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# Editorial

*by Daniel Young*

It's not always easy keeping this ship running, and this quarter in particular has been a tough one for me. Thankfully, the help of our other volunteer editors has been making my job so much easier, and here we are with our fourteenth issue. When it starts to feel like it's all becoming a bit much, all I have to do is open up one spreadsheet: the one that tracks subscriptions. Our subscriber base is building! *Meanjin* editor Jonathan Green recently pointed out that literary journals already have a built-in crowdfunding model: subscriptions. The support of our subscribers means there are people out there with faith that we'll produce four more issues of great writing, and this is what sustains me when things get tough. If you aren't already a subscriber, head online and sign up:

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

I'll keep this editorial short and refrain from enumerating what lies beyond this page. It is, most simply, the best poetry, creative non-fiction and fiction that has come our way in the past three months. To get things started we have Megan McGrath's second column on literary jealousy, featuring an interview with Anna Spargo-Ryan, a previous *Tincture Journal* contributor and author of *The Paper House*, out now through Picador. Enjoy!

# Making Noise: Part Two

*by Megan McGrath*

I'm pushing along with the novel at a rate of two thousand words a day, buoyed by a weekend writing retreat that unlocked a few plotting secrets and changed the way I'll write forever. It helps too that I've been reading rubbish books. Popular books by mid-career authors who have found a way to publish their mediocre writing about mediocre characters in mediocre towns, and I think if I can just keep going I might be able to break the back of this stupid long thing I'm trying to write. I think that if I can finish, maybe, I've got a shot at being ordinary, too. Somehow I've managed to make myself believe that being just OK and published is good enough.

Then my sister tells me she's getting married.

She met a guy on Tinder about a year ago and tells me they're getting married in a month because this guy's OK (he's not the worst, that's for sure) and why wait if they're adequately happy and they may as well start a family and just, you know, see how it goes.

Suddenly I don't much feel like settling anymore.

When has OK been good enough for me, or for my writing? I realise I have thirty thousand words of rubbish writing and an express ride back to uncertainty.

It shouldn't be this easy to derail me. I've always done the work when there is work to be done. I've balanced writing with a career in the arts, a partner and demanding family, and a bad habit for playing and watching sports and frequenting pubs. So this wedding shouldn't be my undoing. But with this project, it is.

§

Around this time it feels like everyone is moving forward around me, again. And in this instance, it's true. I am stagnating. Not writing. Not even trying to write. I give up on reading the mediocre novels and instead I go back to reading lit journals, hoping they'll stir me in some way. I read (and am confused by) an article about jealousy (I think?) in

*Meanjin* and the subsequent (perhaps obligatory) response in *Overland*. I follow the fallout across the literary scene. With every word I feel more and more like an impostor. Nothing helps.

Finally, in *Kill Your Darlings* I find a ripple. A simple truth from Anna Spargo-Ryan, author of *The Paper House*, published by Picador. She writes, “There is no other way to write a book. Unless you *actually write it*, you will always have zero books.”

Does half a book count? Because that’s what I have. Half a rubbish book.

I go by Anna’s blog see what other wisdom she has for me, and find where she has written about a low point of her own. “I spent a lot of time lamenting to other distressed writers, to remind myself that we all have this common experience.”

Common, at least, was better than mediocre. I take her advice and reach out. Who were these other writers, I want to know. And isn’t she jealous of their success and wisdom?

“I’m not jealous of their wisdom,” Anna kindly writes me back. “We all learn this stuff the same way, which is through the hard slog of doing it. They know more than me because they’ve done more than me. One day, I will have done more and hopefully the things I’ve learned will help another emerging writer. It’s so easy to feel jealous, as a writer—every time someone publishes a new book or finishes a new draft or wins an award—but at the end of it, if you’re wasting time being jealous, you’re not doing your own work.”

I haven’t thought of just not being jealous. Turning it off. Stop wanting after things I don’t have yet. And Anna, with her confident voice and honest style and her natural, easy going humour, makes me believe it’s possible. She makes me want to keep going.

So I do.

Read more:

<http://blog.annaspargoryan.com/>

<https://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2016/04/the-real-work-on-writing-one-book/>

<https://meanjin.com.au/essays/getting-square-in-a-jerking-circle/>

<https://overland.org.au/2016/03/vulgar-rhetoric/>

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

# Her Last Detox

*by Laura McPhee-Browne*

*—for Lucia Berlin*

Carlotta woke, on the first afternoon of a thick and haughty heat wave, in the detox clinic on Eleanor Street. Her legs were feathery familiar when she placed them on the sticky laminate floor and walked towards her very own toilet, done up with skin-coloured paint and holding bars. She didn't wonder what was for breakfast.

Six days it had taken. Four days last time, two weeks the time before. They knew her when she called; placed the phone down and yelled for Brian who knew her the best, his smooth voice guiding her back into bed each day that he told her there were no vacancies yet. On Friday, yesterday, Brian had been sick, and a woman who said her name was 'Gloria' in a voice like salt had told her that she was 'in luck', though it didn't quite feel that way. She'd been careful not to begin on her own this time; had drunk four mugs of white in the kitchen that night after she'd showered, draped herself in her biggest pair of pyjamas and packed a small bag full of underwear and framed photographs—one of each of her boys, one of all of them bundled on the porch of a holiday house back when she could go on holidays. Then she'd climbed into bed, called all four of them on her cell phone and tried not to sob as they told her they loved her, and that they knew she could do it this time. No one, not even herself on the morning of a big and brutal hangover, believed that anymore.

Now she was here, and the drear was recognisable. She'd been shaking when she woke but hadn't been able to pour some calm down her throat. The taxi, pre-booked and driven by a man with kind eyes who appeared to enjoy the languish of summer, arrived at the detox house at 10 am and by this time she was already angry: why couldn't she just have a couple drinks? There were people doing worse than she was. The anger had faded quickly, had lost its shape when she realised she would give her right leg for a bottle of vodka and that this was not the way it should be when the birds were still chirping. By the time she had checked in, handed over her anti-depressants, her razor and her small round bottle of Xanax, she was as steeled and dull as an empty sink.

Carlotta washed and dressed in what she had left in a pile on the floor. She was due in Group, which they did now in detox as well as rehab, and she didn't want to be late. The best seats were the ones nearest the door in case things got too much—too big, too small, too sober. She hoped there would be a new group counsellor and not Sally, with her vegan leather boots and nods like a bobble head dog. She hoped it was a man, someone she could eye at least. Not another well-meaning wool woman.

It was Sally. There was another woman who told everyone her name was Linda and wore a purple vest over a purple mesh long-sleeved top, but she was just there to learn, because she was a psychotherapy student and wanted to run groups like these herself one day. Carlotta wondered why anyone would want to run a group like this. She had always assumed that the group counsellors were hard up for money or depressed or something, or that they were eccentric volunteers. Learning that Linda and maybe even Sally wanted to be here, or at least pretended to themselves that they did, made Carlotta feel even more like she had to say something. She fought against this, sitting with her legs crossed at her ankles and her cardigan pulled down over her hands. She let herself imagine glass after glass of champagne flecking her insides with gold.

After group, Carlotta and two guys she'd seen in here time after time went to ask for Valium. All of their hands were shaking and Jimmy felt sick like he was going to vomit, like he had been all morning in his toilet down the hall. They knew it depended on which nurse was on shift, and that they had to be meek and quiet as mice trying to carry food back to their holes. Being an asshole wouldn't get you anywhere, Jimmy reminded them as they shuffled towards the door marked 'SANITARIUM'. When he opened his mouth Carlotta could smell his body fighting against its walls. She looked over at Douglas, who looked even worse than last time she'd seen him, and she wondered if this would mean more Valium or less. He was coughing in a way that made her feel fearful. He sounded like he was dying.

The nurse working gave them one pill each, and didn't even bother with the spiel. Carlotta had no bourbon in her drawer; she'd learned years ago that there was no point drinking when you were trying to see if you could heal. She knew too that you had to believe—it was the one thing her doctor and Sally and the nurse and all four of her sons said that she knew was right. What she wasn't sure of was whether she would know when she did believe, or whether it would just be the next step, when her body couldn't

take it anymore. That time seemed dark on the horizon. Douglas had been funny once. She'd even thought that maybe he could do it for her. Now he was a shell making moaning noises, just a pair of eyes that couldn't see.

In Group the next morning they talked about hangovers. Carlotta was asked to talk about how hangovers were for her these days, and to close her eyes (take as long as she needed) and try to put herself there—in bed or on the couch—so she could feel the way she felt after she had drunk as much as she wanted to. It was to remind her how horrible it felt, but she didn't need a reminder. She told Sally that when she was hungover she felt like she had no edges. Sally reminded the group that a hangover was your body trying to recover from the shit-show you had put it through. Every single person in the group nodded, as though they hadn't thought this one hundred thousand times, lying in bed trying to hold their bodies together with juddering arms. Sally looked pleased with herself, and ended the group five minutes early. She was a heavy smoker.

Carlotta and Douglas and Jimmy and a woman Carlotta saw sometimes at her local pharmacy and bottle shop and everyone else who was able to keep themselves upright did an activity after dinner. It was something she remembered her boys had done when they were little, when they'd come home with paint hands and large pieces of paper coloured like butterflies. Linda, the woman wearing purple, was showing them how to do it, and she was nicer than Carlotta had thought, smiling wryly and telling them that this may look like child's play, but it was still the most joyful thing she could remember ever having done; that getting your fingers wet with paint was like dancing in a warm patch of sea. She had a purple shawl over her shoulders now, for it was cold in the rec room, and Carlotta thought she looked pretty in the moth light.

It was fun, and joyful, and almost took away the yearning for a few seconds at a time, between scotch fingers and strong tea and question answering. Carlotta's finger painting was the most beautiful, everyone agreed, and when she got back to her room she hung it up on the wall with the Blu-Tack Linda had given her. But then her chest suddenly ached for bourbon warmth, and the blues and greens of the wings seemed to be dancing in an unseemly way, so she went and made herself a stale Maxwell House with four sugars in the kitchenette, where at least the light was bright enough for nothing to be hiding.

On the fifth day Douglas died. Carlotta only knew because his room was clean and empty when she passed it on the way to breakfast, and when the group asked Sally where he was she wouldn't answer them. This happened sometimes, and Carlotta always wondered whether it was a bad seizure like they warned, or whether death might seem the only option once you realised this would be your last detox. She wondered as she stirred her Cheerios round and round, trying to make them one with the milk, whether she would die in a place like this. Her boys probably assumed she would, her doctor and her therapist too. For now, the idea was a cloud above her, filling with rain.

She left detox on the morning of the eighth day. It was so hot outside that the air around her wobbled as she opened the taxi boot and placed her small bag inside. She hadn't told anyone what time she would be getting home, and when she opened the door and stepped into the house it was cool and light-filled and empty. Tears that felt as big as grapes had been waiting behind her eyes for hours, and now they burst. She cried for the concept of drudgery, and every single hour left. She cried that she couldn't stand it. The phone rang and she wiped away the tears and answered. It was her eldest, and he said he was coming over, with his wife and daughter to see her. She put down the phone with shaking hands, shaking for nerves and not for drink, and ran to the pantry for the bourbon.

*Laura McPhee-Browne is a writer and social worker from Melbourne. She is currently working on what she hopes will be her first book, a collection of 'homage' or 'echo' stories inspired by the short fiction of her favourite female writers, the first of which can be read at Overland: <https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/222-5-autumn-fiction/olam/>. You can find her at [lauramcphiebrowne.squarespace.com](http://lauramcphiebrowne.squarespace.com).*

# What's to Be Remembered

*by Anna Kerdijk Nicholson*

In a sentimental wash of ink we found  
proto-rhyming Portuguese appliqué work,  
a premonitory stash of myths.

What's to be remembered? The air's  
an amphitheatre, commissions solemn,  
chosen as by a high priestess or poet.

Many more consciousnesses, tendrilous hearts  
bitten, charred, selected for the role,  
healed with script-like wounds.

*Note: 'In a sentimental wash of ink' is after a line by R Adamson.*

*Anna Kerdijk Nicholson's most recent book is Everyday Epic (2015). Her second book, Possession, received the 2010 Victorian Premier's Prize and Wesley Michel Wright Prize.*

# The Pact

*by Regan Lynch*

Lucas didn't feel like drinking, but he found it hard to say no. The bar was shut. His manager leapt over the counter, nimble for a rotund alcoholic of thirty-eight years, and shoved a beer into his hand.

"Welcome to the job," his manager said.

"Thanks, William."

"Call me Bill."

They were standing in a bar, central Brisbane, the floor still sheen with Lucas' mop-swipes. With the music off and staff gone, the imperative bustle of life, it became nothing but a plastic, glass and concrete shell. A hollow monument to capital.

"So, what brings you to Brisbane?"

"Uni."

"Oh, yeah. What are you studyin'?"

"History. Maybe religion, I don't know yet."

"Oh. Right. Cool."

Bill sat at a low wooden table; Lucas joined him. He saw Bill's beer was almost gone, so Lucas gulped a large mouthful of his own. He tried not to gag on the gas that puked from the neck of the bottle. When he recovered, he found he had nothing to say. It was silence, then, that choked him. He tapped a finger against the edge of the glass.

"I better go, soon," he decided. "I don't think the buses run for much longer."

"Don't worry 'bout it. If they stop, I'll pay for your cab."

"All right."

Silence again. Lucas wasn't sure this conversation was worth the free beer and time, let alone a taxi fare home. He was thrown, too, by Bill's jovial hand-on-shoulder, his smile, his eye that lingered and shimmered in a contact that Lucas always had to shatter. Lucas didn't feel a glimmer of warmth or friendship for the man.

He looked out the windows. A dark figure walked by, a disturbance through tinted glass. He wrestled with the need to remain polite.

"Why'd you move to Australia?"

"Work. Boredom." Bill swigged from his beer. "Not much goin' on for me in London."

"Right."

Every conversation thread was a corpse slapped against the pavement, a dead end. Lucas drank. Another beer, open, was passed to him. He returned his gaze to the window, out to the shadow-city streets occupied by stray bodies, by those outside of city time—the homeless, the kitchen-hand slick with month-old grease, the drunks too drunk to remember the weeknights of closed doors and 'we're shut's.

A figure stopped, individuality indiscernible through the dark-blue warp of the glass. They looked in; Lucas looked back. The whorl of black where their eyes would have met swayed but didn't move.

"I'm going to fuck you bloodless."

Lucas turned back to Bill.

"I'm sorry?"

"Hm?" Bill queried through a mouth of beer, its neck nuzzled into his lip. He swallowed, put the beer back on the table. "What is it?"

The figure in the window was vanishing out of sight. Its shadow was shrinking, evaporating liquid in the darkness.

"It's nothing. I thought you said something."

“So you’re a faggot, yeah?”

They were in the botanical gardens near Parliament House. Rows of empty bottles, pilfered, leaned drunkenly against each other on the warped wood of a picnic table. Lucas was running his hand across its surface, hard, back and forth, the other hand busy with a beer. He thought about correcting Bill’s use of ‘faggot’, which always sounded to Lucas, no matter how warmly said, like the whoop of an ambulance siren, but deeper, like churned gravel guttering in its double-syllabic cheap engine chortle.

He didn’t, though. It was too hard. Far easier to not have the argument, to let it happen and be over.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. That’s cool with me.”

Bill was nodding, drinking. It was at least three o’clock, and he didn’t seem to be in a rush.

“I better go,” Lucas said, once again. He looked about for a cab, as if a black and white hulk would pool itself from the duck pond or flash its headlights from the scrub. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Wait, wait,” Bill reached out a hand, grabbed Lucas’ wrist. “Don’t leave me to drink alone, yeah?”

“I have to go.”

“All right, yeah, OK,” Bill said. He placed the bottle on the table, causing the balanced comrades to cascade in a waterfall of glass to table and grass. “I’ll walk you to the taxi rank.”

But when Lucas got in the cab, he wasn’t alone. He felt dizzy and sick, one step to sleep already. He thought he glimpsed an amorphous shadow pool into the back seat, like night itself had followed him. But it was just Bill. He was leaning on the back of Lucas’ seat, talking to the driver, directing him to an address that wasn’t Lucas’s.

“We’ll have a few at mine, yeah, before you toddle off?” Bill said, hand clapped on Lucas’s shoulder. “You can crash on the couch, too, if you want. Save me paying another fare.” Back to the driver. “Thanks mate!”

They pulled out into near-empty streets. Lucas, far from protesting, said nothing.

§

Lucas stumbled through the door ahead of Bill. His hands were on the walls, and once, the floor, but he couldn’t feel them. Numb wasn’t the right word—it reminded him of sinking into a bath of such temperature that it became indiscernible from his skin. The place where his body ended and the water began wouldn’t exist, and he would float there, indistinct and anomalous. This is how he moved through the world: intoxicated, warm, the boundaries of all things beginning to break.

“That’s the couch,” Bill said. It was unremarkable; it lurked in the shadows of the unfamiliar house. “Want some water?”

Lucas sloshed some water onto his face, only to feel a warm gush, a metallic tang. He looked down to see his hand slashed open, the jagged remnants of the glass jutting from his grip, an abandoned lighthouse arising from a small ocean of blood. He saw, but he didn’t feel. He dropped it in the sink, moving backwards on tender feet and dodging barbs below.

“I’ve got bandages upstairs, mate. Come on, now.”

They went up the stairs. He leaned on Bill as though they were friends and not just the victims of mutual self-poisoning, their not-quite suicide pact. Up here, all things were personal. Up here were the photos of Bill’s family, a niece, or a nephew; a book, some glasses, candelabra perched on a table.

The candles were already lit, and by the little electric flames, Bill led Lucas to the bathroom.

“The light’s not working. Sorry.”

Bill crouched by the cabinet. The door, open, spilled faint and flickering half-light into the room. Lucas looked into the mirror and thought he saw someone familiar.

“Here.”

His hand was wrapped with ritualistic grace and precision. It bled, still, and made its mark on the floor. Lucas stared at it—the way it pooled, its signature glint—and felt a wash of dread. That bath-warm intoxication turned rancid.

“I’d like to be alone,” he said.

Bill looked up, bandages in hand, bent over Lucas’ injury and close, too close, his lips parted.

“Hm?”

“Leave me alone for a second.”

“All right.” Bill clipped the bandages. “I’ll be across the hall, yeah? Don’t be shy.”

Bill left. Lucas waited a moment, then darted into the hallway and grabbed a candle. He shut the door. He returned to the mirror, his face up-lit, and looked just over his right shoulder and into the pooling darkness. He squinted, as if through tinted glass.

“I don’t want to do this again,” he said. He waited. “I don’t want to do this again.”

If he wanted a response, he didn’t get one. He dived, suddenly, to the floor, and slammed open the toilet seat. He vomited. One, two, three heaves, each reviving something of the night past, a history of liquid slaps. He breathed—deep, ragged breaths—and stared into the bowl. Where his acids pooled, where his blood dripped down the edge of the cistern, a dark thing stirred.

*I’m going to fuck you bloodless.*

He slipped backwards. Before it took shape or form, Lucas clawed himself up the bathroom cabinet and clicked off the candle. Darkness obliterated the thing. Lucas stood, but the world stood with him and he found himself, once more, on the ground. He tried again, and succeeded. He wanted to get out, to get away, but his senses were traitorous and his directions malleable. He ran, but into a bedroom. Bill sat on the edge of the bed, naked and crying. Everywhere about him the shadows twisted. Lucas thought he would puke again.

Bill looked up at him. His eyes were bloodshot red with weeping.

*Sleep here*, Lucas heard. Bill rose, came closer. *You're tired, and hurt. Just sleep here.*

Lucas shook his head, but Bill's hands were there, all of a sudden, and they were so sure. Lucas found himself lying down.

“No.” It was only quiet, but still, he said it. He pushed back at the dark. “No.”

He felt it, then, that unwanted protuberance, that *thing* so cold it must have slid down from the upper atmosphere or cracked itself free from the oldest, darkest sea-ice. He pushed, again, and nothing gave, but wasn't that always the way? Tears that weren't his own dripped onto his face, and a weight pressed onto him that was far greater than a single human body. And, somewhere, a deal was made.

*Regan Lynch is a Brisbane-based writer, theatre-maker and performer with a keen interest in spec-fic and queer fiction. His work has featured in AustLit and Semper Floreat, as well as coming Highly Commended in the SLQ Young Writers Award. [www.reganlynch.com](http://www.reganlynch.com).*

# it's an interest

*by Ben Walter*

shoehorned, you admitted, into  
riding goats around the table; ponies,

would you pass the gravy? chooks,  
a cup of tea? you trudged bracken

acres and the skin of shaved sand,  
hangover shed bricked with grass

as dagged utes gathered round a  
round of fire. how can the rain

speak clearly when it treads these  
pages? i am not fingered on your

murmuring hands, but seeds are  
heavier than trees. see my own cup

cooling at this bustling feast; i am  
chewing though letters of straw.

*Ben Walter is a Tasmanian writer of lyrical fiction and poetry. His writing has been widely published in Australian journals, including Meanjin, Island, Griffith Review and The Lifted Brow. He was the recent guest editor for Overland's special anti-/dis-/un-Australian fiction issue. His stories 'Teething' and 'City Fish' can be found in Issue Two and Issue Seven of Tincture Journal.*

# Pidan

by Deb Wain

As a young girl I thought our ancestors were the best cooks in the world. This opinion was based on the only evidence that I had available to me, and I felt justified in giving thanks to the elders not only for my life, but also for the eggs. They had made and set aside the thousand-year-old eggs that we ate mashed with tofu and seasoned with rich, black soy sauce and sesame oil as my favourite dish. One thousand years is a long time and they must have been thinking of their future generations as they prepared them and stored them away. I found this realisation humbling and I felt that it justified my thankfulness. I was pleased they had been so thoughtful, for without their consideration, what would my favourite food be?

We brought plenty of the eggs when we migrated. Great ceramic jars of them lined the back wall of our simple house in Bendigo's Chinatown. At first we were not allowed to open them. Mama said she was too homesick to eat *pídàn*, and I hoped that she would get well soon. I suggested chicken soup with plenty of ginger to help her to mend. She laughed at me and rubbed her hand on my head and I felt there was much I did not understand.

When I finally saw my favourite dish on the table again I was so excited that instead of playing in the street with my cousins and friends, I sat at the table waiting for the adults to come so we could begin the meal. After such a long time, and all of my longing, it did not taste the same. I asked Mama which ancestor had prepared them because the flavour was not as I remembered it. She sighed and said, "Yuan, you will wonder the strangest things until all becomes clear and then you will pine for the wonder."

My mother often spoke this way, in barely intelligible riddles. When she did, I assumed she failed to answer my questions because she didn't know the answers. I thought she too must have been disappointed with our choice of whose eggs to bring with us on our journey. Perhaps the next jar would taste more like the eggs of old.

I worried that the jars along the wall could not possibly contain enough eggs for a lifetime of eating. What if the ancestors didn't think how hungry a small girl could be?

But Mama reassured me by saying, “The ancestors know more than you can possibly imagine, Yuan. They are wise people. We shall not run out of eggs. You need to learn wisdom too, Yuan. Study well and stop worrying about your stomach.”

My school was located in a neighbour’s yard. My teacher was an old man, a teacher back in China, who had come during the gold rush. Mr Zhou quickly realised that he could make more reliable money growing vegetables for the miners on the goldfields around Bendigo than he could searching for an elusive yellow metal. He struck up business partnerships with a number of publicans who shared the same idea—that there was more money in supplying meals, rooms, and beer to miners than there was in digging holes in the ground. Mr McCarthy was the first publican to accept Mr Zhou’s vegetables and Mr Zhou was forever grateful to the round-faced Irishman who was still a good friend. They must have both been a hundred years old. Mr McCarthy’s nose was bulbous and red and he walked bent over and leaning on a cane. Mr Zhou’s back was straight and he only carried a cane as a general threat to his students—it encouraged us to learn our lessons well, the thought of being struck with that cane. If he thought we were not listening, he would smack it against a desk.

