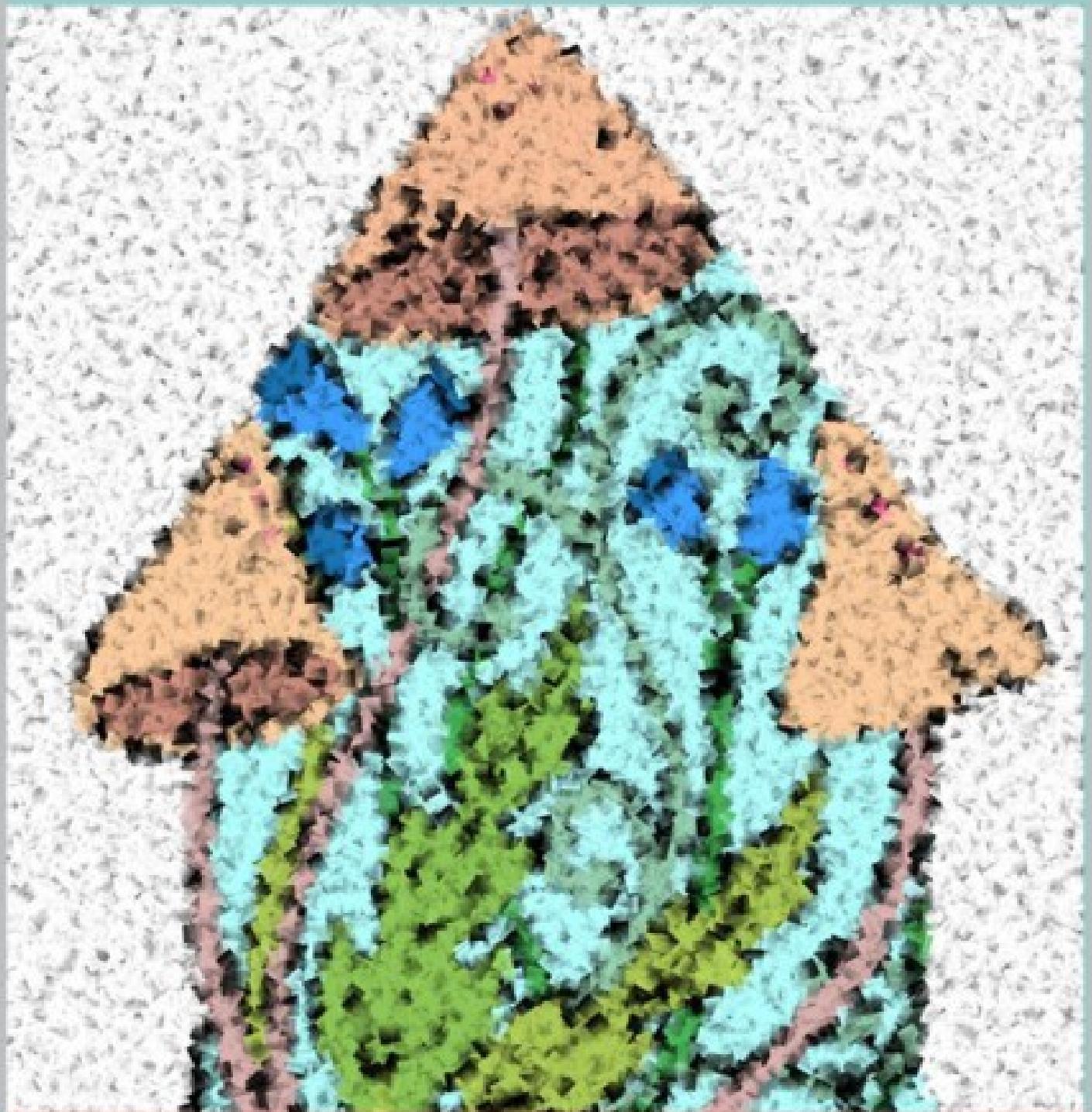


Tincture Journal

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Editor: Daniel Young

Poetry Editor: Stuart Barnes

Editorial Assistant: Jessica Hoadley

Email: editor@tincture-journal.com

Web: <http://tincture-journal.com/>

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Editorial

by Daniel Young

The fact that you're reading Issue Four of *Tincture* means we've made it through 2013, our first year. While I wouldn't necessarily *recommend* that anybody should wake up one morning and decide to start a literary journal, I must admit that it has been a fun and busy year, working with a great bunch of people and publishing heaps of amazing work from our talented contributors.

This is our largest issue yet, clocking in at over 50,000 words, so I hope you've got some time over the holiday season to really get stuck in. As usual, the writers come from all around Australia, and their work appears alongside some special international guests: Canadian novelist Amanda Leduc has contributed the only non-fiction piece, "In Praise of Loneliness", and we're featuring a number of American writers, hailing from California, Brooklyn, New Orleans, Michigan and Iowa.

Issue Four marks the first time we've published a play, which you will find at the very end of the book. Sydney's Emily Brugman, a UTS writing student, has contributed her script "Toilets and Other Big Questions". This is something we'd like to do more, so if you are a budding playwright with a short script, please send it on!

As always, this issue begins with "Inferior Bedrooms", but this time we are taking a break from Meg's adventures with Moose; instead she draws on Don DeLillo's *End Zone* and treats us to details of her summer scandal with a state football player.

The poetry, selected by Stuart Barnes, comes from a wide source of inspirations. Zenobia Frost captures the essence of Toowong in Brisbane's inner west, a place close to my own heart, while Peter Bakowski dedicates his hitchhiking poem "Leaving West Texas" to Vince Gilligan of *Breaking Bad* fame. New life is covered in Zenobia Frost's "Birth" and Anna Ryan Punch's "Newborn",

while B. N. Oakman's poem "Trash" takes its inspiration from Sigmund Freud's dim view of humanity.

The fiction in this issue is almost too varied and wonderful to encapsulate in an editorial. Jessica Hoadley, one of our editors, has identified 'Home' as a common theme in these stories, and you may also pick up the recurring motif of mushrooms: together, these have inspired our cover art. There is so much I could write about these stories, but perhaps it's best to simply let you get on with reading them. Enjoy.

Inferior Bedrooms: Summer Scandal

Regular column by Meg Henry

Breakaway is the first injured state player I've seen this close up. He's on crutches, plastered from ankle to thigh with a cast as yet unmarred by the inevitable scrawl of his teammates. He was a good player last season, but this snapping of ankle and curl of tendon, already a favourite on YouTube, would see him benched this year.

At twenty-two, his hairline is receding, and his dark eyes have the gravity of someone who ordinarily wears glasses, but he has charm. And in this newly-renovated clubhouse with first-grade mauling the opposition on the field and their parents fawning at coaches and captains over champagne, charm is the only victory we have left.

If you were to ask me how I'd ended up zip-tied to him, naked, and back at my apartment you'd be bound to wonder if you must endure a play-by-play in print. But let's keep things simple. Footballers are simple blokes.

Post-game. Players showered, dinner served. The annual pairing of first-graders and state recruits takes place over dessert. This is what he's doing here, I realise, as captains noose young men to one another. When the firm plastic is slipped first over my wrist, then over his, I ignore the pinch of skin and instead feel his pulse racing against the back of my hand. All the parents leave just as the reporters arrive and we both know things are about to get nuclear.

We escape to his car, bound by the wrists, and the logistics of this, with him on crutches and me in high heels after a half-dozen Henschkes, are not sexy. But we make it, somehow. Two survivors of the impending media blast.

Up two flights of stairs and into my bedroom, I unbutton his shirt and slip it from his free arm, exposing his broad shoulders. Without words, it seems very important to get him completely naked before cutting the zip-tie. So I take off his shoe, then his dress shorts and jocks, first out and over him, then the cast. In the

lowlight he is young and pale and perfect and I touch where his firm thigh disappears into the plaster.

The glint of the scissors brings us back to the reality of who we are and what can't happen between us. I slide the blade between plastic and flesh and make the cut. The win was never going to be the act itself. The win was getting him here, three suburbs away, naked in the End Zone.

Meg Henry reads and drinks in excess. Often at the same time. She likes damaged men, instant coffee and intellect. While she is renowned for bad ideas, she is also an award-winning writer from Queensland. Follow her [@TheMegHenry](#) or visit inferiorbedrooms.com.

After Midnight: Toowong

by Zenobia Frost

The night's swelter
cut with lemon myrtle,

we slink
between ibis-legged houses
and wakeful graveyard.

Possums troupe feats – wire
to teeming wire, with tails
inking the sky.

So many ladders to widows' walks
and gated views of the city,
glinting under fog:

stone suburbs to woodcut oubliettes.

At night these dark hills
are waves to carry us. We belong

to the hour of the curlew –
to the blues of its determined song.

Synopsis

Insomnia is a great way to get exercise in Queensland's cooler hours. I wrote this poem in paean to the murky-moonlit split streets, hills and goat tracks of Toowong, Auchenflower and Bardon.

Birth

by Zenobia Frost

Her body yawns
with the kind of yawn that grows
low in the lungs and forces the mouth.

Her belly empties itself,
splitting flesh, as infant burrows
from cavern to surface.

The child bursts sac and caul,
and with soft new fingernails
sheds the mother.

Synopsis

Well, I'm sure it's clear I'm not terribly maternal. Moreso, though, in this poem I hoped to evoke the animality and gore of the natural act we've so romanticised.

Zenobia Frost is a Brisbane-based writer and critic with a PhD in burning the candle at both ends. Zen serves as Cordite's assistant editor as well as a poetry editor with Voiceworks. Her forthcoming manuscript was recently shortlisted in the Thomas Shapcott Prize. You can find Zen on Twitter [@zenfrost](https://twitter.com/zenfrost) and blogging at <http://www.zenobiafrost.wordpress.com/>.

Housing Needs Assessment

by Lynette Washington

Housing Needs Assessment: Application

Date: 10/2/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: N

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: N

Suggested Category: 2

Please provide reasons for Category 2 recommendation.

Client is a 17 y.o. unaccompanied minor and refugee from Afghanistan. He has limited English language skills and is attending high school. He has inadequate financial resources (his income comes from Centrelink) and is unable to secure work.

Client has no security of tenure and faces imminent homelessness. He is currently living with another refugee whose wife is due to arrive soon. When she arrives, the Client will be asked to leave the premises.

Client advised that last month he was kicked out of the house due to deteriorating relationship with the other tenant and was forced to sleep in a park for

several nights.

Client has requested individual housing, but the Housing Officer does not see any circumstances which would prevent him from sharing with appropriate persons.

Please explain why Client cannot secure housing in private market.

Client faces discrimination in the private rental market due to his lack of English literacy and lack of rental references.

If there are any other issues, please describe.

The original Housing Assessment Support Letter was provided by City West College, where Client is attending high school, and stated that issues included “extreme sadness, anxiety and depression.”

The Housing Officer therefore concludes that without appropriate safe/secure long-term housing the Client’s ability to study and work in Australia will be severely impaired.

Housing Needs Assessment: Response

Date: 15/02/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

The request for housing has been denied.

Housing Needs Assessment: Addendum to Original Assessment

Date: 28/2/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: Y

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: N

Suggested Category: 1

Please provide reasons for Category 1 recommendation.

Further to my previous report, new information has been made available to the Housing Officer through an interpreter and a psychologist report. This additional information has caused the Officer to change the Client from Category 2 to Category 1.

Through the interpreter, the Client has advised that he endured significant trauma and loss and is experiencing chronic mental health issues as a result. It is imperative for his mental health that he has safe, secure and independent housing. The amended psychology report (attached) attests to this and states that the Client's mental health will continue to decline if his housing needs are not met.

The psychology report also shows that the Client's ongoing mental health issues are exacerbated by living in a shared house. He is currently incapable of developing relationships due to severe emotional trauma. With continued treatment he may regain his mental health, but under present conditions he finds cohabitation distressing and is not able to develop functional relationships with the people with whom he lives.

Psychology Report

Client's psychologist has provided a further letter of support. An excerpt is below:

“It is my professional opinion that Mr Mohammed's present medical condition precludes him from living with others and that it will be beneficial to his ongoing health if he is housed independently. I have diagnosed Mr Mohammed with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder associated with an event in which he witnessed the deaths of his parents, brother and best friend when a bomb exploded in his native country Afghanistan. All four were burned beyond recognition. Mr Mohammed is currently distressed by intrusive memories and nightmares, avoidance/numbing behaviours used to cope with re-experiencing the trauma, sleep disturbance, anger/irritability, impaired concentration, hyper-vigilance, anxiety and depression. His condition is long-term and affects his day-to-day activities and ability to cope. His long-term prognosis is unknown and contingent upon his responsiveness to treatment.”

Housing Needs Assessment: Response

Date: 12/03/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

The request for housing has been denied.

Housing Needs Assessment: Application

Date: 26/03/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

Health/Disability Issues: Y

Financial Issues: Y

Social/Cultural Issues: Y

Current Tenancy Issues: Y

Exceptional Circumstances: Y

Suggested Category: 1

Please provide reasons for Category 1 recommendation.

Faraj is a beautiful boy. Smooth, brown skin. Tall, strong. He might have been an athlete. He has black wavy hair and he wears it long. It flips over his left eye and he doesn't push it away. He's using it to hide from the world and I'm sure he doesn't know it makes him look like James Dean.

He doesn't speak much English and I don't speak Dari so it's difficult to communicate, but we have developed a series of hand signals that he seems comfortable with. Maybe it's easier than speaking. Words can hold so much pain.

Please explain why Client cannot secure housing in private market.

I want to take him home with me. Perhaps my husband and I can cure him of his fear of loss. My husband, who teaches Middle Eastern cultures at the university, will give him our most comfortable chair, and they will speak (although my husband only knows basic Dari and Faraj only basic English). The conversation will be notable for its mutual concentration, fascination and respect. My husband will make Faraj warm Milo at night-time like he used to do when our children were young.

My husband knows that Faraj means 'relief from bad times' and Faraj will be a relief for us both, a chance to focus our energy on someone who needs us, just like the old days, before we started to look at each other blankly after the evening meal.

Even though he's not capable of friendship, he will help us.

But Faraj can't stand to be around people.

If there are any other issues, please describe.

One night I will knock on Faraj's door and open it before he has a chance to respond. I will find him with his sleeve pulled up and a compass in his hand. He will be scratching a crisscross pattern in the soft skin on the inside of his bicep. There will be splashes of blood drying on his jeans and I will realise why he always insists on washing his own clothes. I will wonder where this starts and if it will ever end.

Housing Needs Assessment: File Management

Date: 26/03/2013

Housing Officer: Jenny Dunbar

Client: Faraj Mohammed

File closed and archived.

Lynette Washington is a short story writer who is currently completing her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. Her stories have been published by Spineless Wonders and SWAMP. Her story "Promise" was runner-up in the Peter Cowan 600 Flash Fiction Competition, and this story, "Housing Needs Assessment" was recently awarded a High Commendation in the Footpath Library Short Story Competition. Lynette blogs regularly at <http://lynettewashington.wordpress.com/> and can be followed on Twitter at [@LynneTashi](#) or on Facebook at [Lynette Washington – Author](#).

Before Everything

by Andrew Hutchinson

But before everything, my friend Davis and I used to steal rides on the train. Davis had an older brother who worked for nightclubs and concert promoters and in summer we'd catch the train into the city and stick up posters for shows. We'd have to wait till after dark, still in t-shirts and shorts and we'd sneak around, dashing between the reach of the streetlights. We treated it like a competition—find the hardest to reach places and put up posters. The roofs of buildings, off the sides of freeway bridges. The harder it was to get them up, the longer they'd stay. We'd squeeze through security fences and kick our way into abandoned buildings and run, floor by floor, the posters flapping behind us. We'd crawl along thin metal pipes, squeeze our heads between cracks. We'd balance, step by step, along metal stairs that shivered at the edges of the night. And we'd get ourselves into places long forgotten. Dirty rooms with grime-caked windows, way up at the top of the world. Intricate murals painted all across that no one would ever see again. It was warm all night up on those rooftops, baked by the sun, and you could see the red glow that hung above the city. Way up at those red flashing beacons, warning aircraft of the peaks, where the wind fills your ears and flaps your clothes tight against your body.

Davis was the best at it. He'd scale water towers like they were nothing, finding his footing in the thinnest gaps in brickwork. He'd have rolls of tape jammed up along his arms and posters poking out of his jeans and he'd be up at the cliff of a building, looking down on the headlights streaming below, like an explorer conquering uncharted ground.

We talked about girls and how we were going to leave town, our shoes dangling over into the next world. Davis was there the night my dad left, was staying over when Dad came home drunk and demolished my mother, flaw by flaw, then rolled out for the last time. Mum coiled up and crying on the carpet, the front door gaping open like a wound. Silhouettes of neighbours looking over from their front steps. Davis sat next to me on the concrete outside my house, put an arm round

my shoulders, told me none of this mattered. Told me we can do anything. Then he never said anything about it again.

Sometimes, what we'd do is we'd wait till the trains stopped for the night then we'd slip down into the city loop tunnels, howling and black with soot. They have security guards go through them but you can see their torches from a mile off and you can fit into the shadows as they pass. We'd get down there and we'd put up posters all through. And it was so dark, we didn't know if they were upside down till later, when we'd catch the train home in the morning light. Us, filthy and stinking of alcohol and piss and glue, sitting amongst the office workers in white shirts and black pants, all trying not make eye contact with one another and we'd gather up at the window and point out all our work. Rows of fluoro-coloured lettering flashing past. Davis' eyes jittering back and forth to see.

One time, Davis was treading, step by step, across a glass pane and it cracked, like ice blocks in water, and he got off before it shattered and he hugged onto me and laughed.

"I thought I was a goner," he said. And another time, before everything, we were up on the roof of one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city and Davis was right over at the edge, looking down into the depths and he yelled across to me.

"Hey-yo," he said, followed with "I love you, dawg." And then he jumped.

Andrew Hutchinson's first novel Rohypnol was published in 2007. He is working on his second.

Leaving West Texas

by Peter Bakowski

for Vince Gilligan

After you wipe the binoculars,
the black horse you spied
between cacti
and a devil's spill of boulders
appears closer.

The riderless horse wavers,
hobbles forward,
a bullet in its left flank.

You imagine the fallen rider,
the sun glinting off his spurs.
Another minus sign
in the thickening ledger
of the drug trade,
a trade you both
tried to siphon.

You stand in the killing desert,
listen to the wind
that will never level
the mountains and canyons,
all these places of ambush and revenge,
and hear the sound of a helicopter.

Nothing to do but split
on the motorcycle.

You understand Southern California better

where a gun is
used to caution
those who trespass,
who take the axe
to bargaining tables.

Some brothers there still owe you,
appreciate your eyes—
open when they need to be,
closed when they need to be.

It's a long ride,
but needs to be made.

You gun the throttle,
make rubber bleed.

Synopsis

“Leaving West Texas” was inspired by hitch-hiking from Fort Worth, Texas to Los Angeles, Southern California, several times in the 1980s, reading lots of crime fiction, and watching the TV series *Breaking Bad*.

The black room

by Paul Bakowski

for Charles Simic

No light switch.

No windows.

A pile of kindling

but no matches.

Room without

books, or pillow,

or a thimbleful of water.

Nothing to do

except lie down

on the cold floorboards

and see how dark

it is inside you.

Synopsis

“The black room” was inspired by owning and reading numerous collections of Charles Simic’s poetry, and being interested as a poet in compression in poetry—to hint at more while using less.

2013 represents Peter Bakowski’s 30th year of writing poems.

The Dead

by Candace Petrik

A funeral has lots of rules to it. Mostly they are about being still and talking quietly and watching people get buried. And also there is the listening part that goes on forever, where you can't fidget and you can't pull a face or yawn even if you are tired. And the person who is a priest is the one you have to listen to when he talks, even if you aren't used to being in church because nobody ever had the sense to take you. The priest has a lot of things to say about God and being dead and he knows all these things about the dead persons, like magic. But Auntie says she gave him the things to say on a piece of paper. And the things are stuff everybody here knows, or else if they don't know the things then they shouldn't be here. That's what Sab says. Because if you knew the dead persons then you don't need to be told about them.

"It's part of remembering them," Auntie says. Her nose has snot coming out of it and her lipstick is only an outline of red.

I have to go forward after all the talking and throw dirt on the coffins. They are brown but a golden pretty brown that is nicer than the dirt, which gets stuck under my nails. I grab the biggest handful for Mamma and it tumbles over the sides and falls down below. I only grab a piece of dirty rock for Dadda and just chuck it, but it doesn't even make a dent where it hits. Maybe I missed? I think it will take forever to bury someone if you have to do it by the handful. Everyone gets a go, but after Sab and Auntie I stop watching. And then Auntie has an arm around me and says we can leave, but Sab wants to watch them get lowered down all the way. And so we watch. But we don't stay to watch them be covered up with dirt because Auntie says that will take too long.

Auntie's house is far away from our old one. I don't know exactly how far but to get here the car has to go over huge wide roads where you can speed really fast and

there aren't any houses. And then there are more little roads and more and more until your bum falls asleep from sitting. Auntie's house used to be just for Christmas and sometimes even birthdays. She has crayons that go away in an old shoebox and sheets of paper to draw on. Drawing is pretty dumb, but when I am finished sometimes Gram or Auntie give me money so they can keep the pictures, and so I draw a lot. On Christmas everybody ate lunch together, and everybody was: Auntie and Gram and Pa and Mamma and Dadda and me and Sab. And the big people got coffees and wine and the small people got hot chocolate. Only that made Sab mad because hot chocolate is for babies, even if I'm not a baby. Sab doesn't like drawing, so I always sat quietly making pictures by myself. He would turn the TV on even though Mamma would say:

“Sebastian, please—not on Christmas.”

But Dadda would say:

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, woman. Just let him amuse himself. At least it will keep the little shit out of trouble.”

And there would be a Christmas movie on and Sab would curl up on the couch all quiet until it was time to go.

Auntie's house isn't for Christmas now. It is for always.

§

Sab doesn't like sharing rooms. We have our own beds, only mine is smaller and his is really a couch that pulls out like a magician's trick. Auntie is buying new beds with the fire money when it comes, but this has to do for now. Sab is going to live in the room upstairs, but Auntie says it's filled with 'junk', which means things that have been forgotten about and so become rubbish to throw away. Sab is going to help Auntie sort the junk out, and I can help too if I don't get in the way. She doesn't know that I am very good at not getting in the way. The upstairs room is called an Attic. Sab is very smart and he knows all the words.

“It comes from Attica. That's Latin,” he says, and looks around to make sure

Auntie isn't there. "Everyone knows Attica is a jail in America. It's where the police send you if you get caught."

The Attica smells like wet paper and dust, so I am glad Sab is the one moving up there and not me. I stay perfectly still while Auntie passes the boxes to Sab. The stairs are fold-out like in a pop-up book. When you are down below you can see the string dangling from the ceiling and you have to pull. Only I'm not tall enough to reach, but Auntie doesn't know I can move a chair to climb onto and I will be able to pull it just fine. Auntie makes excited or sad noises when she sees some of the things in the boxes and this makes cleaning take a long time. I am not really helping, I'm just sitting near the window with Bo Bear in my lap. The window is so dirty that you can draw pictures on it with your finger, and I draw a house and a girl with her own Bo Bear. But I run out of window. Some of the boxes have photos and so we have to all gather round and look at them, and I don't know any of the people. Even the people I know don't look like themselves. One box has toys, only they are dumb ones that have paint chipped and bits missing and they belonged to Auntie and Mamma.

"Maybe you can play with these, Poppy?" Auntie asks. I shake my head and don't say why. But Auntie picks up a little toy horse made out of yellow plastic. She plays that the horse is trotting towards me and I have to take hold of it even though I don't want to.

"It belonged to your Mamma," Auntie says, and I think maybe she will start crying again.

"It looks jaundiced," says Sab. That means its liver doesn't work well, like with Dadda. I laugh and Auntie looks away, going back to the boxes.

The fire money is going to take too long to come, so Auntie takes us shopping for new beds and says there is no point waiting. Sab and I want the same kind of bed—they are special ones made of silver steel that glints under the showroom lights. Auntie says it is too many deer and money doesn't grow on trees. Even crying

doesn't work. She buys Sab and I both bunk beds, so we can have friends over. Mine is painted pink with little yellow flowers on it but Sab gets one that is plain wood-coloured. The delivery men come and set both beds up, and they call mine a 'princess bed'. When they are gone I get a pair of scissors and scratch as much of the pink off as I can.

Gram and Pa have been far away and couldn't be sad with us at the right time. Auntie doesn't like this, but when we pick Gram and Pa up from the airport she cries and hugs them and forgets she is mad. Pa is mad though, because his mouth is thin and his eyes are hard. And he talks through his teeth.

"I'm so sorry we weren't here, Elizabeth," he says. And his voice comes out in bursts, like he is having a hard time pushing a boulder uphill. "That bastard, that goddamn bastard."

"Dad," Auntie says, and Gram hushes him too. We get in the car and I want to know about the bastard. You aren't allowed to use words like that if you're small but big people do all the time, especially Dadda. The words that are bad don't even mean the right thing when people say them. Bastard means a person whose parents aren't married, but I know heaps of parents who aren't married and nobody says anything. Shit is just poo but said in a mean way. Fuck is about making babies but Sab says it doesn't really mean that. It means people doing sex but not being in love when they do. Mamma said sex only happens when you love somebody very much, but Sab says she told a lie. Sex is the same as anything else that big people like to do, like playing Monopoly or watching TV.

Auntie drives the car and Pa sits up front with her. The back seat only has room for three and I have to be in the middle. That means I can't see out the window properly. Gram takes hold of my hands and strokes them like she thinks I am cold.

"I hear you have a brand new house," she says and I can tell from her high voice that she is trying to make me happy. But it is an old house; Sab and I are the only new things in it.

"I want my real house," I say. Gram wipes something from her eye and pats my

knee softly.

“I know,” she says. “It’s not fair.”

The old house had a trampoline and there was a pond and the backyard was better with a willow tree and a pine tree. Auntie’s backyard is made of concrete and there aren’t any trees—just a flowerbed with scratchy plants and woodchips. I want to bring the trampoline over but Sab says it’s probably burnt too.

Gram and Pa have their own house, but they are going to stay with us anyway. Auntie makes Sab share the Attica with me, and I have to give up my new room and my new bed. Auntie won’t say for how long, and when I ask she gets mad.

“What happened here?” asks Gram, and she touches the scratched pink paint.

Auntie looks embarrassed, like she is the one who did it.

“They claim it happened in the factory,” she says with a huff. “You’d think for all the money it cost, they’d send us something decent.”

“I hope you return it,” Pa says.

Auntie nods but doesn’t say yes.

§

They are talking about the baby again. They don’t like letting small people hear about dead things, even though dead things are everywhere. When they see me listening they always go pink in the face or else look around with their eyes showing the whites. And then they share a look. The look means they are sad about the dead, because the dead are always hurting people from inside.

When Gram came home from the airport she explained it but not very well.

“It’s like a pain, right here,” she said, and put a hand on her chest. Then she gave me a hug and kissed me on the top of my head. She whispered something about it being OK, but she was crying. Some dead people are worse than others but it

seems all of them can easily get at your insides, especially your heart. They must have something sharp like a knife that they use. But the dead people don't scare me. And I already know about the baby.

The big people are in the kitchen talking and the table has some of the funeral food on it. It's nasty stuff made with rice and vegetables. We have to eat the funeral food for dinners until it's all gone or else goes off, because Auntie says we can't be wasteful.

"They never were the same after," says Gram. "He was so small. Such an angel. Looked just like you, Elizabeth, as a baby."

"I know, Mum."

They started talking about the baby after they were done talking about being sad without Mamma. I don't remember it being here, because I wasn't even alive yet. But Sab was and he says it was an annoying thing. It didn't stay very long though and then Mamma and Dadda had me. And Sab was happy because I am better.

"Lyle started his drinking then, as I recall," Gram says.

"That's not true," Pa says. "You know as well as I do that man was never right in the head."

"Dad, the children," Auntie says.

"Let's just be grateful for small mercies, shall we? He's gone and they're safe and sound."

"Hush, now. Let's keep our voices down," says Gram. "He wasn't the nicest man, but he did seem thrown about little Gabriel's passing. For what it's worth."

"Thrown, that's an interesting word," Pa says. "Not devastated? Not grief-stricken? Look at how he reacted and look at Virginia. How it destroyed her."

"Stop it," Auntie snaps. "This is not the time to suggest such a thing. Ginny is

gone and all you can do is rage about Gabriel! It was cot death. It was seven years ago.”

“If you say so,” Pa says, “but look what’s happened now.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Auntie is crying I think, because her voice wobbles. “Can’t you see this upsets me? Can’t you just drop it?”

I have the crayons out from the middle drawer in the living room. The shoebox is green and there are scribbles all over it. I am drawing on a piece of white paper, but I’m just doing circles around and around. They can see me back here from where they are in the kitchen. I keep my head down and scribble a lot, but I always know when they are checking in. They go quiet, like when lots of birds are chirping in a tree all at once and then suddenly stop. Sab hears it too. He is lying on the couch, but he is only pretend-reading his video game book. When the talking starts up again he sits up and looks at me. Mamma said that I look a little like Dadda but that Sab looks the most like him. It matters to people who you look like and I can sort of tell that Sab has Dadda’s mouth, but only when he’s frowning.

