

TINCTURE JOURNAL

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sky filled with wispy, white clouds. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a lighter, hazy blue near the horizon. In the lower-left corner, the dark silhouette of a tree is visible against the bright light of the sun, which is partially obscured by the branches. The overall mood is serene and natural.

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Editorial

by *Daniel Young*

Every now and then I find myself in a reading funk—a period where neither novels nor short story collections, nor the kinds of long-form journalism and narrative non-fiction that I usually enjoy, can really draw me in. At these times, reading poetry can help; it aids a kind of slowing down that can be exactly what I need. Doing something else for a while can help too, but that normally involves the kinds of distractions—social media, television—that make it more difficult to engage with a book. Usually it’s just a matter of allowing time to pass, then finding the perfect book or story to get me all excited again. Often, literary journals provide the spark.

It’s possible (although for me, quite rare) to delve into an issue of a literary journal and feel a bit ‘meh’; but as with fossicking, panning for gold, there’s always that possibility of a eureka moment—something special grabs you, energises you, changes everything; you go to the author’s bio and find out what else they’ve written; surely, there must be *more*. And then, like magic, the thrill of reading has returned.

My taste, and the tastes of our other prose readers and our poetry editor Stuart Barnes, are mostly what drives the content of *Tincture*; reading submissions can bring about the same eureka moments, though from a more unfiltered base—a set of works that hasn’t already passed through somebody else’s editorial sensibilities. But it’s not just our tastes—it’s our tastes combined with the delicious randomness of whatever happens to come our way within a given reading window. Did somebody say magic?

I have a habit of selecting works longer-than-you-may-find-elsewhere, and I’d like to draw particular attention to Ramon Glazov’s story “The Nesting Pair” (16,000 words) and Wang Ping’s memoir “We Are Water” (8,000 words). Ramon Glazov has had fiction in *Tincture* before, and his story “Nothing but Mammals” is available on our [website](#); this time, he returns with a slow-burning Perth suburban gothic story that enchants with exquisitely drawn-out descriptions before grabbing you by the throat and refusing to let go—it’s one to savour. Wang Ping is new to our pages but well-known as a Chinese-American poet, writer, photographer, performance and installation artist, dancer, singer, and professor of English at Macalester College. We’re delighted to have her, and I hope you’ll be delighted to have her writing transport you to the heights of Everest. Enjoy!

Daniel Young is the founder and editor of Tincture Journal. He recently won the 2017 Transportation Press ‘Smoke’ microfiction competition for his story “Dalian Blood Futures”.

Political Reflections

Part Three: Mother of All Bombs

Non-fiction by Alexandra O'Sullivan

Easter falls on the first Sunday after the full moon, which this year happened to be just over a week prior to Anzac Day. This meant that the two public holidays in 2017 came thick and fast, so I connected them symbolically, and to the events of the world that were swirling around them.

On Anzac Day I woke late, with no spirit to get out of bed. My son Nicholas dragged me up eventually, and I spent two hours trying to get him to tell me what he wanted for breakfast, as I wondered vaguely if there were any cafés open in Frankston. A friend rang and asked me what I had planned.

“I’m just wondering how to get through the day,” I told her.

“Get through the day? Are you depressed or something?”

“No.”

It was something I couldn’t explain to her. Something indefinable, like the term ‘Australian values’—a term that nowadays seems like it was birthed on the beaches of Gallipoli—that made me want to curl up in the foetal position and wait for it to be over. I felt like I was being dragged backwards into the public holiday just gone, and everything that happened on that Easter weekend.

§

I first saw the news on Facebook, in a friend’s status update. Of course, then I had to go and turn on the real news, just like the people who witnessed 9/11 from their backyards had to run inside to check their own eyes by trusting what they could see on TV.

The real news confirmed it for me. The American military had dropped the ‘mother of all bombs’ on an ISIS target in Afghanistan. Though Trump was simply honouring a campaign promise to ‘bomb the shit out of ISIS’, that leap from a promise to its fulfilment was still a shock. I thought back to his other promises, trying to remember them all. Ridiculous as some of them were, I had a fear that no promise would go unfulfilled, and no ‘enemy’ would be left unpunished.

Lest we forget.

But it was only Good Friday, Anzac Day was yet to come. I had four whole days of motherhood to get through with no school or work to break it up. When I began writing this

piece, I planned to critique the use of the word ‘mother’ in the ‘mother of all bombs’, but then I realised—motherhood can feel like a war at times, and mothers are like warriors. So I gave up on that idea, just like I gave up on the idea of writing at all that Easter weekend, and surrendered to catering to my six-year-old child, still in the attention-seeking phase of his life.

“Look at this mummy! Look! Look!!”

“Oh ... a rock ... great, darling.”

“Watch me throw it, watch me throw it.”

We decided to go to a local family fun day, but as soon as we left the house it started to rain. I turned the wipers on and steered the car into McDonald’s, the only place open. I bought a coffee for myself and a hot chocolate for Nicholas, just to start his weekend chocolate parade nice and early. We sat by the window watching the cars sloshing past and sipping our warm, sugary drinks, waiting for the rain to stop hitting the glass.

At the family fun day, the sun pushed through the clouds. Nicholas ran from ride to ride, demanding money in a voice buzzed with adrenalin. Defeated, I handed it over. I climbed into the Cha Cha with him and gripped the handrail as the long arms circled fast, the shorter arms circled faster within them, and our seat threatened to spin right off the whole thing. I kept my eyes open, challenging my ability to trust. Nicholas entwined his arm with mine and sighed, “Isn’t this fun mummy?”

§

“It’s all about having fun,” I assured him the following week after his first soccer match in the under-sevens team. They’d been savagely beaten. I’d watched all the fun draining away from his team as goal after goal flashed past them.

I’ve never previously cared about sport as a spectator, but the connection my son has given me to the game has changed things. At his most recent match, as the score teetered on 3-2 our way, I found myself screaming, “Don’t just stand there! Attack! Attack!!” A roar of adrenalin rippled through the crowd and the mum next to me turned and spoke in a voice of amazement.

“I’m turning into an ugly mum!”

“I know!” I replied in the same tone, “What’s happened to us?”

The more important question, I’ve since realised is—as mothers—what are we doing to *them*?

“Did you see me stop the goal mummy, did you, did you?”

“I saw you! I’m very, very proud of you!”

I don't think we ever really leave the attention-seeking phase. It's just that, as we grow older, the world becomes harder to impress, mummy no longer feigns interest, so we have to do more spectacular things. And when we do them, we have to win.

Paul Tibbets, commander of the mission that dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in the Second World War, named the plane Enola Gay, after his mother. I wonder if he wanted to yell, "Look mummy, look! Look!" as the mushroom cloud rose into the sky.

§

George Orwell once described sport as "war minus the shooting". Both war and sport invite people into something bigger than themselves, into a "higher plane of power". In both, we admire decisiveness, action, bravery. *Don't just stand there, attack, attack!*

Trump's actions have been decisive. It's his explanation of them that has been less so. After the bombing of ISIS, he was wonderfully circular in his description of what happened.

"Eh, everybody knows exactly what happened and what I do is I authorise my military. We have the greatest military in the world, and so, yes, I do give them complete authorisation. We are very, very proud of our military."

Listening to it makes me feel like I'm back on the Cha Cha, challenging my ability to trust.

§

"When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice," Trump declared in his inauguration speech, showing his exceptional ability to smash contradictory sentences together and pretend it makes sense. That statement is like a concentric circle. No room for prejudice against who? Yourself? An unhealthy obsession with patriotism is the very thing that leads to prejudice. Like those good old Australian values of mateship and hating the other team.

Soon after Anzac Day, I was drawn into a ferocious debate. It's taken me a while to realise that once you become a part of that bigger thing, it's very difficult to step outside it, and the punishment is often harsh if you do. I felt so much for Yassmin Abdel-Magied, for the punishment she received for stepping outside the military complex and writing "Lest We Forget (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)" on her Facebook page. For insulting the Anzac Spirit, by simply questioning our continued involvement in war. But there's nothing the mob loves more than a good public flogging, especially if it helps marshal the troops. And even though they've now successfully driven her out of the country, their cries for blood still echo through the cybersphere.

I felt so strongly that I sent a message to my friend who is ex-army, to see if he could help me understand the hatred. What I got back from him was the same hatred I was wanting to question, and we fell into a fight. I have learnt to stay out of pointless arguments online, because they are—well—pointless, yet here I was, getting swept along in a stream of

pointlessness. I couldn't stop and neither could he, but his arguments caught me in a whirlpool and sent me around and around. I was back on that fucking Cha Cha, only now it was spinning in time to a military beat. Does honouring the dead mean agreeing with what was done to them? And what we continue to do? He seemed to be telling me that this was so. I withdrew, consumed with rage.

Later, I pounded out my thoughts on my laptop. The words rolled onto the page. I shaped them into a persuasive argument. I could not allow such an attack on my moral structure to go unpunished. I was heading for that higher plane of power, reaching, reaching. I wanted to send it to him immediately, but a small voice of reason told me to wait. To sleep on it.

The next morning, I leapt at my computer. I added more. I paced the lounge room. I made Nicholas breakfast. I returned to it. I stabbed and stabbed until I was satisfied. This was the mother of all emails, and my fingers trembled over the send button. Then I stopped. What was the point of this attack? I couldn't help feeling like my good intentions had evaporated, and I was driven by a new desire. As an ex-athlete, I am not immune to the thrill of winning, to what that desire can do to a person. What would I start if I sent this email? Where would it end? I shut off my computer and went to the backyard. Nicholas and I lit a fire. I watched the flames. I had a sudden urge to go somewhere. I thought if I spent another day near my computer, I might just drop something huge.

Maybe I *was* depressed.

§

On the train to Flinders St, I watched Nicholas pressing his forehead against the window, the way I used to when I was a child. His ghost face pressed back. He stared at the tracks rushing past, two continuous, parallel lines.

“Sometimes it feels like we are moving, and sometimes it feels like the tracks are moving.” He smiled at me in delight of the mental trick.

I nodded and wrote in my diary *war is the ultimate disintegration of debating skills*. Then I put my diary away and pressed my own face up against the glass, looking down at those two lines that never meet.

At the art gallery, I followed Nicholas through the echoing rooms. He isn't interested in the kid's corner, but loves to walk from room to room, just looking at the sculptures and the paintings. We entered the modern furniture room, filled with 'one of a kind' pieces. I went to the wall and read a short note on the movement of Individualism. I felt suddenly uplifted.

“Nicholas, look at these beautiful chairs! Have you ever seen a chair like that?” I bent down to his level and put a hand on his shoulder, gesturing at the display. “Do you see how they make each chair different? So, people aren't all sitting on the same ones, everybody has their own chair. Don't you think that's cool?”

I desperately wanted him to think it was cool.

“Yeah Mum, okay let’s go somewhere else.”

I followed him through the paintings in the next room. I was unsure whether I’d won or not, but I was buzzing on a still-undefined sense that I was on the edge of something, a new kind of beauty in separateness. I’ve learnt through my son’s soccer, it’s having a connection that turns things ugly. It awakens that tribal desire to fight for your own team no matter what.

We wandered out of the art gallery and up to Nicholas’s favourite park, the one behind Fed Square. I sat on the hill in the sunshine. After a while I noticed a stream of football fans marching peacefully along the riverfront towards their game. Nearly everyone wore matching jumpers or scarves. *War minus the shooting*. I wondered how important that minus still was, or if in this communications age, all warfare is now connected, and impossible to separate. I pulled my son away from the park, ignoring his protests. We entered that stream of scarves and jumpers, walking hand in hand towards Flinders St, quietly, against the flow.

Alexandra O’Sullivan has a BA in Media Communications, Literature and Creative Writing. She writes articles for The Radical Notion, along with writing fiction and creative non-fiction.

Moederland

Part Three: Stolen Property

A postfiction series by Johannes Klabbers

When I was thirteen I thought being Dutch was really crap. So boring and useless. We couldn't stop our country being invaded by the Germans. And we couldn't beat them in the World Cup final either, even with Crujff and after being 1-0 up within the first two minutes. We made one ugly little car called a DAF that no one wanted, and everything had an old people smell. We spoke a stupid language which you could only use to communicate with other boring Dutch people. Things and people from England and Amerika, on the other hand, were exciting and interesting. When the opportunity came to go and live in England where the Beatles and the Stones (and the Who! and the Kinks!) were from, I couldn't believe my luck. But the harsh reality was that the life of a fourteen-year-old schoolboy in the outer suburbs of London in the early 70s was no picnic. And I was still Dutch!

What would have happened if I'd gone to New York, or for that matter, LA, or Berlin? But I didn't. I went to London and, eight years later, an Australian woman I met there, bought me a ticket to Australia.

A fragment from an old song drifts up from the unconscious. The voice says:

You stumble, sometimes fall.

Pick yourself up!

Hold yourself up to the light!

Duck your head!

Watch for the blade!

If you could pick any time in history after 26 January 1788 to arrive in Sydney, Australia, what would it be? I'll leave that hanging for a moment but I bet you know what my answer is going to be.

Which Australian band would, in time, become the subject of a Belgian Trivial Pursuit question?

There was a particular heady quality to the music made in Australia (and by Australians elsewhere) in the 80s. If I made a list, someone—perhaps a fan of the Frontier Scouts or XL Capris, would complain about them being left off the list—except they *would* be on it, so it wouldn't apply, but you get my drift. It was an optimistic music, deadly serious—except for Dave Warner from The Suburbs—but without the darkness or the desperation of the music I had played and listened to in London.

Everything was possible.

I was a nomad. I didn't stay in any place in Australia long enough—except in Wagga Wagga, and you might say I stayed there longer than I should have. But in 1995 I was completely broke to the point where I'd get off the bus at the stop before mine to save ten cents on the fare. I didn't have to do anything except show up in Wagga and they offered me a job teaching at the University then and there. I guess you might say I was in the right place at the right time. For more than a decade I had money, and earned a PhD doing what I would have done anyway, talking about Artaud and smashing up cheap portable CD players with a wooden mallet while they were playing as people watched and applauded—and polluting the minds of several hundred students. I learned how to think. I learned how to read people. I learned how to say what needs to be said and I learned to ask questions that have to be asked.

But I didn't learn how to hear what people were saying until after I left. That was in 2011.

*Darling you are not moving any mountains
You're not seeing any visions ...*

§

Fast forward twenty-odd years and I'm no longer in Australia. I am back where it all began.

I found an image online of the main shopping street in the city where I live and where I was born and raised, taken at night in 1957. I imagine my twenty-two-year-old mother (she turned twenty-three on the day I was born) walking through that street, as the foetus which was to become what I am was forming inside her. It is a different place now but the form of a city changes faster than the human heart, as Chris Kraus wrote, quoting Eleanor Antin who was quoting Baudelaire.

*I am here.
It is summer.
This has been one of the most difficult years of my strange life.*

The Dutch have a thin, exaggerated way of being exuberant when welcoming or thanking someone or enthusing over something—to a point that borders on the hysterical. They applaud wildly and start singing boisterously and in unison at the drop of a hat. This is strange to me. In my mind the Dutch are a dour, serious people, quite reserved, known for their sobriety and bluntness—and their willingness to exploit your weakness. If they haven't taken advantage of you, the Belgians say about the Dutch, it's because they haven't thought of it yet.

I've never bought as many dud things that needed to be returned as I have since moving back to the motherland. It is broken, it doesn't work at all, it has a hole or there is a stain on it, or a part of it is missing. It is easy to return things to the shop for a replacement or a full refund. No one bats an eyelid. It happens all the time.

—That's okay, you can just return it.

—But I don't want the hassle of returning it. If I buy a thing I just want it to work.

You can also take it back because you changed your mind, and if you buy something in a shop and the same item goes on sale there within two weeks of purchasing it, by law they have to refund you the difference. It's a consumer paradise.

§

There are a myriad of ways in which you can be humiliated by a Dutch person, but they only work if you're also Dutch. I have an effective disguise: I can look and sound exactly like an Australian. But sometimes I forget to be an Australian. There is a particular, patronising way of being rude to someone in Dutch while smiling and apparently being *very* nice, but it too only works if you're sensitive to the nuances of the language and the mannerisms. You signal your preparedness to be humiliated by certain linguistic cues, or perhaps it's just that you look slightly sheepish about being in the world and occupying space in it, and then it begins.

Or is this just a thing that middle class people the world over are adept at?

I don't remember, but it's possible that I didn't notice this when I was a child here since I wasn't at all interested in what adults did or said or how they behaved. This was when boys would sit on me and extinguish their cigarettes on my hand. Even at the age of forty I could point at one of the scars, but now that I am nearly sixty it seems to have faded—either that or my eyesight has deteriorated—but I well remember the weight of the big arse of one of the boys, Arthur, on my chest.

Is it possible that most Dutch people just aren't very nice? And most people aren't interested in making the effort to be nice? And that when a Dutch person is rude or awful it is a lot more upsetting to me because it happens in Dutch? I don't have the linguistic and cultural defences a normal Dutch man my age would have acquired against being humiliated. I am an actual Dutch man-child and they are sitting on my chest. *Why would someone want to be mean to me!?* If they tried this in English I would laugh at them, but when I am wearing my Australian disguise they wouldn't even try. And no Australian would ever do this to me. It wouldn't work—and anyway why would they bother?

§

A year later when I see online that the price of something is a certain number of Australian dollars I think yeah, but how many Euros is that? Is money the measure of everything? Try language. I've almost given up trying to speak Dutch. You might say I am anti-Dutch. Get over it, I want to say to Dutch people. Why not focus on English, or another language which is understood by more people than your obscure lower German dialect.

But this is our shibboleth, they would say if I said that and if anyone took any notice of what I said. This is how we know 'our people'. This is how we keep certain things amongst ourselves. This is how we know someone is not one of us.

I have arrived. I am home—or rather, this is my home now, even though this land is strange to me. I've invested ... *am investing* ... almost everything I have left—not only my money, energy, but my gumption, my wherewithal, and my ability to think about what it means to belong, to not belong ...

Someone, I don't know who, an anonymous person in a call centre that I'm speaking to in Dutch, is unexpectedly generous and funny. She does something for me that she doesn't have to do and I am grateful. I am unable to express my gratitude in the way that I would like. I search for the right words but they don't come.

Thank you for your time. I understand that you didn't have to do this. I am truly grateful for your generosity and your kindness.

There.

How do you say that in Dutch?

Dank ... is all I am able to get out.

Maybe it's enough.

Johannes Klabbers is a Dutch/Australian writer and posthumanist therapist, currently living in Europe. He is the author of I Am Here: Stories From A Cancer Ward (Scribe Aus/UK 2016), which tells the story of an academic in the Australian outback who takes a voluntary redundancy and reinvents himself as a secular pastoral worker in the largest cancer hospital in the southern hemisphere. The Australian described it as "wonderfully insightful". His website is johannesk.com. He tweets [@johklab](https://twitter.com/johklab), is on Facebook [@johkla](https://www.facebook.com/johkla) and blogs on Medium [@johannesk](https://medium.com/@johannesk).

Vase of Gerberas

by Lisa Brockwell

Don't be fooled by our apparent cheer.
Underneath these blocks of colour
we are acid. We don't like to live so close
together; each one of us vain. We hate
that you think we all look the same.
Whenever one of our number bends at the stem,
her head too heavy for that slender wand
to hold any longer, those of us who remain
avert our faces from what is weak
and defeated. We want you to take
her away, don't let her ooze into our
clear water. Days pass, glacier clock,
and the strongest of us still look good.
That's what we tell each other.

Lisa Brockwell lives on a rural property near Byron Bay with her husband and young son. She was runner-up in the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize in 2015. Her first collection, Earth Girls, published by Pitt Street Poetry in 2016, was commended in the Anne Elder Award.

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Disappearing

by *Myfanwy McDonald*

Fernley's sister is a moth. Wrapped up in her quilt cocoon. Her money box is a ladybug. A fat, round ladybug with a dumb-arse smile. It sits on a shelf above her head.

He reaches for the money box, looking down at Tamara to make sure she doesn't wake up. It's heavy. Filled with coins. He flips it over, opens it and tips out as many coins as will fit into his palm. Moves closer to the window and glimpses a few pieces of gold.

Outside, fog rises off the lagoon and the sky hangs over the street like a wet, grey sheet. People disappear out there, Fernley thinks. People can just disappear. He squeezes the coins tightly in his hand until it starts to hurt. Something cold runs through him.

§

Except they don't, Fernley thinks. Do they? Anyone who is missing is somewhere. Even if they're dead, they're somewhere—buried, burnt; something is left, a pile of ash, bones wrapped in a sheet of dried-up skin.

Swimming training is over and Fernley is in the changing rooms having a shower. The noise of the other boys is dying down. Most have finished getting dressed and are outside, waiting for the bus to take them back to school. Someone sneezes. The slap of a wet towel against the wall. A bag is zipped open, zipped up again.

Fernley has his sister's coins neatly lined up in small piles on top of the metal box that is inscribed with the words: *Hot Water: 50c, 12 minutes*. The concrete shower block has no roof. He looks up and watches the steam from the shower drift up into the sky. It's like the world is too big. Too open. As if he could just dissipate. Break apart like a cloud.

A tap on the cubicle door. "Fernley, is that you in there? The bus is leaving." Fernley sees the tips of Mr Jardine's white shoes from underneath the door. "Fernley?" The water starts to run cold. Fernley drops another handful of coins into the box. Coin-on-coin clunks. One of the best feelings in the world, he thinks, to go from being cold to being warm.