In the afternoons when lessons were finished, the bent-double Mr McCarthy would come to collect Mr Zhou and they would walk the streets speaking animatedly in a mixture of English and Chinese that I could not follow. Sometimes I watched them pass the front of our house and I tried to put the hand gestures and the smatterings of Chinese words into some kind of context. I made up a number of satisfactory stories for what their conversations were about, but I was never sure if I was right.

Mr Zhou played the *èrhú*. Sometimes in teaching us about a poet or some event in history, he would remember a song and would take up the instrument to play for us. The lessons for the day would be forgotten in music and our childish quivering voices trying to emulate Mr Zhou’s strong pitch. We would often try to ask questions that would prompt him to pick up his *èrhú* so that we could relax and not use our brains for the afternoon—only our ears and voices and hearts, which we all agreed was much easier. We took turns trying to lead Mr Zhou into a recollection of a song so he would not realise what we were doing. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it did not.

Mr Zhou’s son and daughter-in-law worked growing vegetables now that Mr Zhou

was too old to spend all day bending in the market garden; he was too frail to wield a hoe but not so frail that we weren't afraid of his cane.

After school there was work to do in the house. I scrubbed the wok ready for dinner with a brush frayed and rounded by use. Sometimes Mama would send me to Mrs Chu in the market to collect fresh greens to go into our dinner. Mama would flick them around the wok in hot oil with spring onions, garlic, and soy sauce, then when they had become glossy and dark green, she would serve them over rice. I complained aloud that I had so many lessons to learn from Mr Zhou. He had set us learning times tables—different tables for different years—and I was behind. I had too much to learn. Mama said, “Be grateful that you have the opportunity and be humble towards those who did not. You know what we say; having no education is like having eyes and not being able to see. Do you wish to remain blind to the world?” I lowered my eyes to the wok and put extra effort into making sure it was properly clean.

Mr Zhou taught us numbers and his knotty fingers flicked the abacus to show us how to work it quickly. We called out more outrageously enormous figures and the cracking beads of the abacus would give Mr Zhou the answer. We had no way to check that he wasn't making the answers up, the figures had quickly gone beyond what our best maths student, Tan, could do in his head. I ran home at the end of the day to tell Mama and aunty about Mr Zhou's abacus and his nimble fingers flicking towards the answer. My feet slowed when all of the adding and subtracting made me think of something terrible. I stopped in the middle of the street. The eggs. Adding and subtracting.

I walked the rest of the way home in plodding, heavy thought and could feel the skin between my eyebrows puckering. I rubbed at it the way Mama would so that I would not have wrinkles before the time I was married. But the eggs! There was too much subtracting.

“Ah, little Yuan,” said my aunty as I came through the door. “What did you learn today?” I did not answer her.

“Mama, who is preparing the thousand-year-old eggs for our descendants? How will they know we were thinking of them if we do not put aside eggs for them?”

“Don't worry so much, Yuan,” she replied. “Just learn your lessons and leave the

ancestors, the eggs, and the descendants to me.”

“But Mama, we learnt adding and subtracting—”

“You should tell her, Big Sister,” said Aunty to my mother.

“What must you tell me? Have we run out of eggs?” My concern for our descendants fled in the face of concern for my own stomach. My mother clipped me gently across the head in mock scolding and pushed me from the kitchen, “Go and learn your lessons.”

My worry was not alleviated that evening at dinner. There was no dish of thousand-year-old eggs. Mama had been cooking during the day, preparing all of the specialties to celebrate the arrival of her sister, but she did not mash tofu to add to the amber and coppery-green eggs. I did not want to ask about them again but my eyes kept stealing to the earthen jars along the wall, as if I could see through the thick ceramic and assess their contents if I looked hard enough.

Mr Zhou taught us about Qu Yuan the poet. He taught us of his sacrifice and how the women of his village wrapped rice in bamboo leaves and dropped them into the river—the first *zòngzi*—so that the fish would leave Qu Yuan’s drowned body undisturbed. He was buried under the water. The men rowing fast in the dragon boats could not save him. When I was born, my face was round and my father was studying classical poetry. He much loved the *sāo* style of Qu Yuan and so I was named with a boy’s name for the poet. I had heard the story of Qu Yuan’s life before but Mr Zhou’s tellings made me realise that we could all make a sacrifice. Even someone as young as I.

When I came home in the afternoon my mother was mending a shirt. I told her, “I do not want to eat any more thousand-year-old eggs, Mama.”

“Why not?” her brow furrowed as mine had when I was walking home the day before.

“I find I no longer have the taste for them,” I said, trying my most mature voice but Mama just laughed.

“Is it because they don’t taste the same as they did in China?”

“No,” I shook my head and began to cry.

“What is it, Yuan? What troubles you?”

“I want to save the eggs,” I gulped, “for our descendants. I don’t wish to eat them all, then my children’s children will have to go without. I wish to make the sacrifice. A good ancestor would do that.”

“Oh, silly, Yuan,” Mama hugged me quickly to her chest. “Come with me.”

We walked to the earthen jars against the wall and she lifted the lids in turn. “These are the eggs I prepared when we first arrived. You see, we have nearly finished them all.” She lifted the second lid. “These eggs, I made just last month and they will be ready in a week or two.” In the third jar, Mama said, were eggs she had prepared that day. We could start eating them if we needed to in forty days. At first I didn’t understand, but Mama looked at my face and smoothed the creases away. “Yuan,” she said, “the eggs aren’t really a thousand years old. The ancestors didn’t really prepare them for us. Would you like me to show you how? I have some coating ingredients left over.”

I watched as Mama collected mixing bowls that were stacked for emptying at the back door. In the largest one was a mixture that looked like mud. Mama took a duck egg from a bowl on the bench. She scooped her fingertips into the bowl of mud and smeared it across the surface of the eggshell. Her fingers worked in the same way as they did when she smoothed my brow. In the small bowl was a powdery mixture. “This is the rolling power,” Mama said. “It has ash and lime, salt, tea, and yellow mud. The ash and the yellow mud might be the reason the eggs taste a little different here. We can’t collect mud from the Yangtze and perhaps the yellow clay that Father dug for us is not exactly the same.”

I wanted to make an egg so Mama allowed me to put the mud on. “The powder can hurt your skin,” she said, “See how I use only my fingertips? You mustn’t touch it.” Mama rolled my egg in the powder for me and we added the two eggs to the top of the jar that Mama had prepared during the day. We filled the top with extra mud and pushed the jar back against the wall.

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*dancing in the garden, drinking coffee, or learning new things. (Deb is a current PhD candidate at Deakin University.)*

# Carnage

*by Joshua Kemp*

Danny Holsworth's watching a porno on his phone as the bus rocks around us. The two primary school kids behind him are leaning in their seats to watch. I catch a glimpse of it but can't make sense of all those bodies jolting and squirming together. I fucken hate porn. A little voice inside tells me there's something not quite right about it.

When I look up again Estelle's glaring at me in the next seat. She saw me looking and now she's giving me the evils. Thinks I'm a creep, just like Danny Holsworth. I go to tell her I wasn't really watching, but she turns away before I have the chance. The birthday girl scowling at her friends. I wanna tell her I'm not into that shit. And I'm not.

Then I think about what I like to look at on my new Samsung, and keep my mouth shut. If she knew, she'd never speak to me again.

§

No one was more surprised than me when Estelle invited me to her birthday party. We'd only been broken up for a month. She handed me the pretty little card in a glittery pink envelope without a word and turned away again before I had a clue about what it was. The invitation announced it was a sleepover at her place down in Dunsborough. Can't say I wasn't confused as fuck. She'd hardly spoken to me those past four weeks.

The day after we broke up she called me at home and read out a list of reasons why she had to dump me in front of all her friends. I talked about horror movies too much. I never talked about my feelings, especially how I felt about her. I hadn't called her once over the two week holiday period back in April. She couldn't forgive me for that one.

The truth was, I did wanna talk to her about things. All kinds of things. But a lotta the time, it was stuff I couldn't put into words.

Like when I was nine, I saw a guy nearly get eaten by a shark at Seagrott Bay. Back then Dad used to take me out snorkelling every weekend, and we'd go to a different spot each time. It was a Saturday and the water was fucken freezing. Too cold for Dad, even

with a wetsuit on. I begged him to let me go in by myself and musta kept on so much, so eventually he gave in. He watched me from the shore but, right at the edge of the water, like a cat too scared to get a paw wet.

I hit the water hard and felt the cold grip my heart. Under there it was all lanky sea grass and patterned sunlight in crystal blue. There was only one other guy in the bay with me snorkelling. About dad's age, I could see his beer-gut in his wetsuit. Propelled along by heavy-duty-looking fins. I stayed clear of him, cruising around the limestone jags which had tumbled into the bay from the cliff above, but kept him in the edge of my vision. A little guilty to admit, I was glad to know there was someone else out there with me.

I'd just decided to head back into shore when I saw the shadow.

I just glanced at it, for like a second, as it skidded across the ruckled sand below. The sea grass thrashed and parted. A giant in a shiny flash of chrome. Its eye looked like a starless night.

When I turned, beer-gut guy had disappeared and was now enveloped in a huge pulse of red ink. I could make out two shapes wrestling. Man and beast. The red stain in the water getting fatter.

I had no idea why, but my entire body started to tingle. Not in a scared way, but a good way. It was like when you listened to a song that really meant something to you, sometimes your body reacted on its own. Adrenaline, Dad told me it was. He got it when he listened to Pink Floyd.

I got it watching that fat snorkeler getting his leg mauled.

The guy didn't die. Mum drove me all the way to the city a week later to meet him at Royal Perth. His name was Laurie and he was all stitched back together in his bed like something out of a crappy Frankenstein movie. His left leg gone from the knee down. We stood there awkwardly chatting for about fifteen minutes before I could get outta there. Seeing him alive left me feeling a little defeated.

As if something had been left unfinished.

I wanted to talk to Estelle about all this shit. How it made me feel. How I'd never felt anything like that big tingle inside before. But I was too scared. She'd say that wasn't a normal reaction to seeing someone get mauled by a shark. She'd call me a freak.

She'd give me that look, the same one she just shot my way for glancing at Danny Holsworth's porno.

## §

The bus pulls up in the main street and Estelle's Dad is waiting for us in his shiny blue Navara. It's a dual-cab, so all six of us pile in. Three girls, three boys; I guess Estelle was given a quota. She sits in the front and I try to catch her eyes in the side mirror, but she still looks pissed as we cruise through Dunsborough Lakes. Somehow, I've let her down. Again.

I have missed her this past month. I could tell her that, but it all feels a bit hopeless now anyway. We never kissed, like some of the other kids were doing, jamming their tongues in each other's mouths. I knew she wanted me to kiss her, but every time I came close the fear would send me into a freeze. The most we'd done was hug. She'd insisted on three to four a day. When she wrapped her arms around me I'd feel her little breasts against my chest and be reminded that she was just a girl. We were still just kids. It was stupid to expect us to behave like the moaning freaks all the boys were watching on their phones.

But now that she's gone, I miss the way her hand used to wriggle into mine, her fingers tickling my palm. I wish I had kissed her now, and when I think about how I've missed my chance, I get this feathery, pillowing feeling in my guts.

Estelle's house is huge. Two-storey with ceramic flamingos in the garden. I had no idea until this moment that her parents were loaded. Well, compared to mine anyway. It's a little intimidating.

We're herded into the backyard by Estelle's Dad and almost immediately the three girls disappear to change into their bikinis. When they show up again, they look silly. Children wanting to be grown-ups. How am I expected to be attracted to this? I've only ever fantasised about older women. Salma Hayek in that vampire movie, dancing on the

table and dribbling beer into Quentin Tarantino's mouth.

Everyone starts filling up water bombs with the tap beside the house. I cop one in the chest and feel a bit pissed about it. Danny threw it. He's taking the whole thing way too seriously. He pitches another screamer and it hits Estelle in the side of the head so hard it tears her earring out.

All of us stand there in shock, staring. She tries to compose herself at first, but then just breaks into tears. My insides sink to see her so upset. Her Mum and Dad take her inside to clean up the thin line of blood running down her neck.

Blood.

I saw it on the news one night not long after Estelle broke up with me. Someone mauled by a shark on the north coast of New South Wales. The guy'd survived, but they showed footage from the helicopter of the blood in the water. Like a red stain softly diluting in the surf.

With Estelle seemingly gone from my life, I started to think more about that day at Seagrott Bay. The fizzy feeling I got seeing Laurie getting torn up. There was footage from Nature documentaries on YouTube. Great Whites snatching little seals out of the air. I watched as many of these as I could find, but they still didn't get me tingling.

My Mum and Dad had made the common mistake of letting a teenager have internet access in his room and so I started searching for animal attack videos on Google without judgement. The first one I found was of a hunter somewhere in the American wilderness being torn apart by a grizzly bear. The cameraman turned away before you could see the really good stuff. But I did glimpse the grizzly's first swipe, the blood spray across the grass, steam rising from his opened ribcage.

And there it was. My body filling with lemonade.

When Dad got that feeling, he said it was like being touched by God.

§

Estelle's still upset at dinner. She sits in her chair with her arms folded. Not even her mates can cheer her up. The plaster peeling a bit from her ear lobe. I think I should say

something, my responsibility as ex-boyfriend, but all words depart me. As usual.

Considering how flash the house is, I thought we'd get a better meal than snags and party pies. I eat with my hands like a feral. Miles Ballich watches with disgust and shakes his head at me when no one else is looking, but I just ignore him.

*Fuck them, I think. They invited me to their big, flash house. They can see how the other half lives. And eats.*

We aren't poor, not exactly. Mum goes to the Salvos for my clothes, but. Dad's ancient Rottweiler lives in the hallway and no one ever cleans up the winter coat he leaves on the carpet. Sometimes he's too brittle to make the backyard so he just shits on the kitchen floor.

After dinner Estelle leads us all up onto the top balcony and we play spin the bottle. When the empty Coke glass finally stops, of course, it settles on me. Estelle glowers and it's like another knife-wound in my guts.

"Taz," one of her friends prompts. "You have to kiss Taz."

"I don't want to," she says.

She spins again. It stops on Miles. The little shit grins from ear to ear. It's one of those sickly, awkward thirteen-year-old kisses. Again, I'm sure they have no idea what they're doing. They're trying to copy what they've seen in movies.

Watching them lock lips, I'm suddenly fidgety to get out of here and get the fizz back in my limbs. Last night I watched a video of a scuba diver on the Great Barrier Reef getting attacked by a school of grey reef sharks. The fucken things swarming on him like wasps. Blood inking through his torn flipper. Suddenly the hurt in me seems so small. And I forget why I even came here.

The first chance I get, I escape the spinning bottle and hide away in the toilet, the Samsung Mum bought for me like a dark gemstone in my hands. It's so many things at once. My lifeline, my fuck buddy. For the past month I've surfed the darkest corners of the internet for the sort of animal attack videos they shut down on YouTube. There was footage of dogs mauling people in dingy backyards. A huge python eating a dead child in

Brazil. Lions dragging wildlife poachers to the savannah floor. Watching the heady violence from the safety of my bedroom, I knew it couldn't go on forever. Because it was worse than porn, I knew that. Someone one was gonna track me down eventually. One of those cyber-cops. They'd tell my parents. I'd be shamed at school.

Worst of all, Estelle would shun me forever.

But it was worth it. For that fizz in my blood. I find a video of a woman being trampled by an escaped elephant and turned the volume off. They probably think I'm in here having a wank. I smile darkly at this.

If only they knew.

When I wander back out onto the veranda I can hear hushed voices chatting, giggling. Estelle and Miles are curled up in her sleeping bag on the couch overlooking Dunsborough Lakes. The moon shining in the man-made bodies of water. I'm still tingling inside. The freak high on carnage.

So I just go to sleep in the guest room with the others and I dream of my private carnage. Laurie's leg coming off and the red stain in the water.

## §

Estelle's Dad bundles us all into the Navara the next morning. I'm ready to go home already but Mum isn't picking me up till lunchtime so I have to grin and bear it for now, watching the road unravel and refusing to look at Miles or Estelle.

When we pull up under the Rottnest tea trees, I should recognise where we are immediately, but I'm too busy thinking about the way that woman's leg broke under the elephant's tramping feet last night. It's only when I wander onto the hot beach sand after the others that I see the limestone cliff above the emerald water and I know.

We've come to Seagrott Bay.

No one knows. I've never told anyone about that day. It's like being invisible. When Laurie was attacked it was all over the news. *Sunrise* even. But no one mentioned the little kid who was in the water at the same time. And how the shadow had skidded past him, overlooked him, to take the beer-gutted guy instead.

I haven't been snorkelling since that day, Mum and Dad won't let me, so when I see the water shining, I'm wriggling around inside like a nutter in a straightjacket. Estelle's Dad dumps a bag of snorkelling gear on the ground and I dive right in, choosing a spare and heading for the shallows.

I'd almost forgotten what this was like. Your heart skipping a beat as you first hit the icy cold. Your shadow going ruffled below you on the sand, falling apart and coming back together again as the sun pulls you into focus.

I'm pretty far out when I realise there's someone else in the water with me and I start to see it's Estelle. There's a pinch in my stomach and I'm a little pissed to see her following. I don't like the feeling of someone else impinging on this moment. I'm about to tear away and kick off further into the sea grass when I see her up close and her eyes are the same colour as the emerald blue water.

We hover face to face, almost cautiously at first. And I know all's forgiven and forgotten. I fill with every silly romantic thing I've ever wanted to say to her but I can't say them now coz I'm under water and breathing through this fucken tube. Instead we stay there a while, reading each other's eyes through the clean masks.

The moment's only broken by the flutter of movement. I catch it outta the corner of my eye and for a sec I think it's the shadow. That shadow I've been waiting for all these years. And it is a shadow, kind of. A flat one, dark and slow and sliding below us.

The huge stingray glides under our bare feet and I can see the wonder shine in Estelle's eyes. We both fire down after it, skipping along the sea floor, through hanks of sea grass.

I look across at my ex-girlfriend and feel glossy and warm under here with her. All this time I was worried about sharing with her. But here I am, sharing. And no words are needed.

Coz I'm looking at Estelle, I don't see the other shadow at first. It comes outta nowhere, smaller than the one which had taken Laurie's leg off. I can tell it's a Bronze Whaler by its colouring, but hardly have time to register this. It ploughs into the stingray's wing. I feel Estelle start to back-pedal in shock.

I'm about to do the same, out of instinct, or for her sake. But then I see it. A puff of red blood blooming in front of us. The shark twisting and tearing. Corkscrewing this way and that. The red cloud getting bigger until you can only see shadows of movement within.

I can sense Estelle's panic. But this is too much to let go. With the two bodies squirming together in a tumult, they form what looks like some kind of organic temple.

This.

This is what I've been waiting for. Two completely different lives converging to establish some greater whole. But for that whole to be established, there has to be a sacrifice. Something has to be dismembered in the process.

Then I feel her hand snatch my wrist. I turn to her in a fug and see the terror in her eyes as she points toward shore. I follow like a drunk man trying to swim.

When we reach the shallows and pull off our masks and snorkels, she snares me by the arm like I'm a kid and she's the adult. "What the hell was that, Taz?!" she cries, the veins in her neck standing out. "Do you have any idea how bloody dangerous that was?!"

I rip my hand away too quickly and stare at her. "Fuck off, Estelle."

And I get out of there before I can see her pain. Going back up the beach, I'm all warm and fuzzy inside. Coz if I'm hurting her, then at least I'm not hurting myself.

I stand at the edge of the water to see the red out there in the bay. I watch that red stain fatten, expanding, reaching out for me. I watch it try to encompass us all. But it begins to lose colour, and fade.

And then sadly, I see it start to recede.

*Joshua Kemp is an author of Australian Gothic fiction. He is currently completing his PHD at Edith Cowan University in Bunbury. His short stories have appeared in Overland and P3.*

# Evolutionary Lap

*by Rosanna Licari*

Hair flat under the cap  
below the goggle line

water

surge forward and

breathe out into

a glide a pull a pause

above the dark stripe undulating  
at the bottom of the pool

this you ride

your head and elbows

moving in and out of the splash

as if preparing to fly.

*Rosanna Licari is an Australian writer and poet. She won the inaugural 2015 Philip Bacon Ekphrasis Award for her poem 'The Wait' after 'Alligator Creek, Cairns' by Ian Fairweather, 1939.*

# Last Night in Tokyo

*by Kali Myers*

“What’s that noise?”

“An alarm.”

“An alarm?”

“Well yes I assume so.”

“So there’ll be someone here soon then.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“But there’s an alarm.”

“So?”

“So ... people. The alarm will ... raise the alarm. You know; someone breaks in, alarm sounds, cops; all that.”

“Security alarms are usually silent.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They’re usually silent. Why would you give someone you want to catch advanced warning?”

“What? Alarms are loud and noisy to scare people away. The alarm at my mum’s always brings the neighbours running.”

“Does this look like a house to you?”

“What?”

“Does this look like a house to you? It’s not—it’s a government building. Government buildings don’t make noise. They have those silent alarms that just make the

buzzing noise in the security room so the guards know something's up.”

“Umm ... OK. So then Dr Professor ...”

“Dr Professor?”

“Whatever.”

“What's a Dr Professor?”

“Fuck, I don't know. Smart arse then. Captain Fucking Brilliant. Einstein. Take your bloody pick.”

“My pick of what?”

“Gah! Of nothing. OK.”

“OK ... were you asking a question?”

“Yes! Yes I was asking a question.”

“What was it?”

“About the alarm.”

“Ah yes. That. Still going. What about it?”

“Well if it's not a damned burglar alarm and there's no cops coming—we should totally be hiding though—then what the hell is it?”

“Oh, I don't know. Fire?”

“Fire?!”

“Yeah could be.”

“Fire? Fucking fire? There could be a fucking fire alarm going off and you're just standing there.”

“Well you are too.”

“I .... but ... you ... oh for goodness’ sake. Should we be getting out of here?”

“I thought you wanted to look at the view.”

“What?”

“The view. That’s why I brought you up here. I thought you’d like to see the city one last time.”

“OK. But now there’s an alarm and I find that worrying.”

“But if you don’t look out I’ll feel bad.”

“Feel bad, why would you feel bad?”

“Well, ’cause it was meant to be, like, a nice goodbye.”

“A nice goodbye?”

“Yeah. Cause I’m leaving.”

“WHAT?!”

“Surprise.”

“What the actual fuck are you talking about?”

“You know; dinner, date, beautiful view for a nightcap. The perfect date.”

“The perfect date?”

“Yeah, sort of an ‘I love you but I have to leave you’.”

“What?! You’re leaving me? I thought you were just leaving.”

“Well yes, but I figured you’d be staying.”

“OK. OK. I can’t really deal with this right now. There is an alarm, possibly a fire, and we’re here illegally.”

“Yes ... and?”

“Well would you like to go?”

“Yes, that’s why we’re here.”

“No, not go from me, go from the fucking building before we get arrested or worse fucking killed.”

“We won’t get arrested—burglar alarms are silent.”

“FUCKING KILLED THEN. Either way, perhaps time to head for the stairs?”

“It’s locked.”

“Sorry what’s locked now?”

“The emergency exit.”

“How would you know?”

“I tried it just before.”

“When?”

“When you were running around looking for the security cameras and thinking we would get arrested.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me that we were trapped up here?”