Gram and Pa don’t stay over forever, which is good. They live not very far away in a house with a proper garden. Only it is their house and I can’t have it, I have to have this one with the bad garden. We are allowed to visit though, because the car doesn’t take long to get there. And I get my own room back. Auntie doesn’t return my bunk bed to the shop people. It is mine to keep.

§

There are little girls who live up the road from Auntie. They have a puppy dog, but a big one that is yellowish and it runs after tennis balls and poops everywhere. Sometimes it poops in our front yard and Auntie has to clean it up. You can train a dog to do things, like sit and beg and roll over. It is funny to watch the girls do this to the dog. It is even funnier when the dog runs away from them and won’t obey. They chase the dog and it keeps winning over and over.

Auntie sees me watching them. I have Bo Bear with me and we sit on the front

porch, because there is nowhere else good to go.

“Why don’t you ask them to play?” she says to me.

“Why?”

“Because it will be fun,” she says, like this is obvious.

“No it won’t,” I say. “I want to play with Sab when he gets back.”

Sab is with Gram and Pa. They are taking him to the shops to buy a new video game machine and some games as well. The fire money is supposed to be here but it still isn’t. So Gram and Pa are helping out.

“I think those games will be too old for you, sweetie,” Auntie says. I frown and don’t reply because I was having a good time before she started talking to me. “Go on, get up,” she says. “I’ll take you over to them. You don’t need to be shy.”

The little girls watch us walk over. Auntie holds me by the hand and I squirm but she is stronger. The girls stop playing.

“Hi,” the biggest one says.

“Hello girls,” Auntie says. “This is Poppy, she was wondering if you’d like to play with her.”

“OK,” the big girl says.

“I don’t want to,” I say.

“Don’t be silly,” Auntie says. Then she looks back at the girls with a smile. “She’s just shy. What are you names?”

I don’t care, but Auntie makes me say hello anyway.

“That’s Hello Kitty,” the big girl says, pointing to the dog running around. I want to hit the girl, but Sab says I can’t hit. Even if people deserve it.

“Hello Kitty is a cat,” I say to the girl. “That’s a dog.”

“He’s my dog,” the girl says. “I named him.”

“It’s a stupid dog and its name is stupid,” I say. And the smaller girl starts to cry. This makes me laugh but it is even funnier when the big girl goes all red in the face. I wonder if she will cry too.

“You’re mean,” says the big girl. “You’re a meanie.”

“It’s OK, Poppy,” Auntie says, putting her arm around me. “We don’t have to play right now.”

I cross my arms and stare at the girl whose dog has a cat name. I think she must be one of the dumb people Sab talks about. I don’t care what he says, I am not being friends with a dumb person. Not even if they are funny.

§

We can’t go to the new school right away, because we need to heal and it is too soon. When I do go, school is really Prep. I was in Prep before but now it is a big deal to be there. Sab is in the big kids part of the school and has a proper class with proper lessons and a desk. That’s also where the big slide and good playground is, and only the big kids get to play on it. My lessons are dumb lessons, like drawing and crafts and listening and then there’s free playtime. At Prep you always have to be part of the group. We have to play nicely, which is what big people say when they want you to be quiet. But if we want to sit by ourselves we shouldn’t—we should join in. Sab says it’ll be like that forever at school, only worsen as you grow. There are stickers the teacher gives for doing things her way. If you play nicely you sometimes get a sticker. If you share things, like toys, you get a sticker. If you make a painting she likes, you can get a sticker. If you pack up the toys neatly, you can get a sticker. If you sit quietly during stories, you get a sticker. But you don’t always. Teacher saves the stickers and sometimes when a kid doesn’t get one they let out a whining noise, like a smoke alarm. I don’t want a sticker. They have a lion cartoon on them and they are round, they say: doing grrreat! But lions can’t

talk and they don't care how you're doing. If there was a lion in Prep he would just eat everyone.

Kelsey is one of the kids who cries about stickers. She has dots all over her face but they aren't sickness, they are freckles—but lots of them. When I play I am in the sandpit with the best digger. The best digger is bright green with silver wheels and all the boys want it. When they try to take it I scream and hit, so they have to let me have it. I get bored playing with the best digger though. I try to see if I can break it into pieces. Then I see that Kelsey is playing near to me with a doll she has taken into the sand. She is playing that her doll is friends with the digger.

“Go away,” I say. She looks like she is going to cry, and so I say it again and she does.

I snap the digging part off. It's the green shovel bit and it's mine now. I put it in the pocket of my overalls, and then chuck the rest of the digger onto the sand. The boys who wanted it start to yell when they see. But they can't make me give the shovel back, because I will hurt them.

Teacher comes and talks to me and she makes herself small so her face is near my face.

“Poppy, I think Kelsey wants to be your friend,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because she likes you. Maybe it would be nice to play with her? Don't you think it will be nice?” the teacher's voice is the musical kind that goes up and down all the time. I don't really know what a friend is, except that it is people who do things together at the same time.

“I don't want to.”

Teacher doesn't get mad. She smiles and says stuff about how she knows it is hard, but she wants me to give it a try anyway and that she thinks I am a very brave little girl. That's when I know what she is talking about, because big people always

call me brave when they don't want to say about Mamma being burnt up in the bedroom all screaming and you can't open the door. It has to be locked. I wonder if Teacher is sad about Mamma like Auntie is, but she wasn't at the funeral.

It doesn't matter that I don't want to. Teacher takes me by the hand and leads me to the bottom of the castle, where Kelsey is. The castle is really a dumb wooden thing that arches over the sandpit, and you can walk on it and stare down at the sand-playing. Kids play at being kings and queens up there, only they're not. They don't even have crowns.

“Poppy wants to know if you'd like to play with her, Kelsey,” says Teacher. Kelsey nods a few times and looks down at her doll. That means I have to. Teacher leaves us alone to play and she's smiling. Kelsey wants to play dolls, so I tell her to take her dolly's head off and bury it in the sand. She starts to cry again, but she does it anyway.

§

It's the weekend and Auntie wants us to pack our bathers, because we're going somewhere special. Gram comes too and they shove the car full of things. Blankets and food and clothes. It's a road trip, but only for Saturday and Sunday. We have school on Monday again.

“Why go away if we have to come back?”

“Make sure you like the beach first,” says Gram, “before you start planning to park there for good.”

The only beach I've gone to is the one near Luna Park, because Dadda had things to do there and dropped us off to play, but didn't give us money for more than one ride. Sab was the lookout and he'd wait for Dadda to be gone for ten minutes. Then we'd walk back under the goofy Luna Park teeth and go to the water. The sea is free so we'd use the money to buy food at the kiosk: chips and sauce and a Coke each. You have to watch out where you stand at the Luna Park beach. Sometimes there are needles and you can catch AIDS. So you wear shoes always. Most of the

time the sand near the sea only has food rubbish and bottles. It's the part near the path that has the orangey-white needles, like a pin-cushion. I walked along the very edge dodging waves, or else swam in my undies and Sab showed me how to do doggie paddle and how to hold my breath. Sometimes it got dark and it was Mamma who came for us and she'd be mad, but at Dadda. Only she'd never say it with her mouth, just her eyes. And she'd gather us up and take us home on the tram and train and bus.

This other beach isn't even in Melbourne and there aren't any needles I can see. It's a place you drive ages for. The sea is all tumbly and the sand goes on and on for ages before it hits road. But the part where people live, the houses and streets and gardens, they look the same as anywhere else nice. Like Auntie's street.

I love the sea. I like it even better than the one near Luna Park because there are proper waves here. They are all curly and angry. They grab you and drag you down down down and if they wanted to they could keep you there.

"Sweetie," Auntie calls. "Stay in the shallow bit—there could be rips!"

Sab is off somewhere, but he isn't swimming. He's gone down the beach and left me. Auntie pulls me back from the water and smears lots of sunscreen everywhere. It's cold and sticks to the wet sand, making sandpaper over my skin. I pull away so she can't touch me anymore.

"Rips are part of the tide," she says. "They could pull you out to sea if you're not careful."

"Don't scare her," Gram says. She is under a shade tent—a fold-out thing that is green. She sits inside it on a folding chair, because her skin is old. Auntie waves her away.

"Poppy, listen," Auntie says. "Just stay in the shallow bit."

"I wanna swim."

She sighs.

“Well then, if you feel like you’re being pulled out too fast by the water, I want you to swim sideways. Got it?” She waits for me to nod and mumble a yes. “Don’t struggle against it, just swim to the side. You’ll break free.”

“Elizabeth, she can’t possibly swim out of a rip,” Gram says. “You’ll take all the magic away from this.”

“It’s called water safety, Mum.”

I run back to the sea and leave them to fight. I wonder if I will meet a Rip today. I hold my breath underwater for ages to see if I can feel what drowning might be like. I think it must be the opposite of burning to death. But my body does its own thing; it pops me up to the surface like a bubble of unwanted air.

§

There is smoke, smelly and orange all around our neighbourhood and even in the city. It is orange from the sun trying to shine through. But it’s not just one house on fire; it’s lots. It is grass and trees and people probably. Summer means fires, Auntie says, because people are stupid and start them. It’s not dangerous to play outside. It is just smoke. The fires are in the country towns and different parts of Melbourne.

“They can’t come here, sweetie,” Auntie hums. “You’re safe.”

I don’t really believe her. Lots of things burn and there’s plenty of them here. There’s houses and the pretty trees on the nature strips and the Edinburgh Gardens down the road.

“Who started it?” I ask, but Auntie doesn’t seem to know. She switches the TV onto the news and we eat our pasta watching from the couch. The man says firebugs did it, but they’re not caught. And I hope the bugs don’t fly here and start more fires when I’m asleep. Fire is like a very clever person and it needs to breathe oxygen just like us. It dances and runs and smacks things to bits, like something with hands and teeth.

The TV man lists the number of dead persons that the fire made, and it’s lots.

“He makes it sound like they’re aiming for higher next time,” Sab says, and he spits a little bit of pasta sauce as he talks. “Like it’s a video game with a maximum kill count.”

“Stop it,” Auntie says. “They’re people.”

“Not anymore,” Sab says. “They’re charcoal.”

That gets him sent to his Attica.

§

The smell of smoke isn’t going away. I don’t see the fires but I know they are there because of the dirty sky. Auntie makes me hold her hand when we walk to school. Some days I find her keys first and put them in a secret spot so I never have to go outside again. But then I remember it doesn’t matter if you live in a safe place like Auntie’s house, because my old house was fine until it suddenly wasn’t.

Some people who die get burnt up on purpose for their funerals instead of being buried. I don’t know why Mamma and Dadda had to have both. Sab says in olden times people were piled up together on bonfires and everyone would stick around to watch. You watched and said goodbye, only they were dead already, not locked in a bedroom. I don’t know if it counts if you don’t see, only hear it. Dadda pounding at the door. But you can’t, said Sab. Don’t, just leave it and it will be better, I promise. Sab says it doesn’t hurt but that’s a lie. I’ve stuck my hand on hot things before, like the stovetop. It makes a white mark and it stings because your skin gets melted. And it hurts for days and days.

§

I have a birthday this week and I am six. Auntie wants a friend to sleep over in my scratched bunk. I don’t have to do the asking but the friend still has to come. It is Kelsey. Auntie makes me invite over the dumb girls with the Hello Kitty dog too.

Kelsey is a lot like the Hello Kitty dog. I can get her to sit and roll over but she is bad at staying. If she doesn’t do it properly I am allowed to hit her, because it

doesn't count as real hitting if I have a good reason. I find a long stick and stand over her with it. But you have to do it where big people can't see because they don't understand good playing. I play it with Kelsey in my room. She is better and better at not crying now, since crying just makes Dadda angry.

Auntie knocks. There is a surprise for me through the sliding glass of the back door: outside in the bad garden and yard are balloons bobbing about like loose heads. I see a long table with a yellow cloth and paper plates. Sab sits with his elbows out, resting his head so he looks wonky. He's staring, maybe down at the dirt or at somebody's feet or knees. Gram and Pa are talking but then Gram sees me and waves, pointing at the two Hello Kitty girls as if she's answering a question. I have to like the cake because it's pink and big and swirly with flowers. It's on fire. Cakes are supposed to be on fire on your birthday, but Auntie opens the sliding door with a quick jerk and I can smell it. The smoke. I can see it staining the sky and I can taste it on the roof of my mouth. It's in my throat. My eyes. My tummy. My hair. It's touching everything with its burning fingers. It has legs and it can run so fast, faster and faster until it suddenly stops.

They can't make me go out. They won't. Gram comes inside to whisper to me, and she grips me by the arm but I sink down lower and scream right there on the carpet. They need to lock the door to keep the smoke away. But I don't say that. I just cry and cry in a heap.

The table stays outside. So do the balloons. Everyone comes into the cramped kitchen, standing around the cake that doesn't have any fire on it anymore. The six candles are pink too. Everyone sings the happy birthday song, but not Sab because he is looking out the window. And not me. I am coughing out little bits of leftover crying and rubbing my eyes redder and redder.

§

There is a man who goes to our old house. He looks at the burnt bits lots so he can see what the fire did, like maybe how a doctor checks a dead person to make sure they're not just sleeping. The fire money has to come soon, but the man is not helping and Auntie yells on the phone. There are rules about fires even though they

all end the same way. That's why there has to be a policeman talking to Sab, but not to me.

He doesn't come in a police car. It is white and there is a policewoman inside as well. They aren't wearing their blue outfits and hats to help me tell they aren't just regular people, but Auntie says detectives are secret about what they wear.

"Come in, I suppose," Auntie's voice is funny. I stand behind her. Sab isn't here, he's in the kitchen. Auntie offers the detectives tea but they wave a hand like it is not interesting. Sab doesn't look up when we find him sitting at the table. He waits like he thinks dinner is coming and he rubs his hands a little over the wood and fiddles with the placemat. You don't eat dinner in the afternoon. He must be holding his teeth together the way he is breathing all deep through his nose.

"It's alright, princess," the policeman says, pulling back a seat at the table. "I'll get your brother back to you soon."

That means we have to leave because Auntie mumbles something to me and takes me by the hand, out through the living room. She tries to open the sliding door to the backyard only I jerk away and don't let her.

"There isn't any smoke," she says, and points through the glass. "See?" Her voice seems too heavy though, like she is holding in a mouthful of water. So I don't know what to believe. One of the detectives, the lady one, comes out of the kitchen. But she is alone. I can hear Sab and the policeman softly talking in mumbles that waft through the doorway and settle around us like ghosts.

"You have a nice house," the policewoman says.

Auntie doesn't say anything back.

"My old one was better," I say.

Auntie looks at me, but I don't know what she wants. She still has my hand and her grip pinches a little. The policewoman looks away.

I stare out at the backyard, at the spiky garden and concrete and washing line with the sheets still pegged on. The sky isn't orange but that doesn't mean anything. We don't sit down, even though the couch is right there next to us. The policewoman stands too, her arms crossed. I wonder if we are supposed to be telling her something and if I am in trouble for hiding Auntie's keys or for hitting Kelsey. I give the door handle a big yank and it makes a squeak as it slides a little to the side. Auntie doesn't move or even look up much. I don't go outside, but I don't shut it either.

When Sab stumbles into the living room his face is red and blotchy. His arms are hugged around his body and he pushes past the lady, past the couch. Behind him I can see the policeman striding out, but slower, not smiling or frowning or anything. Just looking. Auntie pulls Sab to her, muffling his face against her in a wobble of sad little noises. She shushes him softly. The detectives are talking. One of them says Auntie's name, but she acts like she hasn't heard. Maybe she hasn't because when she does look up she wraps a free arm around me and kisses me wetly on the top of my head. But I tug her a little, pulling towards the open door. I want to show her so she knows it's all OK. She doesn't have to cry. I can't smell it, the smoke. All the fires are out now.

Candace Petrik is a writer from Melbourne who has been published in Wet Ink, Voiceworks and The Death Mook. She is currently studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT.

Newborn

by Anna Ryan-Punch

for L

Your eyes are
still dark blue.
I have touched
and memorised
places in you
I will lose:
your new arms,
soft-furred;
flaky feet
in newborn purple;
head completely
in my hands.
Your eyes
in their first colour
I will keep them
as you make me
disappear.

Anna Ryan-Punch is a Melbourne poet and critic. Her poetry has been published in Overland, Antipodes, The Age, Quadrant, Westerly, and Island. She blogs at annaryanpunch.blogspot.com.

Keith vs The Ones

by Andrew G. Bennett

“The very thing you would never want to be a part of is what will eventually grab you by the throat and kill you.”

That’s what the old man tells me.

He also says, “It’s because we follow the same patterns in our lives. We tend to do the same things. Sometimes we do them over and over again. We never realise we’ve been there before.”

“Yeah?” I say, disinterestedly.

“Yeah... that’s the way they track down serial killers. They tend to repeat the same actions.”

I look at him and see an old man with worn clothes, a creased, dirty face and eyes in a tired body where someone much younger used to exist.

“And so you’re a serial killer, are you?”

He shakes his head and reaches for a bottle beside him. We are sitting on the gutter in front of a graffiti-stained wall. According to my watch it’s after 2 am and the bar I was drinking in has now been closed for over an hour. I don’t know why I sat down beside this homeless man but, then again, I probably do. Sometimes I tend to do strange things and homeless people can be nice because they don’t judge you, or tell you to go away.

I once told a girl I liked that I was Jewish because I wanted to go out with her, and I thought she was Jewish. She wasn’t, and then she didn’t want to know me because when I told her that I was “just pretending” to be Jewish she said I was “untrustworthy”. I asked her if it would change things if I was Islamic, which I wasn’t either, and she hit me in the face and walked away. It hurt. It hurt a lot.

“I’m not one of them, I’m not a psychopath,” the homeless man says and then takes a swig from his bottle.

I’d forgotten he was there.

“Good to hear... thanks for the advice,” I say, looking again at my watch. “I better get going now. I’m Keith, by the way. My favourite food is mushrooms.”

I don’t know why I tell him this, but I guess I tell most people this. I just don’t know why I didn’t tell him before, because now I’m leaving. It would probably have been more appropriate to tell him what my favourite food was when I first sat down—not that it really makes a difference, I guess. Being a homeless man, he probably doesn’t get to eat what he really likes anyway, so he might be reluctant to discuss his best dish.

“In centuries past,” the old man continues, “people have been documented as believing they were made of glass. They tended to walk very slowly because they believed their bodies could fracture at any time. In those times, people thought them mad but their loved ones did not tell them that... they supported them, they helped them negotiate life and its jagged edges. The point is, if they believed so strongly that they were made of glass, they were made of glass!”

“Of course,” I say, pretending to comprehend what he is saying. “Well... I should get moving,” I smile, “before I start turning into glass.”

He nods and I push myself up from the gutter by placing my open palms behind me. Now standing, I brush the dirt from my hands.

“You’ll be back here again,” he says, and laughs, “you’ll be back here before you know it.”

I pull out my wallet, select a ten dollar bill and drop it on the pavement beside him.

“I don’t think so.”

He picks up the ten dollars and rubs it between nicotine-stained thumb and fingers, then raises his head to look at me.

“Now I know you’ll be back.”

“Why?” I ask, “How do you know that?”

“You’re following a pattern.” He reaches into his trouser pocket and produces what looks like a piece of metal. He holds it up towards me. “Here, take this. You’ll need it.”

“What is it?”

I take the object from his hand. It’s round-shaped and looks very old.

“It will protect you.”

“From whom?”

“The ones... they will want to kill you.”

I try to laugh, and say, “You’re beginning to freak me out. I’m catching a taxi home—I’m not hanging around here for long.”

“There’s no taxis in this part of town,” he says, “not at this time of night. Good luck, brother!”

With that, he returns his attention to his bottle.

I walk away from him, bemused. The bit of metal he gave me is still in my hand. I put it in my pocket. The streets are poorly lit, with shadows everywhere up dark alleyways that disappear to uninviting destinations—places I don’t want to know about. I feel a little unsettled. The old guy with his bottle and strange conversation has made me feel nervous.

Not far up the road, I’m happy to see a taxi rank. There’s already a small guy standing there dressed in a black dinner suit.

When I walk up to join him he acknowledges me with a slight nod.

“Been waiting long?” I ask.

He proceeds to complain about the lack of cabs. He has an educated, somewhat pompous accent, and angrily remonstrates about how he had been at a function and had decided to leave late. Now there are no taxis. He says that he’s rung the taxi company three times on his cell phone, but no one answers.

“I’m Keith,” I say, “I like mushrooms.”

“Right,” he says, and doesn’t tell me his name.

I consider that the old homeless man was probably right—no taxis around here. I don’t even know where this part of town is. I went to the bar with a guy from work. He drove us there in his car, but he bailed early—said he had to get home or his wife would kill him, said he had some marital problems. I stayed behind in the bar. I don’t know why. Sometimes I do some stupid things.

“You’d think these idiots would want to earn money,” the small man complains bitterly.

Dressed in a white shirt with blue tie, he has thinning hair and a large Adam’s apple, which moves up and down as he speaks:

“It’s an absolute disgrace! These people shouldn’t be allowed in the country if they don’t want to work.” As his enormous Adam’s apple bounces up and down his long neck, he reminds me of a miniature giraffe. “I’d ring them again but my cell phone’s battery is almost flat. Can you ring on yours?”

I hesitate.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have one.”

He looks at me with an expression of disgust on his little face.

“Well, I do have one but I think I left it at home...” If looks could kill, I’d be

dying now. “I leave it at home a lot because I think I might lose it when I go out...” I can tell I’m just making things worse, but, with me, excuses can sometimes be compulsive. “It’s just one of the stupid things I tend to do.” I think I should just shut up now.

He’s looking at me like I must be the stupidest person in the world. I can see in his eyes that he views me as a complete cretin.

I’m shuffling my hands in my pockets for something to do because this guy is annoying me with his disapproving stares. I know my cell phone isn’t in here—it’s almost certainly hidden somewhere in the bathroom cabinet back at home, just in case my flat gets robbed, but just maybe it is in here?

Nope! All my hand finds is the metal object the homeless guy gave me. I pull it out to inspect it. I discover that it’s a coin of some sort, stained with age. The little guy notices it.

“Give me a look at that,” he says, and I pass it to him.

“This is most unusual,” he says, inspecting the coin closely, “I’m a collector but I’ve never seen a coin like this. Where did you get this from?”

“Up the road,” I say, shrugging.

“I’m an expert in this field and I’m not even sure what country this comes from.” He holds up the coin to the light. “There’s an inscription here, see?” He sticks the coin up under my nose. “But who knows what language it is? It’s most disconcerting... I’m the foremost expert in this country on foreign coins. Why haven’t I seen something like this before?” He quickly pulls a business card from his top pocket and pushes it into my hand. “Come and see me at my office in the city as soon as you can. This coin could be worth a lot of money.”

“Really? How much do you think?”

He doesn’t answer my question.

“It’s a most fascinating piece...” Seemingly reluctantly, he moves to return the coin, but then stops and keeps it in his hand to look at it once again. “It could be Persian?”

“Can I have it back now?”

He sighs and drops it into my open palm.

“Come and see me as soon as possible. Nine o’clock Monday!”

“Sure...” I read his name on the card he has given me, “Brian...”

The card reads: Brian Smyth: Antiques, assessments, tax advice, and investment opportunities.

“I’ll look it up in my catalogues when I get home,” he says, then releases an unexpected growl that takes me by surprise. “That’s if I bloody well ever get home! Honestly, why don’t they give taxi licenses to someone else but lazy immigrants?”

“I guess it doesn’t pay that well... someone’s got to do the menial work in society.”

He rolls his eyes and swallows and his Adam’s apple jumps alarmingly.

I tell myself that I won’t be going to see Brian at his office on Monday, but something in the back of my mind replies that I probably will.

I don’t like Brian. He seems like a racist, he’s very pompous, and he reminds me of a giraffe, but I guess I’m a bit of a fatalist: I’ve met Brian, he’s seen the coin and he’s made an appointment for me; I know he’ll probably rip me off, and give me a lot less money for the coin than it’s worth; but maybe that’s meant to happen. This is the sort of thing that happens in my life, it seems inevitable, and I probably will go and see Brian at his office, unless something changes. Unless something changes, I’ll be off to see Brian at his office on Monday, he’ll take my coin and give me a pittance for it, then when I get home there will probably have been a robbery and because my mobile phone’s been stolen, I’ll have to spend the money

he's given me on another phone. Unless something happens.

“Bloody immigrants...” Brian mutters to himself.

I forgot he was there. I think to myself, if a taxi doesn't come soon, I'll have to put up with Brian the little racist giraffe for much longer than I'd care to.

“Right! And here come more people looking for a bloody cab,” he announces angrily.

I follow his gaze and see three figures in the distance moving towards us on the sidewalk.

The figures walk slowly, though seemingly deliberately so. I make them out to be men. Their arms hang awkwardly and somewhat strangely by their sides. As they move closer I can see their faces in the dull street light. They look strange! They seem to be coloured men, with dark pigment in their facial skin, but they also appear sickly pale, and their eyes... As they move slowly closer, I can see their eyes are blood red.

“I don't like the look of these guys...” I think aloud.

“They better not try and jump the queue,” Brian the miniature giraffe says, “we were here first!”

Brian stands defiantly as the three men approach. They walk up and stand in front of us. They look really creepy with their blood-red eyes and paler than white complexions. For some reason their skin doesn't look like it should be so white. They look like people in hospital who are very close to dying. Their arms hang by their sides as if they're already dead.

Brian steps forward two paces and starts remonstrating with them.

“I'm first in line for the next taxi,” he says, “I've been waiting for a very long time!”

The three men stare at him with faraway eyes.

“Just move down there behind that guy,” Brian tells them, motioning towards me, “you’ll have to wait your turn like him.”

One of the men looks to his companion, the one standing closest to Brian. He says something in a foreign tongue. It’s a guttural-sounding gurgle and spittle now drips from his chin.

“Foreigners, are you?” Brian says, “Can’t even speak bloody English I suppose...”

That is the last thing that Brian says.

The man closest to Brian turns to his companion who has made the gurgling sound. His mouth opens to reveal small, strangely sharp teeth. Instantly, a frightening growl emerges from somewhere within him:

“I smell blood!”

It happens so fast that I’m not sure if it’s even really happening at all. I feel like I’m in a movie, and not one I would choose to see. The growling man lurches forward and crouches down to fasten his teeth on Brian’s neck. Brian yells in obvious shock and pain, but the man just keeps on biting. Blood is shooting out of Brian’s neck, and as my heart beats uncontrollably, and I shake in terror, the man swings his head across Brian’s neck with an almighty jerk. As Brian swiftly collapses to the ground with a whimper, the man emerges from his crouched position with Brian’s Adam’s apple in his teeth. The man now stands with blood dripping down his chin, Brian’s bodily part wedged gruesomely in his mouth. The third man swiftly drops on Brian’s body like a hyena attacking an injured antelope. Then, as Brian convulses on the ground, one of the other men looks at me with his blood-red eyes.

He says in a growl, directed solely at me, “I smell blood!”

My legs want to start running now, so I let them have their way.

As I am racing down the pavement away from the men, my thoughts revolve primarily around actions of self-preservation, but I do wonder about Brian. I'm compelled to think of him. Not a lot of us have a choice about what our last words on Earth will be, and I pondered as I run if Brian, wherever he or his spirit now is, will be at least a little happy with his choice of final words. Seemingly racist in nature, I wonder whether his discriminatory final sentence would have given him at least a little solace. I doubt it.

I'm not sure why I think about things like this... maybe the homeless guy was right—maybe I'm following a pattern, maybe I'm doing the same kind of things all of the time and I just don't know it? Though I've never seen someone murdered before... But, anyway, this pattern of behaviour just has to stop! If I get out of here alive I'm going to give up mushrooms for a month.

§

I've been running for what seems like ages and I'm tired and my legs hurt. I'm sheltering in a dark alleyway. It's not a very practical hiding place because there's only one way in and out. There's a brick wall at the end of this alley. But I'm tired and I wish I had some mushrooms to eat.

If the men who attacked Brian are the ones, as the homeless man called them, hopefully they don't run as fast as me, and hopefully I can have some time to rest up before I continue my run.

I can hear a noise outside in the street. Someone is coming. If I'm always following a pattern in my life, maybe the ones chasing me follow some sort of pattern as well. Maybe if I talk to them about patterns they won't kill me? Oh God! The noise is coming closer.

I wonder... is it not too late to start believing in a god? If so, which religion should I choose? So many options, and I don't have the time at the moment to consider them all closely. The noise is moving towards me—it sounds like the slow, deliberate footsteps that the men who killed Brian had been making.

I'm thinking that I should have joined the armed forces like my father wanted me to. Then I probably would have been killed years ago, in some foreign country, and I wouldn't have to now worry about being murdered. Resigned to my pending fate, I move down to the back of the alleyway where there's light from an adjoining building.

I'm nervously gazing up to the light when a figure rushes from out of the darkness and grabs me by my arms. We both fall to the concrete. A beam of light shines across his face and I see it's one of the men I earlier encountered with Brian. He puts his hands around my neck and now he's moving closer towards me with his sharp teeth glistening in his open mouth. I'm scared as hell, but then something strange happens.