"Fernley, the bus is *leaving*." Jardine taps on the door again. Sighs. Walks away. Then the shoes reappear for a moment.

Warm, warm, warm, hot. As hot as it will go. Burning.

§

Recess is over by the time Fernley gets to school. He's only just sat down for History when the loudspeaker emits a high-pitched buzz. Ms Westerman rolls her eyes, folds her arms and rests

against the side of her desk, waiting for the announcement.

“Fernley Drost, please come to the Vice Principal’s office. Fernley Drost.”

Ms Westerman stares at Fernley. “Well there’s no point starting,” she says, “until Mr Drost responds to that *special* request.”

In the courtyard outside, a kid with white-blond hair, wearing a green-and-yellow tracksuit, sits on a low wall beside a garden of dead plants. He’s blowing a purple bubble of gum and picking at the sole of his shoe. Peeling off pieces of plastic, like skin, then dropping them onto the cement.

“Hey!” Fernley calls out. The kid looks up. Sucks the bubble back into his mouth. He’s small. Smaller than most of the other boys in year seven. He’s wearing glasses. Squinting in the sun. The boy waves, then goes back to picking at his shoe.

People can just disappear. Disappear into thin air. Can they?

§

The Vice Principal carries a hip flask filled with whiskey in the front pocket of his ill-fitting jacket. And he has a stash of pornography in his desk. So they say. A radio at low volume mumbles in the background and Mr Halse has his pen poised over a pad of paper. His hand shakes slightly.

“Drost,” he barks suddenly.

“Yes Mr Halse.”

“Do you want to explain to me why you were late this morning?”

“I missed the bus.”

Halse leans forward and peers down at Fernley. “Did you miss the bus? Or did you fail to get on the bus *deliberately*?”

I disappeared, Fernley thinks. I disappeared into thin air. Like steam. Like a ghost. “I was in the shower. I couldn’t hear anything.”

Halse leans back and his chair squeaks. “Mr Jardine said he knocked on the door but you didn’t come out.”

“I was in the shower.”

The Vice Principal leans forward, clasps his hands together and nods. “What’s happening at home son?”

“Not much. Everything’s fine.”

Mr Halse nods again. “Your father?”

“Fine.”

“Your sister? How old is she now?”

“Fine. She’s eight. No. Nine. I can’t remember.”

Halse puts his hand to his mouth and clears his throat. “And your Mother?” The word breaks as it comes out of his mouth. Fernley shrugs. The Vice Principal stares.

Lunchtime detention for a week. *Because I know things haven’t been easy.*

§

On Saturday morning, Fernley skips swimming practice. “What kind of sick?” his father asks from the doorway of the rumpus room.

“*Sick* sick,” he replies from the beanbag, plunging his hand into a box of Froot Loops, making a funnel and pouring the cereal into his mouth. Tamara reaches over and grabs the box for herself.

“Fernley,” his father says, burying his hands deep in the pockets of his cardigan. “Don’t teach your sister bad habits.”

“I’m not *teaching* her anything. I’m just sitting here.”

“Okay, okay. There’s no need to shout.” His father leans forward on his toes, then rocks back and forward a few times. “This is all getting to you. isn’t it, son?”

“No.” The word jumps out of Fernley’s throat, harsher than he intended.

“Poor little Fernley,” Tamara giggles, patting her brother’s head.

“I’m *sick*! I feel *sick*,” Fernley says, swiping at his sister’s hand. “Nothing is getting to me. Now can you all just shut up?” He reaches for the remote. Turns up the volume. Drowns out the sound of everything.

§

“Turn it down!” Fernley’s father shouts as he walks past the rumpus room later that morning. “There’s someone at the door.”

When they hear their mother, Tamara puts her hands over her ears, squeezes her eyes shut and starts to chant in monotone: *la-la-lalala-la-la.*

“You’ve ruined those children.” Their mother’s voice reminds him a cat preparing to fight.

“Well that’s your opinion, Verity, and you’re entitled to it. But you know you’re not meant to come here without letting me know.”

“That boy,” Fernley’s mother says.

“The boy is fine.”

“He’s a shell of what he used to be. His spirit is gone.”

It happens like this: Fernley feels as if he’s travelling through a tunnel backwards, fast. Travelling, but somehow in the same place. He puts his feet flat on the floor and clenches his fists. Hands sweating. He’s here. Right here. Still here.

“Perhaps you’d like to go and cool off for a few hours, Vee. When you come back, we can talk about this calmly.”

“You’ve ruined those children!” she screams.

“Well, I’ll say goodbye now.” The click of the door as Fernley’s father shuts it gently, and the sensation stops. Fernley is stationary again.

“Alright in here?” their father stands at the entrance to the rumpus room, running his fingers through his wild crop of grey hair. Tamara is still singing. *La-la-lalala-la-la—la-lalala*. Fernley turns around and taps her thigh. She opens her eyes. “Come on Tamara,” their father beckons her to the door, “you can help me in the studio.”

A few minutes later, a rapid movement at the window catches Fernley’s eye. When he turns to look, it’s his mother at the window, waving her arms. As he watches, she pulls herself closer to the gap between the window and the pane and lets out a long drawn out hiss.

Fernley stands up and walks to the window. Pulls the blinds closed. Sits back down. Takes a deep breath. Then tries to lose himself again in the mind-numbing travails of Wile E. Coyote.

§

Lunchtime detention in the library. Fernley types *missing boys* into Google. He clicks on *Help Us Find Mark*. Mark Grasch. Eleven years old. Went missing in 1993 from Escondido, California. Set off to the bus stop one morning and never came back.

Four years after he disappeared, Mark’s parents received a package containing a series of photographs. Some of the photographs are on the website. A blind-folded boy, standing in the centre of a bare room in a pair of white underpants. There’s a sign around his neck, but the focus of the camera is not sharp enough to reveal the words.

Fernley looks out the window and sees the white-blond kid he saw last week in the courtyard—same green-and-yellow tracksuit—alone again, digging around in the dirt. He’s crouched down, stabbing at the garden bed with a stick. His chin is resting on his knees. He rubs his nose every few seconds, then wipes it on his pants.

Any kid can be taken. Plucked off the street. And once you’ve disappeared, can you ever come back? Or do you leave something of yourself out there, lost, wandering?

§

Tuesday afternoon. A session with the school counsellor, Mrs Kong. She has white powdery skin, like a marshmallow. “So,” Mrs Kong stands up, straightens her skirt, and sits back down again. “Do you want to talk about what that was like for you Fernley?”

“What what was like?”

“When your Mum first got sick? How you felt?”

Fernley shrugs. He’s watching a kid play basketball outside. “Dunno,” he says. The counsellor nods. Taps her pen. Nods again.

“Have you ever known anyone whose gone missing?” Fernley asks.

“Missing?” Mrs Kong says. “Now why would you ask that?”

“People go missing all the time. One person in Australia goes missing every 7.3 hours.”

“Did you just make that up?” Mrs Kong smiles and exposes a mouthful of crowded, yellowish teeth. “That seems like an awful lot of people.”

“I didn’t make it up” he says.

“Okay.”

“Well. I did. But it happens all the time.”

She sits back in her chair, crosses her legs. “Fernley, is there something in particular that you’re worried about? Something you want to say?” Basketball Kid shoots at the hoop and the ball comes bouncing back to him. He stands on his toes and throws again. “Hm? Fernley? Are you afraid of something? Or someone?”

It would only take a moment for someone to overpower Basketball Kid. Grab him from behind, drag him to their car, stuff him into the boot, activate the central locking system. All before anyone even noticed he was gone.

“There’s this boy.”

“What boy?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Fernley, I can’t help you unless you ... ”

“And he went missing and sometimes I think ... ”

“What? That you’re going to run away? Fernley, that’s not a good solution to ... ”

“No. He went *missing*. Someone *took* him. And he never came back.”

“And you’re worried,” Mrs Kong points the tip of her pen at him. “You’re worried you’ll be taken like him. Fernley, listen to me.” She sits forward in the chair and leans in towards him. “Abductions are very uncommon in Australia. Especially abductions of children.”

“I’m not a child. I’m fourteen years old.”

She smiles. “No,” she says. “No you’re not a child. But, teenagers, children; very, *very* uncommon for either to be abducted. Besides,” she sits back in the chair again and winks. “A big, strapping boy like you—a champion swimmer! You could fight them off easily? Hm? Fernley?”

He has an urge to grab onto one of Mrs Kong’s fat crooked teeth and rip it right out of her head. He looks down at Basketball Kid. Bouncing and shooting, bouncing and shooting. Right then, something breaks. Without a sound, unceremoniously—like a glass that cracks in your hand while you’re holding it.

§

After school, Fernley waits by the gates. Leaning against the wall, his hand resting on the seat of his bike. The kids in year seven exit in flocks. Huge big squealing groups of them. They jump around like puppies—tugging at one another, falling over, bouncing back up again.

“Hey,” he steps forward, grabs a kid’s arm and pulls him from the group. The kid barely notices, still laughing, looks up at Fernley with a spoilt twerpy smile on his face.

“What?” the kid laughs. Small brown freckles cover his nose and cheeks. Sandy brown hair—a long, silky fringe.

“Who’s the kid in the green-and-yellow tracksuit? Blonde hair. Bubble gum. Who is he?”

“Why? Is he your boyfriend?” Fernley twists the boy’s arm. “Ow!” the kid scowls and pulls away. “What’d you do that for?”

“Just tell me, shithead,” Fernley leans down and pulls the boy’s face close to his. “Who is he?”

“Okay, okay. You mean the one with buck teeth? Looks a bit like this?” The kid puts his front teeth over his bottom lip, screws up his face, holds his forearms up and lets his hands hang limply from his wrists.

“Yeah,” Fernley says, “that one.”

“That’s Rabbit,” the kid says.

“Rabbit?”

The kid shrugs, flicks his hair and readjusts his fringe. “Rabbit. That’s his name.” He clutches the straps of his backpack and bolts off towards the gate.

As he’s cycling home, Fernley stops at Ken’s Corner Shop. “Bubble gum?” Ken says when Fernley places five packets on the counter. “Chew on it and stick it under the school desk. Isn’t that what you boys do?”

“Something like that,” Fernley says, looking down at Ken’s open hand; the grooves of his fat palms ingrained with dirt.

§

“Someone called,” Fernley’s father says when he walks into the kitchen that night. “Someone from school. Wants you to go to some party on Friday night?”

“I had a weird dream last night,” Fernley says, dumping his bag by the fridge. His father turns around, the butt of a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his lips, grater in his hand.

“Was it about a girl?” His father hands him a bowl of pasta and a bowl of grated cheese. “Or a boy?” His father punches him, playfully, on the shoulder. Smiles.

Fernley sits at the table in the corner of the room. Fills his mouth with pasta. Spoon after spoon after spoon. So full he cannot speak.

§

Fernley waits by the back entrance to the school, next to the hockey field. He has the packets of gum in his pocket. A few minutes after the bell rings, Rabbit comes out of the school hall, pulling up his backpack, tripping over his own feet, standing aside for the other kids streaming past.

As the kids start flooding across the hockey field, Fernley keeps his eyes firmly fixed on Rabbit, tracking the green-and-yellow tracksuit, the distinctive awkward gait.

“Fernley,” someone slaps his back as they walk past. “Coming to the party on Friday?”

“Maybe,” Fernley says. As Rabbit gets closer, Fernley gets butterflies.

“Fernley,” some other kid tries to shake his hand. “See you at training tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Fernley says, looking over the kid’s shoulder, not wanting to lose sight of Rabbit.

As he gets closer, Rabbit has the same look on his face. Squinting into the sun. Glasses too loose—he’s holding his head up to keep them from falling off.

“Hey,” Fernley says, reaching out for the kid’s arm. “Rabbit.” The boy looks up at him, a white crust in the corner of his mouth, a strand of spit stretched between his lips. “Hey,” Fernley says again, then he doesn’t know what to say, like a first date, like asking someone to dance. “I bought you something.” He pulls the packets of bubble gum out of his pocket, opens the kid’s closed fist and puts the packets of gum in his hand. Rabbit looks down at his hand. Holds the gum up, close to his face.

“I like Original flavour,” the kid says, snorts back a hunk of mucus and wipes his nose with his sleeve. “But Grape’s better.”

They are standing in the middle of a crowd of rowdy kids, but Fernley feels as if he is underwater. Sounds are muffled, and everything slows down. He reaches out to touch Rabbit’s hair but someone pushes the kid from behind and he’s pushed forward in the throng.

“Hey,” Fernley calls out after him, but he doesn’t know what else to say. He walks home along the lagoon. The surface is shiny, like oil. A lone cormorant stands on a branch, shivering, eyes closed.

Any kid can be taken. Taken away from his family. Taken away from himself.

§

Fernley and Tamara are sitting in their mother’s psychiatrist’s office. Their mother sits in the corner of the room, legs tucked up against her chest.

“So,” Dr Gingold says. “Verity? Would you like to share what’s been happening for you? Your children have come here to speak with you. That’s nice isn’t it?”

“Those are not my children,” she says.

“Verity. These are your children. Fernley and Tamara.”

“He ruined those children.”

“Verity. Would you like to share what you’re thinking?”

La-la-lala-lala-la—la-la, Tamara whispers underneath her breath, hands over her ears again.

“Him,” Fernley’s mother growls, pointing at Fernley.

“Verity. This is your son. Fernley,” the doctor says, her open hand pointing towards him, as if he is an exhibit.

“He has no soul.”

Dr Gingold’s brow is slightly furrowed. She nods slowly, sits forward and brings her index finger and thumb together, points to no one in particular. “Verity. This is your son,” the doctor says, facing their mother. “Fernley.”

Fernley is travelling backwards again. Backwards, speed of light, through a tunnel. Closes his eyes. Clenches his fists. Here. Here. Still here. “Fernley?” Dr Gingold says. “Fernley. Can you open your eyes for me please?”

Like steam, like a ghost, like a cloud. Disappearing. Dissipating. Gone.

§

Fernley is hunched over in the shower cubicle, arms wrapped around his knees. “Fernley?” White shoes appear beneath the cubicle door. “Fernley? You’re late for training. Are you going to come out? Fernley?” Jardine sighs. “You know, we’re all getting a bit sick of this behaviour. I’m going to have to reconsider your place on the squad. I understand that it’s been difficult but ...”

Fernley turns the shower on. No coins. No heat. The sound of the water hitting the tiles drowns out the sound of Mr Jardine’s voice. He sits beneath the water and hopes the cold will shake something off. Put it right again.

§

Fernley waits behind the school, in the doorway of an abandoned factory. The bell rings and kids start walking past, on their way to the road. He scans the crowd—looking for the green-and-yellow tracksuit.

When the crowd thins out, he feels something sinking in his chest; like an anchor slowly dropping. He needs to set himself some concrete goal or task to deal with the feeling, to stop himself from crying. I’ll sit here all night, he thinks. I’ll sit and wait, won’t move, until Rabbit comes. Then he sees the green tracksuit. Rabbit trips forward, rather than walks, as if his body is off balance and he needs to constantly readjust.

Fernley runs out onto the grass. “Hey, hey, stop,” Fernley says, next to the boy now, hand on his shoulder. Rabbit looks up at Fernley. His eyes are washed-out-blue—like an iceberg. “I want to show you something,” Fernley says. “Come on,” he starts walking back up to the school. Rabbit wipes his nose with his sleeve.

“What?” the boy calls out. But when Fernley looks back, the boy is following.

The school is almost deserted as they walk back through it. Mr Jardine is carrying a net filled with soccer balls. As Fernley walks past his car, Jardine turns around and crosses his arms. “See you at training tomorrow, Fernley?”

“Sure,” Fernley says.

Mr Jardine looks at Rabbit quizzically, then back at Fernley. “Who’s your friend?” Mr Jardine says but Fernley doesn’t look back.

At the top of the hill, Fernley turns around. Rabbit is almost bent in half trying to carry his heavy pack. “Come on,” Fernley says. “I’ll carry it for you.”

“No. I can do it,” the boy says. “Where are we going?”

“My house,” Fernley says. “Just at the bottom of this hill.”

When they get inside, Fernley locks the door. Rabbit wanders into the kitchen. “You can put your bag down,” Fernley says. Rabbit shrugs and drops the bag, pushes his glasses up towards the bridge of his nose. “Milk?” Fernley says, opening the fridge.

“I’m allergic,” the boy says. Fernley shrugs, then lifts the carton up to his mouth. His throat closes up, as if he’s forgotten how to swallow. He puts the carton back down on the counter, his hand shaking.

“Are you okay?” the boy says.

“It’s upstairs. Come on.” In the spare room, Fernley leads Rabbit to the built-in wardrobe; the rack strains underneath the weight of Fernley’s mother’s excess, never-worn clothes.

“In here,” he says. When the boy gets close to the edge, Fernley shoves him from behind; it’s like pushing against a sheet of cardboard—the boy is so light, so thin. He quickly slides the door closed, and places a long wooden pole in the runner, so it cannot be opened. The screeching sound of coathangers being pushed up and down the metal rack, as the boy moves around inside the dark space. “Hey,” Rabbit says, pulling at the door handle.

“Shut up,” Fernley says.

“Hey! Let me out!”

“I said, Shut. The Fuck. Up.” Blood gathers in some dark place.

§

Later, in the rumpus room, Fernley is staring at *The Flintstones*. The front door opens and his father appears at the entrance to the rumpus room, bags of groceries in his hands. He drops the bags in the hallway, comes into the room and stands behind Fernley. “Aren’t you a bit old for

this?" his father says.

"A bit old for what?"

"Cartoons."

"They're educational."

"Ha!" his father puts his hands on Fernley's shoulders. "I don't know about that." He taps his fingers on Fernley's shoulders. "Fernley? Son? I'm worried," he says. "I'm worried we may be losing you." Fernley leans back and looks up at his father's messy face.

"Losing me?"

"Well you seemed so distracted. Distant, you know?"

Fernley looks back at the TV. You have lost me, he thinks.

"What's that noise?" his father says. "Can you hear something?"

You have lost me, Fernley thinks. But something else is growing, and gradually falling into place.

Myfanwy McDonald is a Melbourne-based writer of fiction. Her stories have been published in The Big Issue, Going Down Swinging and the Boston-based zine, Infinite Scroll. Her short story "Numb" was shortlisted for The 2017 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She lives at myfanwy-mcdonald.squarespace.com.

Tēnā Koutou, Tēnā Koutou, Tēnā Koutou Katoa

(Greetings, Greetings, Greetings to You All)

by *James A.H. White*

out of paper mulberry *kiekie & toetoe*
I can show you in *harakeke* tall flax leaves
sharper greens my undressing with *pounamu*
God stone of what I used to beat until soft
behind the *wharenuī* paua shell eyes glossed
in close sing what I miss most of Aotearoa
land of the long white cloud plaiting piled & weaved
pampas or *pohutukawa* red stamen I string
like my skin from light to dark on cliff's edge
above another whale breach stragglers still arriving
crossing thresholds between my hands reeds too rough
to bend into anything more right off the bush

James A.H. White is the author of hiku [pull], a chapbook (Porkbelly Press, 2016). Winner of an AWP Intro Journals Project award for poetry and four-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has been published by Colorado Review, Black Warrior Review, Passages North, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, and DIAGRAM, among other journals. Born in England to British and Japanese parents, and a former resident of New Zealand, James is a first-generation American currently living with his partner in South Florida. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Florida Atlantic University, where he was a Lawrence A. Sanders poet fellow and currently teaches. You may follow him on Twitter [@jamesahwhite](https://twitter.com/jamesahwhite).

The Nesting Pair

by *Ramon Glazov*

Launce Trover didn't own the laptop repair shop in Ye London Court arcade, but he was around much oftener than the owner—six mornings and two afternoons a week. The job was a good fit for him. He replaced dead batteries and cracked screens, patched up chipped Toshibas with epoxy putty, sprayed dusty circuitry with compressed air, took keyboards apart and bathed the keys in soapy water. The dolcetto aroma of rubbing alcohol fortified him daily as he wiped crud from plastic casing.

A 1930s generation of Walter Scott readers had built Ye London Court to look like an open-air Tudor laneway. It had the mood of an old studio set, from that golden age before grime and mud were prerequisites for historical drama. Two rows of shops faced each other on an incline between a pair of portcullised arches, their signage in Gothic letters, their canvas awnings held up by miniature polearms. The Australia Post branch bore its logo on a red escutcheon. Mechanical jousting knights would emerge from the clock at the northern gate as it chimed. If business was slack, Launce would stare at the tourists drifting around outside, buying opals, pearls, ugg boots and other oleh-olehs. Still, business never slackened for too long. Customers who could do nothing themselves would ask Launce to inoculate their devices with Kaspersky or Malwarebytes, or diagnose arcane glitches. He was trusted, at times half-reluctantly, like a personal physician.

Launce, in fact, wasn't hard to trust. His eyes were beady, perhaps a bit swift, but his face was flat, modest and free of beard growth even in the twilight of his twenties. The fringe above his tall forehead ran level and straight: pageboy hair for a dutiful pageboy face. Much as he hardly blinked, he didn't ever seem to sweat. He could wear polyester office shirts throughout the Perthian summer with no discomfort. There was a waxy sheen to his skin, as if a fine layer of Lady Speed Stick had been rolled onto him from head to toe, leaving every pore hermetically sealed. Addressing customers, he sounded artless, yet impossible to shock—like a plumber who'd seen and smelt everything too many times to care.

