcade of indiscriminate surging and levelling. Already brittle, crumbling facades folded to the earth like so much forgotten waste. The cause had something to do with excessive downfall and faulty root systems.

Charlie followed the path of the water as it swirled off in the distance, toward the steep bank overlooking the city. The bulbs atop The Willis Tower blinked through the fog—a white bleating call, a tempting, taunting rhythm. A lone maple stood at the corner of the homes, a stark contrast in the gloomy light—forest green and autumn orange. How sturdy were the roots, Charlie wondered. Did they wind down to the business centres in the loop? Farther? Did they span ages or continents? *The old joke about digging to China.* Did anybody care?

When he stepped inside, Charlie rolled out the plans for the day, flattening them atop the island in the kitchen. He put his lunch box on one end for a paper weight and mashed the other edge down with his forearm. He only had two or three things on tap for the day, but he noted right away that one of them was going to be a challenge to figure out. Right in the centre, at the crest of the high-ceilinged area in the hallway, the directions called for an etching of sorts. It was more like a painting, really. Charlie skimmed his hand over the plans, dipping his eyes in closer for a better look. Yes, it was a sign of some kind that they were asking for. Somewhere near the top of the wall, he was to paint a... saying of some sort. Oh, it was a bible verse. Was it? He blinked his eyes, adjusting them to the small print. He left his place at the island and switched another light on above the table. When he returned he was able to make out the full wording of the passage. He was to paint the sentence: *The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied. Proverbs 13:4.*

The directions advised that the verse be painted no lower than fifteen feet high on the wall. It must be to prevent vandalism, Charlie thought, or was it for striving in some roundabout way, lunging or longing? In any case, what mattered most was the application. He knew that all the paints and brushes were available for such a task; he had come across them earlier, and he had confidence that he could make it look presentable if not elegant, but he was concerned that he had not seen any type of ladder.

He started by scouring the perimeter outside. With his jacket tented over his head, shielding it from the rain, he searched all possible areas surrounding the buildings. Nothing turned up. He looked in all the closets, the garage and even the utility shed parked at the end of the lane. There was no sign of anything resembling a ladder. He thought of stacking paint cans and boxes, but they were too unstable to rely upon, and there was no possible way he could be asked to amaze under those conditions. Work that shoddy he could not sign off on.

At nine he called the number Folds had given him for the offices. By ten o'clock there was still no reply. He walked out to his truck and got inside. He cracked the window and lit a cigarette. If he did not hear back from Folds by the time he was finished smoking, he would have to take action on his own. There was a hardware store about four or five miles east. There was no way to be one hundred percent sure that they carried only Linem brand products, but he was under the gun. They would have to understand. It would be impossible to reach that level without some assistance. He thought about the words he was about to write on the wall inside. Slugs, was it? It wouldn't be surprising if the tenants tried defacing or destroying the wall altogether. When you really thought about it... what was the message? What were they trying to say? *The soul?*

He flicked the cigarette out the window, its glowing orange tip washing away before it hit the ground. The tires splattered brown sludge against the siding as he sped away.

Friday traffic was clogged and maddening without the added weather. Nobody knew how to drive in the rain. People had strange fears, Charlie thought. Dying in some horrible accident was not something that registered any fright in him. Things like loneliness, impotence and the prospect of hidden dangers had the potential to bother him, but nothing transparently catastrophic. The most harmful things in life always seemed to be the ones you couldn't see or imagine.

It was past one o'clock by the time he returned. He had missed his lunch break entirely. His stomach grumbled as he rolled to a stop in the driveway. Two spots down sat a green Buick with corroded panelling and a cracked passenger door. Charlie had seen this car before. He turned the ignition off. Inside the house a plump, stocky shadow snapped into place in front of the window. Within seconds the shades were lifted to reveal the bantam form. Folds stood like a sergeant with his arms folded over his chest, feet shoulder width apart. Charlie sat for a few moments, snarling out the window, his keys clenched in his fist. He hopped out of the truck and slid the ladder off the bed in back. Folds held the door open with his foot, arms still crossed above the waist.