There's a crackling sound and steam, or some kind of smoke, starts to rise between our prone bodies. The man looks at me with faraway eyes—he's right in my face. Then he begins yelling as if he's in pain. He releases my neck from his grasp and starts flailing his arms around. Quickly, he moves off my body and retreats to the wall, wailing all the while. Smoke is still trailing up from my body—it's coming from my coat—from my coat pocket. I reach in, and there's the coin. It feels hot in my hand. Now I'm holding it, the man's eyes are wide and staring as he cowers away.

“Hmm...” I think aloud.

I sit up and reach forward and touch him with the coin. Smoky steam pours from the place where the coin touches him and he screams in terror. I reach out and touch him again with the coin and the same thing happens: he yells in pain and screams in abject fright.

This is great!

I touch him with the coin. He screams.

I touch him with the coin. He screams.

This could go on all night...

I wonder how much I'd get for this coin on eBay? It would be a whole lot more than Brian would have given me. That's for sure...

I touch him and he screams.

I touch him and he screams.

I touch him and he screams.

I reach out and pretend to touch him, but don't touch him, and he screams anyway.

I feel like a god.

I hold the coin up above my head, and say, "Take me to your leader!"

But he just screams.

Pretty soon, I bore with this. I give him a kick in the guts, saying, "that's for my mate Brian," even though Brian wasn't a friend. Then I walk out of the alleyway and look around the streets.

There are more of the same men, the ones, hanging around, so I let them see the coin and they all, without exception, cower from it.

"I am Legend!" I yell, having seen that movie on DVD only recently.

I walk back up the road, without a care in the world. The ones are scattering from the street and disappearing up alleyways.

Something else quite strange begins to happen. Suddenly, I can see everything around me much more clearly. I can make out the distinctive shapes of the formerly grey buildings and their darkened window cavities. Birds begin to flutter by and call.

Oh... it's just the sun coming up...

There's actually a taxicab a little farther up the road. I hail it to go home. But I will be back—I know it.

§

I sit on the gutter, a bottle of liquor stashed behind me. By my side sits a younger man. He has left a bar sometime before and is now patiently waiting for my wisdom. I begin to repeat, to the very best of my ability, the old homeless man's words as he told them to me.

“Our lives follow patterns,” I tell the young guy. “We tend to do the same things like this and that, and other stuff as well. Sometimes we do things a lot but forget we did them, so then we do them all of the time—stuff like that.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I tell him, “and I'm not a psychopath either.”

I reach into my pocket and produce the coin and hold it up to show him.

“Take this,” I say, “it will protect you from the ones...”

He reaches for the coin and takes it from my hand. Turning it over in his fingers, he stands up and grins.

“And you'll be back as well,” I say. “I know all this because of patterns, and stuff like that. Oh yeah... and look out for people made of glass. Don't tell them they're mad because they're not.”

He unexpectedly tosses the coin at my feet.

“I don't want this rubbish!” he says loudly. “Why don't you have another drink, you old drunk.”

I'm shocked by his attitude.

He turns and marches away up the street.

“Hey, pal!” I call to him. “It’s not supposed to be like this! This is not how it works... I give you the coin, I save your life. That’s how it works!”

“Piss off, you loony hobo!” he calls back.

I’m feeling a little peeved.

This caper isn’t as easy as it looked...

“I’m not a hobo!” I yell to him, but he’s already out of earshot. “My name is Keith!” I yell to the empty street.

I sit for a while. I consider having a swig on the bottle, but I don’t like alcohol much. It reminds me of stale potatoes.

I reach into my hobo bag to find my lunch.

Ah... mushrooms... Life doesn’t get much better than this!

Andrew G. Bennett is from Sydney, Australia, and has been writing fiction for over ten years. He has published three books of short stories, written an as yet unpublished novel and has had over thirty short stories and poems published in a variety of journals and magazines. He loves to write as he finds it to be an excellent outlet for his creativity and plethora of inspirations and ideas.

Man in City has City

by Rhett Davis

A city was growing on the top of his head. It'd started off small, a baby city, with a few houses and streets and maybe a post office (it was difficult for him to tell exactly what was there because every time he tried to bend down in the mirror to look a few people or cars or buildings fell out, and despite the obvious inconvenience of having a city on his head he was a man who respected life in all its forms). It grew over time into a city complete with skyscrapers and onramps and parks and harbours and airports. He tried to hide it from strangers under hats, but somewhere the city found a power source in his head and the lights it produced from windows and streetlamps could be seen through the fabric, so he stopped wearing hats. He'd walk down the street and people would think he was a busker or an actor; they didn't realise the city was fused onto his head and subsisted somehow on his flesh; they thought he'd put it there deliberately. If they had known they may have backed away and rearranged some laws to ensure his incarceration. Instead they were curious and often surrounded the man, investigating the delicate grid of little streets, trying to determine whether the inhabitants of the city had the latest fashions or worked for the right companies. For a while, during his morning coffee breaks, a man called Francis sat behind him and mapped the city in great detail. He never found out what Francis did with those maps. A woman named Annabelle used tiny cameras on tiny flying robots to take photos of the little city that made it look as large as a normal city. A picture of a bridge that spanned the man's skull and earlobe captured while he slept (head upright to prevent loss of property and life) did spectacularly well on the Internet and the woman got a book deal and he didn't see her after that. The city slowly spread and its expanding suburbs began to cover one of his eyes. He was reluctant to get it removed, even when the weight clearly began to impact his neck and spine. Soon he was forced to wear a neck brace, but the city kept expanding. Its suburbs became endless as the little people believed that houses with yards were far more appealing than apartments, and soon both his eyes were covered, and his ears, then his nose, until eventually they covered his mouth completely and he stopped breathing. When the

coroner realised the man had grown an actual city on his head he'd ordered the man buried standing up, his head poking up out of the ground, and so demonstrated a power that even the coroner was unaware he had possessed. The man was installed in a public park and his head and the little city protected by an attractive glass case. Of course, without its host and his gushing humours to sustain it, the city lost power, its airlines fell from the sky, and it became a dank, collapsed place. The few inhabitants who were left dressed in rags and combed the streets for morsels of food. Visitors to the park lost interest in the installation (it was very depressing) and the man's head was soon neglected and his city overgrown and when, in many years' time, someone uncovered it again, they remarked on the irony of finding the ruin of a city in the ruin of another.

Rhett is a fiction writer from Geelong, Australia. He has published stories in The Big Issue Fiction Edition, Sleepers Almanac, Verandah and Page Seventeen. He is currently studying an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He can be found online at rhettDavis.com.

Skids

by B. N. Oakman

put that bloody camera away it's not a fucking zoo beggars
and boozers and pushers and crack heads a kid squatting on a
swag nursing her caged rabbit a groomed dog with a man
who sleeps rough looks a damn sight worse than his dog
don't step on that syringe that woman fucks for her fixes
please don't slobber about family happy families?
that's a card game isn't it? suicide for fathers' day murder
for mothers' and spare us home sweet fucking home where
the smug feel good because they're not down here two
crazy bastards running amongst the traffic kamikazying
with cars and trams you'd reckon they wanted to die who
gives a shit? never met a mad bastard who hasn't a family
someplace busy washing their hands and straightening that
big rug still at least it's not christmas taken your meds
yet? been sentenced to therapy with some normapathic
psychologist? and what am I doing here you ask? with
my beautiful woman my polished leather shoes my rolex?

I live close by real close and I'd rather this mob
than the deluded shits who drove them here forget the
facade and you'll need a micrometer to measure the gap now
don't puke on me about home I'm a wallet and woman kind
of man there's not much else you can count on sometimes
you drag each other back from the abyss sometimes you pull
each other over the edge there but for the grace of god say
the believers dumb fucking luck say I like to hear my
story? another time maybe? yeah sure you've got a lot
to do no hurry there's always a berth in the gutter
paradise a thousand screams away

Trash

by B. N. Oakman

*I have found little that is 'good' about human beings
on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash...*

—Sigmund Freud in a letter to Dr Oskar Pfister, October 9, 1918.

A savage judgement, but understandable
if we recall Vienna preferred its women
hysterical rather than defiled, and how,
excoriated by his peers, he was labelled
a lunatic after his early publications. Yet
his misanthropy matured long before
his books were burned and the 'gangsters'
railroaded him to London where he was
cremated in '39, incognisant of Wannsee
and one-way train-trips, never to hear
tidy Aryans fulminate against stains
on laundered linen when the sky rained
black ash, never to hear millions adulate
'positive thinking': fortune's bounty befalls
those who contrive to think right thoughts.

B. N. Oakman (Bruce to his friends), formerly an academic economist, started writing poems in 2006. He has since published many poems in Australia and overseas as well as a full-length book, In Defence of Hawaiian Shirts, and two chapbooks, Chalk Dust and Secret Heart. He was awarded a Literature Board grant and his work is recorded on an ABC Classics CD, Peter Cundall Reads War Poetry. Currently he's preparing a second full-length collection which may or may not be titled Golden Boy.

<http://www.bnoakman.com/>

Hok Diam

by Cher Chidzey

Two-storey terrace shop-houses lined the north side of Teck Chye Terrace, a bitumen road studded with potholes. Hok Diam, the good fortune shop, sandwiched between a motor repair and a funeral costume shop, belonged to Rong's carers Gong Gong and Po Po. The front door was made of pieces of plank, slotted into a custom-built door frame. To open the door, the planks were removed and to close, the planks were reassembled. Behind the shopfront were Po Po and Gong Gong's living quarters. Thin planks separated Hok Diam from the upper floor where Rong, her parents and brother lived.

The pink slip, the final eviction notice from the Building and Construction Authority came two days ago. It ordered the residents of Hok Diam, together with two adjacent shops, to vacate within a week or the wreckers would help them. The tenants knew not to fight the government departments, not in Singapore anyway, where the authority's words were law. The demolition would be necessary to make way for widening a road that ran alongside the motor repair shop. To resist would mean they were obstructing progress.

Ten-year-old Rong stared at the bubbles rising in a tall glass of Sarsaparilla, sucked hard, and groaned. Thinking of every item in the shop—every person living in the shop-houses on Teck Chye Terrace—made her want to cry. She refrained because crying was a weak person's business.

Rong glimpsed a red plastic tub leaning against the wall in between two racks of shelves. It reminded her of Chen, her baby brother, splashing in a flock of rubber ducks and Po Po holding him as if he was a pearl in her palm. Then he looked like a troll and Rong was unforgiving of his invasion. Her room was taken over by unwanted items such as nappies, talcum powder, pilchers, cotton wool, rattlers, and milk bottles.

Rong nicknamed Po Po 'the engine' because her toothless speech sounded like

a leaky gas stove. Po Po was in and out of hospital since the first eviction order had come three months ago. Rong had complained about the floor that never stayed clean, the creepy crawlies, the exhausting humidity and heat, and the continuous banging from the motor repair shop, but she wished she could take it back as if by doing so she could stay. Rong was uncertain if she could survive without the continuous flow of customers, the gossip and, above all, the old couple's nurture and harmony. The front door was disassembled in the morning and reassembled at night, harmoniously, regardless of the amount of money in Po Po's mobile cash register and her bra.

Something crashed. Rong glimpsed the fragmented shop sign. She sobbed. Gong Gong saw and ordered his son to burn the lot.

Avoiding the contents of the shop, she stared at the passers-by. Men in rubber boots unloaded fresh produce from lorries for the wet market. Drivers tooted their horns, shouting abuse at whomever was blocking their way. Vapour rose from the bitumen like steam from simmering rice porridge. She saw Filipino, Indonesian and Sri Lankan maids heaving shopping baskets or pushing trolleys behind old women whom Rong's mother suspected were live-in mothers-in-law because professionals would not be seen jumping puddles of stagnant water in a wet market and mingling with the vulgar stall keepers. She realised the days of hearing live ducks and chickens squawk, seeing fish flap, mud crabs abseil, wicker baskets and the blood clams smile were over. She sucked harder. Sarsaparilla gushed—her tongue froze—a cold front surged to her head. Numbness felt good. She should recommend it as a relief for pain.

She tried to swipe *The Day* from her mind. Most importantly she would miss her friends, especially Ah Tei, the one whose broad smile melted her heart, whose tongue-rolling proper Beijing accent filled her with admiration. To Rong's mother, Ah Tei was a commoner, like the residents of Teck Chye Terrace, and he was unlikely to become a professional, not with his pigeon English, not when he had dropped out before completing high school. The eviction was a gift from God for Rong's mother, an escape route from the commoners. Rong knew that from the arguments her parents had gotten into, but she could not possibly guess her mother's

worst fear of Ah Tei seducing her daughter.

Rong fiddled with the puzzle Ah Tei gave her as a farewell present, wondering about his whereabouts. It was out of character for him to break a promise. She needed Ah Tei, her jester, now, because she was in the doldrums. Perhaps he was hurting and could not bear to say goodbye. Moving out of Hok Diam, she would have to replace Ah Tei, the Game Master, which would be difficult. She recalled the long lazy afternoons spent playing games with Chen, designed and supervised by Ah Tei.

A discount tag flew off a jar of pigs' ears biscuits—one of the many plastered-on commodities. She knew she would never again taste her favourite pig's ear biscuits, suck Sarsaparilla from the tall glass packed with ice cubes or chew on the barbecued chilli cuttlefish. These snacks were classified as junk food and given to her secretly by Po Po when her mother was out of sight. Coins rattled in the pickled olive can hanging above her head. It was time to disband Po Po's coin 'cash register'.

The late morning sun highlighted the almost empty shelves where cans of cooking oil, soy, packets of sugar, salt and spices had once stood. The feeling of emptiness she could not describe. It was as if her innards had been removed. Tomorrow the wreckers would strip everything bare and the wrecking ball would complete the destruction. Hok Diam would be no more. There was one last thing she should do, a task she had done with Po Po as a child. It might not save Po Po from her stroke, but she wanted to perform the task as the farewell ritual to Hok Diam, to Po Po and Gong Gong, to her childhood.

She slipped off her stool, headed towards a wooden box, the last in the shop. Chen was helping himself to miniature pieces of chocolate from a jar. As he licked his velly-sticky fingers, grunting in bliss, she threatened him with dental visits. He shrugged.

Gong Gong looked up from his invoice books. He nodded. He would have let Chen and Rong eat anything, do anything, take anything. Rong recalled the joyous

times when they had worked in the cake shop. Her little hand stamp, stamp, stamped the characters ‘Longevity’ on the cover as Gong Gong turned box kits into cake boxes. She giggled when Gong Gong was slower than her. An inner voice said, “You’ll have to leave him behind.”

Rong picked up a bar of soap, a foot-long golden bar. She ran her fingers along its length, felt the undulations where the Chinese characters ‘Sunshine’ were imprinted. Rong had lost count of the number of times she had watched Po Po cut a bar with a cleaver, her calloused hands shaking. Rong picked up a cleaver, divided the bar into ten pieces, one for each year of her life. “Have a good cry. But she’ll have to go too.”

Through the veil of tears, she saw wings fluttering. An insect landed on a pile of old newspapers, the ones Po Po used to wrap the soap before handling it over to the customers. She trapped it, coerced it onto her right palm—a routine she had performed many times. When she was younger, it used to be Ah Tei who did the trapping. The helicopter game invented by Ah Tei Rong started playing when she was four, a game that cost nothing. Rong alerted Chen. She extended a leg of the beetle and directed him to tie a knot around it. He tried but his velly-sticky fingers failed. She mocked him. Chen pulled his ears outwards, rolled his eyes until they were focused towards his nose and pushed his tongue towards the roof of his mouth.

By the third attempt Chen succeeded. Rong tickled its belly—it spread its wings—emerald images flashed past. Rong exerted a little more tension—it accelerated. “Let it go.”

“Let me have a go,” shouted Chen.

She handed it over to him. He tugged harder—a spectrum of blurred wings.

“Let it go.” She snatched a pair of scissors.

She snipped. The beetle soared. Chen howled.

Rong followed its flight till it became a green dot.

She sighed. “Goodbye Ah Tei. Goodbye Hok Diam.”

Cher Chidezey migrated to Australia 38 years ago and has published poetry, short stories and a memoir called The House of 99 Closed Doors. Her stories have been read on Southern FM, 3CR, Radio Adelaide, and she was interviewed by R. Aedy on Radio National for the Life Matters program.

Wuttle

by Christopher Cassavella

I never thought of my brother as a good guy. I guess when you live with someone, you see them different than everyone else. You see what they spit out when they brush their teeth, how they eat their dinners with their hands, getting bits of corn stuck on their elbow, and when they take a shower—how much hair they leave behind—these are the things they do when they don't have to present themselves to the world, and as a family member you have the privilege of seeing it all. Out on the streets, the smile my brother would give the ladies, the old man who he'd hold the door open for, and the butcher he'd make jokes with all seemed to like him. My brother was a good fellow to them. And I suppose if I sit down to think about it he was always a good guy to me too. It just happened that I lived with him when we were growing up. Saw him when he woke up and saw him when he went to bed and mostly in between we didn't talk, but I just never really saw him as anything more than a guy who lived with me. Nobody ever saw us together and said, "Hey, you two get along real good," or, "You two look just alike." I never got the, "You should be more like your brother," but that's because I wasn't a bad guy either. My parents might have liked my brother better, but that's because he was older and better off with money and luck and they'd see what I did with my time. I'd sit in the park like I was just another blade of grass and wonder what I was doing when I quit another dead end job by just walking out and driving home. I was just confused, like a bowl of cereal showing up to a dinner party. Some people see the world and they can nod at it, and say, "Okay, I can do this." I'd look at the world and think about it and would say, "Maybe not, maybe someday, maybe never."

It took me a few years, a few beers and a good girl and then a few good books to turn me into somebody decent. I became a janitor. I realised after I graduated school and when all I was up to was being a blade of grass that I missed sitting in a classroom. So the only ways to go back, I figured, were either to teach there or clean up the messes there. Though I never liked trying to get people to listen to me much, and my mother always made sure my face looked like my bedroom. Clean

and neat in the night and ready to be seen in the morning, she would say. She was a good woman, I was sorry she had to go. I hope she went off to someplace she liked.

Being a janitor wasn't a bad job, but I did have to shave my beard off. I suppose it would've made the school look bad to hire janitors with long beards, so the beard had to go, but the gig was at a college right near my house and the quiet walk in the morning was fabulous. Sometimes on that walk I would think curious things. I thought once, that maybe somebody should make a device that marks a unique colour on the bottom of all of our shoes, that leaves a mark that shows each other where we are going and where we went. The sidewalks may get messy with everybody always walking, but people might see we're all just the same, walking around with our footsteps headed wherever with whoever. Maybe not, maybe someday, maybe never.

One Monday night my brother called me up at my home and when he heard my wife answer he called her by the name Margene and my wife took offense because her name is Mary. She handed me the phone, told me it was my brother and shook her head as she made sure not to hit the cord into the glass of milk we were sharing.

"Hey brother," I said.

"Hiya brother," he said back.

I took a bite of my cookie and said, "Everything alright? I think you insulted Mary, you mistook her for someone named Margene." I laughed and looked to my wife who chewed her cookie and did not find what I pointed out to be humorous. I could see her point.

"No brother, everything is not alright," he said. "Well maybe most things are... but not for me, not right now. I've done an odd thing and I'm nervous."

I was bad at saying things at the point where I was expected to say them. I could only throw out a noise like a question mark from deep within my throat.

"Do you mind meeting with me?" he asked.

“When?” I asked.

“Whenever you can.”

I thought it over some. “You could come by the college tomorrow.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Why not? I’m free most of the day. Come whenever you want.”

“Okay, just give me the directions and I’ll be there.”

I did, and so it seemed I would be meeting my brother the next day at where I worked.

§

The next day came and I went to school, patrolling the hallways and classrooms for any stray trash. It was a slow day. But at twelve, when I was walking out around the campus, I saw a man scurrying through the entrance gates. He was wearing a long coat, a baseball cap, and shorts.

I walked up to him and said, “Oh, I gotta go and tell the coach I got him a new recruit for the baseball team.” I laughed but he didn’t.

“Hey brother,” he said, but his voice, his face and his shorts all looked morose.

“Alright,” I became serious and cleared my throat to show him as much, “let’s go to my office and have us that talk you needed to have.”

I started walking to my little office that was really a closet, but still nice. Most janitors got squat. I walked along and I expected him to just walk beside me, but he didn’t. So I had to pull him with me. We walked along the campus and I waved to some of the kids who nodded to me first. My brother just sauntered along, getting his neat shoes green in grass he forgot to avoid.

I opened my closet/office door and had him sit down and opened a new bottle

of water for him. “Well,” I said.

He shook his head and nervously rubbed his fingers into his palm. “I was walking down the street just yesterday when I saw a kid, five or six, walking down the street by herself. I looked around for her parents, but she didn’t have anybody near her. So I went up to her and asked where her mummy or daddy were, and she just smiled at me and didn’t seem to want to talk, or maybe she was just afraid of me. Which is a good thing, I suppose. But she kept looking towards the other side of the street and to the park. I made the connection that maybe she was looking there because her parents were there. I asked her if she wanted to go to the park and she smiled up at me. And so I thought that was the best thing to do, I wasn’t just gonna leave her there. There was also this huge puddle in the street, because of the earlier storm, so I had to pick her up onto my shoulders so she wouldn’t get her cute little sandals wet. We jumped over the puddle and she liked that, she said the word puddle, but her little voice said it so it came out like Wuttle. And she kept repeating it. Wuttle. Wuttle. Wuttle. It was adorable. And then... I kissed her on the cheek. Brother, you hear me good—it was just a small kiss. A peck. She was so precious and so full of everything us adults are not. Nobody in the world is like her, or has what she has in her...”

My eyes must’ve given away what I was thinking, because my brother saw them and started to wail. “It was a bad choice is all,” I said. “You said it was just a peck, right? That’s nothing then.”

“What do you think of me now?”

“I think what I always thought of you. That you are my brother and that you are not as good as me at playing sports.”

He still cried.

“What should I think of you?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“The street was empty, the rain was coming down, that wuttle was there and you had to pick her up.” I didn’t mention the kiss this time.

“But what about that peck? Am I a good guy?”

“You’re my brother.” It wasn’t the first time we tried to talk like friends and I’d shown him I wasn’t much interested. I was never good when someone wanted a sketch of themselves. And I was also confused as to why he had done what he did.

He gave up on a response. “And you are mine.” He looked around my office and saw that there was a good collection of 20th century novels and a fair amount of fig newtons. He saw the coffee pot I kept in there, and a trinket my wife had bought me, a tiny pig that wore heels. “Say, what’s that little board you got there? Bad?” He was talking about my magnetic erase board. I’ve had it for as long as I’ve worked at the school. Next to it was a stack of magnetic letters, two of each letter in the alphabet. I’d write out messages or random words when I was bored.

I turned towards the board. “Bad,” I said out loud when I saw it was written on the board. “Did you write that?”

“How? I was right here in front of you.”

“It didn’t say that before.”

“What’d it say then?” he asked me.

“It said my wife’s name.”

“Mary?”

“Now you remember it?”

“I was drunk and nervous and depressed.” He sniffled and took out a sorry-looking tissue.

I shook my head at him and put the letters back so they spelt out WUTTLE. My brother didn’t like that and changed the words again. He wrote out PUDDLE

instead.

“Lunch in the cafeteria?” he asked.

“Why not?” I think we both wanted to avoid what we had just talked of.

We walked to the cafeteria, which was just a few corridors from my office. I waved to a few more kids that passed by.

My brother saw this and said, “Popular?”

“Nah, just know some of the kids is all.”

“They greet you just like that?”

“I’m no vending machine, I have a brain and I can greet them back.”

“I don’t remember ever talking to any of my janitors.”

I nodded my head. “And now you’re the brother of the best janitor in the northeast,” I said.

Then he put his hand on my shoulder and sighed.

We went into the cafeteria and he only bought a coffee and I just bought a candy bar.

“Some lunch,” I said as we waited in line. Behind us was a young woman with her child, and this is when I noticed a thing. My brother looked down at this little girl, but it was longer than a glance, not truly a stare, but he smiled. There wasn’t much to any of it, but I thought about that kiss he said he had given that little girl and I wondered. I really have never thought of my brother as a bad guy either.

We walked back to my office/closet and he put his coffee down and then I noticed the letters were back: that little three letter word—BAD—was back up on the board.

I sat back in my chair and said, “It looks like we’ve got a little mystery on our hands.”

“Guess so.” But his face was pensive. What was he off thinking about when we had a bit of good entertainment on our hands right here and now?

“I almost want to leave again and come back to see if this word bandit does it again,” I said. I bit off a piece of my candy bar. “Maybe we can change the word to STOP, or we can write WHO IS THIS? That could be some good natured fun, don’t ya think?”

My brother and his pensive face nodded and said, “Yeah, if you want.”

“Alright, let’s do it then,” I said.

“Aren’t you afraid this guy is stealing things from your office?” he added, as he started to rub his fingers into his palm again.

“Nope. The door never had a lock and I’ve never once found anything missing. As long as I’ve got my beautiful piggy dressed in her high heels here in the morning when I get in, that’s all I care about.”

“Where should we go?” he asked.

“Not far. I want to see if we can catch them walking in here.” I said this all with a decent amount of fun in my voice but my brother thought I was angry.

“What are you gonna do when you catch them?” he asked.

“Not a thing, just wanna see what kinda face they have.”

I got up from my chair, left half of my candy bar on the table, and had my brother follow me to a staircase at the end of the hallway, where we still had a good view of my office door. We waited inside the staircase for ten or so minutes, and then I got to thinking about his situation and asked him if he was going to be alright.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked me.

“Just ya know, if you’re gonna be alright with whatever has been bothering you lately. You’re the one that came to see me, telling me you got a problem.”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe kissing little girls who don’t belong to you on the cheek might be something you should be concerned about.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal. It was a slip-up.”

“Now you don’t think so? You were the one who told me you needed to see me and then started crying in my office. Why’d you do it?” I asked. “Why’d you kiss that kid on the cheek?” I weighed his expression—slip-up—in my head.

The answers were halted as we both watched a little girl of about three or four sneak into my office. I had to shake my head. I guess it wasn’t rare to see a child around the campus waiting as a parent finished up a class, but today it certainly seemed like a couple of bad coincidences. I looked over to my brother to see what he made of this. It took me a minute to look over at him because I was afraid of seeing something in his face and coming to some sort of conclusion about him.

“Well,” he said, “you said you wanted to find out who was messing with your board. I think we found out.” He chuckled some and started walking over to my office.

“Where you going?” I asked him.

“We gotta confront the little bandit, don’t we?”

“Nah,” I said, “let the kid have some fun. We’ll just stay put until she leaves. We know who’s been doing it, and that’s all I needed to know.” I waited for his response and when none came I started to say something that had really been on my mind, “So, my wife might—”

“Oh stop it, brother. Let’s go over there,” he said. “It’ll be fun.” He continued to walk towards my office and now I had to either follow him or confront him in the hallway about what he thought he was doing with all this. But I was never good at confrontations.

We went into my office and the kid was fidgeting with my magnetic letters and she took off the words we had put up and wrote the same word she had been writing. BAD. She was a real cute kid, one of those kids with a face that made you think we couldn’t be all that bad when we grow up.

My brother sat down and with her back turned to us, he said to her, “We caught you! You were the one switching the words around weren’t you?” My brother looked to me for some approval and had a dumb smile that was almost bigger than his face. He was having fun with this.

The kid turned around and for a moment she looked panicked but when she saw my brother’s big smile she caught the fever and showed us one of her own.

“She’s a doll, ain’t she brother?” he said.

“Yeah she is. Maybe we should go find her mum or dad. She shouldn’t be going around by herself like this.” It was a real thin line between embarrassing my brother and making it known what I was starting to think about him, and I was trying not to make my suspicions too obvious.

“We will,” he said, as if I was ruining his playdate, “but why can’t we have some fun with the little one first?” He kept his eyes on her. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

She shook her head and smiled.

My brother shook his head and smiled too. “That’s my name too,” he said.

They both laughed while I stuck my head out the door to see if anyone was gonna come and claim this kid. The hallways were empty.

“Bad. That’s a great word you’ve been using,” he said. “Do you know what it means by any chance?”

The kid shook her head.

“Well, me neither, I was hoping you might know.” He laughed. “She’s really a darling, ain’t she brother? My God. Precious.” He was looking at her and again she had her back to us and was messing with the magnetic letters. He got up from out the chair and took a couple of letters and wrote out the word, HI, on my board. The H was red and the I was blue.

She read the words he had made out and giggled. She took the H and I off and put B Y E. BYE. My brother and her both chuckled with each other. I kept looking out the door to see if anyone was looking for a child. Still there was no one. I looked back to my brother and so far he hadn’t done anything wrong, but regardless I had been building a protective instinct and I felt my heart going wild so I leaned forward and kept up the watching with a good eye.

“Any chance you like candy?” he asked her.

She nodded her head up and down. You wouldn’t have been able to shake her head quicker if you put her in a paint mixer machine.

“I had a feeling you did. I like candy too. But it seems I have too much here and I was wondering if you wanted some.”

She nodded again and forgot all about the letters on that board of mine.