He got more than his customers ever guessed from these exchanges. In his personal drawer at the back of the shop, he stowed a large notebook—a luxury brand, with calf binding and archival-grade paper. For an active writer, it might've been too dainty, but it was just dainty enough for Launce, who used it as an album for collecting passwords. Over four years, he'd filled it with more than sixteen hundred unique entries. His secret joy was to flip through it and see where his finger landed—on *S4psword*, or *Swapr0ds*, or *CarnE4gles*, or *D0ckers5uck*, or *INedaHer0*, or *FathersRights101*, or *YYYDeLiIah*.

Where had he found such a hobby? Launce believed he may have invented it. Certain friends of his got a buzz from spotting cars with personalised plates and chasing them for photos. So far, though, he hadn't met any other 'password spotters'. Nor did he seek to meet any. Given its

connection to his work, the hobby wasn't something he advertised.

Let the world scare itself numb with legends of hackers, of spy agencies, of fiends who knew how to read people's email through vulnerabilities in their hair dryers. Launce was a slicker species of intruder: the front-door tradesman. Everything his clients feared a hacker could reach by dire technical wizardry, he could reach too, and with no further skill than it took a house-sitter to rummage through a drawer. He wasn't handling secrets that could tip the fate of nations, but he liked his short radius of omnipotence. Pride kept him from overstretching its benefits. If a laptop in his care had a stash of comics, or music, or porn, or TV shows, he copied what pleased him. By now he'd lost the habit of torrenting for himself.

On a Friday morning in late summer, Launce was waiting for his shift to end as he served his fourth customer. This man looked close to retirement age. He wore a leather stockman's hat—the gift-shop version with plastic crocodile teeth. From compulsive twirling, the right whisker of his moustache had become a dreadlock while the left one remained unmatted. A mishmash of protest badges was pinned to his Driza-Bone vest. The laptop he'd brought in had a damaged backlight. Its screen flickered uncontrollably, flyspecks covered the keyboard, the air vent was clogged by an auburn muck—perhaps ear wax, plausibly Tiger Balm. Holding the unit and tilting it, Launce heard something jangle inside, but couldn't tell if it was a loose part or a foreign object. The customer did not want any of these issues fixed: “Don't try to sell me unnecessary upgrades!” He warned Launce that he was nobody's fool and gave a confident list of his precautions. (He never used public wi-fi, never clicked on email promotions, had never owned a smartphone.) All he asked of Launce was to install Kaspersky on his laptop. He trusted a Russian brand. “And *do not* wipe the flyspecks away from the camera lens,” he said. “Keep those where they are!”

When the time came to volunteer his password, however, the man offered no resistance. It was his handwriting now that had become insufferable.

“Is that an ‘r’ or an ‘h’?” asked Launce.

“That's an ‘n’! Read it properly: ‘anI4anI’. *An eye for an eye.*”

“Just as long as it isn't ‘password’ for a password!”

The customer chose to pay upfront. Launce swiped his card through the EFTPOS machine, then pretended to stare at the wall calendar while the man keyed his PIN. This was another of his sports. Catching PIN numbers in the corner of his eye served him no practical use (he didn't bother to write them down) yet he felt irritable whenever he couldn't spy all four digits.

Launce followed the man's finger. It pressed *Savings*, then *1*, then *1* again, then *2*—

The phone whistled in his shirt pocket, spoiling his concentration. Someone had texted him. Trying not to look annoyed, he handed the customer his receipt and saw him off with a chirpy “Take care!”

Finally alone, he opened the text. The sender was his mother:

Could you come over this afternoon? I'd like to have a word, concerning Paloma.

His eyes flew over the message again and again, as if it were a trick question that demanded lateral thinking. But no second meaning revealed itself; it said what it said.

... concerning Paloma.

Concerning indeed! For the past eight years, Launce and his mother had followed a rule: *what concerned his older sister was not to concern him*. No asking about her and no telling. Launce supposed his mother had a parallel rule not to air his name in Paloma's company. That would assume they still spoke to one another. But he couldn't guess whether his mother and sister were on good terms. He knew well that he had no right to such information.

There had been no handshake moment when Launce and his mother brokered this truce. Without earning mention, it somehow became the sensible thing to do. What sort of life had Paloma settled into, if she'd settled into anything? Was Perth still her home, or had she made her name as a Melburnian, or raced off to an even worldlier city? Was she ten minutes away, or eighteen hours by plane?

Launce wondered if his mother's phone had been stolen or hacked, but ruled it out. The tone was too intimate for a phone-thief. Possibly, it was a message she'd meant to send to another person. It did read *concerning Paloma*, after all, and not *concerning your sister*. If he waited, a follow-up text might come, apologising for the mix-up.

A young woman stepped in to pick up a Lenovo she'd left for service. Launce printed out an invoice and swiped her card. This time, he didn't peek as she entered her PIN but stared straight at the midday glare outside.

It was 12.18 now. Twenty-five minutes since the message. No more texts had followed.

Maybe the news was good. Maybe time and distance had mended everything. Maybe Paloma was nostalgic to see him. But *I'd like to have a word ...* ? How often was that a prelude to anything cheerful? Launce had no clue why his mother needed to speak in person. Happy news—or even bland news—could be given over the phone. If only the SMS had arrived with one extra sentence: *don't worry, you're not in trouble*. Though what could he be in trouble for? He'd done nothing wrong recently, and definitely nothing that concerned Paloma.

Launce checked the time on his phone. Fifteen minutes to lunch, then his teammate Bethany would be running the shop. He typed his mother a quick reply: *righty-o, coming soon*.

Once he'd already locked up, it struck him that he'd forgotten to record *anI4anI* in his password album. A bad omen. He groaned, but his current priorities gave him no pause to fix the slip-up.

Twisting past the lazy foot traffic of London Court, he scurried out through the Hay Street gate towards his accustomed car park. Behind him, the jousting knights were beginning to stir, trotting out like hand puppets from their balcony above the old clock, whose enamelled motto read:

NO MINUTE GONE COMES EVER BACK AGAIN,
TAKE HEED AND SEE YE NOTHING DO IN VAIN.

§

Launce's mother, Professor Gwen Trover, lived in Nedlands, close to the UWA campus where she lectured in law. Tort cases and theories of restorative justice formed her main interests. Raised by English Quakers, she'd journeyed away from her ancestral faith with no ill feeling or commotion. That is, she had dispensed with the last few religiosities that her forebears' minimalism hadn't touched.

The house of Launce's teens was in its old spot, its front yard full of dry, untrimmed grass. Professor Trover frowned on lawns; they were 'thoughtless', and the same went for reticulation. All her delight was in watering cans and manual hosing. Thirty or forty nursery plants stood around the yard, still potted, months after purchase, in their original plastic containers. She'd grouped them into rows and circles which promised permanent positions, but countless semester dates had kept their day of planting in suspense. Boronias, grevilleas, verticordias, kangaroo paws, bottlebrushes, woolly bushes ... everything was native to the last leaf. There had been an exception once, a prickly pear cactus inherited from the previous owners which used to block the window of Launce's old bedroom. Now it was shrivelled and grey.

The living room was spare and earth-toned in its furnishings. Hardwood flooring, wicker chairs, papier-mâché lanterns, yellow-ochre curtains in a Helen Grey-Smith pattern. A print of Boyd's *The Expulsion* rested on the mantelpiece next to a Garuda mask from Bali. The fireplace below had more dust in it than ashes. Professor Trover's research interests took up a full shelf near the middle of the room. All the standard books on restorative justice were there, along with works on the legal codes of the Vikings, Maoris and Biblical Hebrews. These stood beside anthropological studies of clan disputes in Papua New Guinea and a photo of Papuan highlanders delivering pythons, hornbills and tree kangaroos to another tribe as 'compensation' for killing one of its kinsmen. Professor Trover had won a certain maverick status by arguing that the ancient phenomenon of blood money was not to be dismissed as backward or primitive. It offered, in her words, "a compassionate alternative to the punitive model of justice, allowing wronged parties and offenders to decide solutions at a community level, to consider their own needs, present and future, rather than submit to outside authorities interested only in punishing the past." She suggested that murderers and rapists could 'redress the damage' they had caused by painting fences or tending neighbourhood gardens. The best justice, to her, was 'local', 'informal' and 'spontaneous'.

When her son arrived, she opened the front door as if she'd been standing next to it for quite

some time, like a castle porter.

“Come in, Launce.”

She was in her baggy house clothes—a cinereous linen smock, hemp pants, Japanese sandals woven from straw—but there was nothing lenient about her features. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun and held fast by a jarrah hair stick.

Launce saw a loaf of New Norcia Nut Cake sliced and arranged on the coffee table, though his mother made no sign that he was welcome to it. They both stood, reading each other’s faces.

“Do you know what’s happened?” she asked.

“No ... ?”

After eight years, Launce found himself so unused to saying his sister’s name that he hoped his mother would be first to broach the topic.

Instead, she repeated the question, “Do you know what’s happened?”

A note of anger had entered her voice and she glowered at Launce with a painful smirk. How much judgement and fury she was reining in behind that smirk, Launce couldn’t say: he could only prepare for it to flow over him, like a gout of dragon-fire, blistering and yet (he predicted) free of swear words.

She maintained her glower, and Launce thought she was just waiting for a few more stutters on his side before she’d lash out.

“Is this about—” he paused. “Is this about the text you sent?”

The scolding he’d prepared for didn’t come.

His mother’s face changed again. Her eyes became worried, pathetic, disoriented, nearly stupid with fear.

“Do you—do you know what’s happened?” She sounded like an old woman who’d woken up with night terrors in a saturated bed, frantic to know where she was. She seemed to look at Launce for solace, as if she truly believed that he understood more than her—and cared little for blaming him as long as he gave her closure.

“Mum, what’s going on?”

“Mum, was it you who texted me earlier?”

“Mum?”

Again, the same question.

“Do you know what’s happened?”

This time, she almost purred it. The ‘Do you know?’ sounded too much like a ‘So you know!’ Her smirk had re-entered the scene, though no longer as a dam against rage. Rather, she gave a mischievous, complicit look, whose accusations came with a puzzling tinge of humour. This was a look Launce might’ve earned as an eleven-year-old if he’d left the toilet seat up or eaten strawberries she’d bought specially for a recipe. It promised clemency in reward for his truthfulness.

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENED?!”

“No! I’ve been at work all morning!”

This answer seemed to assure her, for now, that Launce’s ignorance was genuine. It wasn’t (he would discover) because his alibi was perfect, but because it was perfectly off-the-mark. He hadn’t known which timeslot to blurt out excuses for. And with her Quaker instincts, Professor Trover still trusted spontaneous speech over any other.

At last she sat down and, gesturing for Launce to help himself to the nut cake, she began her explanation.

“I haven’t seen Paloma since Tuesday morning.”

Though it had been three days, Professor Trover wasn’t quite ready to say ‘missing’. Paloma was an adult. In May, she would be turning twenty-nine. True, she’d relapsed to staying with her mother after ‘a few false starts’ in Melbourne and Asia, but she followed her own routine now. Even her absence on Tuesday night hadn’t felt too upsetting, and Professor Trover spent Wednesday at the beach in Cottesloe, assured that Paloma had her own house keys for whenever she got back.

Yet two more nights had passed. Her mind was gnawing through scenarios like a rodent unleashed on a jar of toothpicks.

“And so,” she said, in a voice both sheepish and sly, “I thought it was one possibility that she might be with you.”

Launce fell silent for a moment, chewing his nut cake. How many possibilities had she ruled out before thinking of *him*? Or had something tipped the scales so that he was now the lesser evil?

“Did Paloma say she wanted to get back in touch with me?”

His mother ignored the question. She stared at the floor.

“I don’t know what her plans were for the rest of the week. No updates on her Facebook, either.”

“Why don’t you call the police?” asked Launce.

Professor Trover stared her son in the eye. “I wanted to discuss it with you first. Isn’t it better to manage some issues as a family before falling to other recourses?”

Launce felt his mother’s suspicions hovering close to him again.

“Do you know much about her friends? Her workmates?” He decided not to ask whether Paloma had a boyfriend.

“Too many Internet friends,” said Professor Trover. “I’ve been telling her to have more real conversations.”

Workmates she could rule out, since Paloma was currently ‘between jobs’ and spent more time dreaming of her own business than looking for work. Some of her ideas were promising, her mother admitted, but she had more promising ideas than she knew what to do with. New beverages, new clothes, new accessories, new home decorations. “She doesn’t just get bitten by the creativity bug. With her, it’s like a swarm of sandflies.”

Launce wanted to cut the visit short. All he knew about Paloma’s situation was what he’d heard just now. He dusted the nut cake crumbs off his lap and stood up.

Then his mother dealt him another shock. “You should see her room.”

“No, that’s too much ... ”

His protests came to no use. Professor Trover was already facing the other way, leading him down the hall. He had no choice but to tag behind.

Paloma had always been an artisanal soul. Launce had memories of her as a teen, going to wood-turning classes at community centres. She seemed to be the only one at those gatherings who wasn’t a grey-haired retiree. At present, her bedroom held about a dozen projects in various stages of development. She’d carved other hair sticks like the one her mother was wearing, some out of jarrah, others from blazing vermilion she-oak wood. She’d made parasols, fans and lanterns. She’d snapped up offcuts from rug warehouses and transformed them into carpet bags. Sketches for logo designs lay in a pile on her desk; she’d been toying with one where the letters formed a carpet bag silhouette, but couldn’t decide on the final name. (Damper? Brambler? Strampler?) Using stencils and pastel spray paint, she’d made a doormat that read: WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?

Launce noticed a jar of aspartame on her nightstand, alongside other food additives and a cylinder of carbon dioxide.

“She’s been trying to create a new drink,” his mother said. “A sugarfree version of chinotto. She’s calling it ‘Chinotto Zero’.”

“Sounds messy.”

“Better than when she was etching signet rings and the house stank of acid.”

One project commanded attention above the rest. At first, Launce mistook the material for frosted glass. It was translucent and looked like a pale blue mist that had been frozen in time and cut into beads.

“What’s that stuff? Aerogel?” he asked.

“Thankfully not,” his mother replied. “Paloma tried aerogel, but it was too brittle. As soon as she touched it, it crumbled like shortbread. So she started phoning engineers and aerospace people at the uni and heard about something stronger called Airloy. She even found somebody in the engineering department with a piece they didn’t need and bought it from them with cash!”

“That was how long ago?”

“About a fortnight or so. She’s already finished a few necklaces and bracelets but I don’t know where they are.”

Professor Trover went briefly quiet and scanned the room. She tugged her son’s sleeve.

“Paloma left her laptop behind. And her Wacom tablet.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s a bit worrisome.”

“Perhaps.”

“Launce, you’re better with computers than I am ... ”

“It doesn’t look like it needs repairs.”

“You know I don’t mean that. I tried to get in yesterday, just to put my mind at ease, but the system has a password.”

So this was the test. She wanted to see how he reacted at the chance to breach his sister’s privacy, whether he was sincere about leaving her alone.

“I don’t like this. It would be unprofessional of me and unfair to Paloma. I feel I’d be betraying her trust.”

Having said that, Launce realised that any trust Paloma might’ve held in him had been withdrawn long ago.

“Please, Launce, I’d only like to stop worrying! It would take me two seconds to read her Facebook and her email—then I’ll know. After that, you can close her laptop. I won’t say a word to her, I promise.”

“What if she walked into the house right now and saw us here?”

“I’ll take full responsibility and tell her you’re not to blame.”

Launce paused to weigh over the request, then spoke.

“I think you might have some wrong assumptions about computer security. I service laptops; I’m not a locksmith. If a computer wants a password I haven’t got, I can’t just sit in front of it and crack it like a combination safe. That’s why I ask customers for theirs.” He continued in the most technical patois he could muster, listing half-true reasons for why the task could take days and strain even a determined hacker. Perhaps it would entail the total disassembly of the laptop. “What you’re telling me to do belongs in a movie.”

He left his sister’s room and marched straight for the front door.

“You should go to the police, don’t you reckon?” he asked his mother.

“Society might be better off if people learned to solve more issues without running to the police. Two wrongs don’t usually make a right.”

“Aren’t you worried about Paloma?”

Judging by her face, she was, though Launce couldn’t escape thinking that she was at least as worried for him.

“If nothing changes by Monday,” she said, “then I’ll see about it.”

She might have been setting him a deadline.

§

Launce was in no mood to drive all the way home. He took his second-hand Commodore VT for a shorter run to the UWA campus and parked it next to the Reid Library. What he needed was a good long walk by the river and the grounds of his brief alma mater. He still felt more stupefied than distressed. The proper distress would grip him, he expected, once he’d had time to think.

It was early February and semester hadn’t started yet. The campus, with its tropical gardens and sunny brick courtyards, lay in balmy near-desertion, like a Mediterranean town closed for the siesta hour. A broken trickle of patrons filed in and out of the Reid building. The Tropical Grove had been booked for a Chinese wedding and the bride and bridegroom were posing for photos on the lawn. The university peacocks dragged their tails over the warm brick path.

Those peacocks had intrigued Launce since he'd been an undergraduate. The university had no boundary walls, nothing to stop them from wandering off like chickens. They had a caretaker, presumably, but Launce had never seen that person. Most of the time, the mascot birds went about completely unguarded. And yet they never strayed beyond their old trusty territory. They'd been there even in his mother's student days—occupying the same area of campus and creating just enough offspring to replace themselves.

Launce headed for the Swan River. He would stroll along the bike path at its banks, perhaps up to the Old Swan Brewery, then turn around.

His phone was in his pocket. At any moment, his mother might ring to announce that Paloma was back, that nothing had happened and she'd overreacted. Things would be painlessly inert again. They weren't inert now: Launce sensed he'd have trouble keeping Paloma out of his thoughts, pointless as it was for *him* to worry about her. If Paloma was fine, she was fine. If not, he'd truthfully had nothing to do with it, and it was wise to stay uninvolved. He should have sighed with relief at his lack of obligations. Instead, he found himself disappointed.

It hadn't happened overnight, but he'd gotten used to life as a de facto only child. He might've wiped Paloma completely from his mental family tree if not for this reminder. There'd been times, naturally, when he'd wondered what to tell the hypothetical girlfriend who would ask him if he had any brothers or sisters—how he'd introduce her to a mother-in-law who was still on speaking terms with his phantom sibling. But any hypothetical girlfriend remained just that.

Why did his mother have to break her own policy of silence? It was no help to her, no help to him, no help to his sister. Paloma was already lost to him. He was already over the 'loss', content never to see or speak to her again. Now he'd been dragged back down, so he could think of nothing but her whereabouts. Did it make a difference to the situation if an extra person, a useless extra head, was fretting over her? Launce didn't think so, but perhaps his mother had a lingering superstition that two people's anxieties would be more audible to the universe than her hopes and fears alone.

He almost couldn't resist the idea that his mother had charged him to find Paloma. The very fact she'd mentioned Paloma in his presence made him feel as if he'd been readmitted into his sister's good graces. It sometimes took the right crisis to reconcile people. Could he hope for *more* than a return to normal?

In front of him, the Swan River bulged out like a Swiss lake. Launce spent a while gazing at the bluish-grey water full of yachts, without resolution.

He imagined his sister during her high school years, soon after their parents had separated. Her long, scrawny limbs ... Her sharp, sarcastic face, which always seemed to be suppressing a laugh ... Her hair the colour of cloudy apple juice ... Close to her ears she'd had tufts of finer and wisper hair—a peach fuzz which gave her the feminine version of sideburns. Her arms and

legs teemed with downy blonde filaments. Mosquitoes couldn't hover by without tripping her down-alarm. Even gnats, even microscopic air disturbances, would set her off. She was forever flinching and swatting herself.

That had been the last joyful time of Launce's life. He'd been in year nine and his sister's longings had been nearly as muddled as his. Like orphaned penguins lacking vital instruction, they'd had only the haziest parental metaphors to steer them through an age of discovery. Their mother had told them individually that sex was "as natural as eating or breathing", and expected the rest to reveal itself. She trusted the state of nature: it was acquired culture that warped people, television that deadened the shock of violence, pornography that eroded respect for the opposite sex. In her house, she kept outside thrills to a minimum. No TV set troubled the living room. Launce and Paloma had a single computer between them, which used a dial-up modem well into the second half of the noughties. The internet was rationed like the hot water tank. The bathroom, too, denied the usual paraphernalia of self-exploration. There was no unhooking the single-spray showerhead from the wall, and the bidet, in their Australian home, was an untouched ornament.

Whenever they couldn't visit friends' houses to watch TV or play video games, Launce and Paloma would amuse themselves with Scrabble and Othello. Paloma was fond of cryptic crosswords, though Launce never found the patience to master them. (Such starter clues as *Parrot could be a prey-seeker* made him quit in anguish.) Their mother's bookshelf was resolutely free of 'airport mindrot' and 'softcover junk'. For reading choices, Launce and Paloma had encyclopaedias, atlases, Reader's Digest hardbacks, Folio Society editions, a heap of trivia books, together with a few old titles Professor Trover remained quite attached to: *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Storm Boy*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Black Beauty*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* ...

Their mother bought them Wodehouse novels too, which to her surprise they enjoyed. Rereading the works herself, she was crossed by second thoughts. One afternoon, she sat down with Launce and voiced her concerns. She had the impression that every Wodehouse story featured a young man who would take one glimpse at a girl he'd never met before and decide straightaway that he 'needed' to be with her for eternity. This in itself was alarming. Worse, however, were the stratagems these 'chaps' employed to 'woo' their targets: spying on the girl, faking common interests, befriending her pre-teen sister for access, falsification, extortion, burglary. Launce listened as his mother spoke at length about influences and archetypes. It had sounded preposterous to him at fourteen, but frequently since then he'd wondered if Wodehouse *had* shaped him in some unconscious way, deformed his view of women and left him less-than-well-rounded as an individual. (Something had to have done it.)