"Take a little vacation, did you?" Folds asked. He had stationed himself in the entranceway, his back levered like a doorstep against the bottom rail. His hair and shirt were soaked. A drop of water clung to his nose. If anything, it made him look more silly and wilted under the sagging dampness, more shrunken. But it also made Charlie feel sorry for him. This was the man to which he had to concede, submit... it was a constant battle.

"You can close it," Charlie said over his shoulder. "I'm already fifteen feet inside the threshold." Charlie laid the ladder down in the hallway against the wall.

"What's that?" Folds asked.

"I'm inside."

"No, *that*," he said, squinting.

"It's a ladder," Charlie said.

Folds closed the door. "I don't know why you felt it necessary to leave the premises."

"I mentioned on the phone that I needed some form of extension for the mural."

"Did you not see the stool by the island in the kitchen?" Folds asked. He waddled over to the island, knocking knees with the stool, tipping it before catching it clumsily and standing it upright.

"That?" Charlie said.

“Yes.”

“I saw *that*.”

“And?”

“And what?” Charlie said. He walked over to where Folds was leaning on the wooden stool. He patted the top of it like the head of a puppy. “This couldn’t be taller than three feet,” he said. “I’d have trouble unscrewing a light bulb with that.”

“It is sufficient,” Folds said.

“You must be pulling my leg,” Charlie said. “Look at it.”

Folds felt around the circular seat on top, pressing and kneading it, as if he were testing its seaworthiness. “It’s a solid stool.”

“Ha!” Charlie fought back the urge to make a joke about toilet training. “Would you like to mount it and see how high you can reach in the hallway?”

“That’s not funny!” Folds barked. “You’re practically twice my size.”

“I’m not trying to make you laugh,” Charlie said. “Even at my height I would not be able to reach the necessary fifteen feet the plans call for.”

Folds cleared his throat. He climbed on top of the stool, took a seat. He rested his elbows on the island. He sighed. “Well, I wouldn’t want you to go off script,” he said. After a second he perked up, jerking himself back from the table. “Is it a Linem ladder at least?” His voice came like a fire alarm. He looked as if he were pointing his ears toward some imaginary space station, tuning, trying to pick up radio frequencies from a distant planet.

Charlie knew that he could lie. Folds would be unable to decipher the label. Perhaps it was because he had always erred on the side of honesty or maybe because he was overcome by the impulse to rebel, he told the truth. “It’s a Logpathea model,” he said. “I thought it made the most sense.”

Folds clutched his heart. He rocked back on the stool. “If we weren’t two hours away from Mr Linem’s... Howe’s arrival, I’d fire you right here and now. My name and entire reputation is at stake here today. You had better pray that you are able to wrap up this job and hide that contraption before he sets foot in this house.” Folds swung himself off the stool, thudding to the floor. He stamped over to where Charlie was setting up the ladder in the hall, thrust his finger up at him. “I believed in you,” he said. “I told my boss that you were a good man, a hard worker. I put

my faith in you.”

“You spoke to M. Linem?” Charlie asked.

“I stuck my neck out!” Folds hollered. His voice echoed off the high arching walls and ceiling. “You do whatever you need to do to finish this job. If you are lucky you’ll leave here with the amount of money...” Folds froze. He looked at the watch on his wrist. He yanked the wrist in close to his face, then tilted it away. He cranked it back and forth a few times in front of his eyes before turning on Charlie. “What does this say?” He asked. He raised his arm as high as he could toward Charlie’s eye level.

Charlie leaned in. “It’s five ‘til two,” he said.

“Jesus Christ on high!” Folds shouted. “How much more do you have to do?”

“I have to paint this bible verse and finish nailing down those baseboards over by the entrance. That’s about it.”

“We hardly have an hour,” Folds said. “Where’s the nail gun? Let me do it. Show me!”

Charlie put his arm around Folds’s shoulders. He led him over to the nail gun, placing it firmly in his palm. Then he guided him over to the wall and helped him kneel by the base of it. “You know what you’re doing?” Charlie asked him.

“Of course I do! How hard could it be?”

Charlie picked up one of the boards he’d prepared. He pulled it over and positioned it in front of Folds, down by his foot. “Use your toes to settle it in place,” Charlie said. “Give it some pressure.” He reached around him and navigated his hand into place, angling it just right against the board. “Squeeze the trigger,” Charlie said. He used Folds’s own finger to drive the nail out. “You feel that?” he asked.