“Brother,” I said, “we don’t know if she should be eating that type of thing, let’s get her back to where she belongs.”

“Stop.” I thought for a minute he would write it out there on the board but instead he ripped off a piece of my half eaten candy bar and took some for himself and then gave some to the kid.

She ate it in a hurry and wanted more.

“You want more?” he asked her. “I don’t know if I should give you anymore. I think the rest is gonna be just for me.” He smiled at her.

She shook her head.

“Well, if you want more you gotta finish what I gave you first, and you still have some right here on your lip.” He took his hand and with his finger, rubbed a smudge of chocolate off from her lip.

“Brother, you shouldn’t do that.”

Then I heard someone in the hall call out, “Arlene... Arlene.”

My brother heard it too and so did the girl. He picked her up in his arms and held onto her. “I guess they’re coming for you, kiddo. We had fun though, didn’t we?” He looked at her cheek and I shook my head at him, but he wasn’t paying me any attention.

I stuck my eyes out of my office and called for the lady to come over. “Missing a kid?” I asked her. “I think we have her.” I turned my head back into my office and to my brother and to the kid and saw her tiny hand was pushing his big nose away.

The woman came into my office that now made it known it was once truly just a closet, and my brother handed over the kid.

“She’s a tiny piece of treasure that one,” he said to the kid’s mother.

She blushed like a mother will when you compliment her baby and said, “Thanks.”

“Take good care of her,” he said to her.

She nodded. “Thanks again. Let’s go Arlene. Say goodbye to your new friends.” And then little Arlene pointed to the board. Us three adults looked over to it and had a good chuckle when we saw the board still had the word BYE written on it. They left and my brother finished eating the chocolate bar.

“That was fun,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Good natured fun.”

That night my father called me. He asked me how I was, and then asked how my brother was doing. It was when my father did this, asking me how I was, that I knew it had been too long since I last gave him a call. I told him that my brother seemed fine, drinking his cafeteria coffee and writing down simple words on the board in my office/closet. Then I really thought of my brother and of children and of the wuttles and the smudges of chocolate. Maybe not, maybe someday, maybe never. Then I moved on and saw my wife still wasn't home. My wife might be—she might be cheating on me with a fellow who goes by the last name of Roberts.

“I'm sorry brother, real sorry,” he'd say to me.

Christopher Cassavella lives in Brooklyn, NY. He has graduated from Kingsborough Community College with a degree in Liberal Arts and currently attends Brooklyn College.

Heatwaver

by Emilia Batchelor

What is today? Wednesday? Fran wondered where everyone was. No one on Google Hangout. The block of flats seemed empty. She felt like a kidnapped kid sitting in a shipping container in an industrial somewhere nowhere or halfway out to sea. The sun beat down outside. She closed her laptop and re-opened it. She wrote:

#312

When simultaneously all people over the age of 80 and all canines with an average hair length over 4 cm died. This specific effect of the Sydney heatwave, that visibly vibrated plasticised objects at its height at 4.33 pm EST (that the EST continued to be used along all east coast newscasting on AM radio, except Tasmania, where it is inferred that long wave signals blow in with the winds of Bass Strait, through empty space and out the other ear of Tasmanian folk, did in fact cause major distress to the octogenarians, whose watches confirmed current time at 3.33 pm, in which case they could well be dead—as they very soon were—causing the perpetual motion function to cease, and only their soul remained in this chair or this bed, which could also explain general haziness of either heat or ‘ghostliness’) was not unexpected. Old people and pets all typically suffer to further extremes. What was remarkable was the synchronicity with which they expired, and the coincidental symptoms. All showed signs of a fast-developed yeast infection in the inner ear that reared violently to resemble what Rugby Union players know as ‘cauliflower ear’ and, for the elderly, the spidery varicose veins retreated rather than rose and these superficial veins, already vying for space in a decimated corpse, entangled and quite quickly strangled the deeper veins. In the dogs, the arterial phenomenon was shockingly preempted by an entire loss of fur. The animals felt embarrassment about being bald and licked their owner’s hands for favour, before finding a dark place to lie.

Fran looked at the thermometer outside on the wall of their building. It said 46 degrees. She wondered what exactly it was that the thermometer confirmed that she was feeling. Last night a map had been shown on the television screen at the pub and the middle of Australia was purple and this was a really bad colour for the heat map to be because it meant that things had flipped over the red part of the scale and the meteorologists had to start calculating again from the cool colours. She had been drunk and thought the TV screen mapped the condition of woozy really well.

The heatwave lapped itself. Like a dog's tongue continually hitting the bottom of a dry bowl and scraping away the dirt that had accumulated there.

She wrote:

#56

When the new 'Froyo' fad caused the machines to overheat due to increased patronage in the early surge of the heatwave. One by one the levers used to dispense frozen yoghurt became too hot to shut off, and, with all the levers depressed with each concurrent attempt to serve just one more customer, became each a metallic, burning rod that singed flesh. Soon all the joints were leaking the dairy product. Some said, in retrospect, that Froyo dispensary owners were over the idea and were willing to use the heatwave to liquidate their business in positive anticipation to start afresh and revolutionise Deb Instant Mash Potato. Atop the whitewash of yoghurt were random crests of toppings, and some streets became knee-deep in the stuff. This was quite a lot of fun for children to young adults and thirty-somethings, until it too began to boil.

#273

When 'heat-wave' became a salute between survivors, post-Sydney-heat-wave. It entailed pulling your skin 'til it hurt from your forearm and then letting it snap back, at which point you would hit the arm at the coinciding 'pulling point' of the other

person. If done correctly, for a few moments ‘sun rays’ would show up in soft red. At the same time, both parties sighed audibly and then smiled at each other by compressing their lips. To end the salute with a toothy grin was considered an affront—a gloating reminder to those whose possessions (or relatives) had ‘melted’ (syn. expired, died, stopped working, caught fire).

Fran thought of a piece of cord that has been sucked on and splayed absent-mindedly, and then sucked and splayed repeatedly. She looked at a tree outside. The pavement looked warped. She speculated about a rug that has been put on top of a really dirty floor and now all of the grime has seeped into the rug and it has become so thick underneath so that when you step on it it seems a little like quicksand and you think maybe you just gained some weight. She felt the couch was making her feel fat. Sweating, she wiped her nose. It made her feel fat. She looked at the ceiling and thought “this ceiling is more important in the rising temperatures”.

She wrote, wondering if the letters might float away from the keys in all the humidity. Would she remember which key was which letter?

#18

When the hastening of the birthing of jellyfish eggs into planula larvae in the heated surface water temperatures meant that adult jellyfish were now inured with the task of protecting a handicapped new brood. The adults devised a magpie-like mechanism to source rubbish and seaweed to create barriers to pen the larvae, so that they might survive and continue to develop, a plan far more advanced than expected from globular creatures. Unfortunately, confused by tropical temperatures, Queensland’s box jellyfish migrated south and destroyed the containers, killing all of the babies, a mordant ironic twist that irked the jellyfish’s consciousness. Though they could not make recognisably sad facial expressions, they swam en masse for the ocean depths and suicided. Collectively, their last thought was “an empty bucket of salty tears”.

Fran checked the clouds outside for any dark grey. They didn’t look any

different, the few that hung out, so scarce as awkward hangers-on, sad people at the end of a club night when the floodlights go on. The clouds looked sad but not in a tumultuous way. More like roadkill. There was no rain there or relief or any kind of wind.

#78

When teenagers of the present generation, characterised by a tendency to shrug their shoulders at hectic climatic shifts and an egotistical pique at learning to swim so that beach lifesavers no longer bothered to save them but left out rubber rings on the sand with a laminated note attached that said “good luck idiots, die gargling your own yellow teeth” and garlanded with shells, stopped getting pimples as oil production decreased via and conversant with increased sweating, and instead developed heavy wrinkles. By 7 am the next morning, the coagulated sweat had dried into a thick crust, and was topped up with Maybelline foundation or cheaper versions of the like, to create a new Sydney heatwave trend. These stylings were later attributed to the ‘post-h3a+wav’ movement.

Fran drinks water and stares out the window for, who knows, about thirty to forty-five minutes. It’s now about dinner time and she’s thirsty also.

She writes:

#1338

When people stop eating food for good.

#222

When people pee out their eyeballs and everyone develops male genitals and cries from penises.

#780.5

When when when when when when what?

Fran walks along the footpath and there are nine or so red-top garbage bins on the outside of the footpath, and the way through stinks really badly. It's hot and she's dripping with sweat, it sucks. She feels alone. Looks down and back up at the bins. Nothing has changed, except during the head movement she trips a little and sweat drips from her chin down between her breasts and she thinks 'so hot' and feels like dropping and sleeping here, on the gravel, her and a neighbourhood cat, and that moment might be nice and then the sun will go down, they will bump paws. Tomorrow is Thursday. Remember?

Emilia Batchelor is twenty-two and hails from Sydney. She has had work featured in Thought Catalog, Reality Hands, and Scum Magazine. She is currently living in Seoul, Korea, teaching English.

poem in orange hues

by Mark Roberts

i take the words & layer them
thick on the edge of the page
then slowly spread them
from right to left
till the letters
that don't fit
drop off the page
& land on the floor

for greater depth
& complexity
i take an image
thin & translucent
& spread it across the top
of the page
then sweep it down
stretching it
till it snaps
leaving only a shadow
across words

Synopsis

I was watching a documentary on the artist Gerhard Richter that explained how he created an artwork by pushing different colours across the canvas using a specially designed wooden paddle. I started thinking of trying to create a poem in a similar way.

Mark Roberts is a Sydney-based writer and critic who has been widely published in journals and

magazines since the 1980s. His book Stepping Out of Line was published in 1985, and he has a new chapbook, Six Months, due out late in 2013. He is currently editor of [Rochford Street Review](#) and [P76 Magazine](#).

Transference

by Fikret Pajalic

I was wrong about the trees. The trees knew things no one else did. For years their leaves whispered, sharing their secrets with me. But they weren't the source of my vigour. I would never find out why the vigour was with me. Maybe it was nothing more than an aberration of nature.

I got out of the car and cast my eyes at the trees. Tall, slender poplars surrounded the house I grew up in like a natural fence that stretched upward to the clouds. When I stood directly beneath them and looked up, it appeared they supported the sky. I felt like if one was cut, the rest would fall and the heavens would cave in.

Sometime before he passed away my father told me that when he came back from the Army he looked to buy a property in the country. He drove up and down Victoria until one day he spotted the poplars in the shape of a rectangle tickling the clouds. He instantly knew that was home.

My mother waited for me on a bench on the front porch, her dog Lockie at her feet.

After we hugged and kissed she lifted her hands and I saw her wrists and fingers looked all lumpy and twisted like tree roots. "Could you do it right away? I can't even make a cup of tea with these."

I nodded. I decided to tell her this was the last time when we finished. She would understand. My mother and I sat on the sofa next to each other, our bodies touching along arm and leg.

I had a great record curing acute diseases. Flu, pneumonia, infections, bone fractures were no problem. I had to do repeats for chronic diseases that lingered.

I never helped my father. He was never sick, but he could not escape the

runaway bus with failed breaks. “You help your mum and your sister and no one else,” he told me when I was little. “People will use you, or do worse, if they find out.”

Soon the vigour filled me. Mum tensed as she waited for relief. Gradually her pain flowed through my blood and distorted my bones.

Later, while my mother was preparing tea, my hands were twisted and sore and I once again experienced rheumatoid arthritis. By the time tea was served I could pick up a cup and almost make a fist.

I knew what my mother was thinking, so I spoke first. “It takes longer to recover these days. Getting older, I guess.”

My mother cupped my face with her willowy hands, and kissed me on the forehead.

“Mum, there’s something I need to tell you.”

When I finished speaking a tiny shriek escaped her throat and then she cried.

§

My wife knew what I was capable of. A few months after our daughter was born I told her. I had to. There is only so much you can hide from your spouse. When I decided to share my ability with my wife I knew telling her wouldn’t suffice. So I waited and when our dog Mack got injured I showed it to her.

Mack ran into a cyclist. I lay next to him and patted his back until he calmed down. My wife watched us, still disbelieving, thinking I was playing with her. I could feel she was a little annoyed, but under all her emotions I felt the smallest trace of trust. I needed it.

Mack whined, gripped by pain. I put my hand on his broken leg and closed my eyes. Then, as always, when pain surrounded me, I felt it. The vigour streamed right into my marrow, surging through my bones. A moment later the exchange started.

No one knows this, but it's the time when I'm completely helpless, never knowing how it will turn out.

Mack barked softly. He licked my hands and face. He put his muzzle into my lap. When I was done he jumped up and chased his tail, as if he had to make sure his leg was working properly. He barked happily while my wife watched with her mouth open. I pulled up my right leg pant and exposed my shinbone. She screamed when she saw my broken leg.

“What now?”

“After I shift his pain to me, I expel it from my body.”

I lay down on the floor and waited. The vigour returned. Mack nervously paced around me. I lost consciousness. This only happens when I fix more difficult things. Half an hour later my wife and I inspected my leg.

“It's like new,” she said.

“Yes.”

“When did you...? I mean how...?”

“I was five and my older sister was sick with pneumonia. I saw the fear in my parents' eyes and desperation in the doctors'. Then one night I snuck into my sister's bed and cuddled her. She was feverish, full of medication and not aware I was with her. I spent a sleepless night wishing I could somehow help her, somehow share her pain.” I paused to check my leg, running my palm down my shin.

“Do you think you should do an X-ray?”

I shook my head, “No, it's fine.”

My wife waited for me to continue.

“The thing I remember the most from that night is the constant rustling of the leaves of the tall poplar trees. The night was still. There was no wind, nothing. But

the branches and leaves kept moving. At some point in the dead of the night they suddenly stopped and then I felt my body being filled with... something. I can't really describe it. The closest word I have for it is vigour. Sometimes I feel like it will lift me up and take me away."

I told my wife how I felt this exchange happening between my sister and I. The vigour left my body and my sister's sickness streamed back to me. In the morning my sister was healthy and I was sick. My parents took us to the hospital. While the doctor checked my sister he shook his head until his neck hurt. By the time I was examined my pneumonia symptoms vanished.

My wife's surprise was only momentary. She was actually relieved.

She said we would use it only for serious illnesses or accidents. Our daughter would go through all the childhood diseases, like measles, chicken pox and such. We agreed. She needed to get immunity and we would tell her only when she was older.

"But God forbid, anything more sinister," my wife's face closed down, "you step in and you do your thing."

We lied to ourselves. Soon I was sneezing and coughing all the time and my elbows and knees were bruised. I did what I had to for my child.

I told her all this ten years ago.

§

I woke up in bed and my wife told me I'd been out for nearly two days. And then she said, "It's gone. You did it." She leaned over and kissed my lips. I saw the bulging capillaries crisscrossing the whites of her eyes.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Sleeping."

My underarm was hot and throbbing. The lump was large and tender. For the

first time, I wasn't able to expel the illness. But I didn't care.

"I couldn't—" I touched under my arm and looked at my wife.

"You tried for hours, until you passed out, exhausted."

"I don't remember much."

"I made an appointment for you with our doctor for tomorrow."

"Sure," I said. "I want to see her."

I got up and we walked to my daughter's room. I opened the door a little and saw her propped on the pillows, her hands resting next to her body, her eyes closed.

"Doctors?" I whispered to my wife as I closed the door.

"Dumbfounded."

"My mother?"

"She's on her way."

§

I had pockets on the side of my wheelchair. It's where I stored my phone, books, medication, and my diary. Sometimes I wrote two entries a day. I was hoping someday in the future, when she read it, my daughter would understand. There was no coherence to my thoughts. I wrote them down as they came. I wrote about how it started and how it ended. I wrote about poplars and leaves and branches and talking trees. Through my diary I told my daughter that rosehip tea is choc-a-block full of goodness, that lemon cake was my favourite, that her mother was an excellent swimmer, that our dog Mack died at the grand old age of fourteen, and that he was my first patient.

I told her everything.

I could stand and walk only when I needed to go the bathroom. The doctors were amazed that I was still here. The disease spread and settled throughout my body like an invading army stamping its jackboot on every internal organ.

“What’s keeping you alive?” a kind old doctor, with whom I’d developed a bond, asked me one day.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I answered.

“Try me, I’ve seen and heard a whole heap of weird stuff over the years. Stuff science can’t explain.”

“I’m just different,” I said.

“That I know.”

“A cosmic coincidence. It’s who I am.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Yes, yes we are.”

The doctor and I shared a laugh.

§

My daughter is twelve now and the plum-sized lump under her arm is gone. She’s been without it for nearly two years. The trees told me she’d stay that way and I would stay the way I am. The trees told me I’d get frail and weak like a dried up twig until I got broken.

In the days after my last transfer, and like all those years before, I watched the disbelief in the doctors’ eyes. They drew blood from my daughter. They did scans. They did tests. They looked at their clipboards. They made notes. They had meetings in the hallways, whispering. In the beginning after her recovery they told us to be cautious. “These things sometimes come back,” they said. “She’s not out of the woods yet.”

My wife and I knew that. Those things found a nest in my body. It's what I wanted. But this thing had a vigour all of its own. A dark, sinister one. One that defeated me. One I was glad defeated me.

Now, I wished to be again where it all started. As we drove to my parents' house I watched the sun, the sky and the landscape blur into one.

The summer heatwave that burnt the city gardens to a crisp and singed the lungs of birds, making them unable to breathe, did little damage to the tall poplars. They stood straight and proud, marking the edges of my parents' property, the place where it should all end. Special trees surrounding a special place.

My wife opened the wheelchair and helped me climb down from the car. My daughter held my hand. My mother and Lockie greeted us at the front porch.

Lockie jumped on my lap and stuck his head under my arm. He sniffed and sniffed and when he jumped off me he barked and howled.

"I know mate, I know," I said, "I did all I could."

I asked my wife to wheel me to the poplars. I told her to come and get me a little later. I needed to hear the trees.

I had to strain my ears but they greeted me and I was relieved.

Trees can talk. Trees are people that can't walk. So I listened to them. They have talked to me for thirty years now. Sometimes they told me good things and sometimes bad. Sometimes they were quiet.

Five days after we arrived, in the middle of the night, the rustling leaves of the tall poplars stopped their chatter. I woke my wife.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's time."

I asked her to get our daughter and my mother. They both said they wanted to be

with me at the end. I agreed. It was important for all of us, for the ones who stayed and for the ones that left.

I don't know how long we lay in the bed next to each other, me in the middle and my mother at the foot of the bed. We talked a little, but mostly we cried. We asked each other not to cry. We held each other's hands and faces. We loved each other.

Then my father and Mack came. Mack thumped his tail on the floor, happy to see me after all this time.

I called my mum. I asked her to move a little.

"Dad and Mack are here. Dad wants to sit down." My mother cried as she pointed at her side. I nodded.

Lockie cried, but only I could hear him. My dad could hear him too. My dad whistled and the dog's ears pricked up and he stopped crying. "I'll be all right," I kissed all of them. "Dad and Mack are here to take me."

My dad extended his arm toward me and Mack stood to alert.

I said, "I'm tired. I think I'll have a nap."

I asked my daughter to help me fall asleep and she rubbed the large birthmark on my neck. She used to do that when she was little while I carried her to sleep.

I felt myself becoming lighter. She spelled "I love you" with her finger and whispered in my ear she loved me as she kissed me. I said I loved her too. Forever.

I drifted.

Fikret Pajalic came to Melbourne as a refugee, learned English in his mid-twenties and started writing years later. He has won and placed in competitions, been published in anthologies and literary magazines Westerly, Etchings, Mascara, Regime, Verge Annual, Hypallage, Platform, Structo, Aker and JAAM.

One Big Apology

by Kaylia Payne

If there was anything that could be said of Joe Kowalski, it was that he looked like one big apology. And it was said. Often. “You look like one big apology,” his mother playfully snapped as he tried to awkwardly practice his school speech in front of her. “You look like one big apology,” his teacher laughed at him good-naturedly when he stood up in front of the class and gave his speech, while the rest of his peers snickered behind their hands. He didn’t see why it was so funny; the teacher said this to him every day. “You look like one big apology,” the bus driver smilingly chided as Joe shuffled passed him, trying not to be seen. Not because he didn’t like the bus driver, but because he never wanted to be seen.

Despite hearing this phrase every day of his life, Joe never could get rid of his apologetic shuffle, his averted gaze, and the downturn of his mouth that always seemed formed to say ‘sorry’. However, despite the way it rested on his lips, ready to spring off at any moment, it never actually did. Joe Kowalski had never said sorry in his life. He didn’t need to. Whenever he did anything wrong, no matter what it was, people took one look at him and instantly forgave him.

So what at first glance seemed like a curse actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Being the slow, bumbling person that he was, it took him much longer than you or I would have taken to realise it. But not to fear, he came to the same conclusion eventually.

The conclusion came as he was listening in to a few of the boys’ conversations—the ‘cool’ boys, one could say. He often listened into other people’s conversations. Not because he was interested in their lives (they were only twelve after all, how interesting can a twelve-year-old’s life be?), but because he liked to sit there and pretend that they were talking to him. Pretend that he had friends.

Before you get out your violins and hankies, let’s get back to the lightning bolt moment, shall we? We don’t have all day.

As I was saying, Joe was listening into their conversation. And for once, one of the boys did say something interesting. It may not be interesting to you or me, in fact, I can almost guarantee that it won't be, but despite the uninteresting nature of the words, they changed the course of Joe's entire life. The words in question were: "I got grounded for the third time this month, so I can't come to the party tonight."

These words caused Joe to think: when had he ever been punished? For anything? Ever? And strain his brain as he might, he could not think of a single occasion when he hadn't been forgiven instantly. And it wasn't like he never did anything naughty. In fact, recently he had been quite naughty. He was twelve after all, a combination of gangliness and hormones that always leads to trouble. But one look at his apologetic face and his mother had wrapped him in a hug and all was forgiven.

Of course there must be a limit to how much he could get away with—but so far he hadn't found it. As Joe had no friends, no hobbies to speak of (he had taken piano lessons for three years but had not progressed beyond "Mary Had a Little Lamb"), nor was he any good at schoolwork, there was nothing to occupy his time. And as such, he was tremendously bored. This little project seemed like a good way to fill in the hours. He had no idea at the time just how drastically the 'little project' would change his life.

He started planning as soon as he got home. After hours of thinking, he finally found inspiration from a memory he had of one of the boys who used to be in his class—a boy who had been sent to boarding school after stealing his mother's car and going for a joy ride.

Joe waited until his mother was in a particularly bad mood. This didn't take long, as there was an election that took place a few weeks after he had made his decision to get into some serious trouble. Though all votes hadn't been counted yet, it was looking increasingly likely that his mother's preferred political party would not be preferred by the majority of the country. Joe watched as his mother yelled something incoherent at the television set and then stormed off to take a shower in

the hope that it would calm her down. Though Joe had numerous shortcomings, recognising a perfect opportunity when he saw it wasn't one of them. As soon as he heard the familiar torrent of water echoing around the house, he jumped off the couch and over to his mother's handbag, retrieving the keys in one second and out the door and into the garage in the next. It wasn't until Joe had started the car and driven it straight into the front of the garage that he remembered he hadn't a clue how to drive. He quickly shut off the engine and leapt out of the car, surveying the damage to the front of the car in horror. He had wanted to get into trouble, but certainly not as much trouble as he was about to get into.

The entire front bumper was crumpled. And as Joe's mother was barely better at driving than her clumsy son, Joe had witnessed the cost of even small accidents numerous times. His heart sank as he heard his mother's footsteps heading towards the door separating the living room from the garage. The door opened and his mother stood there, open-mouthed, surveying the damage with disbelief. "I thought it was a nice day to go for a drive," Joe offered meekly. His mother, in her anger, turned around with her hand raised, ready to make up for years of non-violent parenting. But she stopped when she saw his face and pulled him into a hug instead.

Joe was pleased with this result, but couldn't help thinking that there must be an end to his mother's patience. There must be an end to the power of his apologetic looking face. He needed to do something bigger. Something that would really push her buttons.

The next day he woke up with a fever, and his mother insisted that he stay home, though he really didn't need much convincing at all. He felt dreadful, and all thoughts of pushing his mother's buttons were set aside and replaced with a pounding headache and burning throat. He lay in bed and tried to sleep, but the pain soon became unbearable, so he dragged himself into the kitchen in search of pain killers. He groaned with annoyance when he found that the medicine cupboard was bare, but then remembered that his mother always kept a stash of extra painkillers in her bathroom cabinet. He went in through her room to her ensuite to get them, but her open cupboard caught his eye and all thoughts of illness and painkillers went out the window. He could see the shoebox on the top shelf in her cupboard. The

shoebox that contained all of his dead father's prized possessions.

He heard a scream of horror and shock when his mother came home after work, and he smiled. He listened as she angrily crunched through what was left of his father's glass chess set and the torn fragments of wedding photos, and waited. Waited to finally find out what it was like to get into trouble.

She burst into his room with her face full of a fury and hurt that he had never seen before. But she stopped when she looked at him, and felt her heart melt as she viewed his feverish face and pitiful eyes. She tried to muster up the anger and deep dislike that she knew she should feel, but there was something about his face, something intangible but too hard to fight against, that brought forgiveness into her heart. So instead she kissed him gently on the forehead, turned off the light, and softly closed the door behind her.

And that was when Joe realised that his apologetic face had made him invincible.

Joe spent the next five years of his life pushing the boundaries further and further. Soon he had no idea where they were anymore. He lied and he stole, he cheated his way through college, he took from everyone who crossed his path, and he never gave a kind word or action back. Yet his mother loved him all the same. Not because of who he was, or even due to the fact that she had given birth to him and her biological makeup steered her in that direction. No, it was because of his face. His timid, apologetic face. No matter what he did, she just couldn't stop herself from caring. And she wasn't the only one. The people he hurt and took from forgave him as soon as he was caught. And he was caught. Often. But it didn't matter; his face got him out of any trouble he found himself in. He didn't even bother trying to be discreet anymore.

In his most vulnerable moments, he sometimes felt a small twinge of guilt. Not much, but enough to keep him awake at night for an extra five minutes or so. But he was always easily reassured; after all, he had never done anyone permanent damage.

That is, until he met her. It was love at first sight. She was beautiful—all legs and hair and smiles. Joe wanted her. And he was used to taking what he wanted.

One night, he decided to corner her at a house party that he knew she would be going to. He hadn't been invited, but had heard the other students talking about it, and knew that no one would have the heart to kick him out. He usually hated going to these things. While he had never had any friends, it was only recently that he had started actively loathing everyone around him. His years of cheating and lying had taught him to view people as tools to get to what he wanted. He had become frustrated that the world was full of people who weren't of any real use to him.

But he greeted the people at the party warmly, and even found himself locked into conversation about class with an eager group that he recognized from his Drama class. He smiled at them and even threw a few scraps of words their way when directly spoken to. These people were useful. He looked like he belonged here.

After what seemed like hours, though I can assure you was only twenty minutes, he began to get angry. Where was she? Why had she whispered to her friend in class that she would be coming if she wasn't going to? Had this whole evening been a waste of his time?

He was about to give up and sulk home when he saw her. She looked even more beautiful than usual, wearing a figure-hugging dress, her eyes full of hope and excitement. He approached her, and she looked at him and smiled. He could see pity in her eyes, but he was used to that. He had even begun to enjoy it. He opened his mouth to say something, but a group of boys crowded around her, blocking him from view. The tallest of these put his arm around her, whispering something in her ear that made her giggle and blush. It was Sam. Joe clenched his fists. He had seen them together numerous times of course. Everyone had. After all, they had been going steady since the dawn of time, or at least it felt that way to the short memories that teenagers possess. But this time it really bothered him. Because he had made up his mind when he saw her enter the room: she was his tonight.

She went to sit outside with Sam, and Joe stayed inside and schemed. But he may as well not have bothered wasting his time—Sam didn't leave her side all night. Finally Joe went up to go to the bathroom before walking home in defeat. But as he was walking back from the bathroom down the hall, he heard a strange choking noise from one of the rooms. Hoping to see two kids from school going at it so that he could blackmail them later, he burst into the room. And saw her. She was sitting on the floor with her back against the bed, mascara running down her face and her chest heaving with sobs. But she was still the most beautiful thing that Joe had ever seen.

Joe tentatively closed the door and sat down next to her. "Are you OK?" he asked her, concern filtering into his voice. And he really did mean it, feeling himself affected by the obvious pain that she was feeling. She looked up at him, as if deciding whether to yell at him to leave or sob into his sweater. She chose the latter and told him through salty tears that Sam had broken up with her.

He stroked her hair and held her close, enjoying not only the feel of her body against his, but a rare connection with another person—something that he had never felt before. She must have felt it too, because she looked up at him and gave him a soft smile. Before he knew what he was doing, Joe leaned down and gently kissed her. But instead of kissing him back, she pushed him away. "What do you think you're doing?!" Joe was shocked and angry. Very angry. He had never had anyone say no to him before; like I said, he was used to getting what he wanted.

And so he did.

Afterwards, he waited for her to look at him. To see the apology in his eyes and to forgive him with open arms. But she didn't look at him; she kept her eyes firmly on the ground and made sure she didn't see his face, even in her peripheral vision. And then she left.