Growing up in a home that kept the explicit out of reach, Launce had had to make do with the implicit. He would save his lunch money and buy issues of *Cosmo* from the newsagent. Each issue would last him for one or two sessions of personal use; then he would become too nervous to hold on to it and toss the magazine into some stranger's rubbish bin several blocks

away. But his lust also found a more reliable focus. It had stood in open sight on his bedroom shelf: *The Guinness Book of World Records*. One page had shown the woman with the world's smallest waist, dressed in a kind of burlesque outfit with a steel corset. Further along, there'd been a photo of Heidi Klum modelling the world's most expensive lingerie—a bra and panties encrusted in thousands of diamonds and sapphires. Two pages of hidden pleasure, but Launce made the most of them. Like the vision of an owl which could spot rodents in the scarcest light, his mind's eye had adapted to picture flesh where there was no glaring immodesty. Before his X-ray leer, opaque lingerie became diaphanous, sheerer garments turned invisible and mildness ignited into pornography.

Fearing detection, he trained himself to climax silently, without needing to close his eyes or tilt back his head. He would sit up in bed during the whole build-up, with the vigilance of a sniper, half-forgetting to breathe or blink. He would face the opposite wall, sometimes focusing on the window (screened off by the prickly pear outside), sometimes on a framed piece of ancestral embroidery, a Bible verse in blue thread: THE WOLF ALSO SHALL DWELL WITH THE LAMB, AND THE LEOPARD SHALL LIE DOWN WITH THE KID.

He'd been doing this one afternoon when he turned to the window and saw his sister's face. She'd bent aside one of the prickly pear's oval segments for a clear view into his room and now stood smirking at the ridiculous scene: her younger brother, with the *Guinness Book of World Records* resting in his lap, one hand tucked under the blanket, his features held in a thousand-yard stare like the soldiers in old war posters. When he noticed her, his knee sent the book flapping into the air and face-down on the carpet, its cover revealed.

Over the next fortnight, Paloma took every chance to ridicule him. At dinner, she asked to 'borrow' his *Guinness* book, "That is, if *you're* not using it." She would make crafty eye movements, sit next to him on the sofa and trace her finger down his spine, or lick her lips at him while running her foot against his calf under the table. She seemed to bask in his shame, though such an outcome didn't surprise him. But one night she entered his room after he'd turned the lights off. He felt her crawling into his bed. Her warm breath touched his ear. He kept silent, not wanting to wake their mother and secretly enjoying Paloma's mockery. Things progressed into a confusing flurry of movements. Launce realised that mockery was not the end of his sister's aims. When she left, the bed was soggy and Launce suspected he was no longer a virgin.

He felt less ashamed than he would have imagined. His direct fears were over others' reactions. Paloma nonetheless had all the same reasons to stay quiet, and so she did, acting no differently than usual and saying nothing whatsoever about the incident. Launce soon became afraid that he'd disappointed her with his inexperience and her interest in him had died. She was only two years older than him, but that was a daunting gap at high-school age, when every year group was a separate caste. He wouldn't have sat in the same part of the bus as her or eaten his lunch anywhere near her year group. Yet a month later, when he'd lost hope that the night would repeat itself, Paloma snuck into his room again.

A routine took shape: Paloma became like a doting older mistress, almost a teacher. In Launce's awkwardness she found something adorable, as if she relished the game of keeping him nervous, never knowing whether she would visit his room that night. She sometimes liked to thwart his hopes. One weekend, their mother left them to mind the house while she went to an academic conference. Paloma did nothing to take advantage of such autonomy and devoted herself to lathing a jarrah-burl vase. Launce feared that the intrigue was over. Then, the night after their mother's return, he heard a familiar twist of the doorknob.

As his sister swung between condescension and tenderness, he came to associate foreboding with lust. Anxiety can become a habit just for the sweeping relief that arrives when a fear is proven false. And Launce thrilled to expect the worst, though with a buried optimism that nothing would go as badly as expected.

The intrigue dropped off when Paloma flew east to live with her father in Melbourne and study a Bachelor of Arts. Three years later, she returned. Brother and sister found themselves under one roof again. Launce, by that stage, was nineteen and nearing the second year of his science degree. He hoped Paloma's homecoming meant the old arrangement would resume. But when he told Paloma that there'd been no other girlfriends since her, her reaction wasn't warm. She feigned stupidity at all his hints, and her mood darkened when the reminders persisted. Her teenage antics embarrassed her now. Launce sensed that *he* embarrassed her now. She wanted to date rancid-smelling, bearded musicians, not her smooth-featured little brother, whose lack of manly stink lured neither flies nor girls.

Jealousy overtook him. If he was a freak guilty of incest, then so was she. He announced it to as many relatives and shared friends as he could find, intent on dragging Paloma down to his own level of humiliation. *We deserve each other*, he thought, *and we'll be outcasts together*. His sister stopped speaking to him. For three months, he tried to contact her, unconvinced that all her affection for him was lost. He knew the worst pesterers often tried to enlist their target's family members as go-betweens, but felt such rules didn't apply if they were *his* family too. He only gave up when Paloma threatened to call the police.

So began the eight-year truce. Launce didn't continue his science degree and switched to a TAFE certificate in Computer Assembly and Repair. He never hassled Paloma further, knowing it was past his abilities to mend things with her. But for years, he still daydreamed about some event—some outside circumstance—which might bring her back to him. He would see himself stepping into an alley at the perfect moment to save her from a knife-wielding thug. Or he'd imagine Paloma dangling from some vague precipice which he also had a valid reason to be near. Or they'd be shipwrecked together on an island, far from society's judgement, forced to survive by cooperating. The best would come from the worst. Quicksand, crocodiles, snakebite, feral boars—at various points, he'd mused on nearly everything that might put her existence in his hands. Could she stay angry at someone who'd saved her from a feral boar? Of course, it would need to be truly unplanned. He could wish for it, but it couldn't be within his power to organise. That would spoil the miracle.

And now? Had his opportunity come? Was he going to waste it?

He paused by the Old Swan Brewery and stared upriver at Perth: its aluminium towers, under a washed-out aluminium sky, beside an estuary of aluminium waves. A black swan—that emblem of doomed monogamy—was paddling in the water close to him. Launce watched it coil its neck to preen under a wing. Swans could be mean, hissy, little devils, if Wodehouse was right.

Wodehouse ... that name put Launce onto a new line of thought. There was one option he hadn't tried before, a tiny advantage he'd almost forgotten. In eight years he'd never risked it. But now his mind was forming a plan, itemising the steps, weighing the hazards. His feet were brisk and decisive walking back to the car. Tomorrow he would know if life had given him another chance. He was ready to seize redemption by the throat.

§

Saturday dawned. Launce came to work and spent the morning in his typical way. He could have gotten the whole day off, but he had a reason to be in the shop.

In the same cubbyhole as his password album, he kept a spare laptop. It had entered his custody eleven months earlier, through what he accepted was a morally dappled process. Its original owner—a Mr Netherling, travelling on business from Victoria—had been noticeably touchy about divulging the password. In short order, Launce discovered why: its disk drive's unlit crannies held much viler stuff than the common run of Pornhub videos.

He ought to have notified the police. Instead, when Mr Netherling returned, Launce smiled and asked, "What laptop, buddy?" The machine was his to keep.

Today, he had a use for it. He plugged it into the wall to charge while he attended to the morning's repairs. He regretted that he couldn't act on his plan immediately. It would have to wait until lunchtime. Launce wasn't careless enough to use his workplace wi-fi for the task.

A part of him (prudence? laziness?) hoped the plan would fail at the first step. Then he would have the comfort that he'd tried his one idea, extinguished the urge (and option) to meddle, and that there was nothing extra he could do to aid (or worsen) the situation. The plan was a blind shot. He was far less updated than his mother about Paloma's recent doings. But he also knew something less recent, and perhaps more valuable: her Facebook password from eight years ago.

He'd caught it the last time they'd been living in the same house, before Paloma had gotten too wary. For several weeks, they'd had to share the same computer—their mother's, in the dining room—which meant constant logging in and out of their respective accounts.

Launce gleaned the password slowly, over many steps. First, he listened. Facing away and pretending to stare at the bookshelf, he heard fourteen taps of the keyboard (not counting the

fainter sound of shift-key depressions) and judged that there were fourteen characters. Then he allowed himself momentary peeks. The first character was a capital 'G'—easily spotted since Paloma had to press Shift typing it in. The eighth character was an underscore. He noticed that there were quite a few digits, and guessed that they stood-in for vowels. Rather than follow his sister's fingers across the board, he focused on the number bar and picked them up in order: 4-4-4-3-0-0. More peeks, more caution. The longest consecutive string he caught was *pw00*. Now, having used his ears and eyes, he wracked his brain—*pwoo! pwoo!*—for any phrase that made sense. Wodehouse delivered the ray of illumination. *Galahad Threepwood!* Or, more specifically: *G4l4h4d_3pw00d*. When it was his turn on the communal laptop, Launce tested his prediction by logging into Paloma's account instead of his own. Success! Content with himself, he logged out at once. Since then, he'd never used the password. It satisfied him just to have it as a fall-back; his fear of losing the edge had kept it forever in reserve. He hadn't written it into his album. The sublimest of secrets was only for his head.

At lunchtime, he packed Netherling's computer into a carry bag and locked up the shop. Then he hurried down William Street, past the Yagan Square construction site, until he was in Northbridge, surrounded by bars, clubs and eateries. Where there were bars, he knew, there was complimentary wi-fi and modems as promiscuous as toilet seats.

He was about to step into a laneway bar when he realised that he hadn't withdrawn any cash. His bank's ATM was a block away on James Street. He hurried there and took his place in the queue. The lady in front of him (wearing a travel agent's blazer despite the hot weather) was chatting through a hands-free device hooked to her mobile. The scene made Launce uneasy; it was too much like she was talking to herself. Only the sight of a wire dangling from an earbud assured him it wasn't schizophrenia. To relieve the wait, he shifted around and snuck glances at her PIN while trying not to give the impression that he was stepping out of queue.

He didn't dawdle walking back, though his feet did slow outside a sex shop whose armoury of vibrators stood on window display. Some could have passed for abstract sculptures, or those multi-storied blobs that architects were so smitten with nowadays. The others had bifurcated prongs, anemone-like extrusions, translucent jellyfish skin ... one glance at their inhuman shapes made Launce feel bitterly inadequate. Rage shot through his nerves, like the ashes of chickenpox combusting into the phoenix-pox of shingles.

He tried to shove the feeling aside. A quick rummage through his mind produced something to keep it at bay. Weeks before, Launce had read an article about a Perth man who kept two silicone dolls in his house, not merely for sex, but as make-believe companions. He bought them jewellery, shoes, entire wardrobes of gowns. He called the blonde one 'Lyudmila' and the Asian one 'Sumiati'. That detail repelled Launce most of all. If a man *had* to pretend that two mannequins were his life companions, he could've made them Aussie girls at least. In Launce's eyes, nothing was more pathetic than seeking a foreign wife. It was the mark of a derelict. Unfit to beguile their own countrywomen, such men hid behind walls of language and culture, trusting that a Russian or Thai might mistake their freakishness for foreignness. Perhaps Launce

was freakish and inadequate, but he wanted dignity in defeat. Accepting a consolation prize, to him, was worse than failure itself. He did not fancy living with a woman, however loyal, if her love was for *the mystery of him*. He wanted to be accepted by someone who saw no mystery, nothing exotic or new to gild his faults—a woman who could guess him so well that they might've grown up in the same household. (It didn't have to be his sister, not necessarily, but the range of prospects wasn't wide.)

His brooding came to a halt at a bar called Unity Mitford, in a lane behind William Street. The walls were old. The floorboards had taken on a tarry colour and, after sponging up endless spilt drinks, had a tarry stickiness to match. Launce found a quiet bench to sit on, ordered a middy of Strongbow with a plate of sliders and wedges, and started up the laptop.

He ignored *Unity_WiFi* when it appeared in the Networks menu. Instead he connected to the wi-fi from the adjacent bar, Ruinenwert, whose entrance was around the corner. The evening before, he'd asked the staff for its security key and pretended to type it into his phone. The signal from Unity was remarkably strong there, given that the two bars were separated by a load-bearing wall of solid brick. But then, so many things were hanging on that wall—grand mirrors, sunburst wall clocks, vintage posters, flea market paintings—that Launce suspected some curio or another might be concealing a hole. And since *Unity_WiFi* was reachable from Ruinenwert, he predicted the opposite would be just as true.

He'd predicted right. Sipping his cider, he opened the browser.

Facebook's front page sprang into view. This was the moment. Launce typed in Paloma's Gmail address (hoping that too hadn't changed), then *G4l4h4d_3pw00d*. He counted the black dots in the password bar to make sure there were fourteen of them. Touching the wood of the bar table, he clicked *Login* and waited for the page to refresh.

The password was valid. But since 'Paloma' had logged in from an unfamiliar computer, Facebook wanted 'her' to confirm some details before continuing. Launce had two choices: provide the maiden name of Paloma's mother, or identify seven of her friends by their profile photos. By rare fortune, he could've answered the maiden name question. Such rare fortune made the idea unwise. The odds of naming the seven friends called for another class of rare fortune Launce wasn't sure he had, but for anonymity's sake, he would have to try.

The first friend showed up—or, more accurately, their profile picture did. It was a photo of a red termite mound whose lumps, hollows and ridges looked rather like a melting face, close enough to bamboozle Facebook.

This appears to be: There were six names to fill the blank, though Launce doubted any of them matched their users' birth certificates. *Sir Phillet O'Fish-McNugget? Bulk Bogan? Snarls Darwin?* He clicked one at random.

On to Friend Two: now the picture was a pile of hair on a barbershop floor, from a day's

worth of customers, by the looks of it. Blonde locks, brown locks, black locks, platinum locks; ringlets of pink, purple and cyan; streaks of peroxide, gradient dye-jobs. Together, they seemed to form a furrowed brow, squinting eyelids, flared nostrils and a thin-lipped, scowling mouth. Launce couldn't tell if the hairdresser had deliberately arranged it or if the hair had fallen that way by accident. It was a face to Facebook all the same.

He clicked on a random name again.

The third friend's 'face' was a slime mould on a tree stump, its 'features' wrinkly and bald, with a conniving smile.

The fourth face looked furious, its mouth open in mid-yell; its shape had materialised in a spider's egg sack.

The fifth and most sullen face lolled from the tangles of a dried spaghetti nest.

A single mix-up mightn't have shocked Launce too much. At this point, though, it was feeling less like machine error and more the result of careful discrimination, as if something had gazed at and sifted through thousands of images before settling on this unlikely short list. Even the names it gave as options were all joke-names. It would've made a good AI test, Launce thought: *To prove you're not a bot, select all the monikers that contain an obvious pun.* Yet this had to be the work of a machine. By a string of coincidences, it had chosen names and images which gave the illusion of a discerning eye, but there was no firm taste behind it, just as a termite mound's accidental eyelids couldn't truly blink.

The sixth face broke the pattern. The photo showed a handsome, swarthy man with athletic features and a gleaming white smile. At last, an actual person! And for once Launce saw a name which didn't seem like an obvious pseudonym: *Gilles de Montmorency-Laval*. Hardly a standard Aussie name, and perhaps there was a pun Launce had missed, but it fell in range of the possible. So, why not? He clicked on it.

The final photo made him wince. It showed the torso of someone who had survived what appeared to be a shark attack. A row of gashes produced a grin and squinting gimlet eyes. As fast as he could, Launce clicked a name, not caring which.

Probability would have expected him to name one friend correctly. Naming all of them was as likely as winning seven spins of Russian roulette with a single empty chamber. Yet some infernal patron must have smiled on Launce's efforts, because Facebook was satisfied by his answers and conducted him to his sister's account without delay.

Welcome back, Paloma, the home page read.

Launce had the dizzy insight that he wasn't just rifling through Paloma's social diary, but wearing her face as well. He saw a familiar name on the chat sidebar, Gwen Trover. His mother wasn't online just then, though he'd only missed her by three minutes. He would have to search

fast and keep as much as he could undisturbed. Paloma had eleven unread messages from her mother. Launce avoided reading them so they wouldn't be marked *Seen* with a giveaway date stamp.

He went to Paloma's timeline. It hadn't been updated for five days. Now she was calling herself *Paloma Isabeau*, leaving off the surname. Another side-glance at the sidebar: his mother's hiatus had reached four minutes and counting. Launce decided there was likely nothing on Paloma's wall that his mother hadn't already found. Better to check the Messages folder.

Paloma's most recent conversation had been with Gilles de Montmorency-Laval.

Launce opened their chat. At *Tue 15:07*, Paloma had written: *sorry, had to stop for petrol*—a new text bubble—*i'll be there in twenty mins*—a final text bubble—*don't worry, earrings and bracelet are with me*. In smaller text below, *Seen Tue 15:14*.

Keeping the chat window open, Launce went to Gilles's profile:

Lives in Perth, Western Australia
From Champtocé-sur-Loire, France
Friends since November

If Paloma had only known Gilles for three months, they'd produced quite a mass of chat logs. Launce scrolled ever higher, through earlier and earlier chats, watching that neither Gilles nor his mother came online. What amazed him was that Gilles didn't seem at all like a deft conversationalist. He would spend long stretches of chat time giving no reply but *hmmm* to dozens of things Paloma said. Sometimes he would answer *ok*, and eventually *awesome, haha* and *sweet* entered his repertoire of stock responses. Longer sentences weren't beyond his powers, though the results were curiously stiff ...

how are you, Paloma? he'd asked, several weeks earlier.
not too great, haha
why are you not too great?
i feel as if things aren't taking off for me at the moment
what things aren't taking off for you at the moment?
like, stuff in general
well, I hope stuff in general takes off for you

That was his way: echoing, parroting, reverberating, ceaselessly gathering new scraps for his lexicon. Once, he asked Paloma for her favourite colour. When she typed back *lavender*, he boasted that he had *countless lavender rarities* in his home. Launce was puzzled. What sort of response was that?

Yet Paloma seemed charmed by his gracelessness. She found his blunders funny. Perhaps because he was a foreigner, less was expected of him. Paloma had even said, *you're from*

france? your english is very good! Launce felt his rage returning. What had Gilles done to earn all this pity, this coddling, this bonus attention? Nothing! But he was French—or so he'd presented himself—and this had gotten him a free pass. Launce's cider glass, which he'd so far barely drunk from, was trembling in his fist. His sliders and wedges were cold and uneaten. He pressed himself to keep reading.

Gilles had told Paloma that he too was a sculptor. He'd asked if he could buy some of her creations. He sounded especially interested in her Airloy jewellery: could she bring the items to his home so he could see them in person? The address was 1 Hallux Road, Bibilyerup—a suburb at the northern edge of Perth that Paloma hadn't heard of. (Launce had to Google it as well.) Gilles didn't seem troubled by Paloma's prices: \$550 for a pair of earrings and possibly \$700 for a bracelet once he'd inspected it up front. He agreed immediately to pay in cash.

that's rad! she wrote, *is this a present for a ladyfriend, or a relative?*

yes, yes

haha! tuesday afternoon good for you?

hmmm—a new text bubble—yes, yes, for me tuesday is rad, Gilles replied.

Launce realised he'd been neglecting the chat sidebar. His mother had come back online and, judging by the trio of dots wobbling at the corner of the page, she was typing Paloma a message.

In a panic, he signed out.

What would happen now? To his mother it must have looked as though Paloma had logged in again. Perhaps she would put off her plans to notify the police and decide to wait a bit longer—and right when Launce was sure something *was* awry. But how could he explain what he'd learned to her? Or to the police? “And—would you believe it?—I just happened to know her password!” He dreaded that everyone would be more curious about him than about Gilles.

Even barring such dread, Launce had no faith in police. He felt the world was full of incompetents. Behind his customer-service face, he nursed a choleric streak which flared up in times of uncertainty. He found something feeble about leaving a vital task to others, no matter how professional they were. Like many laypersons (everyone being lay in at least one field) he believed his intuition carried special advantages and that any interaction with police would conclude with him saying, “I told you so!” Belated vindication was no reward when his sister's safety was on the line.

He would drive to Bibilyerup himself. Already, he could see how his mission deserved to end. He saw a makeshift dungeon somewhere, a drab, windowless place. He saw his sister naked, chained by the wrists to a support beam. He saw the look on her face as he arrived, just after she'd lost all hope. He saw her blinking and gasping, then weeping, laughing and crying her joy aloud—utterly, helplessly steamrolled by gratitude.

Google Maps showed Gilles's house at a T-junction which ran for about two hundred metres either way before ending in two cul-de-sacs. This was a young suburb, officially within Greater Perth, but slightly past the forward line of urban expansion. Most street addresses were still long parcels of bushland, uncleared save for the firebreaks at their borders. A few blocks had gravel driveways and yellowish sand pads for future houses. A very small handful had finished homes.

Just two properties stood on the crossbar of the junction, both with fully-roofed houses. Gilles's block, № 1, was to the left, while its neighbour, № 27, stretched in the opposite direction, up to the edge of the Bibilyerup Pine Plantation. (It wasn't unusual in Bibilyerup for a street with two homes to have letterboxes in the double-digits. The council still treated each block as a zygote ripe for subdivision, and numbered addresses by how many extra driveways they might eventually hold.)

Launce drew a rough map of where to turn, then went to his car. Before setting off, he took his smartphone's battery out and rested it on the front passenger seat.