“Yes,” Folds said. “I think I have it.” He was trembling. Charlie could feel his whole upper body bouncing with anxiety.

“We’ll get through this,” Charlie told him. “Nice and steady.”

“We’ll double time it,” Folds said. “We’ll do it together.”

“That’s right,” Charlie said. “Just take it easy.”

Charlie hurried back to the hallway. He erected the ladder and notched it into place. As he climbed he could hear Folds’s giddy voice as he successfully spiked each section of the board into

place. “Yahoo!” Folds said. “Hot damn!”

What a strange thing to do, Charlie thought as he dipped the brush into the paint. They wanted the letters in red. Red paint on a white background. Blood, Charlie thought. Red. Colours meant things. It didn't sit right. It was heartless, red. The colour of the organ and its opposite.

The first few strokes came out thin and oily. It was cheap, kindergarten quality. The white wall appeared to almost show through the liquid streaks. Everything was watered down these days. If you weren't careful, Charlie thought, you started thinking everything was watered down, fading. The world was filled with poor substitutes for the original. People had forgotten about the original altogether. The worst part was that not only were they being fed the knockoffs of their superior versions, but they were asked to express gratitude for having received them. You worked for someone or you had nothing. Those were your choices. Work for nothing or next to nothing. Blend or run, run or blend...

He was not all the way at the top of the ladder, but he was far from the ground. Charlie's mind was filling with shifting illusions. He couldn't stop them from coming. They overlapped one another, combined. First he pictured a very old, wrinkled man holding a cardboard sign. “Will work for nothing,” it said. There was a deep, grooved frown carved into his lips; his eyes milky and dim. He pictured another younger, more handsome man facing the elderly one, a nice crisp square of glass in his smooth fingers. His hair was a prickly peak of hair spray and careful comb strokes. “Will nothing for work,” his sign read. He was smiling. Then the images were melting. There were maggots and slugs crawling and squirming all up and down the young man's face. There was blood, pastel rose and coagulated, spilling out from the old man's eyes and ears. It was horrific. Charlie shook his head. He dug his knuckles into his eyes, but still the apparitions persisted. He was feeling lightheaded. He should come down from the ladder. He was dizzy, reeling. The spins were coming. He should really, really...

“Son of a bitch!” Folds yelled from the ground.

Charlie scurried down the ladder as fast he could. “What?” he said. His feet touched down on the floor; his legs already in running motion before they hit. “What is it?” He found Folds doubled-over, clamping the nail gun in his twitching hand. “What? What happened?”

“I broke it,” Folds said. He unclenched his fingers and let the gun coil from his palm. “It was the wood,” Folds said.

“That was no wood,” Charlie said.

“That was no God damn wood!” Folds yelled.

“Shhhhhh,” Charlie said. “Calm down.”

“What the hell are we going to do?”

Folds was pulsating, radiating heat, one enormous beating heart. Charlie heard it pounding, pumping, growing in volume and filling the room in surround sound. The throbbing could be seen in his forehead, his biceps, his neck. It was punching at his skin, trying to bust out. Everything was alive with the rhythmic sounds of a drumming heart. “What happened?” Charlie asked.

“I... I was having trouble sighting up the boards. I couldn't make them flush against the floor. The floor is uneven. Or... or maybe it's the wall. It's me. It's me, Charlie! Help!”

Charlie began releasing the nails from the clip, like a soldier snapping bullets from a chamber. He laid the nails out on the floor, lined them up in a row. They were crooked, bent at funny angles near the head. The images came flooding again—warped fingers and wilted necks, no bodies. There was no straightening them. They worked their independent dances, struggling to stiffen. He shook them loose, whipped his head back and forth. Coughing, he plucked a nail up, tamped it against the board and raised the flat part of the nail gun like a mallet. Perhaps he could drive them in using the steel butt of the gun like a sledge. His eyes were failing him, hazing over. The first nail cracked.

“What are you doing?” Folds yelled. “Give me that!” Folds ripped the gun free, flung it across the room. The attached cord unwound and at the end of its tether bucked clear from the outlet in the wall. “We don't have time for that. Look!” He said. Folds grabbed a nail and positioned it against the floor board on the ground. “Heave ho!” he yelled. His hand formed a tight fist. He brought it down hard and heavy against the spike, smashing the balled flesh of his hand into the metal head, over and over again without pause. “Heave ho!”