Joe left shortly afterwards and didn't give it any more thought that night, nor for the weeks afterwards. He probably wouldn't have thought of it again if he hadn't been attacked as he was walking home from class one day.

They jumped out at him before he even had time to make a sound, dragging him behind a bush and muffling his yells with their fists. They hit his face repeatedly with as much strength as they had, though their eyes were averted the entire time, as if they had been given specific instruction not to look at him. Joe tried to use his pitiful eyes to plead with them to stop, but they kept their eyes focused steadily away—though one wouldn't know it from the accuracy of their punches. Joe felt his nose snap under the knuckles of one of the men, and blood poured onto the ground. The last thing he remembered was how warm and rich it smelled, and how nothing seemed to hurt anymore.

Unfortunately that sensation was fleeting, as he woke up in a hospital bed feeling exactly as you would expect one to feel after they had been beaten within an inch of their life. His mother was standing over the bed with an unfamiliar expression on her face. It took Joe a few seconds to realise that it was disgust. “How are you feeling?” she spat, and Joe was so shocked that he simply murmured “Good”. She nodded curtly and then gathered her things and left, looking relieved that her motherly duty was over for the day.

Joe couldn't understand what was happening—his mother had only ever looked at him with a mixture of pity and undivided love.

When the doctors and nurses came in he put on his most sorrowful face, wanting comfort after his mother's cold greeting. But they looked through him and did their duties, seemingly unwilling to touch him for longer than was necessary.

A few days later Joe was allowed to get up from his bedside and into the bathroom by himself. When he had done his business, he turned to wash his hands and caught a glimpse of a terrifying figure in the corner. The face of the figure was scarred and ugly, but that was not what frightened Joe. It was his expression—lips curled up in malice and eyes that cut. Joe went to scream, but stopped when he noticed the stranger opening his mouth in unison with his own.

It was a mirror.

He stepped closer, disgusted but unable to tear himself away. He looked at the

mangled jaw that spoke of years of lies and deceit. He looked at lips that seemed perfectly formed to spout words full of hatred. He looked at the empty, compassionless eyes, and he knew. He knew that he no longer had his face to protect him. He knew that he would now be judged for his actions, for the person that he was. He knew that he was being judged now. He had seen it in his mother's eyes. He had seen that she remembered all of the horrible things that he had done, but could no longer remember why it was that she had always forgiven him. His apologetic face was gone. And in its place was that of the monster he had become.

Unable to bear it any longer, he pushed open the bathroom door and raced out, accidentally knocking into a nurse during the process. "I'm sorry," the nurse gasped in surprise.

"No," Joe said, helping her regain her balance. "I'm sorry."

Kaylia is a career student who is currently studying an MA in Writing and Literature. A student/public servant by day and a writer by night, she dreams of one day having a job where she doesn't need to wear shoes to work.

Children of the Tides

by Frank Scozzari

Luke was lost. That much he knew. Having paddled too far out into the lazy Hawaiian sea, lulled in by a warm breeze and a tropical sun, he had been caught up in the Molokai Express: a vicious current between the islands of Oahu and Molokai known for its sweeping undertow. He stared out to the horizon, far out to where the sky met the ocean, but could see only blue. The vastness of it, how the ocean blended from one shade of blue to another until it eventually turned to sky, made him realise just how alone he was. No one had seen him back at the beach, or missed him at the hotel. He had neglected to inform the concierge of his daily plans, which had been the routine until that day. Now nearly three days had passed, and he remained adrift without food or water. His only life support was a two-by-three-foot piece of compressed styrofoam. The sun, which had shined blissfully upon him, burnt through the remnants of his sunscreen, scorching his raw skin.

Yes I am alone, he thought, as alone as any man could be. And if I cannot find land soon, I will die.

The current, which had been steady for an hour, took him further in a direction he did not know. He lay flat on the bodyboard, with his arms wrapped loosely beneath it and his face pressed against it. The swells lifted him slowly and methodically. With an apathetic eye he looked out across the surface of the ocean. All morning there had been nothing, not even a fish.

Then he felt a rush in the water beneath him, and when he lifted his head he saw a dark flash beneath the surface. It was something large and fast. It darted from one side of the bodyboard to the other. Then it disappeared deep into the blue beneath him. A few seconds passed and he saw it again, breaking the surface not more than ten yards from him. Emerging like a periscope was the head of a giant sea turtle, its large cranium and eagle beak turned sideways so that its eye was squarely upon him.

“Hello,” Luke said cheerfully, happy to once again see another living being.

The turtle looked on curiously.

“Can you tell me which way is land?”

The turtle bobbed in the water, watching.

“I need your help, my friend. I cannot find land and will die soon if I cannot find it.”

The turtle remained quietly buoyant. Then it suddenly dipped its head into the water, paddled swiftly forward twenty yards, and lifted it back up.

Luke looked around, but saw no land. Grasping the edge of the board with his hands, he lifted himself higher but still saw nothing. He was surrounded by blue, blue, and only blue.

“Where? Which direction is it?” he called out to the turtle.

The turtle did not answer and Luke dropped back down against the board and paddled forward toward the turtle, gently thrusting the water behind him.

When he got close, the turtle dipped its head beneath the surface again and darted away, forward for another twenty yards.

“You must know where land is,” Luke yelled out. “You are a sea turtle. You need land to survive!”

Luke followed, this time keeping a distance.

“C’mon, show me. I need your help. I need you to help me to find the land.”

The turtle gazed at Luke for a full thirty seconds, then turned its head and dipped below the surface again.

“Come back here!”

Luke watched and waited. Nearly a minute passed before the turtle resurfaced. This time it was at least forty yards away.

“Hey! Come back here!”

Luke paddled ahead with more determination, struggling now as the distance was much further and his arms were beginning to tire. When he had gained about half the distance to the turtle, he lifted himself up on the board again. He strained his eyes, scouring the horizon, but saw no land. The turtle disappeared again, and Luke paddled forward and waited. After a few minutes the turtle reappeared; a mere black dot on the horizon, nearly seventy yards off, beyond which there was nothing but blue sea and sky.

Luke looked up into the sky. The path was true, he thought. The turtle was moving a straight line.

Paddling harder now, thrusting the water behind him in spurts, Luke pursued. Each time he got close, the turtle would disappear again, and as before, he would reappear further out, lengthening the distance between them.

Luke struggled to keep up. For half an hour he followed the turtle's path, which remained straight and purposeful. After another twenty minutes, the black dot vanished on the blue horizon and Luke did not see it anymore.

It is gone, he thought.

Dark clouds filled the horizon. Within minutes the clouds were upon him, and large raindrops began coming down from the Hawaiian sky. He rolled onto his back and opened his mouth, taking in what water he could, wiping it from his cheeks into his mouth. It felt soothing and quenching against his parched lips and down the narrow of his throat.

As quickly as the storm came, it broke, and now Luke looked up and saw a wonderful rainbow, arching from one side of the horizon to the other. Within ten minutes, the sky was clear and he was back to the doldrums; no ships, no land, only

blue. He was alone again, utterly alone. The turtle had been a godsend, Luke thought, but he was no better off than he was the day before.

He thought of his cheerful life back at the Wailea Hotel, lounging beneath the ceiling fans in the grand lanai, sampling the fresh pineapple and mango brought down by the bellboys each morning. It was all a distant memory.

All of his life, Luke had lived in peace with nature. He had created good karma with it. And when he first saw the turtle, he was hoping he would be able to cash in on that. Instead, he found himself lost and alone once again, drifting on an unforgiving sea.

§

Many minutes passed, or perhaps hours before he heard a splash. He turned and looked around, seeing nothing at first. Then it came back, and like before he saw a dark flash beneath the surface. But this one was different. It was sleeker, faster and not as wide as the turtle. When it finally broke the surface, cresting completely in a beautiful big arch, Luke saw it at last—a large bottlenose dolphin with perfect lines, a dark dorsal fin, and grey, silk-like skin that flashed beneath the sunlight.

As gracefully as it left the water it re-entered it, leaving hardly a splash.

Luke's weary mind was awakened by the spectacle. Having suffered three days of sensory deprivation, he was exhilarated to see the power, grace and speed that the dolphin exhibited. He searched for the animal, down in the water, but could not find it anywhere. Suddenly, stealthily, it came up right in front of him, as if it had been there all along. Its head bobbed completely out of the water. It seemed unafraid. It was so close to Luke that he thought he could reach out and touch it.

A fellow mammal, Luke thought... an air-breather like me. And suddenly, with that realisation, Luke did not feel so all alone.

“Hello!” Luke said.

The dolphin looked back, jovial and jolly-eyed.

“It is Nai`a,” Luke said. “The leaping fish,” referring to an ancient Hawaiian proverb, said of one who jumps to conclusions.

The dolphin flipped over and shot down into the deep blue. In a few seconds it re-emerged in another flying leap, not more than twenty feet away. Luke watched as it splashed back under. Then moving quickly just beneath the surface, it broke again, cresting higher in the air.

It’s performing for me, Luke thought.

The dolphin returned and resumed a position just a few feet away.

“That was tremendous,” Luke said. “Really fantastic!”

The dolphin’s eyes gleamed. It’s head bobbed up and down in the water.

“I need to find land,” Luke said suddenly. “An island or something. Some place where I can stand. Can you help me?”

The dolphin’s eye remained steady on Luke, looking upon him as one looks upon an old friend. It was an intelligent eye, Luke thought, as intelligent as any human eye, with perhaps a greater sensory perception. And it seemed the dolphin understood his plight.

“I must find land soon or I will die. Can you help me?”

With a playful cackle, the dolphin broke and swam quickly away. Stopping thirty yards off, it lifted its head and looked back at Luke.

“Land is there?” Luke asked, yelling out across the water. “It is in that direction?”

The dolphin made another cackling noise and held its position, as if waiting for Luke to follow.

Luke looked up, squinting into the sun. The sun was high in the sky and he could not tell which way was north or south, or east or west, especially at this latitude,

without a hemispheric tilt. There were no points of reference out on the horizon, so he could not gauge his position in that manner. But it seemed to Luke, it was the same direction: the direction in which the turtle had gone. His instincts told him it was so.

“Okay!” Luke said.

The dolphin seemed to be egging him on. It made a shrilling noise and swam backwards quickly, propelling itself in the same direct line away from Luke. Then it dove, beneath the surface, and when it broke in another tremendous arch, further away, it seemed to be following the same directional path.

He is leading me!

Luke paddled hard and fast, trying to keep up. The board glided swiftly over the swells, but as he continued, mustering what strength he had left, he could feel his muscles weakening. His arms began to ache, and feel like dead weights. Ahead the dolphin was waiting.

When he pulled up within ten feet of the dolphin, the dolphin repeated the process; making a shrilling noise, swimming backwards quickly, diving beneath the surface and breaking in a tremendous arch further away, following the same imaginary line.

And Luke followed.

More than eighty yards through the water, Luke pushed on, finally reaching a point where he was close to the dolphin again. Though he continued to paddle, he did so sporadically, with less vigour, coasting now and then, giving his weakened arms a chance to rest.

But now he was utterly exhausted. And he could feel it. Three days at sea had taken their toll. The lack of food and water, the lack of sleep, the bad sunburn: they all weighed in on him. His body had run out of glycogen. Each time he paddled, the distance was shorter and the rest was longer. His arms had become dead things,

dangling uselessly in the water. It was a matter of dehydration. And hopelessness. Eventually, he could go no more; he just lay there on the board, drifting in the water.

When night fell, Luke found himself surrounded by a big, arching Hawaiian sky, filled with stars that came all the way down to the horizon. Though the dolphin remained nearby, there were times when it was not visually present. But always, Luke knew he was not far away.

We are one, Luke thought, brothers from the same earth, who breathe the same air.

Luke felt a primordial kinship with the dolphin, one that reached back to prehistoric times. It is the ancestral oneness of the earth which binds all living things. From the oceans of the ancient world sprung the first life, and from the tide pools crawled the first mammals. All that which rose up from the yeast share a common beginning, Luke thought. And through the millennia, though they had evolved differently, the bond remained. And there was no such bond as the one between man and dolphin. Humans are like animals, intelligent and fun-loving, but also susceptible to earthly dangers and the predatory nature of things.

In the morning, the water was calm. The ocean was flat as a lake; the sun, surreal in its rising; the earth, unusually quiet; and the sky, filled with morning colour, as one could only see in the Hawaiian Islands.

Luke looked around and did not see the dolphin at first. Then the bottlenose rose above the waterline.

“Good morning, Nai`a,” Luke said, though it hurt him to speak now. His throat was dry and coarse, and it was a bit of an effort just to lift his head. He stared at the dolphin, realising he was as strangely foreign as he was familiar.

The dolphin made a playful, cackling sound. He was ready to get on with business. He immediately turned, dipped his long nose beneath the surface, swam swiftly away for twenty yards, then resurfaced.

Luke extended his arms into the water and tried to paddle, but realised he could hardly move. Beside him, the surface of the water moved in a sideways motion and he understood now, he was merely petting the water without moving through it. The fatigue, dehydration and electrolyte depletion he had experienced the previous day had continued its degenerative progression. Now his joints had all but frozen up.

He heard a noise and looked up and saw that the dolphin had returned close to him.

The dolphin made the cackling noise again.

“I cannot,” Luke said.

The dolphin motioned with its head, bobbing directionally, up and down.

“I cannot my friend. I thank you, for what you have done, I thank you for being here, I thank you for trying...” and babbling now, Luke’s voice slowly faded to silence.

Tired and exhausted, Luke closed his eyes. And he went out, for how long he did not know. When he awoke, the sun was high, and he felt himself moving, propelled forward by some unknown device. He could see small wakes trailing along the side of the bodyboard and realized he was being pushed. When he turned he saw the nose of the dolphin flat against the board, pushing it in a forward motion.

Luke tried to raise his head and look up, but he could barely move now, let alone lift his head. What he could see was only blue. Forever blue. It was his favourite colour, and it pleased him to know that it would be his final sight.

Yes, he thought, he had lived all his life at peace with nature. He had created good karma with it, and if that good karma would not return now, then let him stay in the arms of nature, as a child would stay in the arms of its mother, and let the colour blue be the one that engulfs him.

More time passed: an hour, and then two, and then three. In the fog of his mind,

he heard the dolphin cackling, distantly. He forced himself awake and looked up. Not far away was a storm cloud. And beneath it a rainbow. And beneath that was a green strip raising above the blue.

The dolphin cackled more.

Rising higher, Luke squinted with his eyes. What is it? He was not entirely convinced. His mind fought off the vision; it must be delusional. He lay his head against the board and felt himself moving again. The dolphin had resumed its work. The wake took up again, trailing behind the small vessel. Luke pressed his cheek against the board, wondering what form of dream it was. Then he lifted his head and looked a second time, and he saw it again: the green had grown longer and taller.

“You are my brother,” he spoke to the dolphin, “my brother from the tides.”

The dolphin cackled and continued to push, like a tugboat would push a disabled freighter. The small bodyboard, with Luke on it, thrust slowly forward. The green landmass grew closer and larger, and the clouds above the land broke open in a distant rainfall. Luke could see the sheets of rain falling diagonally, and the sunlight crashing through the clouds, and the magnificent, massive rise of green mountains.

The rain came down, across the surf and onto the shoreline of the distant island, filling the tide pools there.

Frank Scozzari is a Pushcart Prize nominee who resides in Nipomo, a small town on the California central coast. His award-winning short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines including The Kenyon Review, Pacific Review, The Nassau Review, The Berkeley Fiction Review, The South Dakota Review, Roanoke Review, Two Thirds North, Reed Magazine, Hawai'i Pacific Review and The MacGuffin, and have been featured in Speaking of Stories, Santa Barbara's preeminent literary theater.

August

by John Abbott

Knives sink to the bottom
Of stagnant dishwater,

Waiting, to be rinsed
Or cut through malaise.

It hasn't rained yet
In this month named for an emperor.

I haven't swum outside
Or showered in the petals

Of the honey locusts:
Street trees flooding the gutters.

John Abbott is a writer, musician and English instructor who lives with his wife and daughter in Kalamazoo, Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Potomac Review, Georgetown Review, Hawaii Pacific Review, Arcadia, Two Thirds North, upstreet, Midwestern Gothic, Bitter Oleander, and many others. His first novel The Last Refrain is now available from Sweatshoppe Publications, and his poetry chapbook Near Harmony is available from Flutter Press. For more information about his writing, please visit <http://www.johnabbottauthor.com>.

Everyday World

by Les Zigomanis

The clock radio's buzzing awoke Sam. His eyes flickered open. Dust mites floated aimlessly in the grey light that streamed through the shutters. Cold seeped into the bed and urged him to get moving.

He threw the covers aside and sat up. His mouth tasted like rotten fruit, and there was a tightness in his back that the day would loosen but never relieve.

He paddled the alarm off and trudged into the bathroom.

§

Sam hauled himself up from the toilet and wiped his butt. There were bright flecks of red on the paper. Once upon a time he might've worried about bowel cancer or something equally dire. Now, he tossed the paper into the toilet, flushed, and then brushed his teeth. There was also blood in the rinse. He watched it swirl down the drain, caught in the whirlpool of toothpaste foam. He shut the tap off, and lifted his face to the bathroom mirror.

A stranger stared back: face pasty, hair receding, shoulders sagging. He drew himself up. Sucked in his stomach. Ran a hand through his greying hair. Kelly wanted him to dye it. She said he'd feel better about himself. Maybe he should. He could even join a gym. He squared his shoulders. He could make a new man of himself.

The phone rang from the bedroom. Sam hurried out and had almost seized the handset when the answering machine beeped.

"Hey, Sam," a woman's voice said, "it's me Joan."

Sam's hand froze above the phone.

"Are you there?"

Sam's hand wavered.

“Pick up if you're there.”

Sam closed his hand. Took a step back from the phone.

“Fine. Three things just quickly. Money wasn't in the bank this week. Kids need new shoes and school uniforms. Can you see to that? I don't want to go back and forth with this, or get lawyers involved.”

Sam smirked. No. Just the mention of lawyers.

“Also,” Joan said, “Denny wants to take piano lessons at school. You know what Denny's like—he'll do it for a couple of weeks and give up. It's not worth wasting the money. So if he asks you about it, discourage him.”

Denny had always been creative. Sam leaned forward, tempted to pick up the phone and defend Denny's right to take lessons. Maybe if he just found something he enjoyed he'd stick with it. And so what if he didn't? He was eight.

“Finally, I know it's meant to be your weekend with the kids,” Joan went on, “but my sister's having a lunch for Robby—a party, because he finally got some Scout badge or other. I don't know. Anyway, I want to take the kids.”

No, Joan. Sam's hand touched the handset. I have plans. Kelly and I were going to take the kids to the zoo and the movies.

“You can have them next weekend. Let me know if that's a problem.”

There was a pause. Almost as if Joan knew he was listening. Daring him. Sam released the handset.

“Okay. Don't forget the money. Bye.” The phone hung up.

Sam retreated to the bathroom.

Sam stood under the shower, trying to let the warm water melt the tension in his muscles. When he was done, he returned to his bedroom and rifled through his closet.

Grey suits confronted him. Kelly hated his wardrobe. She didn't understand the firm wanted their account executives to dress in solid, dependable tones. Joan had. She'd picked out most of these suits for him. Kelly urged him to shop for a whole new wardrobe. Maybe he would. Along with the gym membership and hair dye.

He put on a charcoal-coloured suit and dressed, then laced his tie around his neck. It felt too tight. He couldn't swallow. He loosened the tie and collar and took a deep breath. His chest cramped, and his left shoulder spasmed. That didn't feel right.

But mornings never did.

§

Sam trundled into the kitchen and began making breakfast: he stuck two slices of bread into the toaster, put the kettle on, and poured himself a glass of apple juice.

A stack of mail waited on the kitchen table. It had accumulated over the week. Sam sighed and fanned it across the table like a deck of cards. Most of it was bills. He opened them, grabbed a pen from his lapel pocket and, on one of the envelopes, calculated how much he owed. He scribbled out the figures. He would have to push their deadlines, maybe even run one or two of them to final notices.

The kettle whistled, steam filtering from its funnel. The toaster ejected burnt toast. Sam scraped the toast over the sink and buttered it as the kettle turned itself off. He fixed himself a black coffee, sat at the kitchen table, and lumbered through breakfast.

His scribbles on the envelope caught his eye—a scrawl through the total amount he owed had a bold curve with a serrated hem. Sam turned the envelope, eyes narrowing. He took his pen and pressed it to the envelope. The curve elongated. Before long, he'd doodled an eagle with wings outstretched.

He sat back in his chair and sipped his coffee. Drawing was something he'd wanted to do when he was young. It was amazing how long it had been since he'd remembered that—perhaps ten years. Maybe fifteen.

He sketched in a landscape around the eagle using other envelopes, then fitted them together like jigsaw pieces. It was no masterpiece— a novelty more than anything. But there was an innocent charm about it.

He wished Kelly could see it. She'd gush, encourage him to take up drawing again. He gathered the envelopes into a pile. He could show them to her at dinner tonight. He paused, just as he was about to put the envelopes in his pocket and fanned them on the table again.

No, he was being silly. They were doodles. Nothing more.

He gathered them up and prepared to scrunch them. He stopped himself. Looked at them once more. Scattered them on the kitchen table.

And left the house.

§

Sam lifted his head to face the day. Wind cut through him. He rubbed his hands up and down his arms. The sky was overcast, a ruddy tarpaulin struggling to contain a deluge.

He started down the drive. Thoughts whizzed and exploded in his mind. Joan. The kids. Denny, eight, wanting to play piano. Kelly. Her smile. His own sagging shoulders. His hair, grey. The eagle on the envelope. Being an account executive. Joan telling him when he could have his kids. His house. His bills.

Pain speared through his chest. His breath stuck in his throat. He fell to his right knee, head bowed, and rested a hand on the ground. Heat flushed from his neck up to his cheeks. He loosened his tie but still couldn't catch his breath. His chest tightened and squeezed the air from his lungs.

He grasped for consciousness before it could slip away. The drive swayed before him, like the swell of an ocean, grey and unforgiving. His hand closed on its dimpled surface, felt the texture of it on his palm.

He looked up to the beginning of the yard where the overgrown grass fluttered. A solitary blade sparkled, like an emerald caught in the sunlight. It brightened until it spilled across the lawn and bled into the tyres of his car, which darkened, black as night. The car's enamel glistened like marble while, behind it, his plum tree swayed on the nature strip. Leaves that rustled in the wind bloodied like gunshot wounds. Splatters infected the neighbour's house; the bricks ignited, as if in flame. Trees in their yard recoiled. Blossoms detonated like fireworks while rims of leaves blazed golden as the sun.

Sam's chest bucked like he'd been hit with a defibrillator and his body relaxed. Tears streamed down his face and his hands trembled. His mind stilled. Head lowered, he pushed himself to his feet, legs trembling. He gulped for air and sucked it into his lungs.

Colours ran all around him until they burned, vivifying into a spectrum so glorious Sam wanted to capture them before they escaped. This was the world around him, the world he'd lost in the drudgery of self-pity, the world that was here for him every day.

He smiled grimly, yanked off his tie, and vowed he would not lose it again.

Les Zigomanis is a freelance writer/editor based in Melbourne, Australia. He's had stories and articles published in a bunch of places, and occasionally blogs on his website at <http://www.leszig.com/>.

We, The Boys and Girls

by Matt Denniss

“Why are you crying?” I lean down and put my arms around her. She is heavily made up and in a short, dark red dress that only she could wear. Her lipstick is smeared and her mascara is gone. She shakes her head and nuzzles into my hug.

“As your all-knowing best friend I will restate my recommendation. You need to forget about him,” I say. She lets out a wail and holds up an envelope. I snap it from her hand and take out the photo inside. It’s Marty. With a girl.

“What? Who is this? Where did you get this?”

“It’s Marty,” she sobs.

“No shit. Who’s the girl with her hands on him?” She just shakes her head, doesn’t know. “Well where did you get it?” I ask.

“He sent it to me.”

“Who?”

“Marty.”

“Marty sent you a photo of himself and his new girlfriend?”

“Yeah”

“But I thought he broke up with you?”

“He did,” she says, defeated. Suddenly I understand how dangerous this game can be.

“Jesus,” I say and take my hands off her, afraid to be too close to this obliteration.

Anna

“Can you believe this?” I ask the next day, at coffee with Anna. She looks at it and shrugs “So what? They aren’t fucking.”

“But he broke up with her. I could understand if he was trying to get even, you know. But why would he want to hurt her?”

“Because he’s just like the rest of them. This photo is, like... it doesn’t surprise me. They are capable of much worse. Considering they were together for years she should think herself lucky.”

Anna has been like this forever. It’s not like she’s got some sad story, where her boyfriend fell in love with her mother or something. She hasn’t been burnt. She was born this way. She just doesn’t see the point of wasting time with guys.

“You really still believe all this?” I ask.

“They will do one of two things. They either fuck you, and it can feel good. You might even come. Or they will fuck you, and if you want to know how that feels, go ask Jane.”

“What about Dane? He treats me well,” I say, and can’t imagine him making me feel like Jane. Though I can’t imagine him making me come, either.

“There are no exceptions,” she says, and looks at her coffee.

“There are good guys around. You’re just a cynic. I’d say it was a gimmick if I hadn’t known you for so long.”

A waiter delivers coffee to two old women at the table next to us. He stands to chat for a moment. “Take this guy,” I say, “talking to these older women. Cute. You’re marginalising people like him.”

“That’s Max,” she says. “He got caught with a woman in the bathroom, an older lady, like those ones, while on shift, two, maybe three months ago.”

“What? How do you know?”

“My cousin works here, remember?” I look at the guy. He seems too innocent to be with anyone other than himself.

“So what’s wrong with that? You’ve never had sex anywhere other than a bed?” I ask.

“Well,” she says, smiling, and I know already I’ve lost the argument, “at the time he was dating the manager here. She found them.”

“Jesus.”

”The only reason he kept his job was because she left. She couldn’t be here anymore.”

Then, “Also, this Dane character you’ve been seeing...” she says, as if she hasn’t met him several times in the last few months, “...Elle, it’s a matter of time.”

Dane

I go home and know I should study and not watch TV. I decide to go to Dane’s place instead, both because I don’t want to feel guilty about not studying and because I want to know if he is going to break my heart. He takes a while to answer the door and while I stand there and wait I can’t help but imagine him having sex with old ladies. But when the door opens and he smiles and says my name I know Anna is a deluded extremist and Jane just got unlucky.

“So what are you doing?” I ask as I follow him into the apartment.

“Ahh... nothing much,” he says as he opens the mail I brought up, pulling open a letter and reading it so intently that I doubt he notices me kissing the back of his neck. I put my hand around him and into his pocket, feeling him, no response.

“Fuck,” he says. “My rent is going up. Twelve dollars a week. That’s, like,

hundreds of dollars a year.”

I hug him.

“This is just another hint from the universe that I’ve been at the bar for too long. I need a better job. Jesus, Elle, can you believe you’re with a loser that works a bar and cleans the toilets?”

“You do it with a cool attitude,” I say. “That’s what’s important.”

“Yeah, I know. But I need a better job.”

“Well, you could—”

“Jesus, Elle, let’s not talk about it. I have the same conversation with my mother each week. I just don’t know what I want to do.” He opens the remaining mail and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, Elle. What were you going to say?”

“I forget.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want to have sex?” I ask.

“Umm...”

“Any way you want.”

“Nah. I’m kind of tired. Let’s watch TV instead?”

“Okay,” I say. Huh? I think.

He hands me the remote so I can choose what we watch, but I just leave it on the first thing that comes on. We eat chips and soon the volume drops out of the TV, as it often does, and the only sound in his apartment is the crunch of the chips. I feel like studying would be a better use of time than watching a silent TV and eating

junk food and not talking to a boyfriend that doesn't want to have sex with me. I think about just leaving, or flashing him a breast and then leaving, but instead I tell him about the photo, and what Anna thought of the photo, and what Anna said about him, how he'd fuck me over.

"The photo is a cheap shot," he says. "Tell her to send one back of herself, naked, just to remind him of what he's missing."

"No way. That's how your parents and boss end up seeing you naked after he makes a thousand copies and plasters them on every telegraph pole in a five kilometre radius."

"Yeah, you're right."

"What do you think of what Anna said? About how you're going to break my heart, because that's just what guys naturally do, like growing facial hair." I straighten up and face him, needing to be assured, needing him to promise he'll never do it. But he just shrugs and says "Anna is bulimic."

"Anna wasn't making a personal attack on you."

"And I'm not making a personal attack on her. I'm just saying, you sure you want to be taking advice from someone who has a psychological disorder? It's like this time I got talked into seeing this band that I'd never heard of. This guy, he worked at the bar for a few months, he told me how he'd been really depressed, and, you know, suicidal, and how his doctor recommended he check into this place, basically a mental institution, and he did but had to check out two days later when he found out his health insurance wouldn't cover it, and I knew all this about him but nonetheless I spent my money and went to see this band. And you know what? It was a wannabe eighties glam metal band with two synths hidden at the back of the stage. I mean. Elle, it was terrible. That's when I truly understood how sick this guy was. But too late, I was there and I stood through the whole ninety minutes of it.

"That's a long bow to draw," I say, "associating Anna, who, yeah, vomits food, with some depraved freak who should be under close monitoring at a mental health

care facility.”