“I thought it might upset you.”

“Well so does you claiming that we’re here for a break-up party, but that didn’t seem to worry you as much!”

“I thought you would want to know.”

“Really? You thought that in the last moments before I was engulfed by flames atop the tallest building in Tokyo I’d like to know that I was only here in the first place because my girlfriend decided that she was sick of me.”

“I’m not sick of you. I’m just leaving.”

“How is that different?!”

“Well I’m going overseas for a year.”

“When were you going to tell me about this?”

“Well, initially after dessert, but then I thought it might be more poetic up here.”

“Not when in the evening, dammit. How long have you been planning an overseas trip without telling me? And what do you mean more poetic?”

“Like lyrical, sensitive, elegiac.”

“Not ... I don’t mean ... I know what fucking poetic means. Why here? Wait, no. Go back to the trip. How am I only hearing about this *tonight*?”

“Oh well I didn’t think you’d want to come.”

“And you didn’t think to ask?”

“Well you didn’t enjoy our trip to Kyoto.”

“That’s a bit different.”

“You don’t like going out for dinner.”

“What the hell does that have to do with it?”

“You like being at home.”

“Because shit like this happens when I leave it. Why the fuck is there water at my feet?”

“It’s been filling up for a while. I think it’s coming through the vents. Maybe it’s a cleaning mechanism.”

“Cleaning? Filling the room with water counts as cleaning?”

“It’s efficient.”

“Is it?”

“Why not?”

“OK, look. Before I’m drowned and I die—ironically alone and unhappy—could you just explain why the fuck—after I agreed to pack up and move to Tokyo with you ‘because it might be a bit of a laugh’—you got it into your head that I wouldn’t want to go travelling for a year and that, therefore, meant we needed to break up in the midst of what I thought was an early anniversary-celebration dinner. Could you do that for me?”

“You seemed happy here. You like being still. I thought it would give us both a chance at being free and happy for the next twelve months. Not fair if it’s just me having all the fun. If you’re still single and here when I get back we can pick up where we left off.”

“Hurray! You still planning on being alive tomorrow? OK shit this water is coming up fast.”

“Maybe we could try a window?”

“A window? We’re on the 112<sup>th</sup> floor.”

“I don’t think they unlock.”

“I don’t think that’s the problem.”

“You’re upset.”

“No, no. Why would I be upset? What could I possibly have to be upset about?”

“The water?”

“Yes, the water. Can we just go back a couple of steps. Why is here poetic?”

“Because we met here.”

“No we didn’t.”

“Yeah we did.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? We met at the dive bar just off campus.”

“Nuh-uh, that’s where we first spoke. 2005: the joint exchange program between Melbourne and Tokyo; all the high-schoolers were brought here on the last night of the trip so we could comprehend the magnitude of the city. I dropped my beanie and you lent me yours. Years later, at those stupid welcome drinks, I finally found you again. I recognised you the moment I saw you. And at last I learnt your name; Ally.”

“Stacey, I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

“I knew you didn’t remember me. But this was the first place we met, and so I thought it would be a good place to say a fond farewell.”

“I’ve never been to Japan before this trip. I’ve never even heard of the exchange programme you’re talking about. I grew up in fucking Brisbane! Now, are you seriously going to cap tonight off by telling me that you’ve had me mixed up with some fucking random for the past two years?”

“Oh shit.”

“Did you not wonder why I couldn’t speak any Japanese?!”

“Huh. Wow fuck that’s awkward.”

“Yeah you think?!”

“Hmm ... you’re upset again.”

“Again? This is still from the first lot of upset.”

“Ah. Yes. Sorry.”

“Yeah? Oh well everything’s fine then.”

“Oh good.”

“Seriously?”

“What?”

“I’m going to just go stand over here by myself for a bit.”

“OK. You want me to come with?”

“No I really don’t.”

“I’m getting a bit scared about this water.”

“Yeah? Finally grasping the magnitude of the situation we’re currently stuck in?”

“It doesn’t look too good, does it?”

“No it really doesn’t.”

“Can I have a hug?”

“What?”

“I’m scared.”

“Jesus fucking Christ ... yeah OK come over here.”

## §

As the sun descends behind the innumerable buildings jutting out into the clouds, the neon lights appear one by one like cat eyes awakening in the darkness. Tokyo—City of Lights—an entangled mass of pulsating, thumping neon. Yet in the spaces between the light, the darkness is thicker, deeper even than that suffocating moment before the dawn. Along one of these shadow paths creep two obscured silhouettes; they trip, giggling, as they crawl along the outer edge of the Tokyo Sky Tree. A dinner heavy with wine sits in their stomachs, its sweetened scent escaping through their shouted whispers as they urge each other on in faux silence to the forgotten, unlocked security door just off the main street. It opens on to a stairwell and closes automatically behind them. Startled, they both jump; a swallowed shriek escapes one of them before being smothered in further giggles and kisses. They begin to ascend, too drunk—or too unfocused perhaps—to register the absurdity of an unmarked, unlocked door leading to the tip of the tallest tower in Tokyo. On and on they climb until they emerge at the summit. They run from

window to window, admiring the immensity of the glowing mass below them. Then one of them becomes startled, flinches at a loud noise. She becomes nervous, clearly wants to leave. The other remains still, her back to the Fuji-san window. They argue. As the first one becomes more agitated—and the second ever more still—a slight trickle of water begins to descend into the chamber from the vents which encircle and enclose the viewing platform. It goes unnoticed until the trickle becomes a steady stream. Now they are concerned; it is not stopping and they have just discovered that the door does not work. As the water reaches up to their waists, the argument is forgotten and they embrace; two scared, trapped animals who have realised they have only moments before they die. As the water stream turns into a violent torrent which bursts open the vents, they are submerged and the room overwhelmed. Then, under the pressure, a window breaks and they topple out in the fountain—still embracing—to the cold, cracked pavement far below. They land, bursting and crumpling beyond recognition—entwined further still—whetted only by the blood which gurgles from the ruined flesh. Where is the water? Where is the glass? At the top of the Sky Tree, there seems to be no disturbance; the windows are intact, the carpets dry, the lock on the emergency exit green for go. As the tangled, destroyed masses draw in a shocked and splattered crowd, the small light atop the tower’s spindle flashes in the night sky; crying out its existence amidst the illuminated city scape.

§

*Ring ring.*

“Stacey? Is the alarm still going off?”

“Nah—that’s just my phone.”

“What the hell just happened?”

“We fell.” *Beep beep.* “Voicemail.”

“Shit did we actually? You OK?”

“I don’t know. I think so. Do I look OK?”

“You look ... the same. How are we even alive?”

“The water cushioned us.”

“You realise that makes absolutely no sense, right?”

“Well how else would we be alive?”

*Ring ring.*

“Is that your phone again?”

Yeah. Private number.” *Beep beep.* “Voicemail.”

“You’re not going to check that?”

“Probably not. Nothing good comes from private numbers.”

“Right. Can you help me up? I don’t believe I can stand.”

“You’re hurt?”

“No. I just don’t believe that I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“We fell. From all the way up there. How is this even possible?” *Ring ring.* “OK, seriously; either answer it or put it on silent.”

*Beep beep.* “Voicemail.”

“Yes, voicemail.”

“Do you think it’s weird?”

“Yes, yes I do.”

“No; not the fall. That there’s no people around.”

“There’s people over there.”

“Yes. But not here. If you just saw two people miraculously land in a travelling

waterfall, would you not, like, go see what that was all about?”

“So maybe no one saw us.” *Ring ring.* “Oh for fuck’s sake Stacey! Give me that!”

“Why didn’t you answer it?”

“What?”

“I thought you would answer it.”

“You said you didn’t answer private numbers.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have to.”

“I know that. But it’s your phone.”

“Still.”

“Still what?” *Beep beep.*

“Voicemail.”

“Yes I know it’s voicemail! Why is it still on loud?”

“The silent is broken.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I dunno.”

“You going to listen to your voicemails?”

“Not tonight.”

“I think someone really wants to speak to you.”

“Then they should call on an unblocked number.”

*Ring ring.*

“OK this is stupid. Hello?”

*“Hi and welcome to being dead.”*

“What the hell?”

“Who is it?”

“Some sort of prank call.”

*“Did you know that the dead count for over 150% per cent of the global population? That’s a ratio of 15:1 against the living.”*

“Who is it though?”

“I don’t know—it’s automated.”

*“Congratulations on your entry into this ancient and unlimited club. You have now joined ranks with some of the most celebrated and famous members of the human species.”*

“This is really weird.”

*“Did you know, that other dead people include Oscar Wilde, Ghandi, Mozart, and TV’s Joan Rivers?”*

“You could just hang up, you know.”

“Nah I want to know what the hell this is all about.”

*“Whilst being dead, feel free to enjoy the innumerable benefits such standing confers on you. Why not try walking through a wall, flying, or just scaring the crap out of your still-living friends and family? Being dead doesn’t have to mean the end of fun. Why not take full advantage of your new lifestyle?”*

“Is it some sort of weird marketing campaign?”

“Then what the hell are they selling?”

“Funeral plans? Coffins? Relics?”

“Stacey, please, don’t be morbid.”

*“If you’re ready to take full advantage of your new situation, press 5 now to call back this number. Otherwise, come visit us at our headquarters. Our friendly staff are always happy to help—”*

“I think it’s done.”

“So what was it selling?”

“No idea. Must just be generating buzz at this stage. Maybe we should listen to the voicemails?”

“OK.”

“You have four new voicemail messages. You have twelve saved messages.”

“Really Stacey?”

“I haven’t gotten round to clearing out the inbox yet.”

*“Message received today at 1.53 am. You’re dead. To replay this message press 1 ...”*

“That was unpleasant.”

“Did you recognise the voice?”

“No.”

*“Message received today at 1.54 am. Really, you’re dead. To replay this message ...”*

“Who the fuck is this?”

“It’s just a prank Ally, don’t get so worked up about it.”

“It’s a pretty elaborate bloody prank.”

*“Message received today at 1.54 am. Seriously, you’re both dead. Get used to it. To*

*replay this ...*”

“This is just sick. People should be ashamed of themselves.”

*“Message received today at 1.54 am. Look at where you fell. Did you really think you survived that? Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt! Message received ...”*

“Well there’s a joke in dire need of resuscitation.”

“Stacey, is this the time for that?”

“Sure. Why not?”

*“End of messages. To replay all messages press—”*

“Stacey, what did you do?”

“I deleted all the messages.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because they were upsetting you.”

“You deleted all the evidence!”

“Evidence of what?”

“Of the creepy fucking stalker stalking us with sick twisted voicemails!”

“He may have had a point you know.”

“What sort of a point?”

“Well, it does seem a bit unrealistic that anyone would survive that fall.”

“So what, we’re dead and we don’t know it?”

“It would make sense in the context of the voicemails.”

“Yes, but not in the context of we’re standing here breathing.”

“What’s that on the pavement?”

“It’s rubbish from the butcher’s next door.”

“It’s right where we fell.”

“So we must have just missed it—yay for us not smelling like rotted meat!”

“Ally. It’s wearing your skirt.”

“What?”

“It’s wearing the same skirt as you. And that’s the remains of my beads on the ground.”

“Just what the hell are you implying?”

“Ally, look! It’s us. That’s us. That’s our bodies. Oh my god. Oh my fucking god. Someone get an ambulance!”

“Holy fuck.”

“Seriously, we’re really hurt. Oh god you’re not moving.”

“Stacey, calm down—it’s OK.”

“No it’s not. How is it OK? Oh my god we’re actually dead.”

“OK OK, breathe. We need to get out of here.”

“Why? We need help!”

“Stacey I think it’s beyond help at this point. We need to leave. This is ... this is not good. We need to get away from here.”

“No we need to stay and make sure we’re OK.”

“Stacey! We’re not OK and we’re not going to be OK! We need to go so we can clear our heads and work out what to do next. Come on!”

The agitated one leads the still one away from the distressing scene. As ambulance sirens sound in the distance, the two non-bodies slip through the shadows and street lights, through the walls and into alleyways, always unseen, always silent. And as the first pink light breaks its way over the horizon, returning the neon wonderland to its steel and concrete corporeality, the two figures begin to fade. They cling to each other one last time—a last attempt to find endurance, durability—as the dewy break of morning light pushes them into eternity, and they diminish to nothingness; forever entangled.

*Kali is a Perth-born, Melbourne-based writer, researcher, blogger and occasional ranter. Her work concerns violence, fairy tales, power, and representations of women. Her writing has previously appeared in Feminartsy Overland online, and on a number of other blogs and scholarly journals. You can tweet to her [@pickwickian36](https://twitter.com/pickwickian36).*

# Bath Scenes

*by Nathanael O'Reilly*

houseboats wait to pass  
through the Weston locks  
as ducks glide upon the Avon

morning drinkers on their benches  
under the willow trees sip cans  
of Foster's watching cyclists pass

a seagull swoops into the beer  
garden and swipes a Yorkshire  
pudding from a startled diner

flies away triumphantly  
as Sunday afternoon drinkers  
laugh, nudge and point

the temperature reaches  
twenty degrees Celsius—  
A scorcher! declares the radio DJ—

and parks fill with women in bikinis  
shirtless middle-aged men  
teenagers drinking cheap cider

elderly couples lying on blankets  
kids kicking footballs to fathers  
a family eating homemade pasties

notes from a busker's saxophone  
drift through Abbey Square

towards Roman Baths tourists

a scowling homeless man crouches  
beside an ATM daring the cashless  
to withdraw without making a deposit

old blokes in the Crystal Palace argue  
about the best way to get to Gloucester  
as wives sip Pimms, roll eyes

a middle-aged bald man in a bespoke suit  
caresses his partner's stocking-sheathed  
thigh as she checks the train schedule

declares there's time for one more  
round as he bounds to the bar  
orders her a double Jameson

in the bookstore basement bibliophiles  
crawl searching the lowest shelves  
for poetry and journals of exploration

at the bus stop young women gaze  
upon shirtless men demolishing  
a building across the street

the Bed & Breakfast owner steps  
outside, lights a cigarette  
leans his shoulder against

the stone portico wall  
takes a deep drag then spits  
brown saliva over his wife's flowers

a workman carries a naked  
mannequin from a shop and throws  
her headfirst into a Transit van

two old ladies bent double  
on the bus stop bench  
laugh their guts up

the day after Halloween  
a cracked vampire mask  
lies abandoned in an alley

a nine-year-old girl turns consecutive  
cartwheels on Solsbury Hill  
before the summer solstice sunset

a taxi driver parked  
outside The Harington Club  
blasts It's Not Unusual

*Nathanael O'Reilly was born in Warrnambool and raised in Ballarat, Brisbane and Shepparton; he currently resides in Texas. He is the author of Distance (2014) and the chapbooks Suburban Exile: American Poems (2011) and Symptoms of Homesickness (2010). Over one hundred of his poems have appeared in journals and anthologies around the world, including Antipodes, Australian Love Poems, Blackmail Press, Cordite, fourW, LiNQ, Mascara, Postcolonial Text, Prosopisia, Red River Review, Snorkel, Social Alternatives, Transnational Literature, Verity La, Writ Poetry Review and Windmills. Nathanael's poems 'A Glance, A Sigh' and 'Lost' appeared in Issue Three and 'Christian Girls' and 'I Was Not Like the Other Kids' in Issue Six of Tincture Journal. An interview between our poetry editor Stuart Barnes and Nathanael O'Reilly can be found online: [tincture-journal.com/2014/06/13/nathanael-oreilly-interviewed-by-stuart-barnes/](http://tincture-journal.com/2014/06/13/nathanael-oreilly-interviewed-by-stuart-barnes/).*

# Silver Lining

by M.J. Mounsey

He believed it was Sunday. Sunset, certainly. The water was cold around his thighs and there was a tan line where the waves crashed. He had been standing there for hours, so was his daily ritual, with the butt of the fishing line digging into his jutting hip bone, his wiry arms aching and a sad-looking, sort of wet cigarette hanging between his lips.

Everyday he stood like that, thigh-high some ways out in the water, drifting between shivering and sweating in the dry Australian sun, his jaw flashing, head tilted forward and the outline of his vertebrae poking out and snaking down from the nape of his neck. He stared off into the distance and waited, prayed, for the tug on the line. *Cast off near the rocks, at the change of the tides. Morning. Sunset. That's when the fish come in.*

*Even better after it rains. Go to the mouth of the river. That's the best place.*

Something his dad said? He wasn't sure. There were no rains any more—no dad too—so what did it matter? The fishing line swam empty in the water; it was invisible to him as it was pulled along in the current so that most of the time he barely knew if it was way out there or just about to hook him in the shin. But he was certain there were no fish on it. There were never fish on it.

He wanted to cry. He wasn't a crying sort of man, no, he wasn't, but he could feel that lump in his throat that he had to get rid of by swallowing frantically a few times. He just didn't want to turn around and get out of the water, go home with no food. When the dark mood took him, he thought he would've gladly stood there instead, forever facing out to a dead ocean that licked his thighs and stomach like he was a little god while the sunlight and starlight floated across his weary face in slow, eternal succession—but he couldn't, could he? He didn't want to die, that he knew. And he had others to look out for. He had to keep going.

“Fuck it,” he breathed with a tremble, tossing the cigarette into the water. He started to reel the line in, careful, careful, eyes narrowed, searching for the hook in the foam, fingers sensitive to even the slightest weight tugging down on it—and then stopped. Movement caught his eye, drew his attention to the two figures picking their way leisurely between the rocks back towards the beach. It was Johnny, the man who joined the survivors four weeks earlier. A short way behind him walked Anna, Grady's wife.

The wind billowed in her white dress and revealed her bony legs and those bulbous knees shining with bruises; she didn't bother to push the dress down. She was swinging out an arm behind her like she was waving goodbye to the sea and Chris thought he could see, even from where he stood, that she was smiling. He jammed his teeth together hard enough they sung a chalk-on-blackboard sound inside his head.

“Empty lines again mate?”

Grady stood behind him on the shore: up to the ankles in baked-on sand, he was tall with a shock of dark hair and too tight skin over his skull. Chris thought Grady was the sort of man that had things going for him, until he started starving to death. Chris didn't shift his gaze from the two figures on the rocks, and although his expression did not change, he became keenly aware of the slow, almost struggling thrum of his own heart.

“Yes. Empty,” he choked out. He didn't look at Grady, but he could see the tall man in his periphery staring at him.

“You ready to do this?”

There was the hint of a plea in Grady's voice, like he half expected Chris to renounce his gameness and then perhaps it would simply all be over and the idea put to rest. But Chris just nodded and tore his eyes away from the shoreline. He slogged out of the water and stuck the rod into the sand, then began a quick, animated ascent of the dune towards the rusted bait stand, the acidic burn of exertion racing through his limbs. Grady, who seemed nervous but chuffed, swiftly followed. Inside the bait stand, under the counter, was the rifle. It was Grady's—he said he found it on a farming property in the mountains, along with the truck they rode to the beach a year ago. Months ago he told Chris with shining eyes that he found the skeletons of the family inside the house strewn around the property like they'd been dragged around by dingoes. He said the dingoes were probably dead too by now, but Chris told him that animals weren't like people; they would've found a way to survive.

Chris retrieved the rifle and checked it was loaded. Grady strode along beside him, wringing his large, skeletal hands over and over, his breath coming short and fast. They rounded the bay until they reached the centre of the beach, just as Anna and Johnny did. Further up on the path that led back to the street, Liam and Alex sat cross-legged and half

faced in towards one another; thin-lipped and greying, they watched with bulging eyes. The last light of day was receding from the sand and into the water like it was being called home; a blanket of darkness fell slowly. Chris and Grady stopped on the beach and waited. Chris' mind was racing; thoughts that sprung from some deep, old place that was untouched by disease and disaster. *You shouldn't be here, you shouldn't be doing this. You should be somewhere else, anywhere else*—and then Johnny and Anna's figures grew larger and clearer and he felt an uncontrollable bitterness wash over him—*but you can't stop now, can you? No. You can't go home, because there's no home, no helpers, no food. There's no food.* Chris looked at Grady, opened his mouth like he wanted to say something. They shared a gaze for a moment; Grady looked terrified and then he flicked his eyes at Anna and back to Chris and sort of tilted his head to one side like he meant to say “come on man, what're you looking at me like that for?”

“It's gotta be done. The Fisherman won't help us otherwise,” he said in a low voice.

Chris just stared at him, his hands feeling warm around the rifle, then he nodded and turned back to Anna and Johnny. At last they had spotted the two men standing in the descending gloom, waiting, one of them armed. Anna jerked awkwardly to a stop, her knees going pointy and the muscles in her thighs straining. She looked at Johnny with wide eyes and then at Grady and she shook her head with a look of desperation in her eyes, just for a few seconds. Grady stared back at her blankly. Johnny continued his approach, his head tilted to one side and a half grin on his face, like he was trying to make sense of what was happening and simultaneously reasoning to himself that whatever was happening was fine. Anna said something to him but the wind carried her words away so Chris couldn't hear what they were, then she pivoted and staggered through the sand towards the trees of the national park. Johnny stared after her for a few moments, his eyebrows knotted together. Then he glanced back at Chris, holding his arms out wide, and Chris thought he could see a glimmer in the man's eyes.

“What's going on, Chris? You should put that down mate, before you do something you regret.” He held one palm up. His chest inflated, he grew taller, his shadow on the sand stretched and he took a few steps towards them, and Chris felt his fingers loosen around the rifle.

“Chris, do it, do it now before it's too late,” Grady breathed into the stunned silence.

It was enough. Chris felt an odd sense of *déjà vu*, like a light switched off inside of him. He raised the rifle and fired a single bullet. There was a terrific boom and crack as it fled the rifle and landed in Johnny's chest with a *thunk* and a splatter of blood. Almost instantaneously a shriek rose from the national park. Grady inhaled sharply.

"Oh, shit," he breathed, rooted to the spot, his mouth hanging open, his brows pulled in tightly. His words sounded muffled, far away to Chris who was staring at Johnny and half expecting his eyes to roll up into his head or *something*; but he just stared at Chris with a look of terrified confusion as blood seeped across his white shirt and down to his belly button. He swayed, cast a glance upwards, collapsed in a spray of sand. Liam and Alex hurried up the steps to the street leaving Chris, Grady and the dying man. Chris looked at Grady and searched the face of his companion for some guidance in the dying light. Grady swallowed.

"Come on," he said, his bottom lip quivering. "Let's uh, let's get the dinghy."

Chris followed him, his hands shaking around the handle of the rifle. He dragged his eyes away from the struggling man on the ground.

When Johnny showed up four weeks before, he told the survivors he was searching for food just like they were. Grady started having the dreams after that. He told Chris that in one of these dreams, the outline of a man called to him from atop a frozen wave. He called the man the Fisherman, said he was a god offering to help the survivors if one of Grady's 'people' gave him something first. Grady became fixated on the idea of the Fisherman needing a sacrifice. He argued that if the group fed the sea with the blood of a man, it would satisfy the Fisherman of their dedication and the god would send them fish and they would be saved. This idea he repeated most vehemently to Chris. He suggested Johnny was an appropriate candidate for the offering because of his newness to the group; he ordered Chris to shoot him. Chris had never shot a man but he told Grady that he would do just about anything at that point to bring in some food. He was never a religious or spiritual man—those ideas were older than his time—but in the past year he had found himself looking out with a growing bitterness at the waves folding and rolling on the rocks indifferently, and wondered if he was truly abandoned.