Charlie moved to pick up a nail of his own. He copied Folds's manoeuvres. “Like this?” Charlie asked, swinging his curved palm down with great force against the round, barbed rim of it.

“That's it! Faster! Keep going. Move!”

For the next two minutes they gave it everything they had, chopping their thinly layered fingers down atop the forged objects. Each stubborn nail withstood thirty or more blows from each clubbed hand. The flesh around both of their pinkies and palms tore open and bled profusely. Within seconds all protection was gone from the limp extremities, stripped clear from the cartilage. It was bone hammering metal. Blood sprayed the wall, their shoes, their own arms, chest and wrists.

“They won't mind,” Folds said, slowing his pace, catching a glimpse of his mangled paw. “It's

the finished product that counts. The outcome.” His last two words came in gasps like the final breaths of a dying man. Both of them had taken turns using each hand. When the first good appendage had been flayed down to mush, the other was brought out and done away with in quick order as well.

“We tried our best.”

“There is nothing in the manual.”

“We wrote our own handbook,” Charlie said. He began laughing at the mention of “hand” and “book” in the same sentence, the same word. He looked down at his hands, cradled the moist stumps into a V against his chest, and rolled to the floor.

Folds, on the final dregs of adrenaline, made it to his feet and headed for the door. “We have to get out of here,” he said. He cuffed his wrists around the doorknob and tried turning it. He wrenched and twisted with his whole body, but nothing. The two gnarled ends just slid from the handle, leaving weepy rogue smears up and down the knob and everything else.

“It’s no use,” Charlie said. “We’ve trapped ourselves in. We’ve done it.” Charlie mumbled *shit* under his breath. He repeated it over and over again in a hushed tone. He closed his eyes, squeezed them all the way shut and then popped them open again. The images were still there. “Come lay down. Put your feet up.”

Folds moved over to where Charlie was curled and laid down straight and flat on his back. He placed his hands under his chin. His head bobbed up and down, rocking to whatever nerve waves or sensations remained. “That’s where the picture was going to go,” Folds said. He was blinking up at the doorframe over the main entrance. “Mr. Linem.”

“You’ve seen it? You’ve seen him?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t see well,” Folds said.

“I’ve noticed,” Charlie said. “What’s wrong?”

“How should I know? I’m not a doctor. It’s getting worse. I need surgery.” He rotated his head, glanced over at Charlie. “Don’t you think? Charlie?”

“Surgery,” Charlie said. “That sounds right. That’s what they do for stuff like that. You’ll be fine.”

Charlie could see that all the colour was draining from Folds’s face. It was turning a mellow pink and blue, all veins and vessels. Charlie worked to wiggle out of his T-shirt. When he had

accomplished the task, using his teeth and elbows, he offered it over to Folds.

“Wrap this around your hands,” Charlie said. He hadn’t noticed that during the time it had taken him to shed the shirt, Folds had managed to tear free a few sheets of cloth rags from a cardboard box nearby.

“You use it,” Folds said. “I can give you some of these rags. You’ll need the warmth. You should put your shirt back on.” His teeth were beginning to chatter. He quivered.

“Those are Linem’s!” Charlie said. He hadn’t realised how angry he’d become. It startled him. “Those are Linem brand towels,” he said, trying to calm his voice. “You don’t want those,” Charlie said.

“I’m dying here, Charlie.” He placed the cloth between each hand and pressed them together.

“It says so right on the box,” Charlie responded, as if he hadn’t heard. “Rock Aluminium Paper and Electric. It’s right there on the box you pulled them from. It’s right there.”

“I’m dying here.”

“Use your shirt!”

Without thinking, Charlie pounded his fist against the floor. He pulled it back, snatching it away. An electrical surge shot up his arm. He wadded his shirt around his hands. He shimmied his way over against the wall, dragging his frozen back up off the floor.

“What do you think he looks like?” Folds asked. He had his arms crossed over waist; his hands lying there like dead fish.

“Why?”

“It’s been sixteen years.”

“Why?”

“Sixteen!” Folds cried.

“Why!” Charlie shouted. His booming voice rang throughout the house. Silence followed. Both of them listened to the others’ panting breaths.