He laughs, “Still, he was a nice guy.”

“Will you say that after the guy takes a gun to my uni campus and starts shooting the place up?”

“I think he’d rather use a knife.”

“Is bulimia even that bad?” I ask. “I mean, I know girls, and boys, party people, who drink so much that they vomit two, three, four times a week. And usually they’re in such a state of intoxication that they vomit on themselves or other people, or in the middle of clubs, or in taxis, unlike Anna, who I am sure is very civil about the whole thing. She’d be clean and hygienic and always flush the toilet immediately after. Should we be looking at it as a valid weight loss strategy in our increasingly obese society?”

“Elle, the vomit isn’t the issue. Yeah, stomach acid will strip the lining of your throat and stain your teeth, but breathing in carbon dioxide is bad for you, and staring at a computer screen for hours doing a uni assignment actually kills brain cells, so everyone is always ruining themselves. It comes down to the fact that it’s a psychological disease. So I would say, yeah, bulimia is a negative.”

The television sound suddenly fills the room and it’s a woman moaning, reaching climax. It’s an actress who became famous from a home sex tape scandal and it’s an ironic case of art imitating life imitating art. It makes me wonder again why we aren’t having sex and then I realise that he hasn’t assured me or promised me anything and all I’ve got out of him is that Anna’s problem is wrecking her really nice teeth that her parents paid thousands of dollars in orthodontic work for.

“I’ve just realised I need to be studying,” I say. “Walk me to the door?”

He opens the door and leans down and kisses me goodbye, tells me I have beautiful eyes and it makes me ask “Why aren’t we having sex?”

His eyes grow wide and he ducks his head out the door, checking the hallway.

“Jesus, Elle.”

“Well, is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you want to have sex?”

It’s the first time I’ve seen him embarrassed.

“I, um... because I jerked off just before you arrived. Sorry.”

“Oh. Okay,” I smile. “Bye.”

The door closes behind me and I feel like skipping down the hallway but don’t. I constrain myself like a grown up would, but grin like a maniac all the way to my car.

Jamie

“Have you ever spoken to someone,” Jamie says and the edge of his lips curve into a smirk, “and the next day they kill themselves?”

“Eww. Jamie, I came to look at your paintings, not hear about your weird fetishes”.

“Elle, you’re such a prude.”

“Maybe compared to you.” The paintings he has shown me are bad, but I tell him they’re good. I’ve known Jamie for as long as I can remember, because our parents went to prenatal classes together. Now his mum is gone and he hates his dad so I guess he feels like I’m the only family he has left.

“Do you, like, get it?” he asks. We’re in the middle of his empty apartment and looking at a series of three works leaning against a wall. Dark greens, purples and grey smeared on what Jamie says is the best canvas you can buy. Standing here it

seems like a bit of a waste.

“Well? Do you get it?” he demands. When I don’t respond he leans his head over in my direction as if I might have a different view. “Of course you don’t get it. You’re not arty.”

“I’m arty.”

“You’re as arty as an ‘I love my job’ accountant who plays Sudoku all weekend and watches The History Channel.”

“No, I’m arty in the way I live my life. I have my own creative interpretation of life. Some would even say that I’m a great thinker, maybe even cool.” I laugh.

“Not me.”

“Well then, what am I supposed to be getting? Enlighten me.” He turns to walk into the kitchen, shaking his head.

“You shouldn’t laugh” he says, “It’s not a joke. I’m serious.”

If I didn’t feel sorry for him already I do when he says, “Each piece stands alone to tell a story but together they convey the tales of lost souls, ever searching for truth and meaning in a world that has given up on them.”

“Oh,” I say. “Cool.”

“Yeah,” he says, “that’s generally the response.”

“So people like it?”

“No. Its sucks, doesn’t it?”

“No. Well maybe a little. Maybe try focusing on something a little simpler.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Things that other artists focus on. Love?”

“You think that’s simple?”

“I guess not.”

“Jesus. How the fuck would I paint love?”

I sit on a beanbag at the edge of the room and notice a hole smashed in the window. A chipped piece of brick is lying in front of me. Broken glass is scattered across the floor and I guess Jamie has just been walking around it. He probably thinks it’s artistic. I don’t mention the photo because Jamie and Jane never got on so well. The last time I brought her here she said, “Just because mummy and daddy aren’t home doesn’t mean you can smear shit on the wall.” It got her banned from all of Jamie’s future art exhibitions. I watch him gaze at his works, wondering where he went wrong. Jamie wouldn’t hurt anyone, other than himself.

“So, have you ever seen someone smiling and the next day they kill themselves?” he asks and I roll my eyes.

“No. Why?”

“Oh, I’ve just heard it’s a bit of a trip.”

Mum

I speak to my mum that night because she likes to hear about Jamie. I tell her how he has dedicated his life to a painting and that his paintings are terrible.

“The last thing that boy needs is another disappointment. After what happened between his mother and father.”

“Well he was talking about suicide,” I say, and smile to myself as my mother begins ranting about young people and drugs and death.

“I know, I know,” I say to her, “I told him just to keep it simple. Paint Love.”

“How on earth could he do that?”

“I don’t know. I’m not the painter.”

“Elle, you might have rose-tinted glasses about love now, but it’s not what you think.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Honey, love is mathematical. If you want to search for true love in seven billion people, you’ll be looking all your life. You’ll know you’ve found the right partner when you determine that the expected quality of all previous and future matches is lower than your current partner, based on an analysis of personal traits and lifestyle preferences. Taste and money matters more than all this nonsense about soul mates.”

“Oh. But that’s so... cold.” I can’t believe what I’m hearing from my own mother. She used to write poetry. I wonder if it’s because of what happened with Dad. I say I’m tired and that I’ve got to go and she says something about “love and war” as I hang up. All I can think about is that I don’t like mushrooms, which are Dane’s favourite food. Fucking mushrooms.

Marty

I see Marty the following day.

“Elle, how are you?”

“Well, I’m about to get my heart broken over mushrooms, and you’re a dick.”

His eyes widen and he suddenly looks like a little boy, incapable of the destruction of my friend. “Let’s get some coffee?” he offers.

“Okay,” I say. “You’re buying.”

We find a shop and order.

“So why’d you do it?” I ask, good friend, bad cop. I fold my arms.

“I’m sorry that Jane is sad, of course I am, but Elle, it’s like what Bob Dylan said, when something’s not right it’s wrong. I didn’t feel like there was a reason for us to be together anymore. Maybe I could have treated her a little better toward the end there, like that night where I told her I didn’t think she was as smart as me, and that all the books and music and films she likes are made from a formula designed for fourteen year olds with too much pocket money. But it was over a long time ago. Why waste any more time? And it’s not like she was innocent. She tried to convince me my grandfather was gay, and that if we were to ever have kids we couldn’t let him see them. I mean, what the fuck? The night she got really high she told me she dreams of her ex-boyfriends all the time. She told me she was bored with sex but then refused to try any new positions. The list goes on. I’ve been over it all in my head. It had to end.”

“So you sent her that photo because she wouldn’t try new sex positions?”

“Photo?”

I dig it out of my bag and place it in front of him. “The photo you used to destroy my friend. You might as well have paid Mike Tyson to take a swing at her. It would have hurt less.”

“The fuck is this?” he asks.

“Like you don’t know.”

“That’s not my photo. It was taken at the zoo. On Abby’s camera.”

“Who is Abby?” I ask and he points at the girl in the photo. He becomes tense and I don’t want to say anything.

“Abby sent this to Jane?” he stares at the photo in disbelief.

“I’m sorry, Marty,” I say.

“For what?” he snaps. “The fact that Jane is hurt and that I’m being charged as a sociopath, or that my girlfriend is the sociopath?” It’s strange hearing him say ‘my girlfriend’ and not be referring to Jane. “Why would she do that?”

“Marking her territory,” I offer, and I realise Marty, and Dane and Jamie all need to be afraid too, not just us girls.

He slumps back in his chair and sighs, “You think you know someone. Shit.”

“Yeah,” I say, and wonder what Dane is doing. I chew my nails. “It’s like, you know when you see someone smiling and the next day they kill themselves?”

And he says “Yes.”

And I say “Oh.”

Matt is an environmental scientist who balances the cold scientific methodology of his professional life with the colour and warmth of words and music. He is hungry and angry but not fat or mean. He likes storms at the end of a hot day and writes short stories while listening to 90s rock. Matt’s work has appeared in Regime Magazine, Word Riot, Vibewire, Surreal Grotesque, Flash Fiction Offensive, Zinewest and Hypallage. Matt’s story “Sham” appeared in Issue Two of Tincture Journal.

Summer People

by Tom Andes

When we broke up in May, Anne said she needed some space and some time to think things through. We broke up again when she came to Michigan for the Fourth, and this time it was because I needed space, she said. We patched things up over the phone a few weeks later. Now we were spending the last week of our vacation with her parents and her kid brother at their summer camp in Wakefield, New Hampshire. That was our reconciliation—one week in the boondocks with her family. Anne would drive back to school in Burlington, Vermont at the end of the week, and I would fly to Italy for a semester abroad.

I kissed her one night down by the water. She was pliant, if not enthusiastic. The sun set in rich, brassy tones over the lake, and it made everything on the horizon turn black, like gilded bronze. Crickets trilled in the woods, and the water licked the dock. I slid my hand under Anne's shirt. I slid it higher until I encountered some resistance.

"Mike," Anne said into my lips. She gritted her teeth and pushed my chest. I looped my arms around her waist and pulled her closer. I ground up against her, but she leveraged me away.

I followed her gaze to the perimeter of trees beyond the boathouse, where a scrubby trail meandered down the hill from the cabin. Fletcher, the kid brother, came flying down the hill, his face streaming tears, his fists balled. He levelled his head at my crotch and charged, and I barely had time to snatch my hand out from under Anne's shirt before he was on me.

"Whoa, there," I told him, and stuck the heel of my hand to his forehead like I was palming a basketball. While I was thus occupied, Anne readjusted her bra, and smoothed down her shirt.

"Fletcher, come on," she said.

“Come and get it,” I told him, squeezing his forehead. His fists windmilled inches from my crotch.

“Mike,” Anne said sharply.

Fletcher flopped onto his back and started writhing on the dock. His face turned the colour of a plum, and the tortured breaths he took between sobs made it sound like he was suffocating.

“You guys,” Anne said, shaking her head.

Her brother convulsed on the worn planking at my feet.

“I didn’t even touch him,” I said.

Anne rolled her eyes. In the dusky light, her face looked like melting wax, limned blue and gold by the setting sun. She folded her arms across her belly, as if she’d grown cold. “He’s just at that age. He gets lonely up here.”

“What is this, some kind of Freudian thing?”

Anne made a baffled face. “Jesus.”

She turned and left the two of us there. I watched her picking her way back up the hill, shoulders slumped forward as she leaned into the slope and wound her way up the overgrown trail. Fletcher kicked the dock. Then he lay there shuddering. Maybe he was hyperventilating.

The next day, Anne went to town with her folks—shopping, the hairdresser’s, something. All I’d seen when we drove through the village were a couple of rinky-dink breakfast places and a country store.

It was a hot, clear day, the kind of day you get at the end of August in the Great Northeast. The sun shimmered on the water in the lake, and cirrus clouds made ragged patches high up where the sky curved back on itself like the inside of a seashell. Fletcher was squatting in the shade beside the boathouse—sulking, no

doubt, because they'd left him behind. He wore a baggy pair of blue running shorts, and his tee-shirt hung from his frame like a tent. He was trying to skip stones on the water, and he was so thoroughly absorbed in the task that I came down the hill just as easy as you please and walked up right behind him. Gnats swarmed in the shade, and the wind rustled the long grasses under the trees along the shore. I pushed him in, and he came up a few feet out, sputtering lake-water.

“Next time it'll be the toilet,” I told him.

He tried to splash me, but he couldn't reach to where I was standing. He cried, and I thought I might have overdone it. But then he nearly pelted me with a rock while I was walking back up the hill to the cabin, and only the sound of a car coming up the gravel road toward the camp saved him—a false alarm, it turned out. But by then, I didn't have the heart to go after him again.

That was Tuesday. The next morning, Fletcher tagged along, but he kept his distance. I looked back while Anne and I were out walking, and there he was, maybe a hundred yards behind us on the old logging road that skirted the lake, glowering at me. He poised like a rabbit on the balls of his feet by the woods along the side of the road. I met his furious gaze. Anne stubbed the joint out on the heel of her shoe and tucked it back into her pack of cigarettes. If she'd seen him, she didn't say anything.

That night, we sat down by the dock, watching the campfires flicker like match-heads on the far shore, listening to the water lap at the pilings, when I looked over and saw him, Fletcher, squatting against the weeping willow beside the boathouse, glaring at us through the darkness.

“What's gotten into him, anyway?” Anne eyed her brother in the guttering light of the citronella candle.

I shrugged. Maybe the kid was stalking us. It was still a vast improvement over trying to wrestle me away from his sister every time I touched her. I helped myself to another beer from the cooler and opened it with Anne's lighter. A warm breeze blew and died as suddenly as it started, and Anne swatted a mosquito on her arm.

She sat up on her lawn chair, a bottle of beer sweating between her thighs.

“There’s something wrong with him.”

“No kidding,” I said.

She lit a cigarette from the candle and sank back in her chair. She sipped from her beer, stretched her legs, and sighed. “You don’t have to be such a prick to him. He doesn’t understand what’s going on with us.”

Anne started collecting her things—towel, magazines, cigarettes, sunscreen, lighter. I swilled the rest of my beer. I blew the citronella candle out and watched a plume of smoke curl out of the squat aluminium bucket. We left the cooler and all the empty bottles on the dock. Fletcher disappeared. But just in case the kid was lurking somewhere, I put my arm over Anne’s shoulder while we climbed the hill. I let my hand slide past her bikini strap and under her tee-shirt to the small of her back. My hand slid lower, and I grabbed a handful of ass while we climbed.

Anne elbowed me in the ribs and stomped up the trail to the cabin. I watched her digging at her bikini as she disappeared through the sliding glass doors.

Inside, she granted me a tentative goodnight kiss.

“Why don’t you brush your teeth before you go to bed,” she told me, patting me on the cheek.

§

“Italy,” Mrs Gordon sighed, her eyes going all moony. She wore cut-offs and a white blouse I could see through well enough to tell the colour of her bra. She shelled peas into a colander on her lap and dropped the pods into a paper shopping bag. She was forty-seven, and she looked good for her age—pretty, well-tanned and freckled, with streaky copper hair and green eyes. Except for the fact she carried a little excess weight, you could hardly tell she’d popped two kids out, and one of them so late in life. “You must be so excited,” she said, snapping open a pod and prying the peas out with the ball of her thumb.

The sour smell of the peas filled the kitchen. Big, broad beams of sunlight angled in the windows at the back of the house. “I was thinking maybe I’d stay for a second semester.” I invented that for Anne’s benefit. “For a whole year.”

“Now’s the time to do it. It won’t be so long before you’re tied down.” Mrs Gordon cast a knowing glance at her daughter. “Then you won’t get to go anywhere till you’re old.”

As if for emphasis, she snapped open another pod and scooped out the peas.

“He’s all talk, anyway.” Anne was sitting at the table, pretending to read the newspaper while she munched crossly on a butter and jelly sandwich. We’d already gone up the road for her morning fix, and Fletcher had followed, as usual, before he’d run off to do God knew what. I half expected to find him lurking under Anne’s chair. “You watch. He won’t make it two months over there. It won’t be Thanksgiving before he’s calling me up in the middle of the night, crying that he wants to come home to Mommy.”

I didn’t know whether Anne meant my biological mother or herself.

Mrs Gordon rolled her eyes. She set the colander on the table and stood, stretching like a cat. Out the window, I could see blue sky, the pointy trees, the lake shimmering under the sun. Mrs Gordon folded the shopping bag over on itself and carried it into the kitchen, where they had separate bins for compost, recyclables, and regular garbage. Even in New Hampshire, Mrs Gordon had informed me, they cared about the environment. “All I know is you two better invest in some calling cards before you go.” She closed the cabinet door and started rinsing the peas. “Those international rates will kill you.”

Anne wiped a ribbon of milk from her lip with the back of her hand. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll call.”

She polished off her sandwich and took her plate to the sink. Anne had inherited her mother’s figure. I counted myself lucky, but Anne complained about her figure. “Thunder-thighs,” she’d say, scowling over her shoulder at her backside

in the mirror. “I’m getting fluffy,” pinching the flesh around her middle until it turned white.

We met on the most awkward double date in history, one arctic night during our freshman year. Our mutual friends were high school sweethearts from some resort town outside Tampa—voted king and queen of their senior prom, the whole nine yards. Dez was a meathead, Sarah one of those eighteen-year-old neurotics who’d already turned into her mother. As for me, I had one girl who put out, but I didn’t like to be seen with her, and I had another girl who’d kept me waiting. When Dez asked me that Friday, I thought, what the hell? I went along, never expecting it would change my life. I could tell Anne had been playing second-fiddle to girls like Sarah all her life. But I’d take a 7 if it meant peace of mind, if a perfect 10 meant attitude to match and every guy I knew trying to get down my girlfriend’s pants.

That night, Sarah chain-smoked Marlboro Lights and gulped beer until she hiccupped. Dez called her a whore, and she threw a beer in his face. He lumbered into the snow and went looking for a fight at a fraternity party while I helped Anne walk Sarah back to the dorms. I perused the books on their shelves and breathed the good, clean smell of two girls living together. Through the door, I watched while Anne held Sarah’s hair, rubbing her back while she puked into the toilet across the hall.

Snow whipped at the windows. Moonlight played across Anne’s pale thighs, and the shadows of the Venetian blinds made bars between her legs.

“Oh, no. We’re not going to have sex, are we?” Anne propped herself up on her elbows when I peeled her panties down.

I just wanted to go down on her. But Anne had a boyfriend waiting for her back home. Of course she did.

We’d sealed the deal by the end of the week. I kept a room on campus, but I’d been all but living with Anne since the beginning of our sophomore year. On our prearranged nights apart, we ended up talking on the phone for an hour. We were just like her parents. We kept the rubbers in a drawer on her side of the bed, the

porn in a drawer on mine.

Maybe she had put on a few pounds over the summer. That was fine with me. She'd always had a very pleasing pear shape, and so help me if I wasn't getting excited right there at the table.

She folded her arms across her chest. She leaned against the counter, narrowing her almond-shaped eyes at me. "What do you think you're looking at?"

I shrugged. I didn't say anything.

§

"I see you two drank all the beer last night," Mr Gordon observed when he came in, setting the Igloo cooler by the door. Anne's father was a good looking guy, but his shorts dated him. They were tight all over, like basketball players used to wear in the seventies.

"Give it a rest, Phil." Mrs Gordon rolled her eyes. On the stove, bacon crackled in a pan. "It's too early to start all that."

"Early?" He chuckled. Then his face darkened. "There was half a case of beer in that cooler," he said to his wife.

"They're just kids. We were young once, too, weren't we? Remember?"

"Nope." Mr Gordon broke a toothy grin. He hooked his arm around his wife's waist and gave her a playful little pat. "I don't remember anything." He winked at me. "Deny everything. Right, Mike?"

"Right," I said.

"How's our international traveller?" Mr Gordon came and stood behind me, gripping me by the shoulders where I sat at the table.

"A-OK, Mr G," I said.

“Alright.” He squeezed my shoulders and shook me where I sat in the chair.

“God, Dad. Will you cut it out?” Anne had dug a bag of baby carrots out of the refrigerator, and she was dipping them in a jar of Marie’s blue cheese dressing on the counter. “My head’s still killing me.”

“It serves you right,” he said, wagging his finger at Anne. “Half a case of beer,” he told his wife again.

“There was not,” Anne said through a mouthful of carrot, dabbing a gob of dressing from her chin. “He’s lying, Mom.”

“Phil,” his wife admonished him.

“I’ll bet she drank it all, too, didn’t she?” Mr Gordon said, casting a sly glance my way.

I didn’t like being enlisted into a conspiracy against his daughter. There was no pleasing both of them. “Well,” I said, hemming and hawing and trying to figure out how I was going to stay in everybody’s good graces.

Anne saved me the trouble. Her face squeezed up into the plainly disgusted look I’d heretofore thought it was my exclusive privilege to elicit with but a few carelessly chosen words. It relieved me to know her father could summon it so easily. I’d already started to fill his shoes.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she announced, and she left the bag of carrots and the jar of dressing open on the counter.

§

Next to the hovels along the shore of Lovell Lake, the Gordons’ modest cabin looked as indomitable as one of the grand old homes in the village. It perched like a battleship at the top of a hill, commanding a view from horizon to horizon. Through the big bay windows in the kitchen, you could see the cluster of white buildings that comprised the village on the south shore of the lake, the narrow strip of sand that

was the public beach, and the tiny gas station and bait and tackle shop huddled on the verge of the piney wilderness beyond. Blue mountains reared up in the distance, enveloped in a sunny haze that made them seem a shadow of the sky.

Anne's father had designed the place and done most of the work on it himself. Just about everything, he said, but lay the foundation. In what he liked to call his first life, he'd been a general contractor. But the year Fletcher was born, when Anne was ten, he'd fallen three and a half stories from a faulty scaffolding, fracturing three vertebrae and crushing his spine. The doctors told him he'd never walk again. Thanks to a Boston chiropractor, he proved them wrong. After he convalesced, he quit drinking and sued the scaffolding company. And what had he done with his settlement? Had he taken the family to Aruba, sent the kids to Harvard, Princeton, or Yale?

He'd gone back to school and become a chiropractor himself.

"I'm telling you, if I'd listened to the experts at Boston General, I'd be a cripple," he said as he took his place at the head of the table Thursday evening. He was some kind of health nut, too. Besides booze, he'd given up smoking, eating meat, drinking coffee. Up at the crack of dawn, he ran five miles before he stepped in the shower. He sat there munching on a plate of steamed vegetables and rice, watching the rest of us devour the marinated tri-tips he'd prepared on the grill, as if he enjoyed not just witnessing but abetting us as we clogged our arteries, plugged our colons up, and polluted our intestinal tracts.

Mrs Gordon put her fork down, chewing around a bit of gristle. I wondered if their sex life reflected the same Spartan regime, if there were certain positions, certain times of the day or month.

"That's the difference between chiropractic medicine and so-called scientific Western medicine," he went on, making little quote marks in the air with his fingers. He picked a floret of broccoli off his plate and bit the head off with his impeccable teeth, chewing it to a pulp. "Chiropractic medicine, you're dealing with root causes, the real problem—usually lifestyle issues." He made a dismissive

gesture. “Western medicine nowadays, there’s hardly anything scientific about it. All doctors do is, they treat the symptoms. They write you a scrip and send you on your way. Six months later, you’re back, only everything is worse. What do they do then? More drugs.” He shrugged. “The pharmaceutical industry is the second biggest industry in this country, second only to defence.”

Beside me, Anne yawned and rolled her eyes. Fletcher was mashing his peas into a sticky green paste with the back of his fork. Once, I’d thought Mr Gordon singled me out for these sermons because my father was a doctor—a real doctor, one who’d actually gone to medical school. But evidently the rest of the family was as sick of hearing him rant as I was. Not that I cared what he had to say about my father. I wanted to know where drinking figured into the equation. Had he given up the booze along with everything else? Or was he drunk when he’d fallen off the scaffolding?

“Don’t listen to a word he says.” Mrs Gordon winked at me, simpatico. “You can’t shut him up once he gets started. More peas?” she asked, a little too brightly, and she passed me the bowl across the table.

“Have some more steak,” Mr Gordon boomed. He reached across the table, stabbed a hunk of meat with the serving fork, and scraped it onto my plate, where it steamed in its puddle of brown and red juices. “The stuff sits in your colon for fifteen years, did you know that?” He laughed, grinning at me through a mouthful of green. “It rots there.”

“All right, Phil. I think we’ve heard just about enough out of you for the evening.” Mrs Gordon placed a hand on her husband’s arm, gently but firmly restraining him, and the rest of the meal passed in silence. The light drained from the windows while I chewed my steak and considered the lamentable state of my bowels.

§

Late the next morning, Anne and I went for a drive. Anne had been driving the same silver Honda Civic since I met her. She’d driven it to Burlington from Lowell,

Massachusetts at the beginning of her freshman year.

The tires fishtailed on the gravel as we wound out of the hills, away from the camp and toward the main road to the village. While she drove, Anne sucked on a Marlboro Light, and she flicked ashes at the window. As if to forestall the possibility of conversation, she turned up the radio and stepped on the gas.

We were rounding a curve when she lost control. The road forked, veering sharply to the left, while a smaller trail, barely wide enough for two cars to pass, wound up through the trees. Anne cut the wheel over hard—we must have been doing fifty by then—and I felt the back tires start to slide.

I reached for the Jesus Grip, the handle above the door. I dug my feet in, feeling for the floor under the soda cans and the fast food wrappers. As we bounced in and out of the drainage ditch along the side of the road, I heard a clunk as a pine bough hit the metal.

We careened the rest of the way down the hill like a pinball, and we slid halfway across the main road before we finally came to a stop, facing the wrong way on a diagonal across the oncoming lane. Sunlight fell between the branches of the trees, illuminating pillars of billowing dust.

I let go of the handle above the door. I plucked the cigarette from between Anne's lips. She stared at the cigarette smouldering between my fingers like she'd never seen one before in her life.

I pitched the butt out the window. I switched the radio off. "I think we need to talk."

Anne started the engine and put the car back in gear. She executed a flawless three-point turn in the middle of the road, aiming us toward the village. "So talk," she shrugged, and she let up on the clutch and jumped on the gas so the back of my head hit the seat.

We were moving again. The tires hummed, singing on the blacktop. A vista

opened up on our left, the lake a cool blue under a bluer sky. Gravel lanes wound away through the trees.

I didn't know what to say. She always left it up to me to start these conversations. It was foremost among her methods of winning the argument. Tactically, it was brilliant. It amounted to arguing without arguing. She clammed up and waited for me to put my foot in my mouth.

"I guess you're still mad," I said. The engine whined as we passed a tractor climbing a hill, and I had to shout to hear myself.

Anne shook her head. "I don't think I'm mad at you. Maybe a little disappointed." She pursed her lips. She peered at me across the car, narrowing her eyes to slits. "Do you think I'm still mad at you?"

The floorboards shuddered under my feet as she swerved back across the double yellow, fifty feet from a pickup in the oncoming lane. If I answered yes, it was no doubt the result of my own guilty conscience. If no, I wouldn't get another word out of her the rest of the weekend. I shrugged.

"That's twice you've just about killed us this morning," I said, trying not to sound hysterical about it.

Anne seemed to consider that. She gnawed on her lip and drummed her fingers on the wheel. As she accelerated into the last, long curve before we reached the village, her shirtsleeve billowed in the wind.

"What if I told you I was pregnant?"

I just about gagged on whatever I was going to say. I hit my door, hard. "That's not even funny."

"You'd leave anyway, wouldn't you? Don't try to tell me you wouldn't because you would. Maybe you were right. Maybe we should put everything on hold until you get back and see where it stands then."

The bottom dropped out from under the car as we plummeted down a hill and into the village.

“What are you talking about? You want to break it off? Fine, we’ll break it off. Just don’t threaten me.”

The tires squealed as we came to a stop, and I braced myself against the dashboard.

“I bet you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Then you’d get to sleep with whoever you want while you’re over there. Well, that’s fine. You sleep with whoever you like while you’re over there, and I’ll sleep with whoever I like while I’m back here. I’m glad we’ve got that out of the way.” Anne smacked the steering wheel. “That’s just great.”

We sat under the red light at the three-way intersection in the middle of town. Up ahead, a drab brick building the colour of an avocado advertised itself as the Poor People’s Pub.

“Why don’t we just try to have a good time this weekend?”

Anne tapped her finger on the wheel. “You mean you just want to get laid before you go.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that. I thought we’d done all right so far that week, the kid brother notwithstanding. My plane didn’t leave for two days. Short of sacking out in a hotel until Sunday, I had no place to go.

The light turned green, and we drove through the village in silence. Men loaded bags of charcoal and bags of ice onto the bed of a pickup in front of the supermarket, and a woman came out of the Century 21 office across the street, cradling a bunch of roses. The other restaurant was already closed for the day, a diner that called itself the Ring-A-Ding Café. It occupied the old train station, a black building with the silhouette of an oncoming locomotive painted on the side.

While she drove, Anne craned her neck to watch the road and dug through the

laundry on the floor behind her seat. She fished her purse out and rummaged through it until she came up with a crushed cigarette box. She shook a joint onto her lap, stuck it between her lips, and cupped her hand around the end of it, trying to hold the lighter steady while she steered with her elbows.

“I swear to God,” I told her, rubbing my eyes. “You make the most bizarre shit up in your head.”

“Will you shut up for a second?” Anne scowled while she sucked back a mouthful of smoke. “Jesus Christ, this whole thing is killing me. I think I’m going to be sick. Here.” She thrust the joint at me across the car. “Why don’t you smoke some of this? Maybe it’ll help you relax.”