The two men, both of them anorexic from starvation, wrapped the moaning, heavily bleeding man in tarpaulin and placed his swaddled form in the old dinghy. Then they

stumbled manically back and forth along the stretch of the beach, plucking up leaves and shells and using them to line the spaces around Johnny's writhing body. Chris moved like a man in a dream, his heart beating slowly, his breathing laboured and his mind's eye trying to picture the Fisherman on the wave, mid-surge, frozen, glistening in the sun. *You better be watching.* At one point, Grady covered Johnny's face with some tarp; Chris could still see Johnny's mouth opening and closing from behind the sheet.

When they were done and there were no more empty spaces around Johnny's body, they waded into the rising water, pushing the dinghy out until it got caught by the current and pulled to sea. They stood together on the beach, cold skin raised in goose bumps, chests rising and falling heavily, and watched it float away on the current until the dinghy grew so small and it had become so dim out that they could no longer make its form from the waves. The sacrifice was done.

The two men climbed the sandy steps to the street. Chris had blood mixed with sand splattered up his arms. He wanted to vomit.

"How long 'til the Fisherman accepts it?" he said with a shaking voice. Grady shrugged in the darkness.

"How should I know?"

"Well, you'll dream tonight and talk to him, right?" Chris offered. Grady just coughed and waved his hand wearily. Deep frown lines formed on the forehead; his teeth stuck out from the shrunken-lipped mouth.

"Look, Chris, leave it alone huh? What's done is done. Just ... just wait."

Chris chewed his lip and said nothing. They bid each other goodnight and parted ways.

## §

He shot up in bed; his heart was racing erratically, so uncontrollable his chest ached and panic swelled in his bloated belly. He was sweating, his mouth cotton-dry, his eyes blurry; panting, whistling like an old, frightened dog.

He had been dreaming: he was sitting much further up on the beach so that he could

make out the powered down silhouette of the city against a thunderous sky. Just sitting, knees pulled up, hand clasping opposing wrist and the wind running through his lank hair. He had been staring at that silhouette, at the silence of the vista—no pillars of smoke, no scavengers exchanging gunfire—just calm, played to the looped soundtrack of the ocean tide hissing and burbling on the shore. He had not been thinking about anything; there was a distinct meditation in the moment. From some subconscious knowing, his attention was dragged to the sea. He watched, petrified, as a monstrous wave rose up from the flat grey water—up, up, blotting the horizon, the clouds and rays of sunlight so that darkness was cast over the beach—towering up and rushing towards him with a roar, the lip of it threatening to crash to the shore at any moment and engulf him. But it didn't; it just held there, frozen, the white streaks of foam glittering very slightly in the last slivers of sunlight dispersing around it. He got to his feet, staggered to the shore, feeling both afraid and excited, a yawning in his chest, a desire, a *hunger* for what came next. Very slowly, a shimmering light, both bright and solid yet ethereal, as if he was looking at it from under water, rose up at the top of the wave and scattered into the sky like thin, golden fingers reaching. A man followed it; he rose up from the wave—Chris could not make out any other details of the man, except that he was tall, broad. It was the Fisherman, he knew. The god gazed down at him. Shivers erupted over his skin.

“I did the sacrifice,” he shouted. His voice sounded flat, unreal. The Fisherman said nothing to him.

“I sacrificed Johnny to you. Will you bring us fish?” he shouted. The Fisherman continued to gaze down at him.

“We’re starving to death. Will you bring us fish, for the sacrifice?” he shouted, his voice cracking. His skin had begun to feel like insects were skittering along it and he suddenly became aware of the exhaustion pulling him down. The Fisherman didn’t respond and as Chris stared at him, he realised that the figure was receding from him, drifting back, back and down into the wave.

“Hey! Hey!” he shouted, running into the water. The Fisherman continued to disappear into the wave. Chris stopped.

“Wait! Wait! Tell me, what now? What now?” he screamed, but as the last word left his mouth, the Fisherman vanished. Chris stood, staring up at the wave with wild eyes,

grasping with a clarity and understanding that one could only summon in dreaming that the water was slowly transmuting from blue to purple, to a subtle pink that grew extravagantly, violently red. Red, like blood. Even the foam no longer glittered; it was dark, hardened like sinew. It was not a wave any more but some coagulated mountain of blood and tissue and flecks of rib and sternum and shreds of red-stained cotton, and somewhere lodged deep within, a dull metallic bullet, bronzed with age, gleamed. *Johnny*. He cursed, staggered backwards, almost fell in a dip in the sand, looked up as he realised the mountain was drooping and the blood-red wave was in motion again, undulating monstrously, the lip of the wave hurtling towards him, the deafening roar in his ears...

§

He wiped the sweat off his forehead. He had heard the front door shut, heard footsteps padding along to his bedroom, barefoot; they were familiar. Anna. He could see her as she stood there in the doorway, all bony limbs and long, thin hair, framed by the faint starlight shimmying through the window above his bed.

“Hey, you OK?” she whispered in her clipped, girlish way. Chris relaxed against his pillow; it was damp.

“Yeah.”

She blew out a breath and climbed onto his bed. The mattress rippled gently under her tiny body. She lay down on the pillow beside him. Chris breathed in her scent, admired the fuzzy shape of her body in the dark; there was a terrible pang in his chest.

“Why’d you do it, Chris?” she said in a small voice. “Why Johnny? He didn’t do anything wrong. He—he was my friend.”

His jaw fluttered; he stared up at the ceiling, clenching and unclenching his fist. *Of course she came here to talk about that.*

“You don’t really believe that stuff about the Fisherman, do ya?” she continued. “Grady’s a filthy liar. He made it all up just to get you to—” she faltered.

“Anna,” he said. She fell silent.

“The Fisherman is real. I know he’s real. I *know* it,” he said, nodding. “We’ve shown our dedication. Fisherman will see it and give us fish in return.” She shook her head. He could hear her dirty hair swishing about her bare shoulders.

“You’ve been gypped, Chris. There are no gods. That’s ancient history, old stories. Grady’s a con and a liar, and you’re—you’re a *murderer*”, she breathed; the last word tapered off into heavy silence. He swallowed a few times, feeling that lump crawling up his throat again.

“I’m not a murderer.”

She was crying. He felt depressed, but irritated too. Bitter.

“Why’d you walk away?” he said.

“Huh?” She sat up.

“Why didn’t you stop it from happening, if you knew? You knew, didn’t you?” he said. It was like driving a knife in, almost like killing again. He didn’t want to, but he couldn’t stand her blaming him when he was the only one doing *something*. She was whimpering and sniffing. She jumped off the bed.

“What could I do against the man with the gun?”

“You could’ve done something if you wanted to, if it suited you, but you knew that Johnny’s time was up, yeah? The game was over.”

She was bawling, telling him to stop.

“He outlived his usefulness to you,” he said. She disappeared from his bedroom, mewling like a kitten.

“You could’ve done something. I would’ve listened to you,” he said, but he didn’t think she heard him. A few seconds later he heard the front door click shut.

## §

It was about noon. Chris headed to the pub with the shell necklace he made for Anna stuffed into his pocket. The building had solar power generators fitted to the roof that

still worked, so on most days the survivors would put on the air conditioning and sit in the dark, drinking stale cider. Outside, the heat hovered in the mid-thirties and was thick enough to suffocate you if you stood for too long. Chris noted with relief and a hint of delight that thick storm clouds loomed heavy and low on the horizon. It rarely rained anymore and not more than the occasional pitter-patter that whispered on the steel roof of the pub and left pore-like holes in the sand. Then it would go as soon as it had come; the sky would iron out its creases and the water would be sucked off the ground. But those clouds looked pregnant with more than light rain.

Inside, the karaoke machine was playing some fast paced rock'n'roll; Grady was seated at a booth, his lanky limbs sprawled out on the faded red seat and his head tilted back. His huge ribcage inflated and deflated slowly and he was tapping his long pointer finger on the counter. Liam and Alex sat at the bar, talking quietly and drinking from half-full glasses. They stared at him as he passed. He couldn't see Anna anywhere.

He fished the cigarettes and lighter from under the bar counter and dropped the box on the table in front of Grady, who opened his eyes and peeked down. He grinned and the loose skin around his mouth folded over itself. Chris took the seat in front of him, removed one cigarette, lit it and sucked on it deeply. Smoke billowed out from his nostrils in grey tendrils and he coughed.

"I'm a goner, Chris," Grady said softly. Chris stared at him with watering eyes through the wall of smoke floating between them.

"What do you mean?"

Grady slumped in the seat and stretched his long spindly fingers on the table. His eyes peered out at Chris from within his skeletal face and he gave a half smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I'm a dead man."

Chris lowered the cigarette; it hovered over the table top. The ashy tip sagged and wisps of ghostly smoke danced up from his fingers.

"How's that possible?"

The half smile was gone. Grady shrugged his shoulders and dropped his gaze.

“It just is. I’m dying, you’re dying. We all are. We’re going the same way as the rest of the world.”

Chris leaned forward with wide eyes.

“But we did the sacrifice, Grady.” He searched the deathly face of the man before him. “The Fisherman wouldn’t let you die.”

“We did the sacrifice,” he agreed; his voice was barely a whisper. His head drooped slightly and it was like he was speaking at the counter top. “I’m sorry I asked you to do it, Chris—to kill him ... Johnny touched my wife and I ... I couldn’t let him live, you know, I couldn’t let him, it made me *so mad*. I had to find a way to get you to do it ... you could do it; I couldn’t. I’m a coward for asking you. A fucking coward. And all of it for what? Where is she now?” He stumbled over his words; his voice quivered and two fat tears streamed down his hollow cheeks. Chris craned his neck. He darted his eyes back and forth across Grady’s contorted face. The parted lips made him look like a fish out of water.

“You think I don’t know he touched her? Grady? Grady *look at me*,” he hissed, rapping his swollen knuckles on the counter top. The man across from him raised his dark eyes slowly. Liam and Alex cast cautious glances at the arguing men. Grady’s expression sagged in defeat. Chris’s eyes glistened in the light of the bulb hanging above them.

“That’s not what this was about; that’s not why we did this, right? You said the Fisherman would come through and—”

“I made him up, Chris—”

“He’ll come through,” he snarled, blobs of spittle landing on the reflective countertop. His heart was hammering angrily in his chest; he felt faint, the world swimming at the edges of his vision. He dabbed the cigarette in the ash tray and killed the flame. “You’ll see the damn fish come in.”

Grady was silent for a few minutes; he watched as Chris again became disguised by

a pillar of smoke.

“It’s OK to feel guilty for what you did.”

Chris scoffed.

“For what I did? I don’t feel guilty. I saw the Fisherman in a dream last night. He’s real. I don’t feel guilty,” he repeated. Grady stared at him, his brows raised, but he said nothing.

They sat for a while like that, smoking and drinking while the storm fell heavy and angry for a few hours and passed. At length, the sun dipped behind the horizon and the heat eased. The survivors went back to the beach together, except Grady; he said he couldn’t even get to his feet. He asked Chris to help him get down to Anna but Chris refused. Grady simply gazed after him, resigned, as the door to the pub clicked shut.

The smell of the sea was carried up to them on the evening wind. Chris could hear the surf coming in and going out, the same as every night, probably the same for all of eternity. Down on the sand, Liam and Alex went up to the rocks with the old stereo and blankets. The moonless sky dimmed to a dark purple and the stars twinkled with a far away brilliance. Chris saw Anna sitting on the shore, her toes dug into the sand and her knees pulled up to her chest. He sat down beside her; she flinched.

“Where’s Grady?” she said, not looking at him. Chris cast his eyes down and he felt a burn rise in his cheeks. He was thankful they sat in the darkness.

“Still in the pub.”

She said nothing, but she wiped her nose and angled her face away from him and he saw her shoulders go up once or twice. He thought she knew. Remembering it, he fished the shell necklace from his pocket and dangled it in front of her. It made tiny clinking sounds that made her turn. She eyed it and then, with a small twitch in her lips, gazed at him.

“I made it for you, to, uh, to say sorry,” he said and dropped it slowly onto her palm. She smiled and put it around her neck.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

They sat together and traced their fingers through the sand while they talked about Anna’s childhood on a farm out west. She said the place was dead now, and all the cattle were just skeletons turning to dust.

“I still have nightmares about Foster, y’know?” she murmured. Old rock’n’roll music drifted over the rocks to them—a familiar song about not wanting to set the world on fire. Anna had told Chris about the town before but he figured she forgot or maybe she wanted to talk about it again. He knew sometimes it was hard to get things off your chest the first time.

“Close to the end—maybe every day—I’d stand on the hill looking down at Foster with a belly full of food, knowing Foster was a ghost town, knowing we let them die.”

She told him about how their town council resolved to withhold their stores of food and water from their neighbours.

“We starved them out. It was us or them I guess ... but I wish I died with them, I swear I do,” she said.

The trees rustled in the wind and the sea foam bubbled on the shore.

“I did it again yesterday. The same crime—I didn’t stop what happened to Johnny, just like I didn’t stop what happened to the people in Foster. I just *watched*. I want to change, I want to be someone else, but I can’t ...” She looked out to sea and shivered in the cold breeze. Her eyes were shining. He frowned.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Anna,” he said. He put a hand on her wrist and she flicked her eyes up at him. She reached a dainty hand up and wiped the single tear off her cheek.

“Yeah?”

“Sure. You were just looking out for yourself. You can’t help the people who are gonna hurt your chance of survival. The instinct for self-preservation is very strong, and for good reason too.”

She tilted her head; a look of horror washed over her face.

“That’s awful,” she cried, tears spilling down her cheeks. Chris squeezed her arm but he didn’t know what to say. It *was* awful, wasn’t it?

They sat silently for a few minutes, listening to the faint music being carried out over the rocks.

“What do we do next?” She hesitated. “Y’know, Johnny told me about a settlement up the coast that’s got some crops going. A science company. We—we were going to go.”

He felt the familiar bitterness engulfing him. He wanted to shout at her, throttle her even, shout and rage until he lost his voice and breath and his lungs exploded. She shifted in the sand so that she was facing him. She gazed at him with wide eyes.

“Chris, you and I should go there, leave all this stuff behind us. We can survive, we can *live*. It’s a ... a silver lining to the clouds, I guess,” she whispered, smiling at him.

Part of him delighted in her words; he felt the small flutter in his chest and let his imagination dance wildly with the things they would do together—but to his dismay, he still felt bitter; he just couldn’t shake it. The resentment was too much; it pushed away all the good feelings, like a large stone weighing down his heart. He shook his head.

“I’m not going. You shouldn’t either. Trust me, Anna, this place here is our silver lining. All of what’s happened, the stuff you think is bad now—when the fish come in and we’re saved, it won’t be bad any more. It’ll be good. We’ll even celebrate it one day! Just look at how it rained this afternoon. Tomorrow I’ll go fishing and you won’t believe how many flatheads we’ll catch. Johnny didn’t know what he was talking about.”

Anna climbed to her feet suddenly; a spray of sand hit Chris in the face and he squinted.

“Damn it, Chris, you’re fucking useless! Don’t you get it?” she shrieked. “There are no more fish!”

She stumbled off towards the rocks, her arms waving wildly as she balanced herself. He stared after her through the gloom. Her thin figure receded on the rocks until she disappeared behind a large boulder. *There she goes—the woman I love*, he thought. He felt a familiar yawning sensation in his gut and wanted to be sick; he thought he probably shouldn't have drunk any alcohol with the shape he was in.

It was just him on the beach now, perhaps the only man on a beach in the whole world. His heart beat slowly; he wanted to sleep, but the more he stared out at the black water, the more desperate he became. He had to *know*. He climbed to his feet and staggered to the water. The swell was gentle but the sea was freezing. It might not have been, he didn't know, but as soon as he stepped in he shivered all over with the last bits of energy he was good for. He kept wading out, knee high, thigh high, chest high, until the sand bank fell away to nothingness, and he attempted to fix his feet somewhere, but the surf lifted him up with a cool weightlessness. He kicked his legs out, didn't make contact with the bottom. It was like he was floating in space: nothing above him, nothing below him. For some reason he recalled suddenly what a fisherman told him when he was a boy. He had been on a charter for ten hours with his father and the fisherman, back when there was still food, before the blight. They caught a single fish between them. The fisherman consoled him with a twinkling eye: "Remember, Chris, it's called fishing, not catching." Chris had never caught a fish before then. It took fifteen minutes to reel in the eight kilogram skipjack tuna. When it was finally thrown onto the boat, flipping and jumping and jerking, his father instructed him to beat it over the head with a baton, to do it quickly before it leapt out of the boat, before it was too late. Chris did it; there was blood splatter all over the floor of the boat. He remembered vividly the feeling of the baton hitting the hard bone in its head and how the blood looked against the boat's plastic white walls. He threw up immediately after, a halting acidic stream of water and red cordial off the back of the boat; he swore it wasn't because he was shocked or upset. It was just sea sickness. His father told him they would have the tuna for dinner that night and they did and he enjoyed it, even if somehow inside he knew he was different. He would go on to hunt and kill many animals, until they dwindled to non-existence and the blight raged like a cancer on the skin of the world. And now, as he bobbed along in the cold sea, he repeated the fisherman's words in his mind in an endless loop. *it's called fishing, not catching. fishing, not catching, you chump. fishing.* He looked out beyond the rolling headland (it was just a black monstrous form in the night now) and wondered

with great fear if Anna was right about the fish and whether she was right about him being a murderer. He thought of pallid Johnny lying in the dinghy with his blood pooling in the tarpaulin (*not catching*) and his eyes wild and filled with terror and the way Grady pulled the tarpaulin over his eyes so he would stop looking at them but he could still see *that mouth* moving behind it, opening and closing, opening and closing. The dinghy had certainly sunk by now—it was a shabby dinghy—and the thought of that corpse-shaped tarpaulin bobbing up and down in the dark empty sea made him quiver violently. Had it been for nothing? (*not catching*) Had he upset *her* and now she had disappeared over the rocks and perhaps she would not wake in the morning but would go off to an eternal slumber thinking only dark things of him (*fishing—not catching. not catching for you. you've been duped. duped chump, by grady and your dad and the whole fucking world, so show me your silver lining?*)

It had happened again. One stroke of luck only—he had killed, he had eaten, he had survived the mass deaths and ended up here on this beach, perhaps in one of the last pockets of humanity remaining. But that was it. There were no more fish. *not catching, not for you, never for you.* He wanted to scream, to howl and yell and run and go home, to his bed and fridge, his mum and school and the movies, to the washing hanging on the line, clean, going round and round in the garden in the gentle breeze, back home to order and a game he could play and win.

He suddenly felt a presence in the icy abyss. Something slimy passed along his leg. He gasped. His heart started pounding and he gazed up at the starry sky with his mouth open. *It's the fish! It worked!* A great relief descended upon him like sleep to an insomniac, all thoughts of the bobbing tarpaulin and the corpse in the pub forgotten, his shame washed away with each swell of the current. He even thought of Anna and that great rip in the hem of her white dress that flashed her silky thigh every time she moved and all the times he thought of touching her and craving for her to do the same to him and now that Grady and Johnny were out of the way and it was just him and her and the fish remaining he could do it and *he was glad.* God damn, *he was glad.*

“Grady? Grady ya coward! The fish are here! All thanks to who, huh?” he shouted joyfully. It didn't occur to him that Grady couldn't hear him, that Grady was sitting, dead, in the dark pub. “Anna! Come and see! We're saved! Forget Foster and Johnny baby!” He looked down with a monstrous hunger to try and make out the forms of the fish

but was instead struck by the sight of the water shimmering with an eerie luminescence. He stared for a few seconds with dumb shock. His mind was racing with images of his dream from the night before.

“F-Fisherman? Is that you?” he stuttered. The luminescence was still for a few seconds, hovering half a metre from him, and then it shot towards him. He cried out and jerked away. He drove his hands down into the water to try and push away the light, but the motion only served to splash salt water into his face. His eyes burned and he rubbed at them furiously with one hand, while the other he swished around in the water to chase off the light. He bobbed up and down and his legs thrashed wildly, but he was carried along with the current and through blurry eyes he could no longer make out the shore in the night or attempt to orient himself. There was a sudden sting in his thigh like he was being pinched. He screamed, a panicked sound piercing the silence of the night. The sensation of a roaring fire raced up his thigh and it burned so ferociously he could only vaguely feel the cold wiggling slime tangled on his leg. He dipped beneath the surface and his mouth filled with water. He spluttered, swallowed, felt the water descend into his lungs and waved his arms around in his struggle to stay afloat. He bobbed up again and sucked in air, felt it get stuck in all the water pooling in his throat and rushing down to his lungs. His chest heaved up and down. He felt overwhelmed by an abrupt exhaustion, like a light had been switched off inside him. A vice-like grip wrapped around his heart and blinding pain screamed up his spine. His head felt like it was about to explode. He angled it back to try and keep the water out of his mouth and glanced over to where he thought the rocks were. He strained his eyes to see the others in the darkness, but he couldn't. He could only hear the faint voice of the rock'n'roll singer as it floated over the rolling sea. He tried to call out Anna's name, but he could only make a wet, choking sound. He wondered why no one came to help him and he thought of Anna, Liam and Alex lying together on the rocks under the blanket, like a line of corpses. He sunk beneath the icy surface with nothing more than a ripple. The shimmering box jellyfish drifted away from him like a spectre receding into the shadows. It dawned on him then that the music would probably play for a while, until the batteries ran out in the stereo and silence finally descended on the beach.

A few minutes later, his body washed up on shore. He was conscious, still breathing, dizzy even while lying flat, his eyes open and staring dumbly, his mind wading through a fog, trying to decipher just *who* it was standing there a few metres away,

motionless, watching him. He could only make out an outline: tall, broad, maybe, or shorter than he first thought? He couldn't tell, couldn't force himself to focus, his mind was adrift in a grey murkiness. The figure just gazed at him. Just gazed. He tried to call out to them, tried to whisper 'help me' but he couldn't even get his mouth open, and every few moments the water would wash up on shore and soak him and get into his nostrils and eyes, so he just stared back at the figure with desperation and certain knowledge that his death was upon him. And they just watched him too, just watched, until his eyes went glassy and he stopped struggling and silence finally descended on the beach.

*M.J. Mounsey is a writer from Sydney, Australia.*

# Blue

*by Kim Waters*

You may call it blue,  
but what is blue  
but an effigy of sky  
surrounding a deck.

It takes one moment,  
an unrequited jab,  
a forking of the flesh  
to send him spiralling,

saluting the sea  
in a slated dive,  
a poor man's tribute  
to a watery grave.

Descending,  
he hears his mother's  
call, the calligraphy  
of a dolphin cry in the night.

Above, the spooling reel  
of a fisherman's line,  
handless and bloody,  
unravelling time.

Below, dusted footprints  
trek over the seabed  
telling him someone is there  
even though he doesn't

remember  
the sea has clouds too.

*Kim Waters is a Melbourne poet whose poetry has appeared in The Australian, Ulitarra and Hobo.*

# How to Disappear Completely (in the Middle of a Staring Competition)

*by Craig Mills*

*See that there, yeah, that's not me*, is what I say to distract my opponent and make it to the semi-final for the International Champion's Champion Staring Competition, held in the heart of Australia's finest city, Brisbane. Known for its perfect weather (when it's not storming of course), Brisbane shines with hope, but who knows what will happen, because when I show up to places I bring it all. I fucking bring it all—storms, plagues, and of course regicide.

There's only ever been one person, on record, to ever disappear completely in front of someone during a staring competition and that person was former Prime Minister Harold Holt, who—rumour has it—is now floating around in the middle of some ocean with Jeff Buckley. Holt told Buckley, in a dream, that his debut album would sell more if he faked his death, and if the album sold as much as predicted they would unite years later and float around in the royalties together.