Above the Mitchell Freeway, the sun blazed like a welding torch cutting through a tempered-steel sky. Its white flames ran along side-mirrors and tinted windows, along the space-frame trusses and plate-glass of the early Joondalup line stations, along the silvery trains gliding up and down the median strip.

This was the quick, automatic part of the journey, a thirty-minute ride before the true stresses of navigation. Launce made a left at the exit ramp next to Whitfords Station and went eastward over the bridge. He passed a succession of meadows, suburbs and reedy swamps, the ruins of a colonial cottage in another meadow, a market garden with a dune of strawberries shielded by green plastic, more suburbs, more meadows.

The web of public transport was thinly spread here. Green-and-orange markers hinted at a bus route, but the three buses Launce saw were all out of service. Indeed, they might have been the same bus roving in circles: the ethereal Route 000. Clumps of new houses would enter his view, packed into mazes by high limestone walls. Only their dark metal roofs were fully visible from the road. The limestone girding them looked fresh, without the graphite tarnish of older walls nearer to the city.

Beyond these chalky strongholds, Launce entered a realm of grit and rust. Old factories and warehouses made from corrugated sheet metal ... Lunch bars selling deep-fried spring rolls and double-strength iced coffee ... Fennel bushes and castor oil plants growing in ditches ... Swampy pits full of rusted car bodies ... Then an enormous scrap metal yard with an old Cessna plane at the entrance ... A sawmill, a panelbeater's garage, a sandblasting business ... A fluorescent green sign for KING KONG SUSPENSION & CRANE HIRE ... To the end of the district, a yard held mound after mound of gravels, sands and pebbles: D'AVERNO & SONS—*Your sand*

and gravel experts for over 30 years!

Perth's native soil is crisp and beachy-looking, even close to wooded areas. No rainstorm can make it muddy. The water percolates straight down. When it's dry and loose, the greyish-white top layer can be as tiring to slog through as the sand of backshores and playgrounds. With sour feral watermelons it can strike a partnership, but it is no friend of the human foot.

Launce came to a busy sand mine just outside the light industrial district. A grey, scrub-topped dune had been carved in half to reach the layer of yellow sand at its core. It looked like the hard-boiled egg of some giant, long-extinct monstrosity. Its yolk-sand—the kind useful to builders—formed a towering, cresting cliff which still appeared moist in the summer heat. A whole escarpment of the same stuff children moulded with pails and buckets, taller than a two-storey house. And with no supports to hold it together, except for the roots of a few woolly bushes which poked out from the cliff-face like black cables ...

Three hefty piles of canary-coloured sand stood in front of the cliff. Their outlines reminded Launce of the Pyramids of Giza. If they stayed there long enough without being carted off, perhaps they would be covered in bushes like the parent-dune. It seemed a miracle, though, that they didn't blow away ... a miracle that the cliff didn't collapse either, like the Red Sea reuniting around the Pharaoh's armies ...

Slightly further ahead, a crescent of yellow sand had been laid to mark a future row of houses; a crust of copper-green adhesive held it in place. Launce spotted a red helicopter with water-bombing equipment crossing overhead. There was no smoke in the immediate area, but it was a Saturday, and an arsonist had doubtless been active somewhere.

When Launce saw the pine plantation at his left, he knew that he'd overshot the road to Gilles's neighbourhood. He punched himself on the forehead and made a rushed U-turn.

He was afraid to lose time, but now a second thought plagued him. What if Paloma wasn't in trouble? What if she'd chosen to cut ties with her mother, and willingly shackled up with Gilles? Launce couldn't remember her being especially manic, despite the ceaseless energy she seemed to have for her little projects. But high-energy people sometimes did spring into mania without notice. Paloma might've launched on a course of action which, drastic or not, remained within her rights. How would he look barging in on her? And if she asked how he'd found her?

Maybe he would just peep at Gilles's house from his car while pretending to be reversing. If he saw Paloma and the Frenchman laughing and drinking sangria on the verandah, he would speed back to the city, defeated but satisfied.

He was meant to turn into Melbourne Road. Where *was* Melbourne Road? He'd reached a newly-built industrial park which had nothing in common with the corrugated shambles he'd driven through earlier. The buildings were modernist boxes of concrete and bronze reflective glass, painted in upbeat colours like two-storey Rubik's Cubes. Garages, showrooms,

warehouses, offices—all closed on the weekend. The only other moving vehicle Launce could see was a Defensive Driving School car, steered by a teenage L-plater who was using the desolation to practice his turns and stops. Launce's eyes widened: there was no instructor in the passenger seat! "He's pinched those wheels," Launce muttered. Yet the boy wasn't driving like a thief; he was making slow, fussy laps around the same buildings and even checking his blind spots. A density of squiggly skid marks suggested nonetheless that the area was popular with hoons.

The park's developers had apparently been given free rein to devise a pageant of edifying street names. Excellence Parade ... Esteem Way ... Benchmark Crescent ... Enterprise Way ... Competition Way ... Initiative Drive ... Ambition Drive ... Drive Drive ... Everything, it occurred to Launce, but the Doubting Castle and the Slough of Despond.

He soon found what had befallen the Slough of Despond: it had been drained and covered in sand pads for another industrial park. A CAD illustration on a billboard portrayed the district-to-be. A grid of asphalt streets had already been laid. The concrete kerbs and streetlights were in position too. But where Launce's eye expected buildings, there were only squares of yellow sand, as if the office blocks and factories had vanished overnight into a neighbouring universe. The sand was blowing free from its troughs of kerbing, striking Launce's windshield and settling in zebra-streaks on the road.

The streets around these empty lots seemed too fresh to have gained a following of hoons—or else the new asphalt was too dark and glossy for skid marks to show. In the arterial traffic of Bibilyerup Road, however, Launce counted an uncommon number of cars with no license plates. The drivers were grubby-looking sorts who could have passed for workmen, but probably speculated in other lines of income. Car bodies lay discarded on the median strip, tucked into hedgerows of Geraldton waxes.

Around four o'clock, he finally spotted it—Melbourne Road!

The road was flanked by banksia heathland and older, mid-century homes, by large blocks containing orchards, chicken sheds and water towers. Cardboard signs listed prices for eggs and home-grown nectarines. Ponies and freshly-shorn alpacas stood at rest in the shady corners of paddocks. Launce had escaped the main circle of Perth's development. Market gardens greeted him left and right, some thriving, others with broken windows and fields of veldt grass as their primary crop. The growers had been trying a wide arsenal of bird deterrents: plastic owls, plastic hawks, lengths of tinsel, even a scarecrow whose overstuffed buttocks jutted out and gave it the posture of a gorilla.

Now Launce was just a few turns from Hallux Road. Market gardens gave way to bushland blocks the size of Hay Street Mall. Letterboxes, automatic gates and crumbly limestone driveways could be seen from the road, but an acre of banksia scrub was enough to screen off any homes behind them.

The bush here was a miserly foliage, adapted to suck every fleeting nutrient from the barren sandplain that supported it. It had little to feed on but itself. Twisted branches forked from the ashen, malnourished trunks of candlestick banksias, their leaves as jagged as pruning saws. Woolly bushes, blackboys and cycads grew in the half-shade below. Parasitic nuytsias—the local ‘Christmas trees’—were blooming like orange fireworks in the teal undergrowth.

Paladin Road, the longer street leading up to Hallux, might’ve been better named ‘Paladin Track’. All its surface was bumpy bauxite without asphalt. Launce’s car bobbed uphill and downhill and uphill again until it came to the T-junction. To his right, plantation pines loomed in an evergreen wall above the native bush, shading the gutted, forsaken bodies of sedans and hatchbacks. To his left, he could just see the end of Gilles’s driveway. Closer to him in the same direction, a big square piece of waxed canvas was lying on the road, weighed down by four limestone boulders at its corners.

As Launce drove onto it, the canvas gave way and the ground fell out from under him. With a nasty jolt, his Commodore landed snout-down. The steering wheel struck him in the chest. His airbag didn’t open, though the passenger airbag did.

The car was almost vertical now, leaning its roof against the wall of a trench deep enough to swallow its front two-thirds. Its back wheels poked up uselessly in mid-air.

Launce hadn’t broken any bones; he expected his chest would soon have a big dark bruise. He could still start the Commodore’s engine, but it was rear-wheel drive. Even shifting his weight, so that the car leant on its belly instead of its roof, didn’t help: the trench was too tight for the seesaw motion he hoped would get the back wheels grounded again.

Remembering the layout of the canvas and the boulders, he realised it had to have been a deliberate trap. The car could wait. His first duty was to get himself out of the trench so he wouldn’t be a sitting duck for whoever had caught him.

He fished his smartphone out from the crevice by the windshield, but couldn’t find where the battery had fallen. *Oh well.* After pocketing the car keys, he opened the driver-side door and stood on it, hoping this improvised springboard wouldn’t come off its hinges as he tried to climb out of the ditch. The door held for long enough. He made a pounce and got his arms over the ledge, then wriggled until his waist, knees, calves and feet were resting on solid bauxite.

He was alone. Perhaps the trap-setter had been expecting someone else at a later time and Launce had arrived too soon for the ambush. The situation was starting to alarm him, but any fear he felt was outdone by the giddy thought that he might get to be Paloma’s rescuer after all. He had to act on the premise that his sister was still alive, even if he couldn’t yet exclude the opposite. He didn’t believe Gilles would let Paloma walk free, though having read his share of true crime books, he also knew that some of these types were sadists who liked to prolong matters with torture and soliloquies. It suited his image of a Frenchman.

Could Gilles's neighbour be helpful? Launce strode up to the front gate of № 27. His hopes sank when he saw the letterbox crammed with unpaid bills and council notices. The firebreak hadn't been weeded in time for bushfire season and was bristling with veldt grass. That meant a fine on the spot, according to a leaflet from the City of Bibilyerup which had lain untouched since September. Launce would have to face Messire de Montmorency-Laval by himself.

He wondered how Gilles managed to get around with the trench blocking the road to his house. This didn't seem like a neighbourhood where anyone could function without a car. The sandy wayside next to the trench was just wide enough to let through a vehicle, but Launce saw no tire tracks.

Gilles's gate was unlocked. Launce slipped in, treading quickly but softly up the limestone driveway. Caution took over when he heard voices ahead of him. He bent his knees, hunched his back and slowed to a creep. The house wasn't immediately visible. Launce recalled from Google Maps that it came after a bend in the driveway, hidden by a hectare of bush.

Reaching the bend, he flinched at the sight of a human figure. An old woman in a grimy sundress was tottering barefoot and singing raucously, to no one in particular.

"Just call me angel of the morning, aaaaangel ... "

The house behind her had a terracotta roof—Google Maps hadn't lied—but that was where construction had stalled. The walls were bare brick with no smoothing or rendering. The iron window frames had no glass. The doorways were doorless. Bits of neoclassical frippery were lying in a pile outside—balusters, limestone cornices, a lion's head fountain with a spout through its mouth—all waiting to be stuck somewhere. Launce suspected the builders had been Italians who'd run over budget.

There was nothing very Italian about the *acting* occupants. A dozen forms sat in the shadow of the house, pulling swigs of tawny port from two-litre bottles which had surely gotten quite warm in the current weather. More of the same bottles lay smashed and empty around the doorways. Some unused cement bags had petrified into boulders, shedding their paper wrappers but keeping their distinctive shape. An old cement mixer, which the squatters had repurposed as a brazier, was full of ashes and soot. Geraldton waxes grew wild on the sand pad and fairy wrens frolicked in the pink flowers. A droning sound was coming from the building. Its source was easy to find. A bee swarm had made its hive in the hollow of a wall.

Launce saw a bundle of Waratah star pickets in the shade and grabbed one. The bitumen-coated steel wasn't too hot to carry in his bare hands. Just short of two metres with pre-punched holes. A bit unwieldy, though he hoped it would at least look menacing.

The squatters weren't menaced. They ignored his questions at first, then heckled him, yelling his words back at him and copying his voice: "Do you know Gilles? Do you know Gilles?" A man shouted, "Yes sir! I know Gilles! He's a fucken legend, you prick!" His companions

chuckled at the sham. Launce turned away from the group and heard calls of “prick!” and “dumbarse!”

He became certain that these people had played no active part in Paloma’s abduction. Like pariahs in general, they were more rowdy than violent, and ultimately they were fearful. They had too many problems already to go hurting a member of the middle class. And their Italianate shelter didn’t even have electricity, let alone the internet.

Just as Launce was ready to despair, his eye detected movement at the eastern edge of the property, where a chain-linked fence separated it from № 27. The fence had a hole in it—about a metre high and wide—which gave open access to the neighbouring firebreak. One of the squatters approached the hole, carrying two bottles of tawny port. He set them down on the border between the properties and placed a piece of chipboard over them so that they wouldn’t boil in the sun. Then he headed back to the unfinished house.

Launce caught up to him. “Who’re those for? Aren’t you drinking them?”

“It’s the price,” the man slurred.

“What price?”

“The price so they leave us alone.”

Perhaps the house at № 27 wasn’t as idle as it appeared from the street. Could this be where Gilles really lived?

Launce stepped through the hole, careful not to disturb the bottles. If he got to the house using the side firebreak, he might be able to take Gilles by surprise. The thought thrilled him enough that a certain gallantry infected his hold on the star picket. He gripped it with one hand, flexing his bicep to imitate a javelin throw, then hoisted the heavy thing over his shoulder in a Yagan pose.

The firebreak was as weed-packed here as at the front. The veldt grass came up to Launce’s waist. Colourless wild geraniums grew in patches. Even the native pigface was an invader in all but name, looking too succulent for the tinderbox vegetation around it and spreading with too much enthusiasm, like a crown-of-thorns starfish choking a reef. The grass roots anchored the soil and made it firmer to tread on, though tall grass was no comfort to Launce as he scanned the ground for snakes. He was aware that modern medicine had reduced snakebites to a question of allergies, like peanuts and cashews. How fast he could reach modern medicine without a phone battery was another question.

Something dark and long twitched in the grass. A tiger snake? No, a feather. A black feather with a glaucous sheen. Launce came across several more feathers further along the path but couldn’t decide which bird they belonged to. They were too big for a raven or a swan, the wrong colour to have come from the wing of a wedge-tailed eagle (and perhaps too big for an

eagle as well). They didn't have the shaggy look of emu feathers, though the barbs were curly, more for ornament than flight ... was someone in the district importing cassowaries?

Solar-powered fox lights stood along the property's perimeter, bookended by limestone chunks to keep them upright in the sand. Launce touched his brow and felt a gritty layer of dried sweat crystals. He hadn't noticed himself perspiring. The flies here were unusually attracted to him. The heat made them so sluggish that they didn't budge from regular hand-flaps. He had to prod them with a fingernail to send them flying.

The firebreak opened out onto a brick house and garden. This house seemed finished and liveable, with a car in the driveway. Launce took this to mean that someone was home: then he saw that the tires had a perfect outline of dead grass around them and couldn't have moved recently. The garden was unkempt and unwatered. A line of rose bushes had gone dry and brittle, their flowers shrivelled to potpourri.

There were more fox lights surrounding the house, alongside other solar gadgets that were supposed to ward off snakes by shooting vibrations through the ground.

Around the corner, Launce found a brick patio and a galvanised steel shed with tinted windows. He wouldn't need to force his way into the house. The glass sliding door next to the patio was already smashed and only a beige curtain hid the interior. But what drew most of his attention was a rectangular pit at the patio's centre. It had been dug to the right depth for a backyard swimming pool and iron reinforcing mesh had been placed on the yellow earthen floor. Only the concrete was yet to be poured.

Inside the pit was a structure Launce couldn't recognise.

It was roughly conical, like an enormous witch's hat, but cobbled together from sticks and branches and crooked banksia limbs and various other roughage, which gave it the texture of a bezoar or a hairball fused with a beaver dam. For stability, its maker had added boulders, rebars, loose bricks and more of those fossilised cement bags Launce had seen earlier.

That was just its scaffold; the eye-catching feature was its crust of decorations. Blue tinsel, blue cardboard, blue cellophane, blue nylon rope ... Blue scrunchies, blue hairclips, blue smartphone covers, blue-mirrored sunglasses, blue sequin bikinis, Blu-ray discs ... A reflective roadworks sign, a handbag, a miniskirt: all blue ... A foam exercise mat, a frosted-glass perfume bottle, a Tupperware lid, also blue ... A blue clown wig, some bluish nylon leggings ... An empty bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream ... A child's anti-magpie helmet made from a blue ice-cream tub ... Blue dustpans, blue dust jackets, blue seedling containers, blue drinking straws, blue coasters, blue cocktail stirrers, hundreds of blue bottle tops ... Blue-coated dingbats, blue-tinged doodads, a blue geegaw ... Bluish frills, bluer trappings and bluest fandangles ... Blue bits tied to blue bobs, blue odds stuck to blue ends ...

Close to the top of the cone, Launce saw a bracelet of little blue spheres, carved from a

substance like paused smoke. It was Paloma's Airloy jewellery.

Gilles had been honest, to a point, about the 'sculptor' part. But why abduct someone for a bracelet they would've been happy to sell? Launce wished, desperately wished, that it wasn't only for the bracelet. He wished Gilles had some other, longer-lasting purpose for Paloma. What was the sculpture worth to him? Who was he trying to impress by—

Launce heard rustling. It raced like a shudder through the bushland, getting nearer and louder, until it jostled the Geraldton waxes around the patio. It sounded heavier than a fox. Someone was running towards him.

Still clutching the star picket, he ducked into the shed and did his best to keep the door shut. The latch was on the outside, he couldn't lock it. When the rustling died down, he peeped through the window to see who'd arrived.

The figure was bipedal and roughly the height of a person, though it looked twice as large. Downy plumage covered most of its body, while great, pennaceous feathers stuck out from its taloned forearms. Its tail was even more thickly-muscled than a kangaroo's, and tipped with long feathers which gave it the shape of a palm frond. They were similar to the feathers Launce had passed on the firebreak, but golden brown instead of black, and noticeably softer and silkier. It didn't look like a costume; even if a world-class contortionist had been able to bend their knees backward to fit the creature's ankle joints, they couldn't have lent it such free movement.

Something about the creature made Launce believe it was female. It wasn't just her feathers. Her deep blue eyes were circular and shiny—gorgeous polished roundels of lapis lazuli. A crest of ornamental plumes protruded from her head at an angle, like a lady's fascinator on Melbourne Cup Day. Strutting along the patio, she seemed unable to resist admiring the structure in the earthen pit, as if it had been built in her honour. She craned her neck, a dovelike purr rose from her throat and she grinned. Sharp, elegant teeth ran from earhole to earhole. There were no molars: her mouth was designed to tear off meat chunks and swallow them whole. Even so, she was beautiful. Launce could already guess why her dark-feathered other half had slaved to assemble a shrine to her.

Her nostrils twitched, as if they'd caught something on the breeze. The she-raptor tore her eyes away from the shrine and turned to face the shed. Now, instead of purring, she let out an inquisitive squawk. "*Kluuuu-ruk?*"

A dash from her feathery feet and she was standing by the tinted window. A single ultramarine eye peered at Launce's features pressed to the other side of the glass. The she-raptor tapped the pane with her sickle-talon, grinning as her quarry flinched.

Launce pulled back on the door to stop the she-raptor from opening it outward. There was a brief tug-of-war, then he felt the creature's resistance drop off. But what was that sound? A

tinny noise—like scratching or clinking. She was trying to toggle the bolt latch and lock him in! He kicked at the door and the bolt missed its mark, thrusting without slipping into the strike. Another kick sent the door slamming into the creature's muzzle. She answered with a furious shriek. At that moment, Launce's nerves abandoned him. He cowered, held the star picket between his thighs and coiled his arms around it, as though it were a childhood hobby horse. Shutting his eyes, he prayed the raptor's assault would be too quick to feel.

A gust of air wafted over his face as she rushed forward, but her sickle-talon never touched him. The star picket gave a lurch, as if its tip had butted into something. Launce heard a cracking noise and another shriek—of agony. His eyes reopened.

The raptor hen hadn't looked before she pounced and the star picket had jabbed into the base of her neck with enough force to snap her primitive wishbone. She doubled back, gasping and choking. Her chest was caved in and bloody froth came fizzing from her nostrils.

Soon she could no longer stay on her feet and slumped onto the patio. She struggled to prop herself up with her forearms and tail. But a split clavicle must have pierced her trachea—or something about as important—because she was finding it harder and harder to breathe and her lungs seemed to be filling with blood faster than she could snort out the red foam. Launce watched her empty her crop in a last-ditch attempt to lighten herself. She vomited pieces of a bobtail lizard, some bronze wing pigeons, a rainbow lorikeet wing and a probable bandicoot. Everything was coated in her crop milk, a beige whey which looked and smelled like an expired probiotic drink.

Having loosed her fill of wildlife, she rested her head on the patio bricks. A sudden tranquillity entered her eyes. Her breathing stopped and she lay gazing at the heavens with a gentle smile.

Launce had killed her—not as Saint George would've killed her, but like a nameless longbowman, fixing his defensive stake into the ground and waiting for it to skewer charging knights.

He brushed aside the curtain and stepped into the house. Whatever fate had claimed its original owners, the raptors had accommodated themselves quite well. The living room floor was littered with tawny port bottles. Like most beachy soils, the local sand was as adept at wheedling into houses as it was at infiltrating shoes and socks. Enough had gotten in to make ridges and humps all over the carpet. The curly bodies of Portuguese millipedes lay stiff on the sand, waiting for moisture to reanimate them. Tiny white snails clung like barnacles to the windows that hadn't been smashed. Cobwebs could be seen in every niche and corner, but not a single spider: harvestmen had taken their place.