We stopped at the top of a hill in front of a ramshackle clapboard building with a green and white striped awning hanging over the front. Outside, a hand-painted sign said Fruits and Vegetables in red letters. Tiny blue flowers trembled among the weeds beside the porch, under the shadow of the awning. Anne killed the engine and leaned her head against the seat. She closed her eyes and started massaging her temples. I offered her the joint, but she didn’t open her eyes, so I stabbed it out in the ashtray and stepped out of the car, wiping the gummy resin off the tips of my fingers.

When I came back from the fruit stand a few minutes later, she sat on the hood of the car. She wore a frayed pair of cut-offs and a pastel pink cotton top. She scowled while she picked at a mosquito bite on the back of her arm.

I set the berries on the hood of the car. “You’re just going to make it worse if you keep picking at it.”

Anne sighed. She looked around, as if taking stock of our surroundings. Beads of sweat clung to the tiny hairs at the corners of her mouth. The car ticked underneath her.

“Are you all right?” I touched her shoulder, but she shrugged my hand away.

“I’m fine.”

“But you were just kidding, right? Back there, I mean.” I gestured down the road, where the village nestled between the hills.

She didn’t say anything. Her hazel eyes brimmed in the liquid light.

§

If I was any kind of man, when Anne and I got back to the camp that afternoon, I would have cancelled my flight. I would have called the college in Burlington and told them to cancel my enrolment in the study abroad program, and I wouldn’t have worried about the money I’d already spent or the opportunity passing. I would have stuck by Anne and seen this thing through to the end, whatever it meant for the two of us. The first thing I did when we got back to the cabin that afternoon was, I went swimming.

I snatched my trunks off the hook in the bathroom. I fished a towel out of the hamper. Mrs Gordon was musing over a cup of tea at the table in the kitchen, and she cocked her head at me curiously as I passed.

“Did you sleep OK?”

Barring some kind of breakdown—and I couldn’t rule that out—no way was Anne going to tell her parents anything. At least, if she’d managed to hide the fact she was pregnant for the better part of two months, I figured a few more days couldn’t kill her.

I shuffled into my flip-flops and made hastily for the door. “I slept fine,” I told her. “Why?”

Mrs Gordon shrugged, muting a yawn. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks.” I took off before the woman could say anything else. I picked my way down the trail on the side of the hill, shielding my eyes as I walked out to the end of the dock. How did I know the baby was mine? Maybe Anne didn’t know

whose it was herself. Maybe she'd only fingered me because I was the usual suspect. I knew she still had a thing for that ex-boyfriend in Lowell. We'd been fighting all spring and all summer. We'd been fighting practically since the day we met, now that I thought of it.

For that matter, Anne had missed her period before—I was sure it could happen. She'd probably made the whole thing up, invented it in her mind. She'd just about blown a gasket over the whole Italy thing. Maybe the prospect of me gallivanting around the Old World while she was stuck in boring old Burlington, Vermont with no way to keep an eye on me, no way to tell when I was coming home or where I was sleeping at night—maybe that had finally pushed her over the edge. Or—even worse—she'd invented it out of spite, and this whole confabulation was her way of punishing me for going abroad without her.

A sailboat passed slowly across the lake, its sail unfurled against the limpid haze. Somewhere in the distance, a motorboat revved its engine. A woman screamed. I stared through the water at the sandy white ridges on the bottom of the lake, where the pilings were moored fast to the earth.

I stood there for as long as I could bear it. Then I took my shirt off and threw it in the grass at the foot of the dock. I kicked my flip-flops off, sprinted the length of the dock, and dove.

I broke the surface like the blade of a knife, felt the shock of impact, immersion, then a slow, slippery friction as I moved under the water, and it tugged at the hair on my chest and my arms. I swam out to the end of the cove where the Gordons' camp nestled, where the water turned a deeper shade of glittering blue. I stopped there, treading water, and stared back at the cabin. It perched at a cockeyed angle at the top of the hill, a pork-pie hat on the head of an enormously fat man. Sunlight glinted on the windows. I scissored my legs, wrenching my arms from side to side. The water was warm around my shoulders, chill by my feet, where the bottom yawned beneath me.

I plugged my nose and dove. I let myself sink like a stone. I sank through

darker, cooler layers of water until my feet settled in the muck and the silt at the bottom of the lake, fifteen, maybe twenty feet down. All that water above me, and my body wanted to rise. I paddled with my arms to keep myself down. When I opened my eyes, funny corkscrew shapes swam through the murk, tiny spirals of light that looked like the microscopic organisms we'd scraped onto slides in high school biology and stained with iodine. The sun wavered above me, a forty watt bulb trembling behind a fluid green veil. It cast a greenish-yellow light down through the water, splitting apart like an amoeba as air bubbles floated upward, and the wind rippled the surface. I imagined myself a corpse. I imagined my body floating slipshod and bloated among the gently waving reeds at the bottom of the lake. I let myself float down there for half a minute, maybe longer. I waited until my lungs felt like they were going to collapse, until the water around me seemed to throb with my pulse. I waited until my head spun, and the light above me went dark around the edges. When I pushed off against the bottom, I sank up to my ankles. As I strained upward, something seemed to clutch me, pulling me back. The water worked against me. It gripped my limbs, as dense and thick as jelly, while the mirrored green surface and that yellow clot of light rushed toward me as if in slow motion, like a car windshield about to explode. When my head broke the surface, I let out a hoarse scream that resounded like a gunshot in that tiny cove as I sucked air back into my lungs. Black spots swam in front of my eyes. My head felt like it was floating off my shoulders, and my heart knocked against my spine.

I lay on my back and paddled out further, out into the main body of the lake, squinting against the sunlight, working my arms and my legs until I lay there and let myself float. A motorboat roared past the mouth of the cove, and I rolled over its wake like a log, kicking to keep myself afloat, staring at the sky. I looked at the shore. All around the lake, pale green deciduous dipped toward the water. Among the trees, darkened windows on the sides of ramshackle cabins reflected ragged tatters of sky. A weeping willow clung to the tiny spit of land at the mouth of the Gordons' cove. Beneath its branches, driftwood protruded from the mud along the shore.

I swam back in, and I hauled myself up onto the dock, where I stood dripping

onto the grey, weather-beaten wood. I sat on the planking while I let the sun dry my shoulders. I peered over the edge of the dock, where a school of minnows zigzagged, feeding in the sunlit water near the pilings.

I climbed the hill and stood by the sliding glass doors on the back of the cabin while I finished towelling off. I wrapped the towel around my waist and put my flip-flops on before I went inside.

In the kitchen, a pot boiled over on the stove. Orange flames leapt from the gas burner and licked the stainless steel. Upstairs, Anne yelled something; I didn't catch what. As I stepped into the living room with my heart in my throat, her father descended the stairs, turning the corner at the landing.

“Mike.” He cocked a finger at me. “Just the man we’ve been looking for.”

I started to say something. “I can explain.” But before I could say another word, he thrust a flashlight and a walkie-talkie into my hands.

§

Fletcher had disappeared. No one had seen him since ten o'clock that morning. Big deal, right? That was only six and a half hours. But they just about lost their minds.

Anne and I made up one search party, Mr and Mrs Gordon the other.

“We rendezvous back here at six o'clock. We've got two and a half, almost three hours of good daylight left, so let's make the most of it. If either of you find anything, anything at all, you use these.” Mr Gordon held up his walkie-talkie, the twin of the one he'd handed me.

“I don't understand why we don't just call the police,” Mrs Gordon said.

“I'm with Mom,” Anne chimed in. She'd showered, and she'd changed into a pair of jeans. You could hardly tell she'd been crying. The emergency brought out the best in everyone.

Mr Gordon held up his callused palms. “There's no need to sound the alarm

just yet, all right?” He put his hand on Anne’s shoulder. “Mother’s probably right. I’m sure Fletcher’s fine. We all know he’s just wandered off someplace. If he doesn’t turn up by sundown, we’ll go ahead and call the cops. Now listen, you two,” he said. “You two are going north by northeast. That’s up the hill from here. I’m not sure what all’s up there, so be sure and take your time, take a good look around—”

“There’s an old sawmill up there,” Anne interrupted him. “He used to go up there all the time.”

“All right, good.” Her father nodded. “Don’t be afraid to knock on anyone’s door or ask any questions if you have to. You see anything suspicious, and I mean anything, you radio in, and you let us know. Your mother and I are going south by southeast. We’ll rendezvous back here at six o’clock. You got that?” He looked at me.

“That’s an affirmative,” I told him.

“On the dot.” He tapped his watch.

§

“Fletcher didn’t start acting weird until you got here,” Anne said. “He’s been fine all summer, I swear to God.”

We were climbing up to the old sawmill. The woods grew thicker, dense with undergrowth, and the road dwindled until we followed a pair of muddy ruts through the trees. Patches of hazy yellow light broke through the tangled nest of branches overhead, but down where we were, it was cool, shady, and still.

Anne cupped her hands to her mouth and called her brother’s name. She shouted herself hoarse but received no answer from the woods except her own voice, coming back to us in echoes.

“I’m sure he’s been on his best behaviour all summer.”

She turned and faced me on the trail.

“I know he can be a pain in the ass. Believe me, I do. But he’s eleven years old, for Christ’s sake.”

“Anne,” I told her. “He just ran off for a while. This is a cry for help, a plea for attention. The kid needs help. If your dad wasn’t such a quack, he’d probably be on Ritalin.”

Anne moved her mouth like she was trying to pop her ears on an airplane. We stood toe to toe under the trees, face to face.

“I don’t think I can believe I’m hearing this out of you.”

“It’s not my fault the kid hates me. He’s had it in for me since the day I got here. Maybe I did push him around a little. There’s a lot more than that going on here, and you know it.”

Anne didn’t flinch.

“I don’t know what you think you’re talking about. All I know is, if you got on that plane tomorrow—if you got on that plane five minutes from now—it wouldn’t be soon enough for me.”

She turned on her heel and stalked up the trail.

“This is exactly what he wants you to do,” I shouted after her. But the woods swallowed my voice as soon as it escaped my throat. I listened to the echo, disembodied, incorporeal, and barely recognized it as my own. The back of Anne’s green fleece vest disappeared around a bend in the trail. Above me, the pines rustled in the wind. I touched the walkie-talkie where I’d stuffed it in the pocket of my trunks and looked at the flashlight in my hand. What did her father think this was, a covert operation? He’d broken out everything but the night vision goggles.

I stood there thinking these things, and then I shouted after Anne again.

“Anne, goddamnit,” I shouted.

I stood there alone in those wild, gloomy woods.

I followed her up the trail at a jog. I followed her until the trail petered out, until the muddy ruts disappeared into a dense tangle of vines and undergrowth, and I emerged into a bright, wide, sunlit clearing. A stream flowed between the trees and spilled over the remains of an ancient dam, pooling below it. Nothing remained of the mill itself but the foundation stones, misshapen granite slabs that jutted out of the earth like giant cracked molars.

Anne stood on the far side of the clearing and shouted her brother’s name into the woods. Maybe a dozen trees had been felled, their stumps gnawed to points. Below the site of the old millhouse, before the stream rushed into the woods and started down the long grade toward the lake, was a beaver dam.

“Beavers,” I told her. “Look.” I pointed.

“Cut it out. Come on. Jesus, look around or something, will you? Fletcher!” Anne called, and she moved off toward the trees.

She disappeared into the woods on the other side of the clearing, where a steep hill climbed toward a ridge of shuddering pines.

I poked around the edge of the clearing. I made like I was looking around. Mostly, I stared into the woods. On the other side of the stream, a scraggly footpath led up a sharp grade. As the sun angled out of the clearing, gobs of buttery light moved on the water, and mosquitoes began to swarm in the shade.

When I got tired of pacing, I found a smooth, sculpted spot that was hollowed out like a seat on one of those granite foundation stones, and I sat there while I waited for Anne. Her brother would have a hard time in the world, no two ways about it. Anne was right. He probably didn’t have many friends. And it just made things worse, the way she coddled him. Sure, he could get away with it now; he could throw a temper tantrum or run away from home, but sooner or later, he’d

have to face facts like anybody else. Anne and I had a problem that wasn't going to go away. I could hold my breath until I turned blue in the face, until I dropped dead, for all the good that would do. Six months from now, Anne and I were going to become parents. It was the worst thing that could have happened to us.

I looked around that clearing again as the light slowly drained from the day. Over my shoulder, back the way we'd come, a soft white haze hung over the pines. I looked at the line of trees where Anne had disappeared.

Sunlight slanted down at a sharp diagonal and caught on the gently furling rapids and the smooth, polished stones under the clear water in the stream. Water plunged over the remains of the dam, seething where it spilled into the pool, spreading ripples across its surface that splashed at the bank, at the exposed roots by my feet. High up, the treetops murmured in the wind. I touched the granite slab where I sat. Sure, it felt like granite. But maybe it wasn't a stone at all. Maybe it was part of a spaceship that crashed here millennia ago. Maybe it was a fortress in the jungle or a promontory somewhere on Middle Earth. Or maybe just a plain old house. Somebody's house—who knew?—maybe your own. Over there, between those smaller stones, was the kitchen. Up the slope, near those pine seedlings, would be the living room, with the den beyond. And there, where the hill sloped up sharply, where the grass grew darkest, and the largest of those stones made a wall in front of the trees, would be the bedroom.

My flip-flops squelched on the soft, loamy earth by the water. This here, this little shelf of moss and rust-coloured pine needles, where last year's leaves were rotting into the ground, would be the bathroom. I kicked clumps of sod into the stream. Sunlight shimmered on the surface of the water. Tiny ripples melted into the water as it lapped at the bank.

When I heard Anne scream, I took off into the woods, and I bolted up the hill toward the sound. I thought the kid was dead, that Anne had found him lying at the bottom of a ditch, and I knew she'd never forgive me if anything happened to her brother. If she'd kept the fact she was pregnant from me for nearly two months, what could that mean except I'd lost her, maybe even before the summer began?

Now, whatever happened to her brother, it would cost me what chance I had to win his sister back.

Anne was standing on a rocky outcropping at the top of a hill and staring into a wide, sandy gorge. The wind dampened the sound of her screaming, even as the sound had carried down to me. Down the gorge, black garbage bags flapped in the wind. Beer and soda cans lay crumpled into little aluminium tents, bleached almost white by the sun, and as many bottles lay glinting down there, shattered, as if by some horrible violence. Nestled in the refuse like an egg in a basket, as if it had crawled in among the bent hubcaps and the black shreds of tyre to sleep, lay the eviscerated remains of a pit bull. Flies lit on its ears, on the yellowish crust around its mouth and its nostrils. The dog's ribs protruded, jagged and chalky, where its skin had been torn away. Something had dragged entrails ten feet from the carcass, and the coiled blue mounds lay festering in the sun.

When the stench hit me, I had to blink away tears. I covered my nose with my shirt while Anne retched behind me. Screeching, a seagull rose from the garbage dump, and I watched it recede into the distance, where a line of trees stood on the horizon.

“Come on,” I told her, and I reached for her hand.

But she wouldn't let me touch her. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and spat into the bushes.

§

We hadn't made it halfway back to the camp before Mr Gordon's voice came crackling through the walkie-talkie in my pocket.

“Base camp to patrol,” the little black box said, muffled by my trunks.

I yanked the thing out of my pocket. I held it up to my mouth and pressed the orange button on its side. But before I could say a word, Anne snatched it out of my hands.

“What is it, Dad?” she sobbed into the walkie-talkie. But she wasn’t pressing the button, so her father’s voice came crackling through again.

“Base camp to patrol. Do you read?”

I reached to take the thing back from her. I wasn’t going to wait for her to figure it out, not in her state.

Then her mother’s voice came crackling through.

“You can come home,” Mrs Gordon warbled between staccato bursts of static.

Anne broke into a run. I followed her out of the woods and back down the old logging road, and we burst through the front door of the cabin just as Mr Gordon was carrying her brother up the hill from the boathouse, where the kid’s mother told us they’d finally found him, fast asleep, and where presumably, he’d been hiding for the duration of the afternoon. Anne and I stood by the kitchen table, gasping for breath, while her father slid the glass door on the back of the cabin open with the heel of his cross-trainer and brought the boy inside. Behind them, the sun dipped down toward the trees on the other side of the lake, filling the bellies of the clouds with a soft purple luminescence, and a reddish glare swam across the surface of the lake as sky and water both turned to rust. Fletcher stirred, but he kept sleeping. He wrapped his slender arms around his father’s neck.

“I guess we’re not going to have to drag the lake, after all,” Mr Gordon said, sliding the door closed behind him.

He carried the boy, still slumbering, upstairs.

“No,” Mrs Gordon said into the phone. She’d already called the police; now she was talking to them again. When she hung up, she let out a long breath as she lowered the phone to the cradle, as if the receiver might shatter in her hand.

“Why would he do this?” Mrs Gordon looked from Anne to me and back to Anne. Anne’s mother seemed to have aged twenty years in the last few hours.

I shrugged.

“You mean Dad sent us hiking through three miles of woods and scared us half to death, and he’s been hiding in the boathouse?” Anne said.

The little orange cap on the end of the antenna waggled as she brandished the walkie-talkie. I thought she was going to smash it. But she stared at it.

Mrs Gordon touched a button on the front of her blouse. “I guess your father and I just panicked. I’m sure you can understand.” She licked her lips, casting me a helpless glance.

“I understand Dad’s out of his mind,” Anne said.

“Honey.” Mrs Gordon shook her head.

Anne clutched the walkie-talkie. She shook her head, so her hair fell over her face. “The boathouse?” she sputtered. She stared at her mother through a web of matted blonde hair.

But it was the sleeping part. That was what got me. Not that Fletcher had run away, and not even that he’d done it out of spite. I’d known that all along, and I felt vindicated by the fact he’d been hiding right under our noses. No, what got me was the sleeping part. As if the boy cared so little for all we’d suffered trying to find him, we barely merited batting an eye.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. And the fact is, I don’t know why I did what I did next. I only know it changed my life, as surely as that lone spermatozoon had wriggled up one of Anne’s fallopian tubes and changed our lives already.

I left Anne shouting at her mother in the kitchen. I seemed to pull apart from them—from myself, even—like a figure in a dream. Mrs Gordon went to her daughter and tried to hold her, but Anne flailed her arms and fought her mother away. I don’t think they noticed I was gone.

Next thing, I was climbing the stairs with my hand on the banister. Maybe I

passed Mr Gordon in the hall. Maybe I saw him in his room, stripping off his tank-top before he stepped in the shower. Maybe he'd already come back downstairs, sat down at the table in the kitchen, and listened to Anne scream herself hoarse before he called a family meeting. All I know is that he was not there when I knocked on Fletcher's door, opened it, and entered the room.

Fletcher lay on top of the covers, snoring, while the shadows of the leaves on the oak tree out the window dappled the bed, and the lavender light darkened rapidly to grey. I'll say it. He almost looked pretty lying there in his blue swimming trunks and his red Spiderman pyjama top. His chestnut hair stuck up in clumps, like tuber shoots, and his pale skin looked translucent in the waning light. His eyes flickered behind their lids, each rolling beneath a fine web of veins, while his pulse throbbed behind the tiny scar on his brow. His hand was curled up beside his face on the pillow. He was drooling, and his lips moved as he murmured in his sleep.

I watched him for a minute. Without his glasses, he looked different.

"Wake up," I told him in a low voice, and I shook him.

He didn't come awake all at once. He opened his eyes and squinted at me like somebody does when he's used to wearing glasses, and he finds his vision suddenly foreshortened. He seemed to be staring at a spot on the bridge of my nose. I could see the welts his glasses had left on the bridge of his nose.

"Do you hear me?" I squeezed his face until his lips puckered, and I could see his crooked teeth and the saliva on his gums. His eyes opened, and he blew spit bubbles as he started to make a low keening in the back of his throat.

"If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I don't know what I'll do, but I will hurt you. Do you hear me?" I shook him by the front of his shirt. "You're making your sister crazy, you freak."

I threw him down on the bed. It started to come to me, what I was doing, and I couldn't believe it. But there was no salvaging the situation by that point.

Fletcher touched the collar of his pyjama top. He felt the fabric where I'd stretched it out and stared down at it in disbelief.

“You made her sick.” He blinked at me, licking his lips. “I know what you did.”

Then his face crumpled, and he started to cry. “She went to see you. She hasn't been right all summer. I've been watching. I know.”

He faltered. He didn't seem to know what to say next.

“I hate you,” he screamed at me, “and so does everybody else. My sister hates you, too.”

Then he leapt off the bed, and he bit me. I tried to snatch my hand away from him, but his teeth caught the fleshy web of skin between the thumb and the index finger of my left hand.

I swung from the waist, and I hit him across the bridge of the nose, raking my knuckles across his mouth. Dumbfounded, Fletcher looked at me from between his knees where he'd fallen across the bed. His nose was cocked to the side, like someone had twisted it a quarter turn, and his eyes glistened as they filled with tears. But he wasn't actually crying.

I relaxed my hand, balled my fist, and relaxed my hand again. The leaves on the oak clacked softly against the windowpane. I stood there, and I wondered what I was going to do.

Then he started a low snuffling, and before I could take two steps toward him, he shrieked. He touched his face, and he shrieked that much more loudly when he saw the blood on his hands. Blood stained his teeth. It spotted his pyjama top, turning the decal purple.

I knelt beside the bed. “Shhh,” I told him. I could already hear footsteps on the stairs.

“Fletcher,” Mr Gordon called sharply from down the hall.

Then I heard Anne. She was calling my name.

Fletcher kicked, slapping me while I moved closer. He tried to shove me away, but I leaned down and lifted his head, and I put it in the crook of my arm. I wrapped my other arm around his chest. He slid his hands under the sleeves of my shirt, and he pulled me close, sobbing into my chest.

We were laying there like that when the rest of the family came in the room. Mrs Gordon propped herself up against the doorframe. Even Mr Gordon was at a loss for words.

Finally, Mr Gordon scrambled to the side of the bed, and without speaking, he pried me away from his son.

§

The truck smelled of vinyl and Armor All. It was a '97, but Mrs Gordon had taken care of it. We flew out of those hills like we were running an Olympic slalom course. Rocks pelted the chassis, and a dervish of dust spiralled behind us.

We laid a patch on the asphalt as we careened around the corner where Anne and I had nearly crashed earlier that day. Mrs Gordon passed two cars on the left as we climbed the hill, heading toward the village.

Mr Gordon sat quietly in the back with his son and his daughter, staring at the trees as they flashed past. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered, and I felt his eyes pierce the back of my skull through the headrest.

Fletcher lay across the back seat between his father and his sister. His head rested on his father’s lap, on a blue bath towel that was already beginning to darken with that singular colour.

Anne had stopped crying, but she’d start again if I so much as looked at her. I kept my mouth shut and stared out the window like everybody else was doing. I

was riding shotgun, where I suppose they'd stuck me to keep me as far away from Fletcher and Anne as possible.

The public beach on the south side of the lake was closing for the day when we drove through the village, and Mrs Gordon had to brake while a flood of pedestrians emerged from the chain-link gates. She sounded the horn, but to no effect. They stumbled into the street under the sun's last rays. The men carried Igloo coolers and lumbered along as if their brains had been baked in their heads, their middle-aged paunches swinging like distended bladders over the waistlines of their swimming suits. The women trudged behind them, lugging overstuffed shoulder-bags, trailing beach blankets. They hunched over in the abject posture of pack mules, bowed as if beneath some crushing despair. Many of the children, I saw, were crying. They hugged their brightly coloured flotation devices. They clutched their soggy ice-cream cones. Only when they lashed out at one another, flailing at their brothers and their sisters with sticky, inept fists, did the mothers intervene, slapping them across the seats of their swimming suits. The sun set in a mute fury. The summer people moved slowly, as if evacuating the scene of some stupendous atrocity, baked in the harsh red glare.

We stopped at the bottleneck where the gravel lot in front of the beach joined the main road. Waving her thanks at Mrs Gordon, a woman carrying a purple and yellow inner-tube shaped like a dinosaur herded a pair of children across the street, and Mrs Gordon rolled her window down and leaned her head out the side of the truck.

"Move it," she yelled, and she hit the horn. She waved her arm, shouting at the cars stopped in front of us, at passers-by.

When Mrs Gordon pulled up in front of the emergency room, they leapt out of the truck. Her husband dashed inside with Fletcher in his arms, and Anne and her mother followed. They left the truck running with the keys in the ignition. I could have parked it for them. I could have driven into the sunset, but I didn't do that, either.

Moths thwacked the halogen bulbs above the emergency room doors, and the sprinklers on the lawn traced lazy arcs in the moonlight. On the other side of the doors, Mr Gordon spoke to his daughter in hushed tones, and she leaned against him, as together they proceeded across the waiting room in a slow, loping gait, her father's arm curled tightly around her.

Tom Andes has published fiction, non-fiction, and the occasional poem in various venues including (most recently) Harp and Altar, Cannibal, and The Rumpus. He is the author of the fiction chapbook Life Before the Storm and Other Stories (Cannibal Books), and his work was anthologised in Best American Mystery Stories 2012. He lives in New Orleans.

I Will be Your True Christian

by B. J. Jones

Who has my voodoo doll?
I watch as my hand rises and
pulls a door open for someone.
My arms shoot forward and
push an old woman's shopping cart.

Who's pulling my marionette strings?
Jerking my arms up and down
to shovel my neighbour's driveway.
Crushing my hand to write
a check to a charity.

Whose hand is up my back?
Working my jaw, forming
the words "I love you."
Pulling the corners of my mouth
up into a toothy smile.

My finger aches to gesture.
My lips thirst to curse.
Instead, my hands fold together
and my mind prays,
"Dear God, please stop this!"

B.J. Jones writes about rogue pharmacists, phantom limbed windmills, quidnuncs, Luciferian calories, amorous bowling shoes, Funkhousers, martyred coupons, Nietzschean wire hangers, invisible tomatoes and pen clicking adversaries while living in Dubuque, IA with his wife. Some of his writing even gets published.

Always be Paris

by Mark William Jackson

for Paul

We were Paris,
lights & love,
baguettes & bicycles
& bohemian dreams
of words that would carry
a bag of repression,
carry a weight
of timetabled ambition
through tunnels
up to city streets,
& hold our faces straight
against a cold wind.

A change of air
& we are here,
two smiles
against an avalanche
of expectations,
just two people hiding
from the world
while screaming
our Tourette's prophecies.

And when it ends,
when it's all tallied,
truth is,
we'll always be Paris.

Synopsis:

This is not about Paris but rather about my late brother. Based on a photo of Paris taken by my brother, Paul, I dreamed a metaphorical life, just my brother and me repelling societal expectations in the essence of the Bohemian capital.

Mark William Jackson's work has appeared in various print and online journals including Best Australian Poems 2011, Popshot (UK), Going Down Swinging, Cordite, Rabbit Poetry Journal and SpeedPoets. For more information visit <http://markwmjackson.com/>.

In Praise of Loneliness

Non-fiction by Amanda Leduc

It is December in Victoria, Canada, 2004. I have been invited to dinner at a friend's house; his wife, he tells me over the phone, is in England for the holiday. Initially I think nothing of this—I know this couple because I've done volunteer work for their non-profit agency, and his wife is often away. Joan is an artist, and Kristof manages their non-profit agency from the lone computer in the room. On Sundays he conducts the choir at our church. The two of them have been married for thirty years and they are madly in love.

He serves me curried chicken and string beans, marinated asparagus and savoury potatoes. We eat off their best china and at first I am flattered at the trouble he's taken, at the elegance. There are candles on the table and the whole apartment is golden with lamplight, the balcony door cracked open to let in the hint of a breeze.

But he sits beside me at the table, and not across. Halfway through the meal he starts asking questions. He wonders if I've ever thought about dating an older man. He pours wine that I do not drink. Then he apologises for the potatoes—they are supposed to be spicier, but he was rushed when preparing them and things didn't turn out quite as he would have liked.

Where were we...? You should be with someone older, Amanda. You weren't meant to be alone.

I laugh as though he's making a good-natured joke. I push potatoes around on my plate. So I should look for dates in old age homes?

Maybe, he says. He isn't laughing. Or maybe you're missing signals. Then he puts a hand on my knee.

I take his hand, and gently give it back. Suddenly I am uneasy, hurt, intensely uncomfortable. I cover it with another laugh. I don't think that's it, I say. I'm just

picky. That's all.

An hour and a half later, I have dodged and blundered my way through questions on masturbation, sexual experience, and hypothetical thought experiments (If you and I washed up on a deserted island, Amanda, how long do you think it would take before we had sex? What would you say if I told you, with 100% certainty, that it would happen that night?). I feel terribly guilty for wanting to leave; I am a guest, he made dinner, it's only fair that I stay as long as is polite. At ten-thirty I plead fatigue, and work in the morning. He tells me there's a pull-out bed on the sofa.

I wish you would stay, he says. Then he laughs. I won't try to seduce you.

But I get away, politely. He hugs me too long at the door and then I leave. I walk home on a winter's night in west coast Canada and I shiver, but not from the cold. As I walk, I think about Joan, who may or may not be oblivious, out on the other side of the ocean. I wonder if this has happened before. And then I think about Kristof, this sixty-or-so year old married man whose first grandchild was born in November. He will soon cease to be a friend after his phone calls become too many. Tonight he will crawl into bed—disappointed? Angry? Missing his wife? I'm not sure. But he will, it seems, crawl into bed alone. Perhaps he will crumple his pillows to the side of the bed and lean into them, pretending that they are his wife. Or maybe he'll make up the sofa bed anyway, and pretend that the cushions are me.