Holt was King of the staring competition and just to be clear when I say 'disappear completely' I don't mean it in the literal sense, even though to do that is quite possible, but I mean to win a staring competition you have to non-exist and part of doing that is to consciously acknowledge that your opponent exists in memory and corporeal form for however long it takes to win the damned thing. I mean you can't just imagine a person to be there, even if the person is there. Instead, you're just imagining that they're not there, and then imagining that they are there. The only true way to be a champion is to convince the person opposite you, your foe, that you don't exist. Not really. And how does one do this, you ask? Well, to practise this is to pretend that there is no 'you'. Bend yourself out of existence like you're that ridiculous-looking white-monk child from *The Matrix* who bends spoons for meditative purposes.

*I go where I please, I do what I please*, is a great exercise in maintaining non-existence, although if you don't have the courage of a climate-change denier, this might not be the one for you. I remember practising this one time, during the funeral of this tour

guide I once knew after we'd bussed through Ireland. Near the last leg of the tour, he dived into the River Liffey yelling something about chewing gum and how he was doing The Holt. The police searched for days and couldn't find him, so he was assumed dead and the funeral was purely symbolic. I remember the night before he jumped in the river, when everyone else was asleep, he told me about how he'd heard of the beautiful beaches of Australia and that he was sure his wife and kids would slow him down if he were to bring them with him, so I always had a feeling that he didn't die, not really.

To non-exist, especially at a funeral, is quite the brain tease if you're not trained as I am. It's not about how people react, but more of how you don't acknowledge that what you're doing is most likely illegal and definitely offensive. If you've never been to a funeral, they suck the life out of you. All the tears and mourning are a real buzz kill, especially if you decide to speak out of line during the eulogy, in the nude, which, by the way, was all about how great this tour guide was and how he knew German and made friends with a couple of German folks. *We're in Ireland, man! Learn yourself some Irish, or something*, I yelled as I was torn away from the podium by a couple of funeral-goers. Admittedly, this is not the best example of non-existing, but it's a great example of my limits. I mean I can do it. I thought I could use the challenge of doing it naked, but I didn't predict such a violent reaction.

*I'm not here*, I say over and over again. What this does is establish the foundation of non-existence—*I'm not here, I'm not here*. A pretty standard exercise. These are the exercises I learnt in Sensei's beginner classes. Basically, the more you start to believe the more you disappear, in a sense. Sensei would then add distractions such as strobe lights and loud disco music, and if you could maintain a low level of non-existence she'd let you compete in the International Champion's Champion Staring Competition.

This is my fifth time here and this is the closest I've been to the final. Last year I was disqualified because my distraction was too 'physical'. Sensei never said anything about how urinating on the opponent's feet was against the rules, but I guess I've learned my lesson for now.

So now I'm keeping to pure verbal assault. Zen and all that. Chants like *This isn't happening* or *I walk through walls* or *See that there, yeah, that's not me*. Unpacking these ideas will hopefully prevent my opponent from non-existing before me.

Brisbane is an easy place to non-exist. The people are already halfway there, walking to work, or jogging to tone their summer bods. Most of the population, if they were to enter the International Champion's Champion Staring Competition would do pretty well. The lifeless look in the eyes of all the people seem to tell me that what they see is not entirely in front of them, making almost everyone non-existent.

This year is going to be the most difficult to compete, Sensei reckons, because we're all to compete on the Wheel of Brisbane. I think this is perfect, because what better way to win the International Champion's Champion Staring Competition than on a goddamned Ferris wheel? And the fact that there is seriously nothing around to distract anyone will make it easy to throw my verbal assault at my first opponent, Reginald Simonson Jr, who hails from Houston, Texas. The only reason he made it this far was because of his bad breath—a sneaky yet cheap distraction.

Me, I don't mind pungent smells, because I have a fetish for them. My last girlfriend couldn't stand that I asked her to wear plastic bags on her feet while she went to the gym because the smell of her feet would get me going for hours. She did it out of love at first, but then eventually she couldn't stand the smell of herself. She said she'd rather not be alienated from society. She left me and I never saw her again.

Reginald's breath wasn't even that bad. Our match lasted forty-six minutes. I distracted him with my chant, *it's gone, it's gone, it's gone*. Eventually he broke hold of the stare to make sure that he wasn't floating around on his own instead of in the Wheel of Brisbane's capsule, which, by the way, was quite comfortable.

Forty-six minutes is a personal best, but it could be better. The world record is thirty minutes on the dot, and it's held by four-year-in-a-row-champion Bob Peeler, who I'll be versing tomorrow because he beat Sally Darlington from Perth, Western Australia. Sensei doesn't believe I'll win because Peeler is way too good and only getting better. His mind games are a lot more complex and he's stepped away from all that Zen crap I've been doing. He distracted Sally Darlington by translating Sigur Rós lyrics, which apparently hold the answer for the exact weight of the Higgs Boson. Sensei is proud of me and tells me that it doesn't matter if I lose and I should be proud of how far I've come, but I reject her pity and tell her this championship is mine and I'll even find the answer to the weight of that Higgs thingy and win the Nobel Prize for something of other.

Sensei shakes her head and challenges me to a staring competition to prove that I'm not all I say I am. Before I even start my chant she disappears on a bus towards West End, to a bar, and wins.

## §

I try to rest and prepare myself for the challenge ahead. Tomorrow I'll warm up with beginner training all the way to advanced training and then work on disappearing completely—literally this time—and Peeler will bow down to the greatness of my non-existence. *I'm not here, this isn't real, I'm not here.* I practise bending my existence. I walk through a wall, which I do pretty easily, but have to pay for the damage, which is fine because I'm confident I'll win the prize money after being crowned king.

I wake up early and tell myself it's time to win and time to show Sensei she was wrong. Bob Peeler usually shows up to the match right on time because he practises to the last minute with his routine. I know this because Sensei told me when she did some scouting on him and I think that maybe she admired him for what he's done and how he is a funny, easy-going guy, but that has nothing to do with anything.

The nerves are kicking in and I'm not sure how I'm to go about this, so I find a picture of Bob Peeler on the internet and practise my staring, my chants, my non-existence. I stare for too long, probably more than a couple of hours. His eyes and hair and face change slightly, because I guess looking at something for an obscenely long time can do that. I see someone else in him. Someone I know. I sense something strange, like the dead rising, but now there's no time, because if I don't get my act together I'll be late for the final and possibly disqualified.

This is it. I enter the Wheel of Brisbane's capsule and Bob Peeler is sitting there and I know who he is now that I can see his flesh and I'm pretty sure that he recognises who I am and I swear to Christ he knows I know. He's in a dark brown leather jacket, which is probably fake because why would you even try to wear the skin of another living thing in a city as hot as Brisbane, but whatever, because even if the jacket is fake it'd still be pretty fucking hot. His hair is longer though and he has a café mocha-style moustache. You know, the ones guys have like they just downed a delicious café mocha without taking a breath and they end up with a beautiful mo that you could be proud of, but I digress, because I have to tell you now that I'm sitting opposite Bob and he smiles

beautifully and shakes my hand and the referee comes and does his thing, then leaves, and the Wheel of Brisbane starts spinning and then we both count down thirty-seconds until the competition starts.

Nothing is said. That would be unprofessional. Five more seconds.

It begins, and our eyes are locked.

“We’re all part of the same story,” Peeler says.

“This is not real, this isn’t happening, I’m not here,” I say too quickly. He smiles, holding my stare as I hold his.

“Come on. Let’s not have this moment ruined with your chants, which I know are just thinly veiled lyrics. I’ve studied you and I know you’ve studied me.”

*This isn’t happening. I’m not here. This isn’t real.*

I think about what to do and then just go for it. “I know who you are,” I say.

“You do?”

I don’t answer him just yet. I steady my eyeballs. Let them float freely without the pressure of my brain holding them still—a skill I learnt from Sensei of course.

“The last time I saw you, you were floating down the Liffey.”

He smiles, and I see him let go of his eyeballs and they too float freely like his body would have a long time ago.

“We have the same Sensei,” he tells me.

“I know you. I know what you did.”

The Wheel of Brisbane completes ten rotations.

“Killer speech at the funeral, by the way,” he says, now smiling, and I see the muscles in his neck relax. He does this with ease, something I’m yet to do so easily, but I manage, just, a few minutes after he does.

It's been about half an hour.

"I didn't get to finish it," I say.

"No matter."

His neck slowly elevates and shortly after mine does too and our heads defy gravity, leaving our bodies to bear the weight of the world.

"Never mind," I say.

"Do you think hope exists on its own?" he asks.

Change of plans. This isn't what I expected and I think he's just riffing.

"Of course it does."

"How so?"

"Hope has existed before we decided to seek it or to have it. How else would it be if it weren't already there?"

One hour passes. It's quiet, or so I perceive it to be. Neither one of us has flinched or moved, apart from our mouths, or so I thought, because I don't recall ever moving my mouth, and think that maybe we are using telepathy.

Our heads, limbs, and torsos are now floating independently, and Peeler is only seconds in front of me from non-existing. The only way I will be able to beat him is if I break down his defences, and then, his crown will be mine.

"I figured it out," I say.

Peeler is silent. His patience and pride are the reasons why he is the International Champion's Champion.

"I know why you jumped into the Liffey," I say.

No movement. By this time we both detach from our legs—our feet the only part of us connected to the Earth—to the capsule.

“It’s obvious now. And it has been for a while. I just never added it all up and you’re here now and I’m here and it makes sense. Holt was King. He still is actually, and like him, you distracted the world from who you were by leaving only the memory of yourself in the minds of others because to non-exist is to begin again, but you can’t do this now, because I know.”

After I say this, his legs reconnect to his feet and I see his right leg twitch. I have him now. My feet join me and I’m now almost non-existing.

“You made the mistake of letting me guess your past. Once I figured you out your past was recreated by my memories of you. You’re starting to un-fade back into existence. Like dinosaur bones growing back into a dinosaur.”

I know this is the moment I win because he doesn’t have anything to say. He exists more and more as I begin to fade away from his vision and I can tell because eventually he breaks eye contact. It has been an hour and a half and finally he doesn’t have the nerve to keep staring at me and instead sees right through me, literally, because by then, I disappear completely.

*Craig Mills is based in Brisbane, but only because it has a better ring to it than Logan. He studied Creative Writing at QUT and was shortlisted for the QUT post-graduate writing prize in 2014. He has been published in Stilts and has spoken at Yarn: Stories Spun in Brisbane.*

# The Day Before Australia Day

*by BN Oakman*

I dreamed I stirred from a dream, my  
heart thumping, fearing the dawning day  
to be your birthday, too late to post a card,  
certain I'd failed to phone for months.

Then I woke and in that slow-to-clear fog  
of returning consciousness remembered  
you died years ago, no longer a need  
to fumble to please, drear duty's debt

finally and forever discharged, no more  
censures telegraphed via favoured emissaries,  
the dream surrendering me to the day,  
the sun coming up burning away the dark.

## *Synopsis*

*I've often pondered what it would be like to dream of having a dream. One morning I had such a dream. Hence this poem.*

*BN Oakman's poems have been published in many magazines, journals and newspapers both in Australia and overseas and recorded for ABC Classics. His most recent books are In Defence of Hawaiian Shirts (IP 2010) and Second Thoughts (IP 2014). He lives in Central Victoria. Once upon a time he was an academic economist.*

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# My God Complex

*A personal fiction by Denis Fitzpatrick*

I miss my God complex. I really, really do. It began with my inherited schizophrenia, triggered at the age of twenty-two, twenty-one years ago, when I began to smoke pot, with androgynous voices in my head that told me I was God. These voices were a cross between thoughts and actual voices that I could plainly hear. Naturally, I scoffed at them when first I heard them, quickly deciding to put them to the test.

“Ok, then,” I thought to them, “if I’m really God, give me a due meat sacrifice.” I was at this time walking with a friend along King Street, Newtown, inner city Sydney, and was also newly homeless (I had opted out of Western society), so a free feed of some meat seemed heaven-sent.

I very soon found this meat, a succulent chicken wing, Thai style, standing out in the gutter. I had been keeping a sceptical eye out for it. I ate it all, including bones. The bones were the best bit: crunchy and tangy.

“You were looking for that, Denis,” said the friend I was with, Reginald, a friend who has since dropped off my radar.

“I know,” I replied.

“Why?”

“It’s a long story.”

From then on I have never questioned the voices telling me that I was God, quickly accepting it as a core belief. And those were very, very happy years, myself being the complete centre of attention of the voices and, apparently, everyone else around me.

But then I gave up pot about seven years ago and the voices went with the smoko. I was sorry to lose them, really sorry, but also extremely glad to have my own head back. I also lost the voices because I became compliant with the meds, and the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. I had re-entered Western society and was willing to abide by its rules, especially since Western society had bequeathed me a rent-controlled flat when I

decided to go mainstream and get off the streets. I still held onto my God complex though, until I began consults with Dr Jakob Alexeyevich Chadov, at the start of 2015. He recommended I see him every three months. After a few sessions Dr Chadov tentatively agreed that I was in a partial remission (no voices or other hallucinations, socially engaged, working, maintaining my flat, motivated, good appetite, etc.) but he said that what was holding me back was still believing what the voices had told me about my actually being God. If that goes by the wayside then I'll quite likely be in a full remission.

So, on the train ride home after that session I had a good think. And soon remembered that in current physics the observer and the observed are fundamentally linked. Thus, since I had witnessed many very unusual behaviours and occurrences (sundry proofs for my Godhead), I too must be very unusual. In other words, mentally ill. By the time I got off the train, in Granville (thirty minutes west by train from Sydney's centre), I had rejected my God complex as being the result of an aberrant, unhealthy mind. I felt great then, finally welcomed completely back into the folds of a wealthy society.

It was June 2015 when I abandoned my God complex and it's now January, 2016. I'm at my local pub in Granville, drinking copiously, and really wanting to be God again. But this time around, however, I'm fairly sure that my Godhead would be justified if I had a Goddess by my side. She'd after all be able to confirm my Status, and I likewise hers. Yes. Yes, indeed. There's most probably a woman here at The Royal who will be a fit companion for my Divinity. And Dr Chadov will have to take my Godhead a lot more seriously if it is also joined by another. No doubt The Goddess and I will also both bear witness to strange events that will prove our Divinity. It's just going to take a bit of searching.

## §

The Royal proved to be fruitless. Which made me think of past loves. So I left the pub and rang two of these past loves (of a grand total of five), and they both said they'd respond the next day. Which they never did. I guess I should have expected that.

I guess also that I'll have to look elsewhere for The Goddess. She's no doubt bound to be about the same age as me, so I'll probably find Her in a nightclub. Going to

nightclubs, though, has always made me nervous, self-conscious, knowing full well that most people there are searching solely for romance. But since I'm searching for Divinity, I suppose there's no need to be nervous and shy. So, I'll start tonight, a Saturday, and hopefully return with some good news.

## §

Well, I've been regularly dancing my weekends away for four weeks now and am still no closer to finding The Goddess, allowing me to thus resume my Role as God. I've tentatively sounded out quite a few young lasses about their being The Goddess, but that always proves to be a highly explosive social bomb: they quickly decide to avoid getting to know me.

So, maybe, like Dr Chadov opines, I'm really not God after all. If I were, The Goddess I expect would rush unto me instantly upon my search for Her. And it's not like Godhead is a difficult Role, in fact it's the best Job in The Universe. Really, there should be swarms of ladies keen to assume The Job; it's nothing but upside from my point of view. Not to mention living forever in absolute bliss. They're simply crazy not to take The Position!

Alas, then, if I'm not God, then who is? Maybe the atheists are right after all? Is life then completely absurd, our brilliant sentience outweighed by an eternity of oblivion? If so, I may as well get it over with now and commit suicide.

Unless, of course (and I've just realised this) I consciously re-assume The Position of God, take back my Godhead simply because there is no one else in The Top Job, providing some sort of fundamental meaning to sentience. I'd just be taking what no one else has dared to take, seeing that God is evidently absent from His Creation, and was quite likely never there to begin with.

Yes indeed, something to think about. In fact, I'd be making an ethical choice, a noble, and moral decision to accept responsibility for Reality, to be the last bastion of hope in case sentience becomes vitally endangered. Sure, in being the last bastion of hope, I might have to sacrifice myself in order to save The Universe, but I think doing so would be very heroic, and well worth The Sacrifice. It'll also keep me on my toes in doing my utmost to preserve Reality wholesomely.

Let me sleep on it; I'm sure my dreams will clearly show whether or not to take this Role so obviously going a-begging. At the least, my subconscious will have a good mull over the matter. See you in the morning.

§

Well, it's a clear, bright, morning here in Sydney, nice and mild, and I have decided to take what no one else has had neither the strength nor foresight to take. And if there is indeed a God I'm sure that He'll send me some signs that I have overstepped the mark. At least then I'd know that there really is a God.

But what am I to tell my psychiatrist? If I were to tell him that I've consciously assumed The Role of God, because no one else was doing it, he'll not only think that I've relapsed into schizophrenic behaviour, he'll think that I've become mentally worse and will have no choice but to schedule me into a psychiatric hospital. Not that I mind psychiatric hospitals, I've always had good times there, but by the same token they are very restrictive. In psychiatric hospitals one is locked in at night, which I've always hated because, having difficulty sleeping, I cannot take long rambling strolls in the dark, cool evenings in order to tire me.

Of course, I could always keep Dr Chadov in the dark, simply lie to him when I say that I still don't believe I'm God. Then again, I'm naturally averse to this, since it strikes me as unhealthy. I get on very well with the good doctor, and lying to him would really be shameful. No, I won't lie to him. I'm seeing him again in three weeks and will tell him then. So, now that I'm God again, I better get used to others again treating me as daft and delusional. What's the point of being God if I can't proclaim it at every opportunity? People have a right to know such an Important Fact. Not that I'm expecting worship, but it's also very nice to be seen as unusual and off-beat. Makes life more interesting, for everyone.

Anyway, I'll be back after my next session with Dr Chadov. Wish me luck!

§

Dr Chadov's response to my news was very surprising. He agrees that it's, purely technically speaking, possible to just take The Role of God, as no one else appears to be Doing It, that it's a considered decision. I told him that I was still not hearing voices and

still free from any type of hallucinations and he fully agrees with me that my choice is in fact an ethical one. He said it was very noble of me to offer myself as a sacrifice if Reality's ability to continue required such a deed. He himself believes that Christ did in fact rise from the dead (himself having seen a middle aged lady come back to life six hours after she was pronounced clinically brain dead. Dr Chadov believes that Christ paved the way for her resurrection.) and thus he can empathise with my moral choice. He did tell me though to keep him informed of how I carried out my Godhead, to be sure to use it as a means to live a healthy life. In his, again, tentative opinion I am in a full remission with the schizophrenia and being naturally 'deliciously eccentric' (to use his phrase) it is only natural that I would have eccentric habits, behaviours, and thoughts. I just have to make sure that my renewed Godhead doesn't lead to negative, unhealthy actions or thoughts. So, Divinity, here we go. God bless you, Doctor!

*Denis has been writing for over thirty years and has been labelled 'Sydney's hippest writer' and 'the hippest of off-beat writers' by the publishing house, Independence Jones (now, sadly, no longer in business). He is in a full remission with paranoid schizophrenia, and over the past several years has written almost exclusively about mental illness, from the point of view of those so affected. He is published monthly at The Short Stories Club ([www.shortstoriesclub.com](http://www.shortstoriesclub.com)), a blog run to promote new and emerging writers, and has several books available online.*

# Newborn

*by Emily O'Grady*

We found the baby at the swimming pool on the last week of holidays. Sasha saw it first, tucked into the nook where the skip met the wall in the car park. For a second I thought it was a kitten; the breathing sounds it made were close to meows and Sasha's cat was as small as a potato when her dad found the whole litter in a cardboard box off the side of the highway. But then Sasha knelt down and pressed her pinkie to the baby's cheek and said, "Look at it," and its little bird mouth opened right up.

I was starting grade eight at the college at the end of January and Sasha was enrolled at the public high school across from the bowls club on Huxley Road. Sasha and I had been neighbours since we were born, until Dad got a job out of the bay side and bought a townhouse closer to the city. On weekends I'd catch an outbound train to Sasha's and we'd walk to the bay and hunt soldier crabs in the sand, by the saltwater pool that had slime-slicked steps around it like an ancient, ceremonial bath. Even though we still saw each other all day at school, Sasha made us write each other dumb letters: boring stuff for the most part, but also things we were too embarrassed to tell each other in person. When school broke up for the year she wrote me a letter telling me she'd gone to the quarry with Tanya. It was someone's birthday so they brought along sparklers and glowsticks, and while everyone else was swimming, Tanya's brother put his hand up Sasha's shirt even though there was nothing there really, not then anyway. And Sasha didn't stop him, just let him do it because he was the only one with a car and she didn't want to be left out there by the still, steely water, and the bats lurking up in the trees like devils.

I ripped up the letter, and when Benny got a job as a lifeguard before starting his engineering course I tagged along to the pool with him all holidays. While Benny leant against the canteen, metal whistle twinkling against his chest like a necklace, I'd bob about on a foam noodle and wait for the swimming lessons and water aerobic classes to clear off, when I could hog a whole lane and do laps up the length of the pool.

Sasha and I didn't see each other for almost a month, until that afternoon in January when I rode for almost an hour to her house to ask for my Sega games back, but mostly

because Benny was sick of me stuck at his heels all the time, and I was sick of swimming every day by myself.

Sasha's house was a fenceless brick, identical to six or seven others on the street. The grass was patchy brown and mostly bare, except for the rain-stiff clothes that had unpegged from the line and were scattered like half-bodies on the lawn. Sasha's dad's ute was in the driveway and his rods and dented tackle box were lined against the house. He was at work most of the time, or fishing up north with his mates on his weekends off. I never saw him at school award nights, and whenever I came round the place was always a mess: tomato sauce-scabbed plates piled up in the sink, sticky lino that suctioned your feet to the ground.

I dumped my bike on the driveway and headed up the footpath. Sasha was sitting on the back patio, dragging a frond around her tabby's front paws. I ripped up a tuft of grass and sprinkled it over her head.

"Did you ride here?" Sasha said, brushing the grass from her hair. There were orangey-blond bits chunked through it that hadn't been there before.

"Yeah," I said. "It's not that far."

Sasha stared at me, at my backpack buckled around my waist, and then at my hair, which I knew was stiff from being soaked in chlorine every day. "Do you want to come for a swim?" I said. "Benny's working at the pool. He might be able to give us free chips."

"I was about to have lunch," she said.

"Right."

"Just wait for me to eat, alright." Sasha stood up and went inside, the shredded flyscreen banging after her.

When she came back she had two hard-boiled eggs clutched to her chest. She handed me one and we peeled the shells on the driveway. Mine came off in flecks, but Sasha tapped hers on the concrete and it peeled away in big shards. Sasha concentrated on her egg, chewing around the white and leaving the grey-yellow yolk for last. I ate my egg in

two bites and then stared at the concrete and tried to think of something to say. When she was done Sasha crunched her shells beneath her heel. I scrapped mine into the gutter.

When we got to the pool I followed Sasha across the grass. It had drizzled all week and there was hardly anyone swimming. Benny was over by the change sheds, stuffing his face with hot chips from a red-and-white striped bucket. I waved to Benny but he didn't wave back.

Sasha dropped her towel on the grass and sat at the edge of the paddling pool. It was so shallow the water barely hit above her ankles. I squatted beside her.

"What's this then?" I said, running a finger along Sasha's shin.

"It's not a big deal," Sasha said. "Tanya told me boys don't go around with girls who are hairy as dogs."

"Looks like you have a disease. Chicken pox or something."

"It's not a big deal," she said, stretching her dress towards her knees.