“He’ll be here in half an hour,” Folds said.

“Get some rest,” Charlie said.

“Do you think he ever wonders what I look like?”

Charlie closed his eyes again. He couldn't stay awake much longer. “Go to sleep, Mr Folds.”

“He'll be here in thirty minutes,” Folds said.

“Sure,” Charlie said. “Do you have your feet raised?”

“Yes,” Folds lied.

“Good.”

Within moments Charlie was out, but just before he went under, a reassuring thought occurred to him. He thought it very possible that he and Folds would survive. In a few hours, Charlie remembered, Catalina, the Mexican cleaning lady would show up to add the finishing touches before the grand opening. Catalina was always on time. She had no choice. *Saint Catalina...* They were blessed, Charlie thought, and that made him laugh a little. *Blessed*. If he'd had the strength left he would have told Folds. They could have joked about it, but then that would have meant admitting other more serious things. It was complicated. Something beyond even...

“He's not coming, is he Charlie?” Charlie did not respond. “Charlie?” The sun was going down in a hurry. A shadow fell across the room, creeping in like a ghost. “Who is it? Howe? Hoooooowe,” Folds moaned. When nobody answered, Folds began to cry. “Come in,” he whimpered. “Please. Please come in.”

Simon A. Smith writes and teaches high school English in Chicago, where he lives with his wife and a murderous orange tabby named Cheever. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Hobart, Quick Fiction, Keyhole, Monkeybicycle, Whiskey Island, PANK and more. He likes it here.

Euthasia

by *Murdock Grewar*

Sterile walls hedge a body; supine and limp.
Electric angels light it up, divine glory sloshed around like white paint.
Smudged lines whisk a stew of honey and yeast around the operating table.
Artistry with blades of biting frost—bristles abrasive alone;
soul-stirring in the intricate hands of Carrel.

A touch of anaesthesia leaks through a rusted valve
as I dream of a place I used to know,
where strangers meet on green-glow grass
vibrant and blissful in a sun-soaked world.

The roses are blooming here

Before the artist lays his hand,
his brush upon the mountains, where earth crumbles softly
and the people are gone—where have they gone?
I am stroked; swept from home in a stitchy prison,
knowing one day, I will stay; I thought it was today.

I dream of a place I used to know,
where friends of old meet on a thriving hill
vibrant and blissful in a care-void world.

The ambrosia is blooming here

Murdock Grewar is a university student of physics and mathematics. Pondering ironically on the logical fallacies of human thought, Murdock draws his inspiration from the absurd juxtaposition between what man really knows about the universe, and what he likes to think. He tends to portray how different our one reality seems when you peer through the dissociative lens of a gentler soul. For more works by Murdock, drop him an email at mkgrewar@hotmail.com. This poem was a winning entry in the 18-23 year-old category of the Young Writers Festival in Western Australia.

Grey Streets

by *Ellie Kiosses*

The skies, once young and fresh, had matured to erotic pinks and reds. The streets were bustling with freakish energy as citizens started to make their way home to their families. Rich little children coated their teeth in sugar and beautiful couples frolicked under the street lamps. Hats were tipped to passing mistresses and a young woman sat in a corner. Her hair was a matted mess and her feet were blackened with silt. Her lips were split and cracked and the rims of her eyes were sore and red.

“Ah, ‘ere she is lads; the little runt! How are’s ya Tabby?”

Three raucous men blocked the woman’s dreamscape, each scarred from bloody battles.

“Please sirs, leave me alone.”

Their laughs were coarse because their lungs were clogged with tar and smoke. “Aw, look there lads, Tabby’s scared of them monsters! The real world you sees, is much more dangerous.”

The ringleader lashed out, grabbing a tuft of Tabby’s hair and hoisting her up onto her feet. Her scrawny fingers tried to loosen the grip but it tightened, making her squeal and shudder. The other two searched Tabby’s rags for coin that passersby had flung at her and pocketed as their own.

Their deed done, the leader released her; her legs gave out and she landed on her arse. “Pleasure doin’ business.”

As they played with the pennies the men disappeared into the lively mass of people; a tear would have been appropriate, but a lifetime of crying had left Tabby dry and weathered.