§

In my second year of university I sat in the basement of a friend's house and talked about loneliness. I wasn't lonely, at the time. I had transferred to a university in Victoria after spending a year in England, and I was excited to be back among friends. That particular day, I'd walked to my friend's house in sandals and a new red sundress. By the time I got to her house I was sunburned and blistered and supremely happy—I had food in my stomach, sun on my shoulders, and I was going to be a writer. The world shimmered with possibility.

My friend, Rachel, lived with her parents in a yellow house half a block from the beach. They were Australian descendants of Fletcher Christian; the kids had grown up on Norfolk Island and the house was accented with timbers of Norfolk Pine. I sat in their basement with my feet on the cool cement floor and thought about the beams that crisscrossed the ceiling—seed to sapling and tree to notched beam of wood. There was a story in there, and one day I would find it.

Rachel's mother, who hated cooking, brought us iced tea and croissants from the bakery down the street. Laurie had graduated with a degree in art history and was more enthusiastic about school than either her daughter or myself, which was odd because she remembered her own university years as both exciting and "horribly lonely". She was dark-haired and tiny and I loved her instantly—my own mother was six hours away in Ontario and missing her, at times, was almost debilitating.

"Terribly lonely," Laurie said again, and as she shook her head strands of hair dipped into her glass of iced tea. "I had a boyfriend, and I always had friends around—but it never went away."

Her words found a dusty little shelf in my mind and stayed there through the rest of my university career. I had many more afternoons at the yellow house by the beach—I spent a great deal of them alone, as it happened, and sometimes I was lonely and sometimes I wasn't. Sometimes the sense of isolation I felt was oppressive, and sometimes I felt so in tune with my friends, and then with random people I passed on the street, that it was like walking in the midst of some sublime cosmic energy.

But when I think back to those years on the coast, those years of the undergraduate degree, lonely seems an excellent word. Like Laurie, I had plenty of friends. I did not have a boyfriend, and while this no doubt contributed to my sense of isolation, particularly as friends began to pair off, I don't think that was entirely it. I lived alone for the last two years of university and I was happier then than at any previous point in my life—being alone, most days, was not the problem. Some of my loneliest days came in the middle of social things. I could go to a party at a

friend's house and spend the entire night close to tears; I could spend a day alone in my apartment and feel no need for company. There was, it seemed, no rhyme or reason to any of it.

As I got older, I realised two things. One: there would never be any logic to loneliness. It came without warning, like the weather. And two: loneliness touched everybody. Even sixty-year-old married men with grandchildren.

Two months after the infamous dinner, Kristof was hit by a car and broke both of his legs. He called me from the hospital and then again once he was home, his voice wistful and oddly shy. I just wanted to tell you, he said, that you're a very special person. Joan was still in the UK, setting up a new exhibition; I never found out if she came back. I stayed on the phone long enough to wish him well and then said goodbye. I'm sure his convalescence went well—he was well-liked in our community and plenty of people would have been on hand to help him out. But for months afterwards I saw him imprisoned on his bed, his hand never far from the phone. He took to blocking his number when he called—I answered the ring of an unknown caller only once, and then ignored them altogether. The last time he called was in June.

§

It is August of 2007, and I am two weeks away from a flight to Scotland. Once there, so the story goes, I will embark on a Masters degree and actually get some writing done. (This story is seventy-five percent lie. I spent the summer writing a novel, so I know that I can do it—what I want, more than anything, is a different country, a different space, a chance to meet people from another part of the world. The writing, I tell myself, can come later.)

To celebrate, a friend from my workplace—much older, and male, but unmarried—offers to take me out for dinner. There is no hidden agenda here, or so I am told—Robert has a business meeting the next morning. He has been called in as an emergency stage manager and the prep for the production will take most of the night. So it will be an early dinner, which suits me just fine.

He picks me up in his new BMW and we drive to the restaurant—a longish drive, so we fill the time with travel talk and the strains of Johnny Hartman. He tells me about Hartman and John Coltrane. (Once in Scotland, a man will kiss me in the shadows of his room while John Coltrane plays softly in the background—I will think of this drive and remember this friend, and for an instant the air will smell of polished new car.) Robert's wife, whom he divorced twelve years ago, was an immense Hartman fan. When he tells me that she was Scottish, I take it as a sign.

The dinner is lovely. We sit at a table next to the window and look out over the gardens as the day fades into night. My companion handles the waiting staff with a charming, gentlemanly air. He drinks his own wine and lets me have my water, and there is no talk of older men, or of how I am not meant to be alone.

But there is a moment, just one. As he tells me about the George Hotel in Edinburgh—you must go there and write, Amanda, at least for a night—he leans across the table, careful, so serious. I will join you, if you want me. In Edinburgh, or anywhere. Just let me know, and I will come to you, wherever you are in the world. And then he leans back in his chair. He doesn't put his hand on my knee and I don't say anything back. We finish dinner some minutes later and then he drives me home—we talk about Scotland, about travel, about my writing plans. John Coltrane fills in the silences.

Once home, Robert pulls into my driveway and lets himself out first, then opens my door. And here is another too-long hug, but this time it's OK, because in two weeks I will be gone forever. Scotland is waiting, with its stories and its stones and its men, who may or may not find me the type of woman they would come to, anywhere in the world. Robert hugs me twice as I say goodbye, and he tells me to be safe. Make sure you write, he says. Then he gets in his car. He waits until I am inside the house and then pulls out of the drive—I watch through the window as he motors away and I am tired, pleasantly full, and just the tiniest bit sad. Tonight I will go to bed and think about packing, and Robert will go home and work on the play.

In the spring of 2005 I moved into my first apartment, a bachelor suite in an area of Victoria called Cook Street Village, a little collection of shops and cafés that somehow managed bohemian cool and yuppie chic all at once. The apartment had a bathroom with a soaker tub, a kitchen with earwigs that lived under the fridge, and a lone window that looked out over the back parking lot. It was always hot, which was hard in the summer but lovely in the winter when I came in from the cold. The carpet was light brown shag and on the day I moved in it had been freshly shampooed—the first thing I did when the landlord closed the door was take off my shoes and lie down in the middle of the floor. Mine, I thought. All mine.

There was a grocery store thirty seconds down the street, and the Dallas Road beach—a triangular apex of land that jutted into the Pacific Ocean and boasted magnificent scenery—was a ten minute walk from my doorstep. In the summer, skydivers rode the currents of air over the cliffs along Dallas Road, parachutes blue and purple and red. I went for many walks along there and often sat on the shore alone.

When I wasn't at work or at class I could go for days without speaking. My mother worried about this a great deal. But I had visitors; I just chose them very carefully. I loved entertaining, and got quite creative with hosting events on a non-existent budget. But my happiest memories of the bachelor apartment were memories of me alone: curling up by the window with a trashy detective novel; dancing haphazardly to The Strokes, the music up as far as it could go; lying flat on my floor and singing along to the entire score of *The Phantom of the Opera*, just because.

Of course, there were days. Days when the apartment felt both impossibly tiny and impossibly huge—days when I carried on entire conversations with the air and any imaginary person who would listen. Early in the summer of 2005 a friend with whom I'd happened to fall in love sat on my couch and told me, ever so gently, that she did not love me back. When she left, I turned on my shower and sobbed for so long that it felt like my showerhead was also weeping; for the next few days I talked to no one. Yet even this, in its way, was a gift—when I first lived in Scotland I had four roommates, and I never got away with tears. The questions

were immediate, the concern overwhelming. I was happy there, in my frantic Scottish flat, but at times I missed the quiet.

Joan Didion, who suffers from migraine headaches, devoted an entire essay to their liberating power. Her time with migraines made her time without them all the sweeter: “For when the pain recedes ... everything goes with it, all the hidden resentments, all the vain anxieties ... I notice the particular nature of a flower in a glass on the stair landing” (Didion 1995). I like that—it reminds me of what I notice, now, from the other side of solitude. Late in 2005 my uncle succumbed to a brain tumour; my cousins had moved out of the house in the previous year, and my aunt found herself alone for the first time in her life. I flew to Ontario for the funeral and what I remember most is the terror my aunt felt at the prospect of an empty house; when I got back to my little apartment I sat at my table and wept, in sadness and in gratitude.

Such a difference, there, between being lonely and being alone.

§

It is a Friday night in Vancouver, mid-July, 2006. In a few days I will leave for the land-locked den of Ontario; I will be spending a year at home with family before flying out to Scotland. There are goodbyes to be made, and I have been putting this one off. Tonight, I am having dinner with James.

James, who used to be my English teacher. James, my closest friend. We have known each other for eight years now and the thought of leaving this—even for Scotland—makes me uneasy.

James has a girlfriend, and before that he had a wife. His wife worked in marketing and his girlfriend, Marie, is studying to be a nurse. Two years ago, when I told the Kristof story, Marie was the first to be outraged. She is smart and beautiful and she doesn't let James wallow in himself. She is always interested in what I have to say.

And tonight, she is not here. There is a family crisis in Burnaby and she is

spending the night, so it is only the two of us over dinner. I've brought strawberries; we wash them just before dinner and they wait on the counter, plump and red. James knows my quirks, so there is spiced rum and cava on the table instead of wine. We toast to many more years of friendship.

Have to tell you, he says. Not feeling too good about this, you going away.

I'll be back, I tell him. Just give me a few years. A few years in Scotland, a few years around the world. We toast again, this time to my upcoming adventures. I'm the world's biggest fraud. Yes, I am excited to go. But tonight, in this cosy apartment with the fantastic view, I am rigid with longing, ready to turn my back on the dream. I wish you would stay. Words that came from Kristof, but do not come from James.

We linger over dinner and then, still talking, grab the strawberries and move to his couch. Suddenly there is a knock on the door. James opens it to discover his neighbour, Anna, who waltzes in, grabs a glass, and helps herself to my cava. She tells us that she is just stopping by, but she squeezes onto the couch between myself and James and will not go away. When James produces his requisite bunch of pot she is the first to partake, her giggles loud and impossibly girlish.

Was anything going to ... happen tonight? she asks, when James is in the washroom. Her stage whisper bounces around the room. There's this amazing energy between the two of you.

I laugh, because there is nothing else to do, and tell her no. Tonight this apartment could hold all the energy in the world and still, nothing would change. My answer makes her smile—a smile that disappears when James emerges from the washroom and asks her to leave. She gathers her coat and shuffles to the door. She does not look back at me. When the door closes behind her, James resumes his position on the couch and reaches for the strawberries. He plucks one out of the bowl and holds it before my mouth, his grin jokesy and boyish.

Amanda, he says. Would you like a strawberry? It is the closest he will ever come to offering me anything.

We make toasts and giggle until four am, and then I snuggle under a blanket on the couch. James pulls his guitar down from the wall and sings to me until the sun peeks over the eastern side of the city.

Well, I joke, halfway between sets, what am I going to do in Scotland, with no one to serenade me?

You'll find someone, he says. And that's all. When he finishes his last song he tips the guitar against the coffee table and leans in to kiss my cheek. Sweet dreams. And then he goes into his bedroom and shuts the door.

§

In the morning, I am awake before James—awake and clearheaded despite the cava and the pot. I make myself coffee, and then slink back to the sofa and sit. I can hear him snoring softly in his room.

I sit on the couch and watch the world crawl by outside. Later James will tell me I was lucky to see the city so dry—usually, the rain is relentless. Later still, he will send me a letter, posted airmail over the sea. I miss your voice. Miss your face and mind. Wish you were here. But he will not follow, and he will not ask me to come back. I will read his words and remember that morning, how large the apartment suddenly seemed, how small. Here I sit, I will remember, here I sit, my coffee growing cold as I listen to him breathe on the other side of the door.

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Amanda Leduc is a Canadian novelist and essayist currently located in Hamilton, Ontario. Her essays and stories have appeared across Canada, the US, and the UK. Her novel, The Miracles of Ordinary Men, was released in North America in May of 2013 by Toronto's ECW Press.

Toilets and Other Big Questions

A One-Act Play by Emily Brugman

Scene 1

An Aboriginal woman stands at Down Stage Left. She is dressed like an Aboriginal lady from the desert: baggy skirt, loose t-shirt, beanie, messy greying hair hanging out the sides of the beanie, a lined face. She is not from the present. She could be a ghost, or something else.

ABORIGINAL WOMAN

I come from Pila Nguru country.
That's Spinifex people.
You probably never seen that desert,
Not really.
You drive that car right by
Quick as you can
Better not stop. Bunyip come get ya! (Laughs)
That my country
I grew up in that one.
This place long time dry
Plenty brown and orange.
White man says no good place
(Laughs) He get the dry mouth, he got no water.

You ever see desert at night time?
Him got sunset fire
My aunty she tell me
That Biarni's campfire.
No more sound just that dingo's yell
And that sand cools right down,

Right there under your toes
That's good place I say.

Scene 2

Lights shift to Down Stage Right. The bedroom of a young couple, SUKI and JAKE. A mattress against the back wall, which is littered with photos and posters. SUKI and JAKE are sitting on the bed together.

JAKE

If you could have PJ Harvey's voice, or Cat Power's voice, whose would you choose?

SUKI

Mmm, PJ's. I like its rawness. It's like she doesn't give a shit, she just belts it out!
Ryan Adams or Tom Waits?

JAKE

Tom Waits' growl would be pretty great. Maybe I if I smoke enough ciggies...

SUKI

Your priorities are all mixed up, buddy.

JAKE

You'd love it.

SUKI

I know.

(Pause. They get closer. Jake puts his arm around Suki.)

SUKI

What did you learn about today?

JAKE

Geomorphology.

SUKI

Geomorpho-what?

JAKE

It's about rocks and land formation.

SUKI

Oh, cool.

JAKE

You know, looking at rocks'll tell you a lot about the world.

SUKI

Like what?

JAKE

They tell you all about the history of a place. How old it is, and sometimes what's happened there.

SUKI

Rocks've got the history of the world on them.

JAKE

Yeah, s'pose.

SUKI

I like that.

JAKE

Yeah. (Pause) So, people at school are starting to apply for new grad jobs.

SUKI

Already? That came around quickly.

JAKE

Yeah, I know. The real shit.

SUKI

Scary. Well luckily I won't be getting a job since I studied writing. (Laughs) What you thinkin'?

JAKE

I dunno.

SUKI

In two months you'll be a geologist. That's just weird.

JAKE

Yeah.

SUKI

So what are other people gonna do?

JAKE

I was talking to this one guy. He's headed out to the mines. Reckons he's gonna be on eighty grand a year, straight up as a new grad.

SUKI

Woah.

JAKE

Says he's not even gonna bother renting in Perth. Just buy. He'll have a house paid off by the end of the year. Won't even be 25.

SUKI

A house hey? The great measure of success!

JAKE

A bit of security wouldn't go astray.

SUKI

That's what Dad's always on about. You buy a house, you've really made it... He's got one. He's not that happy.

JAKE

My mum's still scraping by to make rent, though. She's fifty-six this year. Fifty-six and what's she got to show for herself?

SUKI

Experiences?

(laughs)

(Impersonating her father)

Experiences my ass! Experiences are not tangible!

JAKE

(Laughs)

So you don't ever want one? A house?

SUKI

I mean, yeah, of course, it'd be nice.

JAKE

I wanna own one. Be able to do what I like with it. Paint the walls red if I feel like it. Not have to ask permission. Or worry about rent all the time.

SUKI

A mortgage is kinda the same.

JAKE

Maybe I'll have the means to pay it off.

SUKI

Yeah right.

JAKE

You never know.

SUKI

Well all I want is a little shack in the hills somewhere. Not far from the beach. Somewhere warm, up the north coast maybe.

JAKE

A shack?

SUKI

Yeah. With a verandah all the way around it. And a wild overgrown garden that's got just about everything you need in it. We could drink tea on the verandah in the afternoons and watch the sun go down.

JAKE

Gotta have a good tea-drinking verandah!

SUKI

I'd like to have chooks too. Cluck-clucking around the place. Free range eggs man, the real deal! Maybe even a pig... Not to eat! Just as a mate.

JAKE

We could eat him at the end.

(Suki looks hurt.)

What? Zero wastage.

SUKI

(Continuing)

It'd have solar panels and a composting toilet.

(Pause)

JAKE

Composting toilet?

SUKI

Yeah. What?

JAKE

Sounds like a hazard to me.

SUKI

C'mon. Have you ever thought about how our country's in drought and we're shitting in fresh water?

JAKE

I guess...

SUKI

I just feel like, we're the generation that needs to start doing these kinds of things.

JAKE

Yeah. S'pose so. I know, we'll compromise. We'll have one of those low flow loos.

SUKI

Low flow?

JAKE

Yeah, you know, you attach something to it and it only flushes like half the amount

or something. I think that'd be better.

SUKI

Oh yeah.

JAKE

Yeah. So, what do ya reckon? Could you handle that?

SUKI

What? In our place?

JAKE

Yeah.

SUKI

(Smiling)

Yeah, OK.

Scene 3

Lights shift to Aboriginal woman, still at Down Stage Left.

ABORIGINAL WOMAN

Them white bloke, he don't like that dunny she talk about.

I dunno what I do

If I been born this later time.

I go walkabout lately,

See lots of dunny in my travels,

Good one in Japan.

That one easy, no worries.

But, you know, that desert,

Have good compost there

All the animal

Dingo, dead snake

All be compost

All them animal, people too, shit in the desert.

Big compost out there.

White man he digs a big hole out there, in that desert

Like a big toilet

(Laughs)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 4

Lights up on a boys' lounge room at Down Stage Right. JAKE and his friend WILL sit on a couch drinking beer.

WILL

What would you rather, suck your Dad off, or punch your Mum in the head as hard as you can?

JAKE

That's fucked.

WILL

You gotta choose one man.

JAKE

Shit.

WILL

You'd have to punch your Mum, hey?

JAKE

I couldn't.

(Pause)

(Both laugh)

WILL

You're sick.

JAKE

You're the sick one, mate.

WILL

Shit.

(They both take a swig of their beers).

WILL

Bought me ticket the other day. One way to the mother country.

JAKE

Yeah? Fuck, that's great man.

WILL

Yeah, should be good. Broaden my horizons and shit.

JAKE

(Laughs)

Root some Euros?

WILL

I'll do me best.

What's on the cards for you man?

JAKE

Fuck knows, hey. I've been thinking about heading out to the mines though.

WILL

West Aus?

JAKE

Yeah. Earn myself some real money for a change.

WILL

Fuck man, you should do it.

JAKE

It's pretty hard to get in. Hundreds of people are applying from all over Aus.

WILL

You'd get in though. You're fuckin' at the top of your class, aren't ya?

JAKE

(Laughs)

Yeah, maybe. I been talking to a dude at school about it. It's big money ay.

WILL

Yeah?

JAKE

It can take you all over too. Mongolia, China. Mining boom's not just happening here.

WILL

So it's fly in fly out sorta' deal?

JAKE

Yeah, two weeks on one week off.

WILL

One week to get fucked up in Perth ay.

JAKE

Yeah, could be dangerous. I reckon I'd try not to spend that much time in Perth.

WILL

I'd be off my head for the whole seven days mate! I heard the drugs are off the hook.

JAKE

(Laughs)

I'd wanna be going exploring down south. Camping around Margaret River and that.

WILL

Suki'd like it down there.

JAKE

Yeah. (Pause) Actually Suki's not that into the whole thing.

WILL

Nah? What's she wanna do?

JAKE

Fuck, I dunno, go be a hippie somewhere.

WILL

(Laughs)

Ah, she'll come around mate. Tell her about all the nice dresses you'll be able to buy her on that salary.

JAKE

You know she doesn't give a fuck about that shit.

WILL

Yeah, I know. But that's what's good about her right?

JAKE

Yeah. For sure. (Pause) She's getting all 'morally correct' on me lately.

WILL

About going to the mines?

JAKE

Guess so.

WILL

Man, some other cunt's gonna get that job if you don't go for it. It's still gonna happen. You not doing it isn't stopping anything.

JAKE

Yeah I know. If it's gonna happen anyway, might as well be me right?

WILL

Yeah man. You could really get set up.

JAKE

I know. Suke doesn't get that either. She thinks being poor is romantic or something. It's a writers' thing.

WILL

Fully. You gotta be down and out to write good shit.

JAKE

Till you're really down and out. Then you don't write nothin', all you think about is where you're gonna get your next feed from.

WILL

Bloody writers.

JAKE

Yeah. (Pause) Anyway, gotta make a decision soon ay. Applications close next

month.

WILL

Yeah right. Well, it's like, what would you rather, be a bit of a cunt with heaps of money, or a good dude, but with nothin' to show for it.

JAKE

That doesn't help man.

WILL

I'd be a cunt, take the money.

JAKE

'Course you would. You'd punch your Mum in the head too. Sick bastard.

WILL

Can't believe you'd suck your Dad off.

JAKE

Fuck up. (Pause) Well mate, here's to your trip.

WILL

To the next chapter!

(They cheers.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 5

Lights up on SUKI and JAKE's bedroom again at Down Stage Right. It is much messier than before. There are clothes and papers strewn around the place. JAKE sits on the bed, while SUKI rummages through drawers, acting busy.

JAKE

You know, this could be an adventure. We've never been to West Aus.

SUKI

Yeah, I know.

JAKE

I thought you'd always wanted to go.

SUKI

I have. I do. I really want to go to Margaret River. And to Geraldton. You know that's where my Mum was born?

JAKE

Yeah. We could go there.

SUKI

It's just, I dunno.

JAKE

Yeah, I know. But I think of it like this. It's gonna happen, either way, whether it's us out there or someone else.

SUKI

Yeah.

JAKE

I know you say you don't want much, but it'd be great to get a head start. Not have to worry all the time about how we're gonna get by. Bills and rent and everything. You know that would be nice.

SUKI

Yeah I know. But, it's all a bit excessive. Do we really need that much?

JAKE

You really just want some little beach house? That's it?

SUKI

I think so.

JAKE

I just. That's not really my idea of, the future.

SUKI

Why not? Don't you think it sounds nice?

JAKE

I've. I'm from that. I come from that. I wanna get out of that.

SUKI

What do you want?

JAKE

I want a real house. A nice house. With like, you know, a TV and a dishwasher and air con and all that stuff.

SUKI

A dishwasher? You want me to come with you to dig a big fuckin' hole in the ground that'll pay for us to have a plasma TV and dishwasher.

JAKE

Well what do you want? You want me to come live in the hills with you? Grow all our food from scratch and look after a pig together? Sounds fuckin' great. I'll have shit up to my elbows trying to fix your goddam composting toilet every second day.

SUKI

Fine. We'll live in your over-sized house with all your stupid mod-cons. We'll shit in a normal toilet, use four litres of water every time we flush!

JAKE

Suki...

I thought we already agreed on the low flow dunny.

(They look at each other and laugh.)

JAKE

I'm sorry. It's just. It seems like a good, I dunno, opportunity. We could do all kinds of things. Fuck we don't even need a house really. We could go travelling.

SUKI

Yeah.

JAKE

Do that India trip.

SUKI

I guess.

JAKE

Besides, isn't it a bit of contradiction?

SUKI

What?

JAKE

Well, look around us, we use things that come from mining everyday. Everything has petroleum in it. Those pants, they're polyester right?

SUKI

Um, I guess?

JAKE

Steel is in everything. Our cars, our bikes, this place. It comes from iron ore. That's what BHP does.

SUKI

How do you not be a part of that?

JAKE

It's impossible. This is just what the world looks like today.

SUKI

Hmm...

JAKE

Do you see where I'm coming from?

SUKI

Yeah. I do.

JAKE

We could make a trip of it. Pack the car up with all our stuff. Drive all the way across.

SUKI

Cross the Nullarbor.

JAKE

Yeah.

SUKI

I've always wanted to do that.

(Lights dim.)

Scene 6

Lights up on SUKI alone in the bedroom. She sits on the bed with a laptop in front of her. She types, then reads out loud.

SUKI

Polyester is a synthetic fibre made up of polyethylene terephthalate, a thermoplastic polymer resin. The base material of polyethylene terephthalate is P-Xylene, the same base material used to produce Liquefied Petroleum Gas.

(Suki looks slightly confused.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 7

Desert. The Nullarbor Plains Western Australia.

SUKI and JAKE are sitting on camping chairs at Down Stage Right. They have bare feet and look like they've been traveling for a while. There is a camp kettle on a portable gas stove in front of them. It's dusk, and the sun is setting in the

background behind an old car, packed to the roof with stuff.

JAKE

This place is insane hey? There's just nothing.

SUKI

I know. Can you believe Suzie broke down? Right here. In the middle of the Nullarbor?

JAKE

I know. Old bomb. We could'a been in Perth by now.

SUKI

Hey, she's carrying our whole lives across the continent, I reckon she's doin' alright. Just needs a rest.

JAKE

Yeah.

(to the car)

Sorry ol' girl.

SUKI

Maybe it's a blessing in disguise.

JAKE

Yeah?

SUKI

Well look around.

(Jake takes in his surroundings)

JAKE

Yeah. How's that sunset.

SUKI

We don't get those colours back home.

(Pause as they look at the sunset.)

JAKE

Woulda liked a shower though.

SUKI

Fuck it.

JAKE

Yeah. We're both as dirty as each other.

(The kettle is boiling.)

SUKI

Cuppa?

JAKE

Always.

(Suki pours two cups of tea and passes one to Jake.)

SUKI

This is the best time for a cuppa. Just as the sun's going down. It's reflective.

JAKE

I hope we have a good verandah at the new place.

SUKI

Yeah. Same.

(They both sit in silence for a while.)

SUKI

Would you rather be lost in the desert or the bush?

JAKE

Bush. At least there's shade and water. And animals. Bush tucker.

SUKI

There's water here. People have lived here for thousands of years.

JAKE

I know. But I wouldn't know where to find it.

SUKI

Yeah. For us whiteys it's scary as, to be stuck out here.

JAKE

Yeah. Would be for most Aboriginal kids these days too though.

SUKI

Yeah, for sure. You know this place has freaked white people out ever since the convicts first arrived.

JAKE

Yeah?

SUKI

Yeah. Just too much wilderness. I read an article last semester about this place in Victoria called Mount Disappointment.

JAKE

Mount Disappointment? That's rough.

SUKI

I know! Poor old mountain. These English explorers were on an expedition, they were looking for grazing land, trying to work out the layout of the south. It was early 18-something. They climbed this massive mountain hoping to see what was on the other side. But when they finally got to the summit, the bush was so dense, they couldn't see a thing.

JAKE

I guess that would have been pretty disappointing.

SUKI

They took care of that though. You climb it now you can see right out to the peninsula.

JAKE

Yeah right. Man gotta have his view.

SUKI

Right.

(Suki and Jake sip their tea.)

JAKE

Does it scare you? Being out here?

SUKI

Yes and no, in some ways I feel more at home than in Sydney. This wide open space. I like it.

JAKE

You still wouldn't make it if you got lost out here though.

SUKI

Hey, I might. Maybe I'd find my feet.

JAKE

No way.

SUKI

Maybe I was an old Aboriginal woman in a past life.

JAKE

You're weird.

SUKI

What? Can't you see my soul hanging out here thousands of years ago?

JAKE

Catching goannas for dinner? Nope.

SUKI

What? I'm resourceful.

JAKE

You can't kill a thing. You'd die of starvation.

SUKI

No bras! Those were the days.

JAKE

You never wear one anyway.

SUKI

True.

JAKE

You better watch out. You've seen those old Aboriginal ladies, how far theirs droop.

SUKI

Right down to my belly button. That's what you've got to look forward to.

JAKE

Can't wait.

SUKI

Good. You can grow a huge beard or something if you want. I'll still love you.

JAKE

Thanks.

SUKI

No worries.

(Pause)

JAKE

Sun's almost gone.

SUKI

When I was in Year Four or something an Aboriginal elder came to our school. They told us about how they believe that their ancestors are in the land, and the sky and the stars and stuff. There's this being of the sky, I can't remember his name. But I remember that the sun is his campfire.

JAKE

That's pretty cool.

SUKI

Yeah I reckon. It's a nice idea, that the history of the land is like, in the land. No wonder they respected it.

JAKE

Yeah. Can't disrespect your elders.

SUKI

Exactly.

(A long silence.)

(The howl of a dingo in the distance.)

JAKE

Hear that? Dingoes.

SUKI

Jake. I can't do this.

(Black out.)

Scene 8

Lights up on Aboriginal woman at Down Stage Left.

ABORIGINAL WOMAN

When that red sky gone (points up), you got black sky

Aunty tell me 'bout that one,

Them stars

They all the animals from before.

(Thinks, turns, looks at young couple)

They seen it. (points at couple)

They try hard, that girl, that boy

They all try hard be good

Them people.

Them ones confused

Them don't know where their country

Here, there

Them don't know.

Emily Brugman is a third year writing student at UTS, and a bookseller at Gertrude and Alice bookshop cafe in Bondi, Sydney. She recently had a creative non-fiction piece published in the 2013 UTS Writers' Anthology. Aside from writing, she likes surfing, growing herbs and sewing. She also rants and raves about some of her recent travels at knobbleknees.wordpress.com.

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