"I know that," I said. Sasha stood up and waded over to the green frog statue in the centre of the pool. It had a yellow crown painted on its head and a thin spurt of water trickled from its wide lips, like piss. Sasha cupped her hand under the stream.

"Wanna race?" I said.

"Nah," Sasha said.

"What about Marco Polo?"

"It's boring with two people."

"Benny might play."

"He can't play if he's working."

"Yeah," I said.

"I can't swim today, anyway." I tugged at the goggles around my neck, snapped the

rubber strap against my throat. “You go, though,” Sasha said.

“Right-o,” I said. I headed to the deep end, stripped down to my board shorts and folded my t-shirt onto a diving block. I tested the water with my toes and then slid into the pool. The water was cool, and when I ducked my head under, light squiggled on the tiled walls like tapeworms. I did a few laps and then hooked my feet over the lane rope, arching onto my back. The complex—the change sheds, the thick, squat walls boxing us in—was cement grey, but with my goggles on the water was bright as cellophane. It started to spit. I untangled my feet and drifted to the bottom.

§

In the car park, I peered over Sasha’s shoulder and tried to ignore the stink wafting from the skip. I’d never seen a baby up close before, and it was so small I thought it must have been a newborn. It wasn’t until later I learned that babies aren’t that clean when they come out, not like on the TV.

“It looks like a martian,” I said.

“That’s what babies look like,” Sasha said.

We sat by the skip for a while, taking turns to prod the baby’s dimpled chest and twiddle its sultana-sized toes. And it was like a martian, with its enormous, cone-shaped skull, and buggy eyes that seemed to take up half its face. Its nose like a knob of putty you could yank right off.

Sasha picked the baby off the concrete. It was wearing a cloth nappy and a white t-shirt that had ridden up to show its bulge of a belly, tight as a balloon. It didn’t cry when Sasha jiggled it on her lap. I got right up close to its face and blew into its ear, small and pink as a seashell. It blinked its fish eyes once and then looked at a spot above my head.

“You’re scaring it,” Sasha said, and pressed her palm into my face. Her hands smelled like a mixture of chlorine and that ripe smell that gets on your skin when you accidentally squish an ant in the grass.

“What’s wrong with it?” I said.

“What?”

“It doesn’t look normal,” I said. “It’s not crying or anything.”

“Babies don’t cry all the time.”

“I know that,” I said.

Sasha told me to go and see if anyone was coming back for it. It had stopped raining and I could feel the heat steaming up from the bitumen. There was no one sitting at the metal chairs and tables outside the fish and chip shop across the road. A freight train sliced across the train tracks, and even though the station was blocks away I could feel the pulse of the train beneath my feet. I walked up the street and looked for cars coming around the bend, people cutting across the skate park. The whole street was empty, the road slick black.

When I walked back across the car park Sasha had put the baby back down next to the skip.

“I’ll go get Benny,” I said.

“Don’t do that,” Sasha said, standing up and wiping the dirt from her legs.

“He’ll know what to do with it,” I said, turning towards the entrance. “He can take it to the hospital or wherever.”

“I said don’t.”

“Benny will know what to do.”

“But the cops will put it in a foster home.”

“So what?”

“It’ll get beaten to death. They’ll starve it.”

“Well what then?”

“We’ll come back for it,” Sasha said. “When it’s darker, so no can see us. If people see us with a baby they’ll think we’ve nicked it or something. They might think it’s mine.”

“What if someone else finds it?”

“The pool shuts at five. No one will find it.”

Sasha unchained her bike and cycled onto the footpath. I looked back at the baby. Its skin was pink, like the colour of ham. I touched its leg with the tip of my index finger. It didn't cry. It didn't even seem to know I was there. Its skin was warm as a heated pool.

§

Back at Sasha's house, I left my bike in the grass and followed Sasha up the footpath. She told me to wait for her outside, but I followed her into the kitchen anyway. Sasha's dad was by the open fridge. Bundles of fish fillets sealed in ziplock bags were scattered along the counter and there was a Styrofoam esky on the table.

“Started at that fancy school of yours yet?” Sasha's dad said, squeezing my shoulder.

“Not 'til next week,” I said.

Sasha picked up a bag of fish, passed it between her hands. “Can I sleep at Alex's tonight?” she said.

Sasha's dad closed the fridge and leant against the sink. Tattoos blushed up his neck like blue welts. “That alright with your folks?” he said to me.

“Yeah,” I said. “It's alright.”

“One less face to feed,” he said, scratching the patchy hair at the bottom of his belly. “Well, go give your mum a kiss then, Sash.” Sasha put the bag down and sniffed her fingers. “And get out a fresh change of clothes, would you? They're not sending a lady this week, remember.”

Sasha disappeared into the lounge room and Sasha's dad handed me a slippery bag of fish. “Give this to your folks,” he said. The fillets were the colour of teeth, with strips running through their middles like coral spines. The condensation clung to my skin and tickled my wrists.

When Sasha came back into the kitchen she put the Sega games I'd lent her onto the

table. “Did you like them?” I said.

“Never played them,” Sasha said, as she knelt down and stuffed a box of Cheezles into her backpack. “Look at your little webbed feet,” she said, poking a finger between my toes.

I looked down. The wet fish leaked over my hands and dripped onto the lino.

As we wheeled our bikes onto the road I asked Sasha what we should do about the baby. I told her Mum would have a heart attack if I brought it to mine, but we couldn't really keep it at Sasha's either. I thought maybe we could wait until it was darker and then take it to the housing commission that was going to be demolished on the other side of the train station. The units would be all locked up, but Benny had once told me the whole building was so charred it couldn't be too hard to jemmy into a flat. We could keep it there for a couple of days, then drop it at a church or police station and no one would ever know we had it.

“Look,” Sasha said, balancing on the sloped edge of a chicane. “Someone else has probably found it by now. I bet it's been handed in at a hospital or something. Ten bucks it'll be on the news tonight.”

“What if it gets beaten to death?” I said. “In the foster home.”

“I was kidding,” Sasha said. “Jesus, you're gullible.”

“You said no one would find it.”

“Check if you want, but a bunch of us are going down to the quarry. Tanya's probably already waiting for me.”

“Right.”

“This happens all the time,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

“Well, see ya then,” she said, swinging a leg over the seat. I stood in the middle of the road as she pedalled onto a driveway. I squeezed the fish between my hands and

could feel the raw fillets separating beneath the plastic.

“Tanya’s a slag,” I called after her. Sasha slowed on the footpath. “Even my Mum says so.”

“Sure, Alex,” she said, not turning around. “See you later.”

I stood in the road for a while longer, until a rattling Holden turned around the bend. I wheeled my bike onto the footpath and headed towards the pool. My board shorts were still damp and I could feel them chafing between my thighs, the rubbery skin blistering away. I rode slowly, and by the time I got to the entrance the iron doors were bolted and Benny’s car wasn’t in the car park. I found two dollars in the grass, and crossed the road to buy a can of Pasito from the fish and chip shop. I sat in the gutter and watched the car park. It started to spit again. I looked down at my feet and stretched my toes apart, to see if the skin between them would split.

## §

My parents were in front of the TV when I got home. They had a shandy each and a bowl of salted peanuts on a fold-out table in front of the couch.

“Hi love,” Mum said, not looking away from the screen.

“Where’s Benny?” I said.

“In the shower.”

I stood behind the couch for a minute and watched a tall man win a washing machine on the TV. When Benny got out of the shower I followed him to his room and knocked on the door.

“What?” he said.

I pushed the door open. Benny had a towel wrapped around his waist and was pulling the lid off a can of deodorant. He turned away from me and sprayed it under his arms and then over his whole body. The room smelled like rissoles and Lynx. There were fat pimples on his back, red as berries.

“Nothing,” I said.

I went back to the lounge room. The news was about to start, so I sat on the beanbag and stared at the screen. A few months before, Benny had told me about a man in Perth who’d stolen a car with a baby in the back seat. The mother was inside paying for her petrol and left the car unlocked with the keys in the ignition. She wasn’t gone for more than a minute when she saw the man pulling her car out of the servo and onto the road. It wasn’t until he was a few kilometres down the highway that he looked into the rear view mirror and saw the baby, and straight away he took the first exit and dropped it at a hospital. Benny said the news reporter kept going on about what a great guy the man was, and when they interviewed the mum she was hysterical and so thankful, and everyone seemed to forget that he was actually a pretty rotten person in the first place, to just steal someone’s car like that.

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# Personal Growth

*by Paul Threlfall*

It always happened this way. After the last possible moment, when it was too late to do anything about it. When his break was over, and it was time to get ready, to find his work clothes and shoes, do the ironing, shave, get ready for the next day. That was when he finally got the mood.

He had come up from the basement. The smell of the soil was still there, black, bitter; seeming to mock his ambition. The door behind him open a crack. Silence in the kitchen. He had sat down, long, slender limbs folding with some difficulty into the space between chair and table. Eyes narrowing to slits before the picture window. The sky beyond was bright, so bright after the long dark. The tree shifted in the wind, its great bulk sliding back and forth across the pane like a cat rubbing its back. He sat for a while, watching it move. Beyond, clouds formed and reformed over the city. Perhaps they would bring rain to all of its growing things.

A stronger gust of wind returned his gaze to the tree. The leaves sparkled and rolled, tumbling around each other, as if each danced alone and yet as part of some great, loosely choreographed movement. The supple trunk bowed slightly, letting out a satisfied creak. Cressy watched, dazzled. The tree had nowhere to be. There was only the dance of air; the drinking deep of moisture; the world of peaceful growth beneath the soil. The house felt temporary, huddled beneath its bulk. A scatter of blocks. Ready to be digested.

As his mind drifted, thinking these thoughts, watching the tree, a little breeze found its way through the slit window in the basement. Stirring the black soil, it wandered across the recently vacated space, climbed the splintering stairs, and made its way out through the gap between door and frame. It reached the nostrils of the man sitting there, and he sniffed, a deep sniff, then suddenly sneezed. Like a spore of memory, the smell of the basement soil lodged in his mind. For a moment he was confused, wondering if he was sitting at the table or still down below. He looked in surprise at his hand.

A white tendril was there, sprouting from his wrist, joining him to the table.

The next morning Cressy was up early. As usual the night before his first shift of the week, he had been unable to sleep. It was getting worse lately. In the past it had been only the occasional sleepless night. But now it was every Tuesday, and often Wednesday as well, until tiredness finally wore him down. He had been trying for so long; living two lives, and never really feeling at home in either. A voice nagged at him, telling him he should give up, work full time. That he would get on with his colleagues if only he would commit, stop treating his work as a day job. That if he hadn't succeeded in his ambitions by now, he never would. Most of the time lately that voice took the form of Baren, his supervisor. Only last week Baren had asked him if he wanted a shift on Monday, one of his free days.

“No, I use that time,” he replied.

“Oh yeah?” Baren countered, an amused look on his face. Stung, Cressy had turned away. Baren knew about his project. He had told him a number of times. He obviously didn't believe it was real though. Like most people, he supposed. He couldn't blame them. Where were the results? Was he throwing away financial comfort, career advancement, for nothing? Another thought occurred to him: if he didn't succeed, did that mean that deep down he didn't want to?

Mechanically he chewed his way through breakfast, barely registering the taste of the Rice-Cookys. His mind kept returning to the tendril. It had come after such a long time trying, yet when he had touched it, it crumbled, already dead. Dry. What was it a sign of? The beginning of progress? Or the final failure; time to move on?

Cressy brushed his mop of black hair out of his eye. As he did so he noticed the clock on the kitchen recycling unit. He would be late if he didn't hurry. Leaving the dishes on the table, he made his way upstairs to the roof.

The wind of the previous day had been helpful: the lift's power tank was fully charged. He could keep it topped up by pedalling occasionally. Cressy unplugged it from the turbine mast, removed the wheel clamps and climbed aboard. It always felt wrong to him, the lift. He didn't like being out of touch with the ground. But he lived so far from work; he didn't want to spend long hours travelling overland. He pressed the starter

button and the pump roared, forcing gas from the storage tank into the envelope. The off-white, patched bag rose quickly above his head, his own personal moon. When it was fully inflated he locked it off and started the fans. The lift left the roof with a slight jerk, both fans pointing straight down. He juggled the stick, turning the little open-frame craft toward the north-east. Below him the tree bowed in the fan-wash, as if waving goodbye. Cressy tilted the stick slightly forward, and set off across the morning sky to work.

## §

The day began well. The nursery was one of the biggest in the whole southern suburbs, and with few customers around he had been free to wander the vast aisles as if lost in a forest, tending to the needs of his charges. Fertilising, watering, weeding, pruning, and checking for signs of disease kept him busy till lunchtime.

Yet it always surprised him that he was not happier. He had found work in line with his interests: he loved plants, and all things that grew. Before they were his living, he had derived endless enjoyment from being around them. But now ...

Now there was always pressure. To know more, to answer questions. To produce enthusiasm upon demand. To close the sale. He supposed it was just the difference between a hobby and a job.

Yet sometimes there were good moments, like now. A gentle breeze blew, rippling the canopy of young trees. Cressy swayed too, eyes half closed, humming softly to himself.

“Cressy!”

His eyes sprang open and he turned, snatching up a pair of secateurs from the bench beside him. Baren was approaching up the aisle. His short, barrel-like torso barely fit between the rows of plants. As usual his mop of curly blond hair was freshly washed and shining above watchful green eyes.

“There you are. What were you doing?”

“I—”

“No, never mind. Look, you can ‘grow’ on your own time. I need you to take your

lunch now. We're expecting a busy afternoon and we'll need all hands on deck. Have you finished this section?"

"Yes."

"Good." Baren slapped him on the shoulder. "Off you go. And don't be late back."

Cressy walked off quickly, anger flaring as it often did around Baren. As usual he clamped down on it, but he was unable to resist brushing at his overalls where his supervisor had touched him, as if removing something distasteful. Baren had no doubt seen the gesture. Still, it couldn't make their relationship any worse.

He knew it was his own fault too. He had long since learned to be quiet about his ambitions; that many people saw it as bragging, or a statement that work was less important to him. The latter he supposed was true; but not something one wished to advertise. His lack of ambition in his career had irritated Baren, who for a while had perhaps seen him as a protégé, but now regarded him as so much dead wood. Opportunities extended had been withdrawn, and though he hadn't wanted them when they were there, now he felt adrift, stuck in his position and marked as a shirker. More than that, his extreme shyness, his complicated mass of ambition and fear, had led him to avoid social situations at work. There were so many things he didn't wish to discuss. Although he was perfectly pleasant and seemed to get on with many of his colleagues, he began to wonder if privately they didn't regard him as strange, unfriendly; in short, a crank.

But these thoughts slowly receded as he walked back through the long aisles of greenery, through the smell of soil and water and growing things. The breeze was light and cool with a hint of warmth that spoke of the end of winter. The sun was out, and he rolled up his sleeves, feeling the light move across his skin. A myriad tiny fingers, picking out an alien melody on his largest organ.

Back in the lunch room he took out a sandwich and checked his screen. A news story caught his eye.

*Growing numbers of people across the city are joining, or some would say succumbing to, the latest bio-transformation craze. Unofficial figures provided by a source in the Department of the Environment suggest as many as ten cases in the past month alone.*

Cressy chewed thoughtfully. His mind wandered to home: he saw the basement; the little shed beneath the tree, at the side of the house.

“What are you reading?” It was Loma, looking over his shoulder. She held a cup of coffee in one hand and a tub of Licheno in the other.

“Oh ... it’s about planting.”

“That’s stupid,” Loma said to the room as a whole. “I think they’re faking it. Bunch of attention-seekers.”

“Well, I’m not so su—”

“Oh, sorry!” Loma cut in, briefly covering her mouth with her hand, her tight curls and large hoop earrings bouncing as she moved. “You’re into that kind of thing, aren’t you Cressy?” she asked, crossing to the microwave and putting the tub inside.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been doing that for a while, though,” Cinna added. Small and grey-haired in improbably clean overalls, she watched him intently from over the rim of her mug. Cinna worked full time at the nursery; she had been there even longer than Baren.

“It keeps you stuck out in the middle of nowhere. When are you going to get serious about work? You could meet someone; have kids. Working part time there’s no way you can afford a decent house.”

Cressy sat stunned for a moment, stung by the criticism.

“Well, not everyone wants—”

But he stopped, realising that she’d already moved on; Cinna and Loma were deep

in a discussion about school fees.

§

He really did live in the middle of nowhere, he thought as he chugged his way home that evening. Even by air it took him nearly half an hour to get home. This far out the transit lanes thinned, with just a few other commuters returning to their scattered houses. There was still a lot of heavy industrial traffic though: thankfully, mostly on the ground. Large digestion plants, enzyme centres and spore-conditioning works squatted on the urban fringe like clusters of giant black fungi. Cressy could smell exotic derivatives and weird pheromones on the breeze; not for the first time, he wondered what the effect on human biology was of living among these emissions.

The battery level had dropped only slightly but he needed the exercise, so Cressy pedalled all the way home, gaining a little time. Soon he was circling above his roof. The little creek was there through the scrub, its brown water looking almost yellow today. The black cubes of his home, surrounded by empty blocks. His street was sparsely populated, winding among trees in half-cleared bushland. The local council had zoned the area recyclable: the houses were mostly flimsy, digestible structures, able to be returned to the soil or used as fuel in industrial outgrowths.

The leaves of the tree glinted as he banked, welcoming him home. Along the horizon a border of cumulus was arranged like a frieze, cut into crisp shapes by the wind. The sun dropped below the clouds as he cut his engine and deflated the bag, stretched, and climbed out of the frame. He sat on the edge of the roof and sniffed the air. He smelt rich, damp soil, ready for warmth to return. Twilight spread up from the creek, cold fingers of night filling all the hollows of his world. As if the shadow had found him, Cressy felt a pain in his throat. He swallowed. It was dry, rasping. It seemed he was coming down with something. The birds' last chorus followed him down the stairs and into his home.

§

The screen's alarm shouted Cressy into consciousness. He swiped it silent and collapsed on his back, swallowing gingerly. The pain in his throat was worse, a blade edge dragged across the roof of his mouth. He shook with fever, his skin tingling with hot and cold patches which chased each other about.

He called in sick. Baren as usual sounded sceptical, as if Cressy were faking it. Management were cutting budgets, and there were never enough replacements for staff on leave. No doubt they would be short today.

Next Cressy ate some dry toast—all he could face—then sat for a while in the kitchen, drowsing. It was a fine spot on a sunny morning, and he was soon feeling much better, immersed in a flood of warm sunlight. He was surprised at how quickly his symptoms abated. His skin prickled and stirred, as though it itched to be elsewhere. Eyes closed, the image of the white tendril appeared on the red-orange screen of his eyelids. He saw the pale, hopeful colour; felt again the disappointment as the feeler snapped and crumbled.

His eyes sprang open. Hope filled him; hope he hadn't felt in a long time. It often worked like this when he was sick. He could work on his project with a warm, relaxed attentiveness. At other times he was always distracted: by worry about work, about failing to reach his goal, about future poverty and old age, sickness and death, and the million little procrastinations, little distractions of housework or the garden, of anything at all. And then his two free days were gone, and it was time to go back to work.

But when he was sick it was quite different. In part it was the tiredness, and the sense of being centred on the body, on its fight, on recovery. The world outside, all other priorities vanished. Illness created a timeless space. There was nowhere to be, nothing to do but relax, focus. He remembered years ago visiting an Edvard Munch exhibition at the main gallery in the city. He had been impressed by the story of Munch's life, his great suffering, the long illness he had endured as a boy. But he had also noted how being housebound had separated him from the other children, from the noisy outside world, thrown him back on his own resources. The boy's imagination had blossomed; his talent deepened.

We must return to the soil. Return to darkness, in order to grow.

Cressy sat bolt upright. The words had seemed to come from an unusual place. Not in his head but somewhere deep inside him, vibrations in his bones or the lining of his stomach.

He was still sitting in the kitchen, in full sun, and his pyjamas were soaked in sweat.

He stood shakily and took off his gown, draping it over the back of the chair. He felt hunger. A different hunger. He smelt something: something warm, musty ...

He crossed to the kitchen door and went outside. The screen door creaked and banged behind him. Around the corner was the garden shed, little more than a lean-to against the house wall. He unlatched the door and pushed his way into the warm, close space.

The clothes had grown well. They were hanging on the back wall: a papery black set of coverings with many straps and filaments. He felt a moment of guilt. The clothes represented his only theft from work. They were made from a growth medium he had stolen from the nursery, guided by a simple genetic key he had downloaded and printed out on the nursery's organic printer. Though the key was easily—if not legally—obtainable, the plant-derived growth medium was expensive and rare. He hoped the theft would not be noticed.

Cressy lifted the suit down and held it against his body. It was ready: the warmth in the black-walled shed had given it the final boost it needed. He sniffed again, noticing the musty smell. Growth enzyme. He took the jar as well, and went back inside.

Cressy's mind was silent, his instinct strong. These were the moments, so fleeting, that he lived for. He pushed the thought aside. Never chase the flow away with words. Accept.

He hung the suit on the back of the basement door. Then he got out a piece of bread and opened the jar of enzyme paste. The smell was almost a physical thing, climbing into his brain through his nostrils. He inhaled, feeling a little dizzy. Images appeared to him: of black, fertile earth; of patient, seeking roots. The wind gusted, spinning the leaves, tumbling sunlight. There was almost no sound, as if the world were emptying. He couldn't hear the birds, or the trucks, not a lift nor a train. Just the occasional sighing of the wind.

He didn't toast the bread. He wanted to lose nothing of the freshness of this fuel. He had made it himself, an unbaked loaf, its greenish mass bursting with fresh sprouts and seeds. Perhaps bread was the wrong word. Taking a knife he dug deep into the plant growth enzyme and spread it over the slice. He coughed as he raised it to his mouth, the

bitter, dusty smell invading his nostrils once more. Then he chewed slowly, carefully, making sure he ate every last crumb. He took another piece. He would need to finish the jar.

When he was done he stood, belly gurgling and shifting. He stripped off right there in the kitchen, draping his sweat-stinking pyjamas over a chair. Next he took the grown clothes from their hook and pulled them on. A spider ran out of a sleeve but Cressy paid it no mind. The garments felt like papery bark, warmed by the sun. They irritated him less than he had expected. He tied the straps tight around his chest, legs and arms, pressing the fibre to his skin.

He was ready. Reaching out for the handle of the basement door, he paused for a moment. He saw himself reflected in the doorknob, a stark pale figure in black coverings. His feet were cold, but he barely noticed. He had trained himself not to notice over long years of preparation. A doubt momentarily surfaced: was this really the moment? Would it ever be the moment? If it was, he would never turn this handle again. Pushing aside all doubts, he stepped down into the dark.

## §

Here it was still winter. His feet were white on top, his toes buried in black soil, as if he were a tree of ice. The morning's sun had disappeared behind clouds and now only a little pale light leaked through the single slit window, the pane between wall and 'ceiling': the floor above his head. Cressy faced the light. He stretched his arms out towards it, fingers spread as if grasping a ball. When the pain grew too much he lowered them to his sides; when they recovered he raised them again. He thought of a plant. Of a seedling, or a fungus in the winter mould, under the leaf litter. It reached up to the light quite naturally, growing, stretching, seeking the sun. He had prepared the conditions for growth carefully. The soil was perfect: laced with nutrients, fertiliser, growth enzymes. His feet tingled. Was it from the cold? Or was the process beginning? Were nutrients flowing even now through his pores, effecting a transformation?

The change was poorly understood. Planting had only begun in the last few years: an individual here, another there. Whispers and rumours; online forums; illicit enzyme cocktails sold in clubs. Slowly the news spread, so that those who said it was a hoax diminished in volume, while the numbers of those wanting to try it grew.