The electricity still worked. Perhaps the billing had been linked to an account and automatic deductions were carrying on in the owner's absence. Or the power company, in typical style, was letting the debts rack up before threatening disconnection. It was almost impossible to

break ties with some of these providers and Launce doubted the raptors had the right phone manner. The same must've held for the internet. A wi-fi modem was glowing on a table by the sofa. At the room's far end, a laptop hummed.

The she-raptor had seemed cunning enough, and her kind was probably capable of reading and typing in English. From the desk near the laptop, Launce picked up a curious object: a kangaroo's foot with aluminium foil wrapped around its long middle toe. He tested it against the laptop's touchpad and the onscreen cursor wiggled accordingly. So, Gilles had created a stylus to mock the static charge of a human hand. Clever bird.

The laptop, long past warranty, still ran on Windows Vista. Launce signed in without a password. The browser was open at Gilles's Facebook account. Less than two hours ago, Gilles had been chatting to a young woman with blue glass earrings made from Greek evil eye charms. He'd met her on a swap-meet page called *Perth Beer Economy* and suggested a trade between her earrings and two large bottles of port. She'd agreed to the swap and promised to come closer to evening. Skimming through Gilles's conversations, Launce noticed that most of his friends seemed to be blonde Perthian summer girls, and the occasional summer boy, each bearing some item—handbag, anklet, surfboard, shoe—whose colour was no surprise by now. He closed the browser in disgust.

The desktop had a copy of Gilles's profile picture. If the filename could be trusted, the handsome man in the photo was none other than Louis Alphonse of Bourbon: second cousin of the reigning Spanish king and chief pretender to the vacant throne of France.

The pageboy-haired one raced across every wing of the house, crying out his sister's name. "Paloma! Paloma!" He broke into bedrooms, flung open wardrobes, dug through kitchen cabinets and peeked in the cellar. "Paloma! Paloma!" He checked the main bathroom and two ensuites, ran up and down the stairs and prodded random places with his star picket in search of false walls.

"Where are you, Gilles Livingston Raptor? Where'd you put her?"

At the north side of the house, an open door was swaying on its hinges. Nothing too impressive lay past it, no garden or patio or driveway—just a steep incline at the sand pad's edge with a huge growth of pigface rolling down it like a spiky shag rug. Below were two unused septic tanks, set into the ground during construction, but discarded from the final design. Launce trod cautiously down the slope, using the star picket for balance, and peered into the first concrete cylinder. He saw a jumbled midden of bones. Horse skulls rested beside the neck vertebrae of alpacas, kangaroo limbs next to pigeon ribs, and in the mix he could spot at least a half-dozen human fragments. Femurs, tibias, jawbones, shards of eye sockets and cheekbones, teeth with braces, amalgam fillings and porcelain crowns. He had no hope of discerning individual remains, but he knew enough now.

His moment to save Paloma had come and gone.

Here it would be vain to summarise his feelings as he ran back up into the house. The best account came promptly from his own mouth:

“EEEE-AAARGHH! UUU-AAAARRRG! AAAR-AAAR-AAARGH-AYEEEE! AYEEEE! EEEGH-IARRRH! AYEEEE-ARRH!”

His eyes watered as if sprayed by capsaicin. His sinuses ached. He retched and dropped the star picket, not heeding where. He didn’t want to think or reason or form words, only to bawl like a speechless brute.

He bawled and bawled, keeping no track of time. “EEE-YAARGH-YAARGHH-ARR-EEEURGHH! EEEEARGHH! YAAARGH!”

“EEYYARGH! RRGHH-RGHH-RGH! EEEEEEEAAAARGH! EEEEARG—”

All at once he stopped. Amid his bawling, he thought he heard a shriek that wasn’t his. Had it come from the patio’s direction? With any luck, it was just an echo ...

Launce stood in the corridor and listened. When no sound followed, he went to the living room and headed for the softly rippling curtain he’d parted to get in.

The curtain billowed and a glossy black shape erupted, claws-first, through the fabric. Launce was shoved onto the floor. He fell on an empty port bottle which shattered against his back. Then a mass of dark feathers pounced on him, pinning him down.

This was the clearest and closest view he would get of Gilles’s face. Lead-coloured eyes, with only a hint of blue, scowled at him, caught between anguish, fury and disbelief. The neck-feathers bristled. The mouth snarled, baring rows of sharp teeth. Launce could smell its rancid breath, like roadkill mixed with discount tawny.

Gilles reared back and sent a sickle-shaped talon into Launce’s left eye. Launce felt no pain at the gouging of the eyeball itself, only a burning sting as the claw shredded his defensively closed eyelid. Glare filled his vision, a devastating glare—like a camera bulb which intensified into a flashbang grenade, which became a supernova of white-green overexposure. Gilles picked Launce up by the shoulders and threw him again; this time he crashed against the laptop desk.

Then the attack stopped. Gilles seemed to relent. Through his functional eye, Launce saw the raptor standing and gazing up, as if in thought. He’d seen enough proof of the creature’s intellect. Perhaps Gilles wasn’t content to kill his foe quickly and needed to ponder a suitably painful retribution.

The next few moments were an ugly blur in Launce’s memory. He’d fled into the corridor, stumbled around confused and taken refuge in a guest bedroom at the eastern wing of the house. The room had a bookshelf and a tall narrow window facing the bush. Launce had locked the

door from inside and—with a final spurt of adrenalin—he'd managed to barricade it by overturning the bookshelf. Then he must have sat on the mattress, and at some point (he couldn't mark the exact instant) his wounds and shocks had become too much for him to stay conscious.

§

He lay for a while in a dreamless stupor, too sore to move. He felt sorer now—whenever 'now' was—than when his injuries were fresh. At least the glare in his optic nerve had dimmed; he saw a featureless concrete wall where before he'd seen phosphorous.

Briefly conscious again, he caught the sun setting over the bushland, its brilliant magenta like a strontium flare. Too much light for him. He sunk back into inertia.

Later, he had an impression that he was moving. His first groggy thought was that he was in the window seat of a plane at night: the cabin was unlit, a wingtip navigation light was flashing in a steady rhythm. Or could he be in an ambulance? A beacon was spinning somewhere, casting its red and blue beams across his face.

As his head cleared, he found to his disappointment that he was in the same room. The rhythmic flashing was the fox light outside.

His certainty about the raptors faltered. Had it been a mixed-up dream? But the dried blood was there on his face and clothes; he hadn't hallucinated losing his eye. And there was still just one way out of the house. If it meant dying, it meant dying. Grunting in pain, Launce dragged the fallen bookshelf away from the door.

Dizzily, he groped his way down the corridor. On a shelf in the laundry, he found a keyring LED torch and rejoiced that its battery hadn't gone flat.

Peering from behind the living room curtain, he saw Gilles in the pit, kneeling next to his sculpture. The fox lights provided the only illumination, and the raptor appeared to Launce in blinks of red and blue. He barely seemed the same creature. While Launce had been lying unconscious, he'd torn out all the feathers that his teeth and forearms could reach and was now a cringing lump of bloodied goseflesh. The she-raptor's lifeless body rested at his feet. Gilles was holding one of her claws, animating it like a puppeteer and using it to mutilate himself further. Already his limbs bore many stanzas of cut-lines.

Gilles began to screech, to warble, to squawk, albeit with his own peculiar teeth-chattering and dental consonants more authentic than any cockatoo's. His throat made a whirring noise, like a hard drive during spin-up. It rose in pitch to an injured wail, then collapsed into more screeching and chattering of teeth.

When he saw Launce's eavesdropping face, his only reaction was to turn away, as if he wanted nothing to do with the pageboy-haired one. Even when Launce stepped out onto the

patio, Gilles didn't attack. Perhaps he felt that *he* was responsible for the death of his mate. He'd tried to win her over with the sculpture, and that had brought Launce and his fatal star picket. Could he have anything to live for now? Were there any more she-raptors?

Launce couldn't guess how such creatures had survived thousands of years of human activity, but their kind was likely very rare. They might have been the last nesting pair. They might have even had the same parents.

Gilles picked something up from the ground, a long plastic object. It was hard to make out in the strobing light. Launce squinted his right eye. *A blue flash.* He glimpsed it again. *A home pregnancy test? No ... A red flash.* Definitely not. *A blue flash. A red flash.* It was a barbecue lighter! *A blue flash. A red flash.* Gilles had arranged several bottles of cooking gas around the dry twigs and branches of his sculpture. Shortly, the bushland would be consumed by the highest order of self-loathing.

Launce judged it was time to leave.

§

Torch in one hand, nursing his head in the other, he hurried back down the firebreak, through the torn fence and past the Mediterranean house. The squatters, prudent people, had already vacated the place.

Launce arrived on Hallux Road. The trench was empty, his Commodore nowhere to be seen. He trod on something hard and flat. Shining the torch over it, he saw the front and rear number plates of his car. Whoever had done the towing, he suspected it hadn't been the council.

Maybe Gilles had kept a similar arrangement with the local car thieves as he'd had with the squatters. A symbiosis might've arisen even if the thieves had never seen him in person. Who'd first concocted the trench set-up: Gilles, hungry for baubles, or the thieves, greedy for auto parts? It was the question of the chicken and the egg.

A pair of headlights appeared from around the corner, followed by a silver Hyundai which stopped as soon as the driver noticed the open trench. A cheerful-looking young woman got out to ask Launce for directions. Her earrings were a pair of Greek evil eye charms.

She stepped close enough to see Launce's injuries. "Are you okay? Do you need me to call an ambulance?"

"Might be quicker if you gave me a lift."

"What happened to you?"

In a frail, creaky voice, Launce told her that he'd been carjacked and mugged, and that when he'd tried to look for help all the houses behind him were empty.

“Your name isn’t Gilles by any chance? I was supposed to meet up with ...”

“I think someone’s pulling your leg. This isn’t a nice neighbourhood.”

“Ok, hop in. I’ll get you to the hospital.” She opened the door to the passenger seat and helped him sit down. “My name’s Ashley.”

A few turns away from Hallux Road, while they were driving past a market garden, they heard three loud bangs in the middle distance. Ashley thought it was a shotgun. In his mind, Launce was certain it had been the gas bottles. Glancing sideward a few minutes later, he saw a column of maroon smoke rising from the direction of Gilles’s block.

Ashley had been shockingly lucky. It occurred to Launce that if he hadn’t—

He didn’t continue that thought. He didn’t say a word to Ashley. He was grateful that she was driving him to the ER and that was all. He’d lost the will to delve into anything that smacked even lightly of courtship.

Ashamed and exhausted, he leant back in his seat and shut his remaining shuttable eye. And against the situation, he managed to think of something pleasant. How good it would be to join a monastery! He pictured himself with the Benedictines at New Norcia—out in the Wheatbelt, where the soil was red and turned into proper mud when it rained.

Lulled by the car’s engine, he began to dream. He believed that he was a monk, baking loaves of bread, brewing abbey ale, mixing the monastery’s famous nut cake, tending orchards, crushing wine grapes, pressing olives. He dozed off to the vision of losing himself in chores, untold happy chores, enclosed in a community of men.

Ramon Glazov is not a pseudonym. (Visitors to Perth could find perhaps three dozen people who claim to have met him.) He is the translator of Giorgio De Maria’s horror novel, The Twenty Days of Turin (1977).

Snore

by Ella Jeffery

I take it personally. This thing
clawing in your throat
has no place in a speaking world.
It seesaws on some huge
rusted hinge or is wrenched
like a tin roof
in a house-wrecking wind.
Outside, the moon persists
with its one white vowel,
while beside me the sound
drags out half-dead and foreign
as Latin in the bedroom's air.
I stay curled on this island
where the sound shreds all maps
and flares and flares
in black light, dressed in phlegm,
howling for a fight.

Ella Jeffery's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Meanjin, Westerly, Tincture Journal, Best Australian Poems and elsewhere. She is a PhD candidate at QUT in Brisbane.

Middle Distance

Non-fiction by Kate Lansell

I was aware of the notebook before my grandmother Judy died. I did not read it, hold it in my hands, or flip through its pages until after her funeral. It is a small, spiral-bound book with no lines. Perhaps sold as an artist's sketchbook, the paper slightly heavier than a regular notebook. A picture of white flannel flowers has been pasted onto the cover. In it Judy recorded quotes from writers such as Oscar Wilde, Vladimir Nabokov, William Morris, Lord Byron. I knew my grandmother read a lot and was an avid library user. I, naively and snobbishly, presumed she read the indistinguishable pastel-coloured shelf-fillers libraries stock in the thousands. Yet her notebook is full of handwritten quotes from the types of writers you aren't likely to see in the large print section of the library.

Contained within the pages of the notebook are reflections on nature, life, death, thoughts on how to spend your days, how to live a full life, metaphysical musings by the great thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Judy gave it to my mother around the time she went into the nursing home and was clearing out her possessions in the way you do before a move. Her final move.

I have a sample of Judy's handwriting in an old birthday card; cursive script that slopes to the right with flourishes on the w, b and l, a half-formed f (with best love from). There is style but also economy, a hardness to the way the tails on the g's and y's aren't fully formed, ending in a straight line. The handwriting in the notebook is different. There are familiar characteristics, but the writing is more upright and mostly printed, deliberate and neat. You can see time and care have been taken copying out these lines with what looks to be a calligraphy pen (the start and end of certain letters are thicker), a pen she may have set aside specifically for the task. Some of the quotes take up a whole page. Some shorter ones start mid-page, showing forethought into how the quote would look on the page; an understanding of space.

I too have taken notes about books I am reading, half filling multiple journals and notepads with thoughts, ideas, quotes, to-read and have-read lists. I haven't given much thought to them as a text, something I could give someone to read. I wonder if Judy was mindful of an audience as she neatly copied out the quotes. She thought enough of the notebook to leave it for us to read, yet I can imagine her thinking it to be a silly thing at the time, just as she minimised most things in her life. These quotes provide an insight into the type of things that struck a chord with her, that interested her enough to write down. Yet nowhere are there any comments, scribbles, notes about what she thought of the readings; did she agree, did some of the quotes stay with her, providing comfort over her life, or did she write them down once, never to look at again? There are no dates attached to the entries. I have no idea what period of her life this notebook came from. Was it a project she worked on over a few years or was it something she continued to write in over a few decades? The opportunity to ask these questions has passed.

The writer who appears most often in the notebook is Aldous Huxley. A prolific writer of dystopian fiction and, later on, philosophy and spiritualism, Huxley is not someone I associate with Judy: the grandmother, the farmer's wife. Yet obviously his work left an impression. A particular quote jumps out at me:

Nature at the middle distance is familiar—so familiar that we are deluded into believing that we really know what it is all about. Seen closer at hand, or at a great distance, or from an odd angle, it seems disquietingly strange, wonderful beyond all comprehension.

I look it up and it's from *Heaven and Hell*, the small follow-up volume to Huxley's equally brief *The Doors of Perception*, one of the great counterculture books of the twentieth century. Both books explore the effects of psychedelic drugs on the mind. In the foreword to *Heaven and Hell*, published in 1956, Huxley writes of "the candle of vision" and how the use of mind-altering drugs can "throw light on the hitherto unknown regions of [the] mind". He likens those areas of the mind to unmapped regions of the planet in the Victorian era. We, potentially, are the naturalists journeying out to the unknown to collect samples and study new lands. "If you go to New South Wales, you will see marsupials hopping about the countryside. And if you go to the antipodes of the self-conscious mind, you will encounter all sorts of creatures at least as odd as kangaroos." Huxley's mode of transport for his exploration of the mind was mescaline, peyote in its natural form. Huxley was a "willing, indeed eager" participant in research trials of the drug. For years he had studied and written about mystics who attained heightened insights and understanding through meditation, prayer, and fasting. Huxley was convinced mind-altering drugs could bring about the same type of experience, an "admission to an inner world".

In the actual antipodes, at the time of publication of *Heaven and Hell*, Judy would have just had her third child, and I suspect was not keeping up with the latest counterculture publications. When my grandparents moved into their white farmhouse on the hill it had not been occupied for some time. There was no electricity, so cooking and washing would have been time-intensive labour. Running a not-yet-modernised household with three young children, I can't imagine Judy having much time for reading or any hobby outside of her family and household.

And yet she did accomplish a great many things over her lifetime. Judy was a busy person; her hands, it seemed, were always doing something. She took up pottery early on. Spinning wool and knitting were more practical crafts she mastered, producing scratchy jumpers for her children and grandchildren in turn. Later she took up all sorts of crafts from papermaking, silk dying, to fine metal work. She was also an amateur historian, self-publishing family history books with an enormous photocopier in her studio.

It is hard to imagine the way she came to Huxley's books. Were they stocked in her local library? Did she hear about him from friends? I like the idea of a radical feminist book group in the sixties and seventies among the farming wives of the western district, but I somehow doubt this was the case. Taking drugs to expand your mind, exploring the areas beyond the wall of our conscious perception, these don't seem like topics my grandparents would have explored.

Especially not my grandfather. His idea of cultural enrichment was the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, broadcast on television once a year. A monarchist and cricket enthusiast, I would be surprised if he knew much of hippy or drug culture. Judy was not one to make a fuss over anything, she hated putting anyone out, and did everything she could to avoid conflict. I just don't see controversial topics like psychedelic drug use coming up over the kitchen table.

Or maybe I have got it all wrong. Perhaps she picked up *The Doors of Perception* at the library and skimmed through to the back, saw some references to art and decided to take it home. She might have cherry-picked some sections of Huxley's writing that appealed to her, questions of nature and painting, and copied those into her notebook. Still, I wish I could have quizzed her about it; about her reading habits, some of her favourite authors. I now have a few suggestions of my own. I could have brought her some books I have read, that have resonated with me over the years. After her funeral, this is the form my grief takes, not of her actual death but of the missed opportunities to dig deeper into who she was and engage in the conversations we never had.

Just as she wrote in the notebook, "although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome." While Nabokov was writing of an adulterous man whose "life ended in disaster", this quote, taken out of context, reads as a witticism, a dark joke on the sum of our lives. I myself have only the abridged version of my grandmother's life. The notebook provides me with a small amount of detail, a few clues to go on with to discover the interior, intellectual life of a woman who, it is obvious now, I barely knew.

Judy was also a painter, mostly botanical and mostly watercolour. Her garden provided subject material but she also collected cuttings everywhere she went. She was notorious for ducking off during a bushwalk to pick a few wildflowers or orchids, fully aware of the illegality of the act, to take home to sketch and paint. Mostly her artworks were large paintings of arranged flowers, now hung in family bathrooms around the state. She didn't paint to sell her work, as far as I'm aware. The furthest she ever went to commercialise her work was a set of gift cards showcasing some of her wildflower illustrations, printed in the eighties. I'm not even sure she sold them anywhere, but I do remember a shoebox full of them in our hallway closet that mum would dip into if she needed to send a card to someone.

The works I like best are her botanical studies that fill another small notebook. They are classic naturalist exercises, colour swatches running down the side, the flower, leaves, nuts or seeds shown if available, the Latin name recorded in pencil somewhere on the page. These seem like sketches she did later in life, perhaps after one of her strokes when she could no longer manage to hold a paintbrush for extended periods, when her line-work became a little less sure and shakier.

Huxley's account of his mescaline trip starts with a description of a simple vase of flowers. Earlier in the day he had noted how the flowers were mismatched and "broke all the rules of traditional good taste". After the drug took effect he was no longer looking at the "unusual

flower arrangement”, he “was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.”

When Huxley writes of seeing nature close at hand, he is referring to art that subverted the traditional landscape scene, studies of flowers and branches common in Chinese and Japanese art: nature at the near-point. “A spray of blossoming plum, eighteen inches of bamboo stem with its leaves, tits or finches seen at hardly more than arm’s length among the bushes, all kinds of flowers and foliage, of birds and fish and small mammals.” Here, he supposes, is where the truth of it is. At looking at nature up close, we can see it in a different light, take it out of context and the sublime is revealed.

I imagine Judy sitting in front of an arrangement of flowers, sketching the outlines of leaves and petals, shading in some detail before dabbing on the first layers of watercolours. Her head would bob up and down as she looked from the arrangement to the page and back again, adjusting shades to match specimen. Did she seek transcendence as she studied the flowers? Did she ever reach a state of otherworldliness as the rhythm of observation and craft quietened her mind, absorbing her in process? Huxley thought that “what the rest of us see under the influence of mescaline, the artist is congenitally equipped to see all the time.” Judy would most likely dismiss this claim, but I can’t say for sure.

I had thought I knew what my grandmother’s life amounted to—a somewhat reluctant mother and housewife, a keen gardener and hobbyist. Someone who could whip up a batch of buttery shortbread with a moment’s notice. She was understated and usually plainly dressed, although she could jazz up an outfit with a scarf and brooch to good effect. Yet I had been looking at her from the middle distance, as an ageing woman to be visited once a year. Her death provided the distance for me to see her in a different light. The notebook has left me clues to the inner life she kept so private, evidence of a critical and engaged mind, open to new ideas and fresh ways of looking at the world.

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After Judy’s funeral, I drive mum back to her house in the Grampians, a two-hour trip through the flat farming country of Victoria’s western district. Directly in front of us the full moon appears on the horizon. Lit pink from the setting sun, it is huge, filling up the view through the windscreen. It is an otherworldly experience; I feel like I am no longer on earth but on another planet much closer to the moon. This phenomenon is called the moon illusion, I later learn. The exact reason for the illusion is still not entirely clear. Even today we’re still not sure what’s going on. One hypothesis is the moon is actually that big, we just don’t see it as such in the sky without any point of reference for scale. When the moon appears near other objects like hills and trees on the horizon, our brains register its hugeness and inflates the size as we finally see it relative to other objects. There is this brief moment when our perception of the moon is altered, allowing us to see it as it really is.