She was about to return to her daydream when a standing blot of colour obstructed her view. A petite little girl, steadfast amongst the activity, stared at Tabby. Her eyes were a deep green, her cheeks were ripe with youth and her golden hair was tied viciously in a bun. The girl did not shy away; instead she radiated curiosity and warmth.

As the girl stared, a burning sensation started in Tabby’s head. An unforgettable pain pulsed through her; the heart of it was the scar at the side of her head.

After treading through the crows, the little girl stopped at Tabby’s feet. “My name is Adora, what’s yours?”

“Please go away.”

“Tabby is short for Tabitha isn’t it?”

“You don’t want to be seen talking to a nutter do you?”

“You’re not a nutter and you know you’re not.”

Tabby’s throbbing pain grew into a blazing furnace, but her interest was piqued. “Why do you believe that?”

Pulling up her skirts, Adora sat beside her. Tabby edged a bit along. “I don’t believe—I know. Only kids believe. Are you alright, Tabitha?”

Tabby’s hands clutched at her hair as the memories fled across her mind. “Yes of course I’m alright! Don’t you have parents to go back to?”

“My parents are dead.” Tabby froze and the wind picked up. “They killed themselves. Together. Everyone tried to ease the pain of the news, sugarcoat my parents’ death but I know what happened and I know they meant it. I ran, no, I walked away. Do you know what happens to orphans, Tabitha?”

Tabby hid the truth from Adora’s preying eyes. “No.”

“Body snatchers.”

A child screamed faintly in the distance, but it only reached Tabby’s ears.

“The body snatchers, Tabitha. They got my parents. I watched as they were dragged off. They told me I was going to be next, but I walked away. I didn’t run. Why do they want me, Tabitha?”

The screaming grew closer; flashes of figures ran across Tabby’s vision. Her body sweltered and her breath became short and shallow.

“Tabitha, what’s wrong?”

Her eyes wept on their own accord and the world around her spun and blurred.

“Tabby!”

Tabby was flung against the cobblestones in spasms. Her lips dribbled out foam and her bloodshot eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her hands clawed at the blood before her, and her feet kicked away the faces, oh the laughing faces. Tabby groaned, spat and then wailed.

Tabby rose to her feet, welcomed by the pungent smell of blood. Red clouds filled her mind and began to rain down upon her. A small darting shape made her heart race. She followed it until the shape became a vivid memory. It was her, a small girl. Two men held each arm as the girl struggled, kicked and screeched.

A pearly white man emerged onto the scene with a drill in his hand and a chair with restraints before him. “Alright gentlemen, restrain her.”

Tabby was strapped to the chair, but not before biting one of the snatchers. The old man’s hand slapped her across the face, leaving it swollen and numb. “Oh my dearie, oh my love, oh my creature. Stay still now; I shall let the demons out of your head.”

One of the snatchers held young Tabby’s head firmly and the old man came in closer. The drill, oh the drill! It came closer and nearer until it met her temple.

“No!” Tabby bellowed. The rain turned crimson and a storm exploded above her. The throttling pain in Tabby’s head grew darker and heavier.

§

Tabby opened her eyes. The streets were barren and silent, except for the screeching of a child. Tabby turned and saw in the lamplight that a man had Adora by her hair. Leaping out, Tabby clutched her claws around the shadow’s neck and pulled him back. His hand let Adora’s hair swing freely around, caught her wrist and pulled her Tabby’s hand away. He turned and pulled Tabby’s face close to his. Years had passed, the wrinkles had spread but she recognised the pearly white man.

The man stiffened and swallowed the last remains of life he possessed. Tabby saw death creep into the corners of his eyes as he slumped forward and fell onto the cobblestones. Adora was revealed, and within her grasp was a defeated memory. There was the drill, coated in its master’s blood. Her eyes were tainted, no longer green but a soulless blue.

Ellie Kiosses is a writer of various tastes ranging from the horror and the paranormal to the comedic and the romantic. Fighting to keep her whole life on one plate, she also studies visual arts at Edith Cowan University, works and dances. She is forever unsure of which one she should fully commit to. Collections of her written works can be found online at <http://www.wattpad.com/user/DoomKittyEllie>. This story was a winning entry in the 18-23 year-old category of the Young Writers Festival in Western Australia.

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