Still, Cressy had so many doubts. He didn't listen to them though. Instead he watched them, their contortions. They told him he was sick, and standing in the cold dirt would only make it worse. He acknowledged the possibility, watched it walking around in his mind. But he knew it was different this time. He closed his eyes and stretched his hands toward the light.

§

Cressy's eyes sprang open. Upstairs his screen was ringing on the kitchen table. It was loud, echoing down the stairs. The day was getting late. He couldn't feel the sun. Without being able to see it behind the clouds, he knew it had set. Soon darkness would fall. Cressy shut his eyes. The ringing continued for a while; then stopped.

He woke in the night. Frost had crawled its way up the slit window, white leaves like ferns with feathered edges. The moon shone, limning the leaves in light. Cressy shivered, shaking with fever and cold. The voice of doubt was loud now. Surely it was madness, to stand here in the freezing dirt. He was a human being! He should be in his warm bed. His throat and head throbbed with pain. His back ached, and all his limbs burned with a cold fire. A stench came from his pores, from his mouth. He forced himself to breathe slowly, pushing the fear away. He watched the fear, as he'd trained himself to do. Slowly he came back to himself, to his purpose. Something was growing within. He drifted down through his mind, down into black soil, into sleep.

The screen was ringing again. Cressy's eyes opened slowly. He sensed it had been ringing for a long time. A small part of his brain thought about moving; climbing the stairs; seeing who was calling. The emerging creature of sun, soil and water watched this part quietly. The desire faded away. Cressy stretched his branches again, up toward the light. Far away there were various sounds that seemed to vaguely have labels: lifts, birds, wind. Gradually they assumed the same level of importance, fading to background. He felt different this morning. The black coverings didn't feel separate from his skin. They had fused, grown into him, softened and strengthened. Slowly he craned his neck, looking down his body. The tops of his feet were no longer white but black as loam. The filaments of the grown garments had extended, sending down tendrils into the soil. They had grown up too, covering his mouth and nose in a soft layer of bark. His old mind panicked and he reassured it, calling attention to the fact that he was no longer breathing. And yet he lived.

Beneath the soil, further changes were occurring. He was no longer putting great weight and pressure on two spots. Instead he felt light. Supported. Stable. Already he could feel strange new inputs coming in from all over the soil substrate of the basement. He was spreading himself out, taking in nutrients, reaching down into the good darkness.

§

The screen rang many times that day, as Cressy grew and spread. The light bloomed and faded, calling him to the window. It spoke to him, telling him that spring was coming. Growth was coming.

Darkness followed light. Cold was forgotten along with pain. Moonlight succeeded sunlight succeeded moonlight. Breath was everywhere, growth was everywhere. Mind diffused and spread with the growth and the quiet breath. Cressy reached for the window, reached for the Earth's core. He thickened in slow motion, moved in slow motion.

Then there was an obstacle. Beyond was the light. Cressy's branch pressed against the obstacle.

§

Baren banged on the door again.

What a dump of a place. Out here in the middle of nowhere. The house looked flimsy, about to collapse. This is what laziness got you. Poverty. A shitty place in a suburb with negative growth. For a moment he felt sorry for Cressy. But he had given him plenty of chances.

He stepped back and craned his neck. Cressy's lift was up on the roof pad. So he hadn't gone anywhere. Perhaps he really was sick. Baren turned around to look at the ambulance crew, waiting on the path. He was about to ask them again when the police would arrive, when he heard a noise from above. The whine of big, powerful fans. He looked up to see a two-person police lift descending. Good. They could break down the door. He began to wish he hadn't come out here himself; had left it to the police in the first place.

Just then he heard a high, tinkling *crack*. Baren looked around, up the façade, then

back down to the unkempt lawn. Sunlight glinted off something down low. He walked along the outside of the house and squatted down. A small window had shattered, right at the base of the wall; the fragments lay in the grass. He peered inside. Strange. Thin white tendrils had pushed their way out from the darkness below. On the longest stem, shining in the sun, was a single green leaf.

*Paul Threlfall is a writer and librarian based in Melbourne, Australia. He has won awards for three of his short stories, in the City of Boroondara, City of Greater Dandenong and University of Melbourne short story competitions. He has also had poetry published in Litmus Magazine.*

# A poem by Dave Drayton

S        C        F        S  
T        H        I        T  
O        O        N        A  
M        C        E        R  
P        O        R  
          L                    S  
J        A        T        P  
U        T        H        A  
M        E        A        W  
P                    N        N  
          I                    C  
A        N        H        R  
N                    A        A  
D        Y        I        Z  
          O        R        Y  
T        U                     
O        R        L  
A                    E  
D        T        G  
          H        S  
B        R                    B  
I        O        O  
T        A        I  
          T                    L  
C                    I  
A                    N  
K                    G  
E

boiling star      finer than hair      bit your throat

*Dave Drayton was a sauna enthusiast, recreational banjo player, and founding member of the Atterton Academy. In 2014 he was awarded the William Blake Prize for poetry. Dave's poem 'Motionless Chariot' can be found in Issue Twelve of Tincture Journal and his non-fiction piece 'Has Elton John Ever Performed at Macquarie Shopping Centre? Or, a Tiny Dancer Beneath the Ice Rink' was published in Issue Three.*

# Begin, Again

*by Jodi Cleghorn*

1.0

ephemeral daydreams

in which I recognise

my whole world was turning

1.1

letters

give shape

to fantasies, emotions and rancours

manifestations and secrets

describing how

a flame bursts through

the gaps in the wood

catching fire

in the thing that is desired

the invisible thing

the absent thing

1.2

along circuits

emptiness

is just as concrete

as solid bodies

1.3

I have not yet resolved

naked silence

a devouring obsession  
variants and alternatives  
everything that does not fit  
the detail of the detail  
a brilliant refutation  
everything that can happen in time  
another kind of vertigo  
mysticism and calculation  
the endless demon of lucidity

the story I would like to write

1.4

we are all  
approximations  
the simplest story  
without words

1.5

in the boundless universe  
nourish my vision  
assure me that I am not just chasing  
invisible particles  
wandering through space since  
the beginning of time...

1.6

I wanted to  
subdivide  
the infinite void  
fade away and be lost

2.0

ephemeral daydreams

in which I recognise  
my whole world was turning

*Jodi Cleghorn (@jodicleghorn) is a Brisbane-based author, editor, publisher and poet with a penchant for the dark vein of humanity. Jodi has had poetry and fiction published in Issues Three, Five, Eight, and Eleven of Tincture Journal.*

# Thank God for Gravity

*by Tee Indawongse*

My mother believes in ghosts. Not aliens though, just ghosts. Well, *a* ghost. Just the one. She says Nanna visits her sometimes. Never says more than that. Just says she gets visits every now and then, when her eyes are closed and the lights are off. I've never had one of these visits, but I was never alive when Nanna was. She died before I was born, when my mother was very young. There was a gun involved, but I don't know who pulled the trigger. It's not something that gets talked about in my family. A lot doesn't get talked about around me.

I know there's some bad blood there; you can taste it in the air, between my mother and her family. Something bitter, *rancid*. Something to do with me—or more accurately perhaps, something to do with my father. He died, I'm told; I've even seen his grave down in the cemetery. He doesn't visit my mother either way, and she doesn't mention him much. I have a precious handful of memories to hold him by. Warm hands, a wide smile, and a laugh that could rock the earth to its core. I have perpetually cold hands, and thin lips, but when I laugh, my mother looks at me with something like love in her eyes.

Today is a Sunday. It is a grey day, a rainy day; one where the smell of frost stays just far enough over the horizon to be less a presence and more a promise. I wake early on these days, rising before the sun does. With a hot cup of coffee, burnt in the way I like, I sit on the bathroom counter at an angle to the mirror, and start to pick off the fledgling feathers making their slow and piercing way through my skin.

They're always the colour of rust, of dried blood, of rotting redwood. When I pull them from my shoulders, they fall around me like a warning. Saying, *beware, watch out for this war zone*. It looks harrowing, perhaps. Violent, even. It doesn't hurt though. I've been doing this long enough now that I can't really remember the pain. It's like plucking my eyebrows or waxing my legs. You get used to it, eventually.

I can hear my mother begin to rise by the time my coffee is reduced to cold dregs and I am sweeping the feathers away. I'll need to burn them later. The smoke will smell oddly toxic, like burning plastic mixed with dried autumn leaves.

“Lucille,” my mother calls out from the kitchen. “How many eggs?”

“Two, please,” I reply.

Entering the kitchen is like walking into another era. The old cabinets are painted pastel greens and yellows, like a faded reminder of spring. There is no microwave in sight, only an old hot plate covered in spots of grease stains. The fridge and oven are older than most of the other appliances, which are in turn older than me. The sink is still stained with angry, black marks from the first time I tried to wash my feathers down the sink.

Scrambled eggs are messily plated and then pushed to my place at the table, mismatched knife and fork already laid out. Slightly overcooked, as always. My mother smiles at the sight of my smooth shoulder blades, pleased at the sight of normalcy or the mark of past pain, I’m not sure. I resist the urge to ask, and instead shake pepper over my breakfast.

When I finish, I say, “Dishes,” and my mother nods absently, her eyes on her tablet, reading the news. There is a war in the east, a financial crash in the west, and this won’t be in the print, but I know in my bones that there’ll be a storm of shooting stars to watch tonight, up where there are northern lights. The knowledge is consuming, comforting, like sliding into a bath full of steaming hot water.

Soap up to my elbows, the temperature just shy of boiling, and the plates and pans come out sparkling clean. Once done, I am free for the rest of the day, not shackled by work or school. I kiss my mother once on the forehead before leaving the house, barefooted, relishing the feel of freshly cut grass beneath my toes.

This place would only be called a town if the cartographer making the map was especially generous. It was one of those places that had a history of a boom, back when jobs were easy to come by. These days it was more of a husk; a rural slice of humanity, a strange mix of isolated and lonely that occasionally drew the curiosity of a wild, desperate city-dweller. Most of them would leave; I would, if it weren’t for my mother. I was the only kid of my age, the only person with the shadow of wings that needed a fortnightly plucking, and the only kind of people I felt comfortable talking to were strangers on the Internet, the ones who could never see my face or my body or the

strange, strange things I did that made my mother's eyes burn with shame.

On my walk—aimless, drifting—my phone pings with messages. The signal in the house is patchy at best, non-existent at worst, and so I need to enter nature to get the best use out of technology. I get messages from fish breeders, show-dog owners, cat lovers, snake handlers and bird-keepers. I am not so enamoured with animals, but the people who care for them fascinate me.

Today, I am talking to Ricardo. He is a big fan of freshwater fish, from the exotic to the mundane. He seems to find so much joy in their simple existence, and he sends me pictures of his tanks from time to time. In turn, I send him pictures of the sky—every variation of cloud imaginable, every interesting constellation that catches my eye on a clear night—and that's how we talk: with fleeting images of things we adore.

Time slips away from me in heady chunks, and I can feel the earth ready itself for a grand shifting and sliding of its plates. Far away from me, a city rumbles and shudders, and the foundations of tall buildings crack asunder with the force of it all. I want to tell everybody I see about this, but as I loop around this empty, desolate place, I see no one who would listen.

My shoulders itch, and I ignore it. I think about the bag full of feathers and how they'll soon eat through the plastic. Regardless of rain, tonight I'll have to build a camp fire, send sparks up to the stars. Some things cannot continue existing, they simply need to be burned. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—*

Without much thought, my feet wind up taking me to the cemetery. I don't find it particularly peaceful here. It's as quiet as the rest of my dying town, the only thing making noise is the wind as it rakes up the leaves into whirlwinds. What it is though, undeniably, is beautiful. Gravestones of all shapes and sizes stand in neat rows, proclaiming names and dates that will soon be forgotten, and even all the ghosts will disappear, too.

Speaking of ghosts, Nanna was originally meant to be buried here. Except she had organised, unbeknownst to my mother, to have her body donated to science. So at a university unknown to me, her organs sit, split up and preserved in buckets and jars. I wonder what they do to the bone and hair and excess fat of her; surely not all of her is

needed. I should ask mother to ask Nanna next time she visits.

I find my father's gravestone. It says his name and nothing more. No date or commemorative words. It's a stark slab of stone that should have every right to be cold and heartless, but I swear every time I touch it, my skin *burns*. Sure, my mother believes in ghosts—well, *a* ghost—but the brief times she talks about my father, well. It makes me believe in *her*.

Makes me believe, for a moment, that she is more than merely mortal, magnetic in the sheer brilliance of her light.

Makes me believe that for her, you would give up *everything*.

A clap of thunder splits the heavens. It begins to rain, heavy droplets that start out gentle but start spitting out like pellets from the sky. My skin is still too raw, too sensitive to be washed out anew. I can feel my shirt clinging to my back, stinging and aching as I run home, slipping in puddles and painting my legs with mud.

My home is quiet, the sound of rain muffled by the walls, and I think I can hear my mother's heartbeat, her breathing, from where she sleeps in the living room, sprawled out on the couch with dark shadows under her eyes. I have my father's laugh but my mother's eyes, ones that are constantly so tired and worn.

Once, when I was very little, back when I used to let my feathers grow out and hid them with sports bras I had no reason to wear at that age, my mother said to me, *Heavenly blood sings in your veins, you are my blessed child*. And then she held me in a hug for long enough that when she stepped back, her skin from where she touched me almost looked as though it had been sunburned.

That doesn't feel like a blessing to me.

*Thank God for gravity*, she said to me. *Thank God for falling, because without that, I'd have never met your father. (I could never have had you without him, she doesn't say, perhaps thinks it's implied; that motherly instinct is inherent rather than earned, and I let myself pretend she says it.)*

There's the smell of melting plastic when I enter my room, and I see the feathers

spill out a little from the bag and onto the carpet. It doesn't bother me; my room has long been victim to my otherness. There are warps in the wallpaper from my nightmares and claw marks on the ceiling I don't remember making. Tiny spots of burned carpet can be found under my desk, from when I was smaller and used to hide there to cry.

My phone chimes. This time it's Ophelia, sending me a string of cat-themed emojis along with a picture of her tabby cat and its litter of kittens. They look small and fragile. Delicate. I look outside my window, realise that while the rain is letting up, it still won't give me a glimpse of the sky to send back. Instead, I message her and say, *look for the falling stars in the north*, and pocket my phone.

I make sure I leave no feathers in my room, and I head towards the backyard. I guess a major allure of living somewhere so far away from the hubs of humanity is the privacy. Our house may be small but the land we own gives us a comfortable measure of discretion. My mother's foresight, perhaps, for moments like this.

Even in the rain, a spluttering match is all it takes to set the feathers alight.

The fire roars with a worrying intensity, and if I could be hurt by flames, I'd perhaps need to step back. Instead all that happens is I cough on the smoke, unnatural and toxic, and taste charcoal in my mouth. A few minutes pass before the fire settles from something obscene to a passable camp fire. I can leave now. Once fires get a taste for my kind of feathers, they don't spread towards other fuel. They consume the feathers until nothing's left, perishing rather than moving on.

This dying town, my mother's tired eyes, and my cold, cold hands.

Much later that night, when the rains have stopped and the fire is still alight in the distance, I step outside again. The air smells clean. It takes little effort to climb up the paperbark tree that grows beside the house. From the midmost branch, I can step carefully onto the roof, two storeys above the ground, just high enough to give a flush of vertigo to the unprepared.

The tiles are slick, shiny underneath the crescent moon. It's colder than I expected, and I shiver. My mother does not approve of me doing this, but what she does not know cannot hurt her. I like it up here. There's room to stretch your limbs. I perch myself

beside the chimney, holding to it for that extra sense of balance, and take in the rolling fields of shadows that surround me. If I focus, I can make out shapes that I probably shouldn't be able to see from this distance, the outlines of possums and frogs in the trees. However, I am relaxed and find my eyes more inclined to fix upon the hazy horizon, past the fire I set hours before.

I don't know how long I am sitting there before the insidious thought makes its way to the forefront of my mind: *you should jump*.

It takes me a while to grasp the idea, to turn it over and look for all the sharp angles. Perhaps the hour, the smell of crisp night air, the cold—they mix together and for a moment, it's absolutely tantalising. I'm even standing, judging my footing, shifting my centre of gravity, readying myself; but for what?

From this height, dying is unlikely, though could still injure myself. Fire may not affect me, but force applies the same rules to me as it does to others.

I'm breathing faster, my heart is racing.

*Oh.*

I'm rocking on my heels now. I've let go of the sturdy brick of the chimney. It would be so easy to jump. Really. There's nothing stopping me. Before I can commit—*you should jump*, looping over and over—my phone chimes. Something about that snaps me back to reality, and I sit down with shaky legs.

Standing must have given me that extra boost of signal, and I find I've received a message from Juan. Different time zones, different hemispheres; his pictures are full of birds in flight, the sunshine making them almost glow. His cousin, the caption explains, released three dozen white doves for his wedding. Juan, a professional bird-keeper, organised everything.

I look at the birds and hear my mother's voice. *Thank God for gravity, thank God for falling.*

What use is gravity without making the choice to jump? My father must have had that same choice, once upon a time. Perhaps not quite the same as leaping from a rooftop, but

really, the difference isn't that great after all.

Me, though. Me. Well, I look at the doves, their wings spread wide open, as if in a desperate reach for ... something more. I scratch at the skin of my back, think about my rust-red feathers.

I wonder how long it will take to grow them out all the way.

*Tee Indawongse is a current medical student at the University of Queensland, Australia. She has a passion for women's health, but in her free time, has a powerful drive to write something worth reading. She has previously been published in Voiceworks and the anthology Incisors & Grinders, published by Monash Creative Writers.*

# A Compressed History of Sound

*by Tom Albert*

**1860:** With a pig's bristle on a pane of smoke-blackened glass, French bookseller Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville captures sound for the first time. The technology to play these recordings does not yet exist, and so Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville is spared the small terror of hearing his own voice echoing outside the chambers of his skull. He leans close to the bristle, pauses, then sings:

*by the light of the moon  
my friend Pierrot  
lend me—*

which he knows only came to him because that very morning he was thinking of his daughter, how little he sees her now, how her laugh has changed since she was a girl, the frequencies flattening, the oscillations growing sparse and *isn't it a shame*, he thinks, *that she wasn't here today*.

*See: Phonautograph; Laughter; French Folk Music - 18<sup>th</sup> C.*

**1895:** The phonograph is abandoned in favour of the gramophone—for multifarious reasons, but chiefly because its wax cylinders secretly remind some Americans of their own bodily secretions. Gramophone records are made from shellac, itself the secretion of the female Lac Bug. It is not known what music (if any) Lac Bugs prefer their shellac to produce, or their opinions (if any) on the merits of 60 rpm recordings versus the classic 78, and not because Lac Bugs lack opinions, but because they *simply were not asked*, a regrettable outcome of the era's benighted attitudes.

*See: Lac Bugs; Marx's Theory Of Worker-Alienation; Secretions*

**1939:** A tiny production flaw sends a pulsing arc of electricity into a German engineer's

reel-to-reel recording set, inadvertently stripping the tape of distortion. This mistake, not so large by the standards of 1939, changes everything. For the first time, the quality of recorded sound surpasses that of live transmission, or, in broader terms, *the past is made clearer than the present*.

For German engineers in 1939, keeping clear and accurate records is very important. The company that makes the new magnetic tapes is called I.G. Farben, and they make many other things.

*See: A/C Bias; Primo Levi*

**1946:** Recording lathes are smuggled into Leningrad, where conspiratorial Soviet youth, deprived of vinyl or shellac, cut forbidden jazz on recycled X-ray slides. There is speculation as to whether the quality of the record correlates with the quality of the X-rays; or with the quality of the bones; or both. Overall, the quality is poor.

**1946:** The whole of Europe listens to bones, but the body keeps more secrets than it tells.

*See: Nuremberg Trials*

**1955:** Within the closed reactor-city of Chelyabinsk 65, Maria Lyudmilovna listens to Bill Haley on X-ray. She knows that if she is discovered, her husband Fyodor will undoubtedly lose his position. Fyodor knows of his wife's infatuation with the West, and prays nightly for her to renounce her passions. They are as unhappy as they are Russian. *I will leave this place*, Maria thinks as she watches the needle spin grooves in fibulae, tibiae, metacarpals; *I will. And when I do, I will rock around the clock*.

*See: Chelyabinsk; Chekhov*

**1973:** The piano solo in Lou Reed's *Berlin*—the one on the first track, the title track—lasts for 58 seconds. It is a strange beginning: the jagged tone chords, the minor ninths, the descending bass notes like scum circling a drain. It crouches uncomfortably at the top

of the album. The solo is a wrongness, a misbegotten child, and from its caul Lou Reed weaves his standard; his black standard around which misfits throng; a rallying cry in glorious stereo for the junkies, the queers, the legions of the squalid and dispossessed: *listen. We, too, were here.*

*See: Serendipity*

**1975:** Retail support for the 8-track system is withdrawn, and *Berlin* is re-released on cassette, without the piano solo—which was really only filler, and anyhow, the album never sold.

*See: Equanimity*

**1995:** At the Fraunhofer Institute, Karlheinz Brandenburg listens to Suzanne Vega sing ‘Tom’s Diner’. He listens again and again, each time discarding, compressing the data, slicing until the critical moment where Vega disappears and the sound in Brandenburg’s headphones becomes an uncanny echo, a not-voice, and for a moment he thinks he has lost her forever. He cuts the audio. The room is very silent.

He thinks about balance, and compromise. He thinks of a pendulum at the top of its swing; the moment’s stillness before the long return to the nadir. At the console, he massages the faders until Vega’s voice is resurrected, warm and idiosyncratic in his ears. He punches in some numbers, then he pours himself a coffee. The Rubicon has been crossed. A high-water mark has been reached. The mp3 is born.

*See: Lossy Compression; Julius Caesar; Hubris*

**2019:** The Google/Baidu Stratusserver<sup>tm</sup> network utilises cloud-based storage to render the planet’s digital capacity effectively infinite. The shackles of data compression are lifted. The world grows louder. Across the globe, humanity is talking, singing, crying, whispering into the Cloud.

**2022:** The Cloud starts talking back.

*See: The Cloud The Cloud The Cloud The Cl*

**Later:** There are no servers. There is no Cloud. There is no coffee, no cigarettes, no Suzanne Vega, no piano solos or 8-track cassettes, no X-rays (although there are plenty of bones), no Europe, no I.G. Farben, no engineers, no vinyl or shellac or Lac Bugs, no gramophones, no pig's bristles, no pigs.

There is music. There is a person—the last person—and she is singing.

Her world is not our world. It is a world without history, because there is no way to keep it. For the last person there is no past, only the crushing *now*, and if she wakes to the sound of sobbing in the night she cannot tell if her memory of it is real, or a dream.