And isn’t that what Huxley was chasing? The doors of our own perception opening to reveal

another truth, however fleeting and impossible to hold on to? “To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception”? Just like a drug-induced vision though, it quickly passes, the arc of the moon’s orbit means it soon clears the horizon and takes its place in the sky, shrinking back to the size we are accustomed to. There the moon becomes part of the landscape once more, back into the context our eyes and mind can make sense of. And we return to our usual position, back from our brief travel through space. Nothing is fixed, perception shifts, people are not who we thought.

Kate Lansell is an emerging writer who lives in Hobart. She has worked as a bookseller and more recently as an urban planner. She writes about place, travel, and the idea of home.

A Tragedy in Four Hundred Parts

by Angela Gardner

On bright fields of water it was something to see
:rain filling the past, trees tall under cumulus.
What does it takes to hold the sky in place?
The moving raft of sky a dark shadow of itself.
The miracle of it. All of us holding strings.

A crowd arrives to hand over hand it from the rooftop,
to set it in motion under our feet. Children jump
between clouds arranged like ice-floes.
An animal, another animal, hunter or hunted.
They chase in repetitions of superheroes
as if help will appear in mask and cape to call us all
in to bedtime.

The crowd jostles now against the tug
of strings first in shock and then in pain. “Put it back”
someone shouts “Put it back” as the pushing and shoving begins.

Angela Gardner is the author of four poetry collections. Her first collection, Parts of Speech (UQP, 2007) won the Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and was followed by Views of The Hudson (Shearsman Books UK, 2009). Her most recent collections are The Told World (Shearsman Books UK, 2014) and Thing&Unthing (Vagabond Press, 2014). She has been the recipient of an Australia Council residency, a Churchill Fellowship and an Arts Queensland Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy grant. She is a visual artist with work in major public collections and writes on printmaking and artist books for journals in the UK, USA and Australia. She edits at the poetry journal www.foame.org.

We Are Water

Non-fiction by Wang Ping

“Walk through the checkpoint, Ping, and don’t look back,” says Tashi, our Tibetan guide. “Pass the soldiers as if they don’t exist. If they shout to stop you, keep walking as if you didn’t hear them. If you hear a gun clicking, stop. Do not run. Do not move your arms or turn around. They’ll for sure shoot if you do. Just wait ’til they come.”

“You’re kidding me, right, Tashi?” I whisper.

“Ping, in the heart of a storm, there’s stillness and peace,” Tashi replies.

I glance at him, his sleepy eyes now lit with a mysterious light. Behind us, the military tent used as the checkpoint for the Everest Base Camp is bulging with tourists waiting to have their permits verified. Before us a gravel road leads to Mount Everest, guarded by soldiers on both sides of the checkpoint. If something happens, a whole battalion of them will rush out from their camouflage tents along the mountain path. On the right of the road is an open field dotted with yak dung, Coca-Cola cans, Budweiser bottles, plastic bags. The soldiers can see any moving object, as small as a mole or a roach, in one glance.

And Tashi wants me to walk through this death field.

“You slipped through two checkpoints already. You know what to do,” he says.

This is different, I want to shout. Those two checkpoints had a much bigger crowd, and a public bathroom nearby. Had I gotten caught, I’d have told the soldiers that I was using the toilet and all they could have done was shoo me back. But here, the other side is our final destination, the Everest Base Camp. If the soldiers catch me, I can say nothing but admit that I’ve slipped through the first and second checkpoints, am now crossing the last one without a permit, and they’ll interrogate how I got here, in what car, and everybody will be in deep trouble.

I remain silent. Tashi has warned me many times about the consequences.

“Ma Jinhua?” shouts a soldier in the tent. He sounds young, about the same age as my sixteen-year-old son.

“She’s outside, officer,” says a girl. “She’s sick.”

“I need to see her face. Bring her in.”

“She’s vomiting. Altitude sickness. I’m her sister. See my permit? Ma Yinhua. We’re twins. We look exactly the same on the photo and in person. Please let us pass. She’s too weak to walk, let alone push through this crowd.”

“She must show her face here. No face, no pass. Next?”

I hear sobbing from the tent, then shouting from the crowd outside the tent. “She’s fainting. Yinhua, come quick. Your sister is fainting!”

I run toward the chaos. “I’m a doctor, Tashi. Let me take care of the girl first.”

Outside the tent, a crowd has gathered. I push in. A girl in a fake Mountaineer coat lies in a pool of foamy vomit. Her eyes are closed, her face is white, but she’s breathing. I check her pulse. Feeble and quick, but relatively regular, no fluttering, no sudden surging or stopping. That’s a good sign. I pick up the oxygen bottle hanging around her neck.

“It’s empty,” says her twin sister, tears in her eyes. “She used it up long before we got here. I told her to use it sparingly, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Get another one, quick.” I order. A man hands me a bottle. It seems every Chinese here carries oxygen supplies. I hook it to her nose.

“Breathe, Jinhua, in, out, in, out,” I whisper, breathing in sync with her.

Colour returns to her face and she opens her eyes.

I feel like weeping. I wish I could lie on the ground like Jinhua, in the foetal position, so I don’t have to run through the checkpoint alone.

“Time to go,” Tashi whispers, taking me out of the crowd by my hand and leading me to the back of the tent again. “This is your best chance to get through, and your last. It’s going to be dark soon. No more delay, if you want to see the peak. Summon your lion spirit, Ping!”

I look at the sky. It’s grey and cloudy. I won’t see the peak even if I sneak through the checkpoint. Is it worth the risk of being shot at? I look at the road, deadly silent. No rumbling trucks or milling tourists to make myself inconspicuous. No sunlight to blind the soldiers’ eyes nor heatwave forming one mirage after another to hide my presence as it did when I slipped through Dingri checkpoint and walked two miles on the Dingri highway. Here, I’ll be an open target once I step away from the tent.

I feel Tashi’s hand on my elbow. I glance at him. How bright his eyes are, his body taut and alert like a snow leopard on the prowl.

§

Since I met Tashi at the Lhasa train station, I’ve been debating with myself if he’s the best or the worst guide, if not the laziest guide, I’ve ever met. Well, I’ve only met two so far, Helen from Qinghai Province, and Tashi from Lhasa, both assigned to us by Bean, a travel agent I found online. There are hundreds of them, all promising the best service and lowest price. I spent many hours interviewing the agents, negotiating costs and discussing routes. Finally I

picked Bean. She sounded the most rational and sincere, and her fee seemed the most reasonable compared to others. Still, it was \$10,000 for five of us to travel through the Tibet Plateau for thirteen days. We didn't have a choice, since foreigners are not allowed to travel alone in this region. We must get a permit to enter Tibet, and another one to visit Everest. We must be accompanied by a licensed tour guide from the moment we arrive in Lhasa till the last minute of our departure.

When we first arrived at Lhasa, nobody came to meet us. Twenty minutes passed, and we were sweating profusely, not just from the unforgiving sun and heat from the concrete square, but also from the soldiers patrolling around us. We looked suspicious, four foreigners and a Chinese, with musical instruments and heavy bags of flags. In the station and on the train, our passports and permit had been checked and rechecked at least twenty times. Now in Lhasa, the security seemed even tighter. A troop of soldiers approached us. The leader saluted and said, "Ruzangzheng, please."

Our permit to enter Tibet had been confiscated by the security guard at the Lhasa Station. I'd tried to yank it back from his hand. Helen had instructed me repeatedly to keep the permit, at any cost. "No permit, no Tibet!"

"This is no longer valid," the guard said sternly. Seeing the despair in my eyes, he added, "Your guide should be waiting outside with the original permit."

Where was our damn guide? What was I supposed to say to the soldier?

"Welcome, Tashidelek!" a brown man appeared out of nowhere and started throwing Hada scarves around our necks, shouting in English and Tibetan. He waved away the soldiers with his tour guide licence, then turned to us with a big smile. "I'm Tashi, your guide. And this is your driver. He's Tibetan, like me."

Tashi's smile had magic. A few seconds ago, we were annoyed, sweaty, and terrified, but now we were in good spirits. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with spiky black hair, dark brown skin, and a belly pushing from under his t-shirt. He was about my height, short for a Tibetan, and he looked dreamy with his sleepy eyes, but I had a feeling that no one would mess with him. The driver smiled and waved at us, then helped us carry our baggage into the van.

We drove into Lhasa in silence. Tashi gave the driver directions in Tibetan then dozed off in the front seat. This was very different from Helen, who would have given us a detailed plan for the day and the entire trip. For some reason, I trusted Tashi right away, even though he was twenty minutes late, and seemed to ignore his 'duty' as a guide. Soon we reached the edge of Bakor Market in the centre of Lhasa. The driver stopped. Tashi told us to get out.

"Your hotel is inside," he said, pointing to the deep of the bazaar. "No car is allowed beyond this point. We have to walk in."

He led the way without looking back. We tried to keep up as we dragged our trunks through

the cobbled streets and throbbing crowd. Soon we lost him.

“I want Helen back,” cried Alex, the musician from LA.

I looked at him with great sympathy. His face was burning in the sun, his beard drenched by sweat. He’d been the rock star of our group as we travelled along the Yangtze, charming Chinese girls and men with his steel guitar, blue eyes and red beard. Alex the filmmaker and my son Wei remained silent as usual. They looked sleepy and pale. The mid summer sun hadn’t tanned their skin at all. Oliver looked around with his ear-to-ear smile, clicking away with his camera. Thank god I brought him on board at the last minute. He’d been so helpful with hanging flags and carrying baggage and cheering us up. He was the easiest to please and most adventurous when it came to food. Anything delighted him, even cow penis, which he tried in Chongqing when we passed through the Three Gorges.

“Let’s wait here ’til he finds us,” I said to my group. “Let’s be patient. Tashi is not a doting ‘mother’ like Helen, but he may be something else, something greater.”

I was right about the first prediction. When Tashi finally found us wilting away under the glaring sun, he just said, “Oh, you’re here,” and motioned us to follow him again. No apology, no help with the baggage. As soon as we registered in the hotel, he said good night and dashed out.

I grabbed his sleeve. “Wait. Do we have all the papers for tomorrow?”

He looked at me sleepily. “Paper?” Then he slapped his head. “Yes, the permit to Everest! You guys have no problem,” he pointed to my four American teammates.

“It’s all here,” he patted his pouch around his waist. “But I need your *shenfenzheng*, Ping, your residential ID, to get a permit for you to visit Everest.”

I smiled, handing him my passport. “This is my *shenfenzheng*.”

He shook his head. “Passport no longer works. For this year, we need your ID issued by the Chinese government.”

“My passport is issued by the Central Police Station in Beijing, the highest Chinese government. You want to know how many bloody hoops I had to jump through to get this in 1986?”

He shook his head again. “It has to be a residence ID that shows where you live in China, the province, the city, the street, issued by the local police, like this,” he took out a small laminated one, similar to a student ID. “If you’re Chinese, you must have one like this. No?”

“I *am* a Chinese,” I pointed to my dark brown passport that has been renewed three times over twenty-eight years, by the Chinese Consulates in NYC and Chicago.

“Then we can’t go to Everest,” he said, whipping out his cell phone. “I’ll see if you can get some refund from the travel agency.”

I heard a silent moan in unison. I turned to my group and saw their pinched faces. We’d been travelling for two weeks, from the mouth of the Yangtze through the hot, flooded Three Gorges to the no-man’s land of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, enduring diarrhoea, flu, hunger, constipation, altitude sickness, and sleep deprivation, just for a peek of the highest mountain on earth. “You’ll forget all the pain once we get there,” I told them repeatedly as I prodded them on. “It’s worth every penny and pain.”

“We shall go,” I turned to Tashi, stone-faced, “with, or without the permit.”

His eyes opened. My words awoke him from his sleep mode. We stared at each other.

“Hello, hello, this is Bean. Speak up, Tashi. What’s up now? Are you even there?” A woman’s voice rushed from Tashi’s phone, fast and hard like bullets. Bean, our travel agent? I’d spoken with her a dozen times from the USA, when I tried to negotiate fees with her. She sounded nothing like this shrew. In fact, I picked her because of her sweet voice.

Tashi covered the cell between his palms. “We have to go through six checkpoints: Dingri entrance and midway, and the Everest Base Camp, and three more on the way back. We can beg and bribe the soldiers to let us through. The chances are slim. I tried for a couple from Australia. Same thing: only passports but no ID. Actually they got a temporary residence ID through our agency, but the soldiers wouldn’t acknowledge them. They saved ten years for this trip, flew all the way from Melbourne, spent three days in a car to Dingri, enduring headaches, nausea, insomnia ... and the soldiers refused to hear their story or take their money. They cried all the way back to Lhasa.”

He looked at me ponderously. “Are you willing to take that risk?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

A flicker of light animated his dark brown eyes. He was fully awake now. Bean was shouting profanities, her voice muffled between his palms. My eyes opened wide. I would never have imagined such dirty words coming out of Bean’s mouth. Tashi picked up the phone with his thumb and forefinger, as if picking up a dried piece of turd, then shut it with a flip of his wrist.

“Very well, then. I shall see you tomorrow at 9 am.”

He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared. I tried to recall his facial features, the clothes and shoes he wore, but all I could get was the light flickering from his sleepy eyes then vanishing into a dark brown face.

I turned to my group. “Guys, we may have found a snow leopard.”

“This is a suicide walk. Can’t we think of a better solution?” I look at Tashi in despair. At the bottom of my heart, I know there’s no other way.

“We can still return to Lhasa,” he says. “We’ll be driving in the dark.”

I shake my head. We’ve climbed over two humongous mountains to get here, along a treacherous road filled with potholes made by streams of water rushing down from the cliff on the left, washing over the road, then over the cliff on the right. The road is too narrow for two cars. When our tire popped and the driver spent twenty-five minutes changing the tire, we created a huge traffic jam. Tashi woke up from his doze and helped for the first time. He worked intensely, never looking up at the honking trucks or shouting drivers until we fixed the tire. The potholes rattled our bones, and our heads hurt as if hammered by mallets. We were held together only by the promise that we’d see the summit and hang our flags on the roof of the earth. Even Wei, who’s been sick and sleeping in his seat for the past eight days since we entered the Tibet Plateau, has woken up. The summit is calling him, too. I can’t let them down. Not here, not now, not after I slipped through the heavily guarded Dingri checkpoint, walking two miles alone in the sizzling sun, my heart racing at my throat, ready to be shot down with each step. We are already here, at the base camp. We can see the summit, almost, if the clouds clear up, if I would just walk through the checkpoint, through the death field.

“Hat and jacket, please,” whispers Tashi. “Your white hat was the most conspicuous thing on the Dingri Highway. I could see it miles away, almost died from holding my breath.”

So he was worried. Would I have felt less terrified and abandoned had he let me know? Will he be watching me perform this third miracle?

I peel off the knock-off Mountaineer hat I bought in Lhasa for the Everest trip. I’m not going to argue with him about the hat, but the jacket? “I’ll be frozen to death without it,” I murmur as I unzip slowly. The temperature is dropping fast as night approaches the base camp. Why on earth did I buy the flaming red fleece instead of the brown one from Patagonia on Grand Avenue, St Paul? Ah yes, I wanted something light for the 3,915 mile journey along the Yangtze, something warm and flashy at the same time for the frigid air at the 17,060 feet altitude of Everest. The six foot four tall red-haired sales man picked it off the rack and handed it to me with a big smile: “You won’t regret having this.”

“Camera,” Tashi reaches out his other hand.

“Shouldn’t it help, if I say I’m a tourist?”

“Not unless you want to lose your Canon 5D and the photos.”

I am shivering. My head feels light, my body weightless without my Canon.

“Your purse.”

“No!” I clutch it to my chest. It holds my passport, green card, driver’s licence, and my sons’ photos. “I need them, just in case I get ... ”

“No, you don’t. If they catch you, you’ll tell them you’re alone. You don’t know me, or anybody in our group. Our paper doesn’t even have your name, see?” He lifts the permits for my son, Alex Wand, Alex Howard, and Oliver St John. If they shoot you, you don’t want to bring us down together with you, right?”

I can’t believe my ears. Is this for real? This sounds too much like those illegal Chinese charging through US customs at the airport to declare political asylum. Before their crossing, the snakehead, their ringleader, strips them of all documents and IDs, so the US government can’t send them back to where they are from. I’ve helped them appeal their cases to the judges from local to federal courts. I’ve written many poems to broadcast their stories. Now it’s my turn to be nameless. And what an irony, considering how I’ve sneaked Americans into Tibet since 1994! I’ve remained a Chinese citizen all these years so that I can travel here without the need of a permit!

“Tell me why I don’t know you?” I ask. I just want to hear him confirm the answer I already know.

“Because I don’t want go to jail for ten years, or if I’m lucky, lose my licence and never find a job again as a guide. I can wash dishes if I were ten years younger without a family, but my daughter is growing up fast. I want her to go to a boarding school in the mainland, like the rest of the Tibetan kids, to get a better education and perhaps a better chance to go to college in America, like you. But she’ll get citizenship, unlike you.”

He gazes at the bare mountains under the grey sky and the military tents along the roadside. “Everyone is looking for a way out. The ice is melting. The leopard is gone. There’s nothing left for us any more.” He turns to me, eyes red. “Why do you keep coming back, Ping? Why still cling to the brown passport so long, so stubborn?”

I am speechless. I wish I could answer this question myself. Since my first book *American Visa*, my publisher has been pleading with me to become an American citizen so they can nominate my books for awards. My friends are worried that my big mouth may lead to my deportation back to China some day. My family, my ex-family? Aiden is married now with his ideal woman: a blonde who worships the ground his feet touch. They live in the house I redesigned and renovated, the garden I built on my hands and knees, but we pass each other on the street as if we were strangers. My sons, my half-Chinese and half-Jewish sons, do they know their mother is still a Chinese citizen? Wei turned sixteen on the day we entered Tibet, and told his father on the phone that it was his worst birthday ever, and when he goes back home he only wants to enjoy American life: video games, pizza, and burgers.

I look at the sky, so low and wet that I could grab it and wring water out of the clouds. I look at the mountains, tall and naked like newborn giants, streams gushing down their brown cheeks like tears. Nothing seems to have changed since I stepped on the plateau in 1992, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013. I've come here whenever I had money and time, by myself, with Lewis, Aiden, and now this group. I know nothing ever remains the same, even for the tallest mountain on earth. As India keeps pushing it up from below, Everest continues to grow, 2.6 inches a year. Yet this strange familiar sense of coming home, of belonging, has never changed.

"I was born here, many times," I whisper to Tashi. "This is your home, also mine. There's something for us as long as the mountain stands and the water runs."

Tashi says nothing, but his sparkling eyes say everything. He cups my elbow in his palm. Heat enters my heart meridian along my inner arm. He's blessing me, his brown face red and sweaty from the transfer of energy. Blood surges through my heart, now beating at a steadier, slower pace, like the hearts of Tibetans and Sherpas that know how to extract oxygen from the thin air and use it at the maximum efficiency.

I hand over my purse to Tashi and look back to the other side of the checkpoint. Our grey van waits at the end of the line. May angels blindfold Wei's eyes so that he won't see my crossing. Would they also blindfold the soldiers?

"Do not fear, Ping, you've got Tara's hand over the evil eye." Tashi whispers as he puts a bottle in my hand. "Sometimes the most dangerous place is the safest."

With a gentle push, he delivers me into the field.

§

How thin is the air at Everest?

At the base camp, 5,400 metres (17,500 feet), the air has about 50% oxygen. You feel dizzy, nauseous, sleepy. Your head hurts like being pounded by hammers. You gasp for air. You vomit everything you eat, then vomit your guts. At Camp One, 6,100 metres (20,000 feet), the oxygen level drops further, reaching 40% at Camp Three, 7,400 metres (24,000 feet). You hallucinate. You hurt everywhere. You can't breathe, eat, or sleep. But you keep walking, one step at a time, after long, painful gasps. You go on with sheer willpower. When you reach near the summit, 8,850 metres (29,035 feet), the air has less than one-third oxygen, and it can drop as low as 14%, as recorded in the 1996 snowstorm that killed twenty climbers. You should have dropped dead, but you keep going.

Above 8,000 metres (26,000 feet), the mountain is an open graveyard where one hundred bodies have mummified in foetal positions, face up, face down, sitting, hanging upside down. Among them is George Mallory, who disappeared into the clouds in 1924. Those who tried to take the bodies down never returned themselves. Above 8,000 metres, you use far more oxygen

than you breathe in. Every step you take, you need five minutes to rest. Your body is so starved of air that it eats itself for survival. First, it cuts off the blood to your hands and feet, causing frostbite then gangrene, even though you need them desperately to hang onto the rope as you climb the vertical ice in the jet stream wind. After the extremities go, your blood stops flowing to your guts and liver, just so your lungs can keep grabbing for air, your heart pumping blood to the brain to keep it nimble in the haze of hallucination. Any mistake—a wrong step in the ice, a missed buckle of your rope, a hesitation of your will to keep moving—you'll be dead, and you should have been dead long ago, with so little oxygen in your blood, PO₂ at the level 3.5, about one-tenth of the normal and less than half than the patients in intensive care. Above 8,000 metres, Mount Everest is the death zone.