Her world is slagged girders and falling ash. It is not a beautiful world, although there is still beauty: it is in the wind and the fields of twisted glass. She sings for these, for small comforts, and for the empty oceans and empty skies and the ground too full of *things*, for the strewn shapes like wet overcoats lying in a darkened hallway, while through a door just beyond there is a warm room full of people and their laughter. Above all, she sings for herself, and although there are no listeners, her song is recorded: for an instant, the frequencies of her voice are captured in a dangling steel cable scratching against a car door. The scratches are a ghost, a memory of sound, and if you listened to them, you would hear:

*by the light of the moon  
one could barely see  
the pen was looked for  
the light was looked for  
with all that looking  
I don't know what was found  
but I do know that the door  
shut itself on them*

*Tom Albert is a writer and performer based in Brisbane. His writing has appeared in Voiceworks, and in cabaret and comedy festivals across the east coast.*

# from 'The Ghost and The Machine'

*by Catherine Vidler*

*the ghost wanted more than he expected*

revenge

to write a book

the exact opposite

to be acknowledged and/or released

to get married

to marry her

none of that early pressure

a birthday cake

a particular cake

to see him just once

fresh breath

to be in the group photo

to dance on stage

to share these memories

your house

a new place

true love

proof

a halloween costume

justice

his love to join him in the castle

to play poker

to talk to me

to play with them

my attention

to frighten me

to talk to him

her as a replacement  
to repair and heal  
to talk to everyone  
to have a sleepover  
some pie too  
to be captured on film  
everyone to leave  
to let us know that it left us the tiny flowers

*the ghost danced*

along the edge of the balcony  
along the creek  
just out of range  
bhangra with me  
in 2006  
to a tune in his head  
in front of her  
around the trees

*the ghost sighed*

and looked out over the railing  
and continued  
and began again

*the ghost was afraid*

of those big animals  
of me  
of her too

of children  
of dogs  
of his two generals  
of us  
of drowning  
of the Tasmanian devil  
of himself at this rate

*the ghost lay half a mile beyond*

the ghost lay motionless  
the ghost lay in wait for her  
the ghost lay on her wrist

*the ghost who talks*

For 'The Ghost Who Talks', by Bill Manhire

the ghost who talks to good effect  
the ghost who talks a teensy bit  
the ghost who talks to visitors  
the ghost who talks about revenge  
the ghost who talks on Friday night  
the ghost who talks about its confinement  
the ghost who talks to the entwined  
the ghost who talks about how rhythm is everything  
the ghost who talks about capitalism  
the ghost who talks in Wormwood Creek  
the ghost who talks to Hamlet (the second time)  
the ghost who talks and walks off-stage  
the ghost who talks about cake and tea  
the ghost who talks about new releases

the ghost who talks about talking trash  
the ghost who talks about 'extraordinary'  
the ghost who talks the night before  
the ghost who talks in the usual way  
the ghost who talks to itself alone  
the ghost who talks about the golden age  
the ghost who talks about local music and radio  
the ghost who talks about its world title victory  
the ghost who talks (if you were wondering)  
the ghost who talks about all the tunnels  
the ghost who talks about exactly the same thing

*Catherine Vidler's first collection of poems Furious Triangle was published in 2011 by Puncher & Wattmann. She has a second collection forthcoming. Catherine's poems have appeared in journals including Sport, Turbine, Quadrant, Blackbox Manifold, Antipodes, Takahē and Southerly. Catherine is the editor of trans-Tasman literary magazine Snorkel ([www.snorkel.org.au](http://www.snorkel.org.au)).*

# Vino e Panini con Michelangelo

*by Mark William Jackson*

I  
sometimes it's necessary to mess with (reality)  
our obsession with logic compels us  
to mow our lawns every Sunday—  
we'd all paint the grass if we could

II  
blow-up!  
blow your mind up  
make your mind up  
blow your make-up

III  
wine & sandwiches in Rome  
London owes you a decade  
God's hand will rest on your shoulder  
along the Po di Volano, at rest in Ferrara

*Mark William Jackson's work has appeared in various journals including; Best Australian Poems, Popshot, Going Down Swinging, Cordite, Rabbit Poetry Journal and Verity La. Mark's poems 'Smalahove' and 'Man Alive, Number 5' can be found in Issue Twelve and Issue Nine of Tincture Journal. For more information visit [markwmjackson.com](http://markwmjackson.com).*

# Early Spring

*by Mark Frank*

Here. Jun's thoughts had been scattered and days passed with nothing done until she moved here, a little village at the base of a foothill that might as well have been on the edge of the inhabited world. When she first came here from the city, she could not believe how dark the night got. She never really felt night in the city. She would play by the river, but when the sun sank behind the mountains, she knew she had to get out of there quickly. One time she forgot, entranced in watching the sun go down. Dusk came, then absolute darkness. She didn't have a light or cell phone to guide the way, so she had to walk half by memory along the dim outline of a path winding back up the steep incline to her house.

When she got inside, there was still a faded orange black aura in the room, as if her eyes were merely recalling the light that had been there just a while ago.

Remembering that light was like remembering her sister.

The day was rainy, forty-nine days after her sister Reiko had jumped. When Reiko died, Jun claimed her book of poetry and hid it in her room.

Little by little, she read the words. She liked to read by candlelight to keep the darkness near. Even then, she whispered an apology to the darkness before lighting the candle, which she felt was a kind of transgression. Reiko had preferred to write in English, which was not Jun's strong point. With her English-Japanese dictionary in hand, she worked through each line, sometimes making notes in the margins. Now these strange English letters were dancing and twirling in her head. She felt like she really hadn't known her sister so much these past years, especially since junior high when they both had become busy with sports and tests and study.

Her family had had a time of growing together, of being together, when everything was unquestioned, and even the art of questioning had not yet been learned. She had photos of that time, but in truth no camera could catch what she was feeling then. It seemed infinitely longer than this brief time of growing apart, when the days would slip by before she could notice.

One night, she dreamed that the book of poems floated off the table and flew out the window toward the mountain. The next night, she had the same dream again. In the dream, she had the feeling of falling in and falling down, a sense of being eaten away at the edges. Somehow everything came together at once and it hurt. Jun began to suspect that the book did not want to be there, just as Reiko had not. These poems, which seemed to both embody and recoil from this space, wanted to be somewhere, somewhere else.

At first she took out the poems and pinned them to her wall, along with photos of Reiko and pretty postcards. But the poems simply hung as if sentenced to be there, displayed against their will.

No, this was not where they belong.

She thought about sending them out to sea. There was an escarpment overlooking the jagged beach where the family had sometimes gone camping. It was the most beautiful stretch of sea she had ever seen. But when she took the poems near the water, she felt some resistance. Just a subtle feeling, nothing as concrete as to suggest a ghost or demon, but the book somehow became heavy in her hands.

No, this is not where they belong.

On top of the mountain across from her house was an abandoned park where she and her sister had often gone to play. She liked the wildness of the place, overgrown in weeds and populated by monkeys. The swing set was now rusted and bent in the middle, but once in the village community centre Jun had seen an old black and white photo of the park in its prime. Sharp young people were in formal wear and having a picnic. One woman carried a dark parasol. It looked like a perfect way to spend an afternoon.

Looking up at the mountain, Jun decided to bury the poems up there, one a day until they were gone.

The next day, she was up at dawn when the morning sun caused the house to shudder and creak. She loved this old house, built on someone else's love of this slope leading down to the river that was more of a creek. She got up, put on work clothes and climbing boots, and set off.

In early spring, as the sun came up, the cracking of the snowpack could be heard,

and from up in the mountains, the stirrings of life, both flora and fauna. The small canal in front of her house was rushing in the spring thaw. There was slush on the road after a wet late snow. Here in the foothills, the roads were clear but some places were still piled high with packed snow from the snowplows.

The mountain was steep, but starting from behind the temple there was a narrow path that serpented its way to the top. When she reached the top, she looked around. She hadn't been here for perhaps two years, but nothing had changed. Since most people didn't know about the park and even those who did were not interested, this was not surprising. With a garden spade, she cut some of the weeds back and dug a shallow hole. She read the poem and then folded it carefully and placed it in the hole. She covered it back over with dirt. She felt a curious and new sense of satisfaction.

That night, she had a dream that she was back on the mountain, hovering over where she had buried the poem. Her feet left the ground, then she floated and flew, not as a miracle but wondering how she had ever forgotten how to do this in the first place. It seemed the most normal thing, returning without fanfare. Enormous letters had sprung up out of the ground, English letters from Reiko's poem, and Jun soared over and around them.

The next morning, she buried another poem.

That night, she had the exact same dream, except now there were more letters and even entire words. She lingered on the kern and the font, the colour and the depth. Some of the letters were splattered with earth. Weeds were coming up, and a sparrow had built a nest in a particularly lovely 'G'. In her dream she could hear the letters as well, at least the low rumblings of some chthonic pronunciations.

Every day for the next forty-seven days, she buried one poem a day until they were all gone, and each night she had the same dream, every time more elaborate. The letters of Reiko's poems began to inhabit the place, with roots running down deep into the heart of the mountain. Day by day, each one somehow stitched together by this project.

Each day her dream had become more vivid as well, with hundreds of letters crowded around the old park on top of the mountain. The snow melted, and soon she could hear buds popping and leaves unfurling. The forest that had been blanketed in

silence began to crackle and speak, a noise that only she could hear.

The evening air was moving just enough to bring the smell of the river up over the empty rice paddies—a fecund smell that carried secrets from deeper in the mountains, up the valley. Soon, the spring rice planting rush would enliven the village.

Finally, on the forty-ninth night, she fell asleep and had the same dream. It was different this time, though—she felt as though the letters were pulling at her, grabbing her. Finally she soared up and above them, above the trees, and toward the higher mountains in the distance. When she awoke, she was still flying, up and out, high above the village, into the mountains beyond the foothills.

*Mark Frank lived in rural Japan for 12 years where he learned to love the rhythms of mountains and rivers. Currently he resides on an organic farm in Missouri with his wife and two young children.*

# A Small, Leftover Hex to Be Undone: charting trauma landscapes and physical patterns

*Non-fiction by Jonno Revanche*

Struggling with the end of my first big relationship, I committed to taking up arms with the city we lived in. It was easy for me, I think, to imagine the place I had once felt so comfortable in lined with psychic traps, ready to open and snatch me in their teeth. I dreamt of a newer place, where trauma did not affect me, where the boy and his physical presence no longer walked the streets. I idealistically daydreamed of release, of peace—I saw myself becoming new.

It was somewhat foolish of me to believe that I would be a new person in a new city. I had seen others make this mistake before me, time and time again. Now that same obstacle was happening in my own life, and I was barging through it. I realised I was no different to these people. I had no understanding of the checked baggage that cost me everyday, even in new destinations, even in places I thought he could never actually be. I didn't know that all of those things would follow me, that the problem was not with what could potentially be happening on the outside, but what was happening within me.

§

One last wish, a final thought, or a penny dropped in a well:

I had come out of a deep hole and felt an overwhelming need to adapt to my new surroundings—I was responsible always for my own feelings of finality. Every day was a new negotiation with narratives of bodies, of being, of compartmentalising hurt. I am referring to life in general and in separate moments that had glimmered and afflicted me—if only I could figure out the equation to make the emotions end. I had been given the keys, driven the car out west (the wind was whipping through my hair, new Grimes in the CD player; I passed bordertown, in the past my dad had mentioned something about a ghost living there in the streets) and I was travelling somewhere with a pure intent and then I noticed the signposts were all painted black. I needed to reach the endpoint. I was

gleaming with skin, covered and desperate to figure out the cause. I was nothing to no one in this context; I had no history, no understanding of culture or of what came before me, of gender or of situation. And it was exhilarating. I had no one's expectations but my own to navigate.

I was a circular wish, a short circuit—a dead animal caught in the pipes. It was two weeks before my departure from South Australia.

I had been thinking about the lack of identity I felt in context of my family. I was the one to be found dying their hair blue in the bathroom, the queer of the family who thought too deeply and expressed things too freely. I was “too much”. I occupied small spaces with my perceived hugeness. “Please dumb yourself down.” I was standing in my bathroom, the floor spotless aside from the little flecks of aqua that had stained the tiles. I put my hands up to my face, feeling the elasticity of the skin, moving it without thinking. This was my body, but it barely felt like it anymore. I leaned in closer, my belly gurgling, trying to catch something in there that I recognised. I had seen this face a million times before, and it had become so permanent. Yet it was just a blur of textures and formations to me now—my face was a word I had repeated over and over, to the point where it was just sound with no meaning. I didn't know if it was real or not, whether there was actually a person in that reflection or whether it was just a collection of ideas.

Depersonalisation cannot be romanticised—it's a bizarre and uncomfortable thing. I was so out of touch with what it meant to have a body. I was experiencing a strange disconnect of where I wanted to be versus where I really was. That's as succinctly as I can put it.

I'd been told that to move past something like this I would have to practice something called radical exposure therapy. The drama of that phrase was almost too funny to take seriously. It sounded a bit like I was going to be thrown into a nuclear chamber and kept there for minutes at a time before being let out to breathe, skin charred, coughing up radioactive matter like phlegm. I imagined myself crawling out, skin implants falling from my arms, hair sprouting from dubious places, vomiting a goop that had the sheen of coconut jelly. Except the reality of it was far too complex. Radical exposure therapy was about touching the parts of your brain that felt scarred, pressing on those bruises, trying to ascertain where you needed to be healed. These thoughts of

therapy wafted away from my mind as I turned onto the new highway, moving fast.

I'm driving with one hand on the wheel and another reaching down to roll down the window. I'm trying to re-enact some kind of horrible B-Grade movie I might've downloaded off blogspot where the movement of the car feels purposeful and symbolic and I'm on my way to something exciting and precarious. I think about how getting over him has been boring and often not revelatory. It hasn't felt like a 'lesson' in the way that I'm grateful for the experience of hardship. Instead, it only crippled me. It means I am constantly resorting to clichés and depending on them to sustain myself and for things to make sense. It's harder for me to connect with a language and sense of movement than other people do, that I once had—instead I feel how much I've begun self-consciously reaching out to other people who have experienced the same thing. We catch each other's eyes and think "you too?"

I thought about how easy it was to pull the wool over my eyes. It has been painful having to resort to it through writing. It's not overly poignant, either, at least not in the way other people understand—not dramatic, because the fists and the crying and the shaking in a ball on the floor and what-have-yous seem more fitted to other times, the beginning stages of the process of acceptance. Writing may be exorcism but it's not painless. When we talk of 'recovery' it can be easy to assume or envisage a linear path that feels something like climbing a mountain. You take a specified amount of steps and it's hard and you sweat like a motherfucker and then you get to the top and you feel accomplished, a bit damaged and bruised, but ultimately at a higher plane of existence than you were before. Except it's not really like that. Recovery is constantly two steps forward, three steps back, one step forward, one step back. Sometimes you're back near the beginning, and you feel a cruel audience laughing at you from above, revelling in your hardship. It is frustrating and inconvenient and often dangerous. It does not really make a lot of sense, and I think that's because humans don't make a lot of sense.

## §

I was staring at an empty shower before me, watching the water fall. I'd been in my grandmothers house for at least four hours, but she was nowhere to be seen. The cream colour of the old bathroom was powerful to me because this is the place that meant everything about safety, about softness, of a tasty comfortability that I could always come back to me. Everything that filled me was just that noise, the droplets condensing,

pressuring, the stream hitting that plastic, ricocheting, blurring into one rush of sound.

I stepped into the onslaught and wished for it to end me.

It was when I returned to earth that I realised I had begun scratching my body with a steel scrub, rubbing with a distinct furiousness. I was hoping that I would eventually be rid of the same skin you touched. Because I knew soon I would have shed all of this, all of these layers. The brushing was abrasive but somehow calming at the same time.

In this place, time seemed to move at a different pace than it did in Sydney. Things were purposeful, calm and sweet. Things happened in slow motion—people went to jobs, they did what they had to do, they returned home and spent time with their family. Homes were not seen as refuges in the way they were in cities. Open space were welcome and filled with fresh air. Cars drove by slowly through main streets. Aromas wafted out of cafés and there were still things to do. It was much easier to stay present.

I remained here for a week, away from all the friends I had known and come to respect. Instead, I spent time with family, going to the supermarket, trying to forget about all the things that happened in Adelaide. Here, a separate life and history for me existed that had value but didn't have to be tied to my life in the big city. There was less pressure to exist on someone else's terms—I could just be, with no preconception or solidified idea of how I had to make my brain or body work.

I stayed there, cleansing my mind for a week, then went back to Sydney.

## §

In moments of weakness I grant myself permission to look at his Instagram. It's the same as always and I feel this sick kind of loathing for it. It's the kind of feeling you get when you eat something you know is bad for you, something you might actually be allergic to, but your defences are low and the need for immediate comfort overtakes everything else. But I don't feel loathing directly for him, which feels strange and curious. After everything, you would expect an intense, primordial sinking feeling. But those feelings never come. I understand that feelings occupy grey areas that can't necessarily be defined by words.

He still opts for all black and white filters and the quality is indicative of the same

phone he's been using for the last five years. I know that he's probably scrolling through it now, obsessively, looking for his next target. I see boys on there that I know he's slept with and boys that I think might be his new boyfriend, or love interest, or fuckbuddy, or something. I imagine conversations that happen between them and they carry a strange sort of violence and persuasion that I once would have willingly accepted. I can sense the mania of those interrogations, and can project into some distant country where I know those things might be happening. My mind casually jolts back to moments that I'm not sure ever existed. They are too rough, too surreal and painful to validate. I want to contact these boys, to warn them, and I feel a sick sense responsibility rushing through me when I exit the app.

The grey areas of memory are startling. Because no matter how hard I try, it's like I'm touching a weak spot, an open wound on someone else arm. "No. Don't touch there."

## §

I waited patiently at the edge of the plane, having said goodbye to my boyfriend and to my father. It had been the first time they met. I admittedly had not planned that crossover very well. My father, unaware of my real connection to this boy, and my boyfriend, unsure of where the boundaries lie in terms of communicating honestly with the first significant man to appear within my life. It was a tense moment, but I wasn't expecting anything less. After five minutes of fragmented goodbyes, we were separated.

After all this time I kept telling him that there was always going to be another man between us. He was alive, and alive within me, and simultaneously I wanted so bad for both of those incarnations to be dead. My boyfriend had accepted that there was another boy hidden somewhere in my chest, ready to come raging up from a tangled sense of memory. For years now I've tried to re-write him, re-write myself in relation to him, and I often wonder whether writing has ever worked.

I wonder—if I write, can I undo all those curses cast upon me? Will these boundaries inflicted upon my body become unravelled? Can I write a counter-incantation that is formidable enough to move me past all the hurt, all that damage? Or is that old skin going to be there forever?

I wonder sometimes if healing is about more than just getting something off your

chest. I wonder how much storytelling gives and how much it takes away.

I begin to see him everywhere. In the time when I thought he would be completely gone, with no opportunity for him to appear, he now haunts me the most.

He is a sizeable fragment of my neuro-system now. I don't want to be a cliché when I speak about this, as if people are not wholes but are in fact different pieces bouncing off another and hitting cemented walls, like ping pong or a handheld virtual game. It's not physical precisely, but it's somewhat ephemeral. Different, new places remind me that safety is never guaranteed. For a long time I carried this outer layer that I didn't realise he wrapped me in. Light enough to go unnoticed, but noxious enough to make a difference. Imagine it now: the glad wrap covering me, melting under the radioactive rays, coating me, affixing to my skin, becoming an unnecessary carapace.

Picture me breathing through it. Now I'm a JPEG. Then suddenly I'm a GIF. I'm a moving screenshot from that same terrible movie I downloaded. I'm a decaying flower observed through the lens of a YouTube viewer. I'm a terrible delay of images that you're staring at now, and now you're looking into my eyes, as I stare back at you, dramatically trying to create some kind of lurid spectre of my own pain. I whisper something and my mouth cracks into a smile. "Mommy? Are you home?"

The sound is bizarre, frightening.

That last hex he performed is now beginning to peel away, because this illness manifests in the body as much as anywhere else. The vestiges of spell-casting that were performed so cleverly now have less of a hold, no matter how much those experiences shaped me with a sense of finality. Picking away at scabs, ripping off old clothes, or perhaps more like peeling away burnt skin. Tossed aside, I discard myself enthusiastically. It's the little brownish skin after boiled vegetables have simmered away. It's a reptile's abandoned shell. It crackles. It melts away, it can be taken off, and it is filled with dead memories, with rotting pieces of relationships, with some kind of meaning that is no longer relevant. It's supremely grotesque. And it wears thinner with age.

When people talk about getting over someone, they speak about it in the language of detox. So he must always be there in the body, those histories of interactions, secured in

unsure places, and we must unwind, forever unravelling. The body knows what the mind does not, and it responds in ways we do not recognise. It's clear in these moments that our animalistic nature comes to the surface when encountering hurt.

He has cleverly cast a spell on me leaving a throbbing mark and it is my job to work around it, to create a life that is harmonious with his branding. I take it little by little, studying my weakness, reacclimatising myself with things that are dangerous. Find a thread to pull, then watch it unravel, then find another one and keep that memory in your mind for the next time.

I was walking down the corner of King Street, Newtown, when I first began to feel it being shed. I felt the rain on my skin, vicious wind eradicating me, stripping away all those terrible things. I began to feel my core being affected. Even on the bus it was there, my lungs operating normally, all that anxiety leaving my body. I began noticing little things. The girl opposite me, flinching, turning her head as the rush went past. The chatter of commuters entering and departing.

I had become something affected, scarred, but could realise I am always becoming new, something different. I saw at once the beginning of renewal. It was a feeling I felt I had to become invested in. There I was, trying to take in all those little realisations, beginning to feel that there was some control now, that I was a million miles away from those things again, that I didn't have to be a prison of trauma.

Those things that bound me withered away. They left a trace, but their power was lost.

I don't want to always be writing about my ex boyfriends.

## §

I enter psychologist's offices, I become swallowed up by perpetual whiteness, I observe the architecture, we smile at each other for thirty minutes and I refuse to open up. I pull things out little bit by little bit, like some kind of sick reversal project, like a weird kind of video where plastic is caught within the stomach of a sea animal and they show you the plastic being removed. I leave the office, I look around the world, I feel aware of the immenseness of the world, and how I feel I could vanish into the sky.

I go about my life. I still feel the skin there. The next time I peel off a layer is in my grandparents' house, and then I feel the thump, and then I'm doubled-over and emerging after five minutes with a carapace there on the carpet, and I am disgusted.

The third time I felt that old skin crackling off was on that plane. I began to weep, almost voluntarily, a reaction that could have been something like breathing. That new air was so sweet, (but was it just the oxygenation of the cabin?) it was completely new life. I was lifted, and shifted, I was carried into the air, I began realising I was something to be seen and cherished. I was enveloped by the sensation of knowing, of encompassing it in my bones, that he was out there somewhere, wishing ill upon me. But now I was so distant I had to commit myself of ridding those last spells, of overcoming the depression. Of becoming something much larger than hope. I wanted to be a slogan, a success story. I wanted to undo that last spell cast upon me.

I had become numb to my own realities, not knowing that the chrysalis had closed off joy as well. I had been encased in the witchcraft he practised upon me. I was a small experiment, something to be played with. Yet with every day something in me became replaced, my own matter being recycled: how comforting to know that someday none of this skin will have been touched or marked by you.

I go down to beaches, I venture into alleyways. I see reflections of me that are true, bright to witness, not harrowing or shameful. I feel a commitment to something we might associate with opportunity. I pass people in the street and see the details of their faces and the things that encompass longing. I finally become accustomed to the order of ordinary life, of some magic that lurks beneath, something different to the spells you curled on your tongue.

## §

I'm watching the Oscars, and then it finishes, it's done. The theatrics is over. Lady Gaga posts an image on Instagram after. I forgive myself for my moment of gay cliché, engulfed in her words.

“I thought no man would ever love me because my body was ruined by my abuser.”

The statement is absolute. I stare at it, intently. My body is rushed full of dopamine, my limbs spasm. My eyes are full and I lay there for two hours, taking in all of it, taking

in all of the things that only just began to make sense. I remain motionless until my housemate eventually returns and I realise that I really I have to get up off the floor.

*Jonno Revanche is a writer, editor, multidisciplinary artist and unreasonably hard working capricorn originally from Adelaide, Australia. Their work has been featured in publications like I-D, Kill Your Darlings, Overland, Krass and Oyster.*