§

“Breathe, breathe, breathe ... step ... breathe, breathe, breathe ... step,” I chant silently as I baby-walk past the guards, into the naked field, my back wide open to their QBZ-95 rifles. Tashi says they have a much greater accuracy. My knees buckle with each step. The entire Everest is sitting on my shoulders. My heart beats madly to send some blood, now blue from lack of oxygen, to my brain. My brain has become a sea of sticky phlegm. How do I cough the phlegm out of my eyes? My mouth is raw, stuffed with burning sand from the Golmud Desert, the giant sand dune we tried to climb barefoot, three days ago. Pain seeps through my soles and heels, reaching all the way to my scalp. My organs are on fire. I jump like a bean, trying to get away from the boiling dune, but I'm stuck in the middle. Going up or going down, I'll be boiled alive in the sand. I need water, but my hands shake too much to open the thermos. Why did Tashi give me this? He didn't allow me to carry water when I trekked two miles on the Dingri Highway in the afternoon sun, when the temperature in the Valley reached over 110 F. Here at 5,200 metres higher, where temperature has dropped below thirty, my neon-red fleece would have kept me alive, not this damn thermos, cold and slick and steely like the oxygen tanks scattered among rocks and corpses in the death zone. I am cradling the bottle I can't open. *Freeze, Ping, freeze*, a voice screams from below, inside, above. *Another step, they'll see you. Go back to the checkpoint, back to your son, before they shoot you down in front of his eyes. He just turned sixteen, and your younger one is about to turn fourteen, waiting for you to call to say Happy Birthday. Turn around, Ping! You can't die, not yet.*

§

“I know exactly what you want,” the Sea Witch rasps, her voice *far and near*. “It is very foolish of you ... for it will bring nothing but grief, pain, loneliness ... are you willing to suffer all this?”

“Keep going,” yells the guard at the Potala Palace, shoving me across the threshold. “No loiter or return beyond this point.”

“The longest and most painful journey is to know yourself,” whispers Tashi, his sleepy eyes wide open under the stupa of the fifth Dalai Lama, which contains 20,000 diamonds and gems,

and a thumb of Sakyamuni, the Supreme Buddha. “You’ll die many deaths along the way, but it’s the only way for your rebirth, away from the wheel of desire and attachment.”

§

Feet sticky, as if the ground were paved with magic glue. A miracle I’m still walking, after so many deaths. Mother’s wrath, sister’s tongue, my awkward stubbornness, loneliness, the Cultural Revolution, exile on a farm at fourteen, first love, marriage falling apart during the honeymoon, NYC with twenty-six dollars in my pocket, ten homes during the first eight months, Allen’s yelling for Buddha, poetry, first book, PhD, first son, first loft overlooking the Mississippi, birth of the second son, full-time teaching three weeks after, torn birth canal.

“Just be quiet and do it,” says the Chair, “we’ve all gone through this, in silence.”

“And what’s the fuss about sleeping with girls in Amsterdam? It’s just a handshake, a business transaction,” says the Father.

“No, you are not good enough for promotion,” says the Provost, “just not good enough for us.”

The mountain looms like a tower, underneath, bones, fossils, molten rocks, temperature reaching 1,300 Celsius.

§

In the death zone, the mind enters another space and time.

Thumb in my belt, unbuckled. If the soldiers see me, I’ll squat and tell them I have to pee and there’s no bathroom around. This is the land Aiden walked with me seventeen years ago, with our tent and sleeping bags, with the beautiful Sherpa we met at the base camp. He carried our bags, singing, laughing, chain-smoking and leaping ahead of us like a mountain goat, and we watched from behind, gasping, stumbling forward inch by inch. We hitch-hiked our way to the base camp in a military jeep, sharing our beef jerky with the officers. No permit was needed then. We could walk and photograph free like birds. Aiden was jealous. The Sherpa was too friendly. We had a fight in NYC, and we didn’t know if the trip would be our first or last. The Living Buddha from Lhasa blessed us: “Everything will be okay upon your return.” And soon Wei was born, then Di. Now I’m on the same path again, alone, with my group on the other side of the checkpoint, my son waiting to follow our path to Everest.

Keep walking, Ping, do not look back.

§

“You’re lying, Ping,” said Aiden’s father. The room was silent like a grave. The whole clan had gathered there in the family’s condo, father, step-mother, sisters and brother and in-laws, gathering to make peace and harmony. No one said a word.

I looked at him. Where did the accusation come from? I had rushed here for this meeting hosted by the expert who promised to put the family back together. Aiden's father complained he had spent a fortune to fly his children from east and west. I had told Aiden I'd be an hour late. I had an appointment with INS in St Paul to do my fingerprints, scheduled a year ahead of time. All went smoothly, but my heart was heavy when I left the office. Soon they'd call me in for the pledge, and I'd no longer be Chinese.

"I called the college. It's closed for Good Friday. No class."

"I know," I said, blood receding from my head as anger gathered in my liver.

"So why are you an hour late?" he said triumphantly. His wife beamed as she anticipated a drama.

I shot a glance at Aiden, then the family specialist. Aiden hanged his head. The specialist's eyes were glazed over. Both had chosen not to hear or see.

I lifted my ink-smearred hands. "I did my fingerprints at the immigration office. I told Aiden to tell you that I'd be an hour late for the meeting."

"Aha," Aiden's father smiled, exchanging a look with his wife. "I knew you'd say it. So we called the immigration office. The phone rang and rang, and nobody picked it up, which could only mean one thing: CLOSED for Good Friday!"

I laughed. INS doesn't observe Good Friday. Did he know phone calls to INS are never answered? Not enough staff to handle the incoming calls. But of course, how would he know, three generations away from his great-grandparents who sailed to NYC from Russia? Did he know how many circles lined around the INS building at 26 Federal Plaza? Did he ever stand twenty-four hours in line just to pick up an application form?

Aiden's father and step-mother beamed at each other as if they had just caught a petty thief red-handed, and from now on, the thief would never dare to show her annoying face again.

I took out an envelope from my bag. It had an American flag stamp on the right upper corner. Inside was the citizenship application. Everything was ready: proof of my immigration status, history, jobs, property, physical exams, fingerprints. It took two years to put all the documents together, to wait for the INS stamps, to wait for the quota. Everything was ready except for the photo of my face, which I had delayed for no reason. Had I had the photo ready, the immigration bureau would have kept the paperwork, and in a month, I'd be a US citizen. The paper had today's date and stamp. This would prove my innocence.

Then it dawned on me. He and his wife had called both my college and immigration office to catch me as a liar in front of the whole 'family', which was not mine. No word or paperwork would change their conviction.

I looked at Aiden. For ten years I'd served him as a girlfriend, wife, mother, chef, manager, travel guide, cleaner, gardener, house designer and remodeler. Would he say a word to lift me out of this humiliation?

"Why did you wait so long, girl?" chided the agent who pressed my inked fingers one by one on the paper. "You've been eligible for citizenship fifteen years. What kept you?"

"I've been busy, and moved around a lot," I murmured.

I scanned the room. It smelled rancid. It smelled of fear. Fear of what? The alien invasion? I lifted my chest. I was the tallest in the room. Aiden insisted he was taller, five foot seven, even though he was five-five. My sons, nine and seven, already showed signs that they would be over six feet, towering over their father, grandfather, aunts, and uncles.

I'm an intruder, with the tall-man genes from my mother's side.

Aiden buried his head between his knees. Was he reciting the prayer from the Torah that he'd never be born as a woman?

I smiled the smile Aiden had begged for at the monthly family gathering.

"Would you smile, Ping, please? It'd make things so much easier. You don't have to carry the world on your shoulders all the time."

I raised the envelope and tore it into pieces. Scraps of white paper fell around my feet like confetti. Some had my black fingerprints, some bore the red ink from the INS approval.

§

Who am I?

A question I've been asking since my first memory.

"You're a girl, and please act like one," said Grandma, her deformed feet bound in bandages.

"You're a ghost," said Mother, still dreaming of college at age seventy.

"Wish you were a boy," sighed Father in his bed, alcoholic liver rotting with cancer.

"You want to write poetry with your sixth-grade English and get published?" said Danny from McGill. "Well, you have a better chance to win the lottery, or go to heaven, or get hit by lightning."

"You got the NEA because you're Chinese," said Larry when I told him about my National Endowment for the Arts award.

"Look at me, Ping," said Soek-Fang, coming to my dreams during my suit against the college

where I had taught since 1999. “You must not die like me, in silence, alone. Too many bones lie under the ivory tower. Bring it down, and lift us out of the white dust.”

“Do you know, Ping, when we were in China, how many Chinese men pulled me to the side and warned me about you?” said Jim. “They assure me that you’re not a women, definitely not a Chinese women.”

“狂,” said John Li, who guided our international seminar in Shanghai. He gave us seal chops as souvenirs. Everyone got a nice word: wisdom, peace, beauty. I was given *kuang*: crazed, arrogant, maverick—the worst insult a Chinese person could unleash on another Chinese.

“Fly, Ping, fly,” said Professor Xi, the legendary gymnastic coach from Beijing University, as she threw me onto the uneven bars without warning. “If your heart sees the stars, your body will grow wings.” When I got off the bars, she invited me to join her team. After one month’s crash training, I got my first gold medal for the Beijing University gymnastic team.

Professor Xi opened my wings at age twenty-one, and I’ve been flying since.

“Fierce and fearless,” said Louise Erdrich, securing a porcupine pin to my hair at her Birchbark bookstore.

§

It’s drizzling. Everything is grey, cold, wet. *If your heart sees the stars, your body will grow wings.* I set my eyes on Rongbuk Monastery, the highest temple on earth. Behind the stupa and prayer flags, Everest looms in the rain. My eyes can’t see, but my heart feels its pull, my ears hear its call, and my nose smells its scent. People are pulled to Everest, over and over again, at great pains and cost, including their lives, by the scent of mountains and water in the thin air, the scent of stardust from the big bang.

Is this why I am here, why *we* are here? Is this why I hang onto my Chinese passport? For this smell, invisible, inaudible, untouchable, and unspeakable, yet stuck in my skin, blood, and genes since I stepped on this land?

No word can describe what’s passing through my mind and flesh.

For every step, you gasp fifteen breaths to squeeze some oxygen from the air.

Of every fifteen people who reach the summit, one of them never returns.

How have you lived, Ping, all these years? You’re not supposed to be alive with so little oxygen in your blood, so little nutrients in your stomach, while carrying so much on your back. Aiden is right. You do carry the world on your shoulders, and it’s too much for him. He wants a wife, a traditional wife who cleans and cooks and keeps her mouth shut, not a fighter with a chip on her shoulder.

Keep walking, Ping, said Tashi. Once you pass the line, there's no return.

Rongbuk Monastery is only forty yards away. I'll be safe in a few more steps.

§

“Hey, you,” says a voice, “what are you doing here? Where's your guide? Your permit?”

I freeze. The voice seems to come from all directions, front, back, right, left, above. It's firm and authoritative, but not vicious. Is he pointing his rifle at me? Can I turn my head to look? Then I'll have to turn my whole body because my neck is stiff with pain as if it were fused with a steel rod.

Stand still, or they'll shoot.

“What's your name?” he asks, more gently as if he doesn't want to scare me.

I open my eyes. He's been right in front of me, the whole time. I didn't see him because my eyes were closed. He's still in his teens, a hint of moustache on his upper lip, a shiny rifle on his shoulder. He inspects me with more curiosity than ferocity, like a scientist inspecting an alien from another star.

I point to the monastery with my shaking hand, teeth clattering. “My guide and friends are inside praying. I have to pee, but the toilet is too gross, so I came here.”

How grateful I am to Tashi for stripping my jacket and purse! Now I look like a normal tourist who sneaks out for a clean toilet. That explains why I don't have my jacket, camera, or purse with me.

“Oh, no, I'm sorry,” I slap my head. “My guide told me I'm not supposed to pee outside, especially at the sacred ground. Am I in trouble?”

He smiles. “Yeah, the toilet does stink beyond tolerance. What's this?” He points to my metal bottle.

I turn pale. The bottle looks like a bomb, and feels cold like a bomb.

“It's a bottle.” I hand it to him. “My guide gave me this.”

He takes it, weighs it in his hand, then brings it to his nose.

“It's just water,” I say, suddenly remembering the scene. “We got it from a spring on the way here. It's hidden under the road and rocks. Our tire popped there and we had to stop and change it. That's how we discovered the hidden spring.” I smile as I remember how excited Tashi was. “Our guide emptied our bottles and containers then filled them with the water. He said it's sacred water from the Rongbuk Glacier. Tibetans and Sherpa travel far to fetch the water for

special events, ceremonies.”

I check myself. Tashi also said the government ordered the soldiers to seal the spring with concrete and steel, because they don't want too many pilgrims near the base camp. That's also why they won't repair the road.

The soldier has opened the bottle, face red from the effort. He's inhaling its scent.

“Please help yourself,” I say. “I haven't touched it. I couldn't open it.”

He takes a sip, nods, then hands back the bottle, as if he were passing weed.

“You,” he says, making a drinking gesture with his hand.

I take a sip. It glides down my throat like an ice cube coated with honey, soothing my inflamed lungs, heart and liver. For the first time since I enter Tibet, I can breathe. I will bring a bottle back to America, I tell myself, if I can survive this.

Survive? No, we're sharing water from the same bottle like friends. I look at the soldier in disbelief. He's supposed to interrogate me, arrest me, yet he's taking my bottle for the second time, drinking the liquid contaminated with my saliva.

Suddenly I understand why Tashi handed me the bottle, why he closed the cover so tightly. He wanted the 'soldier' to have the first taste.

“What's your name?” I ask.

“Tashi,” he says. “From Nagqu.”

I laugh. “Tashi, good fortune from the Black River. I've been there, in 2007 and 2008. I was following the train, to find out what the railroad brings to the nomads, and the winter worm trade. I almost died from the altitude sickness in Nagqu. Actually I was weakened by diarrhoea from the contaminated water. Floods broke into the sewerage system. Why Black River? It's more brown with angry currents, like a mad dragon.”

What am I doing? Why are words pouring out of me like a spring? This man is supposed to be my enemy. He's supposed to check my permit, my ID, then arrest me. Yet, he's smiling and nodding as if he agreed with everything I say.

“How long have you been away from home?” I ask.

“A year, too long.” He looks beyond the looming mountains, to the north, where his home is, Nagqu, Qiangtang Highland. Surrounded by the Kunlun, the Tanggula and Ganddis mountains, the highest grassland on earth spreads 600,000 square kilometres, 4,000 metres above sea level, frozen in wind and snow for eight or nine months in a year. It's a no-man's zone, except for the wandering Tibetan nomads, and because of that, it is a paradise for animals: wild donkeys,

yaks, white-lipped deer, and most beloved of all, chiru, Tibetan antelopes. There used to be over a million of them running wild in the grass, giving birth at the same time, blood turning lakes red, sky darkened by birds snatching up placentas. But the train brought poachers hunting Tibetan antelopes for its under-wool to weave shahtoosh, shawls that sell for thousands of dollars each, symbolising wealth, luxury, and class, shawls that have driven chiru into near-extinction. The train also brings nomads digging for winter worms, followed by Hui merchants, the roots shaped like worms that are believed to increase men's sex power, yet its harvesting is turning the grassland into a desert. The train awakens the plateau with desire, changing it deeper and faster than any other force: guns and cannons and laws: mountains bought and blown up for mining, houses and buildings rising, roads extending, oil, gold, and minerals taken out of Tibet daily, and thousands of tourists and migrants pouring in. Yet the nomads can no longer roam with their cattle. The government nailed them to the land, easier to manage, easier to control. Grass becomes thinner each year, as the land gets no rest from grazing. Cattle shrink. Rodents thrive. Land becomes desert. Cattle die. Nomads starve. They dig winter worm herbs for a living, turning more grassland into desert.

Is that why he's here, guarding Everest, the nomad's son from Black River?

I know the story, his and others. I've visited their homes, drunk their yak butter tea.

He knows. That's why he's not demanding my permit. That's why he's not pointing his rifle at me. That's why we're chatting like humans.

"Why so many Chinese at the base camp?" I ask. "Last time I was here, it was mainly Sherpa and mountain climbers from Europe."

He smiles mischievously like Tashi the guide. "Chinese pay big money to see the summit, but very few got to see it, because of the monsoon. You see the summit in fall and winter. That's when the foreigners come. They pay attention. But Chinese? They are worms: stay in holes in winter, and crawl out in summer."

We laugh. I'm supposed to be mad, being Chinese, being called a 'worm', but truth is exhilarating if you let go of the ego. I am a worm, a laughing worm.

§

The sun comes out. In the immense blue, Everest shows its white face.

We stare at the sublime. It blinds our eyes. But we don't care. We don't have a choice but to gaze.

"You bring the light," says Tashi the soldier, looking at me, the peak, me again. "The sun is not supposed to shine. No one has seen the peak for six weeks. Nobody expects to see it in the monsoon season."

He pauses, then asks, “Who are you?”

I am a worm, I want to say, jokingly, but my tongue is tied.

Then I hear her, from the summit 8,848 metres above sea level, from the 37,000 glaciers, tumbling, dancing, laughing and screaming her way into the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Yangtze, Mekong, Yellow, into the mouths of the Arabian Sea, Bengal Bay, East and South China Sea, Gulf of Yellow Sea ... I hear her meandering out of the snow and wild rice from Lake Itasca, through the most fertile land of North America, into the Gulf, nursing billions of people, nursing trees, plants, fish, birds, animals, rains, snow, wind along her paths.

She is matrix of life, dissolving, balancing, transporting nutrients.

She is equaliser, solvent, conductor, cleanser, life and death all at once.

She wraps 75% of the earth.

She makes 75% of us: bones, muscles, blood, organs, tendons, hair, brain.

She’s a trickster, forever moving and shifting, up, down, circle, gas, liquid, ice.

She welcomes everything with open arms, no judgement or grudge.

No border, dam, or politics can stop her flowing to the sea.

Nobody can own her: money, power, greed.

Nothing can destroy her: herbicide, pesticide, fracking.

This precious thing, most abundant on earth, so old and young, so abused ...

Yet never giving up, making life on earth, and if we’re careless, she drowns a few, to remind us of our origin.

She makes us. She is us.

“I am water,” I want to say, but my tongue is tied, my mouth dry. I am weak.

Tashi hands me the bottle. I reach. Our hands touch. The bottle is open like an O. O is for oxygen, cradled in our hands. Hands are for hydrogen. Two hydrogen molecules hold one oxygen; two rivers—the Yangtze and Mississippi—hug the Pacific under Everest, keeping peace, keeping life, keeping this world together. One drop of water may be nothing. But two, two hundred, two million, two trillion drops of water make a stream, a river, a sea, a planet.

“We’re water,” I whisper.

Tashi laughs. His laughter roars with the glaciers gushing down the Everest. In the thunder of

joy, I see my people start crossing the checkpoint, Alex Wand with his National Guitar, Alex Howard with his camera, Oliver St John with his sketch pad and pen, and my son Wei, who has been sick from the altitude and cold, lifts his camera for the first time since he entered Tibet, his eyes sparkling, his nostrils flaring with excitement.

Everest lights up every soul who lays eyes on her.

I hear Allen Ginsberg fly across the mountains, uttering cries half-human half-bird.

Wang Ping was born in China and came to the US in 1986. Her publications of poetry and prose include American Visa, Foreign Devil, Of Flesh and Spirit, New Generation: Poetry from China Today, Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China, The Magic Whip, The Dragon Emperor, The Last Communist Virgin, and Flashcards: Poems by Yu Jian. She won the Eugene Kayden Award for the Best Book in Humanities and is the recipient of NEA, the Bush Artist Fellowship for poetry, the McKnight Fellowship for non-fiction, and many others. She received her Distinct Immigrant Award in 2014, and Venezuela International Poet of Honour in 2015. She's also a photographer and installation artist; her multimedia exhibitions include [Behind the Gate: After the Flood of the Three Gorges](#) and [Kinship of Rivers](#) at schools, colleges, galleries, museums, lock and dams, and confluences along the Mississippi River. She is professor of English at Macalester College, and founder and director of the Kinship of Rivers project. www.wangping.com.

Goddess Distemper

by Gavin Yates

In your apartment
you draw some
thing

you've never seen before:
the hanging grape ivy

animated
by a yawning window.

It could be two-thirty a.m.
and wet with sunlight.

Gavin Yates is a doctoral candidate with Monash University. His poetry has featured in Cordite Poetry Review, Snorkel, Verge, and Westerly, among others. He is co-editing Verge 2017 (Monash UP).

Lunches and Liability

by *Lauren Floyd*

I went into the eighth-floor break room of Network Infinite, took out my Tupperware container with ‘Evan Dovers’ written right on the lid, sat down, and opened it up to find ... nothing. It was empty. Someone had eaten my lunch and put the empty container back in the fridge. I was shocked, but it wasn’t a big deal. It was probably a mistake, right? But when it happened a couple more times that week, I started to get a little annoyed. I had been putting my name directly on top, so the chance that it could be unintentional flew out the window. Now I feel like I’m a pretty easy-going, unassuming person, and I never asked for much from my workplace. Did I daydream about what things might be like if I was doing literally anything besides recording customer service reports all day? Sure I did. That huge building was like a stimuli graveyard, and every pale blue, symmetrical cubicle was a different cemetery plot. But at least the job was something. It was stable; I already had it. I just had to live with doing the same thing over and over and over ... so when work felt like an absolute drudge, it was nice to go eat in the break room and think, “Hey, this is something else I can do with my time here.” With each empty container, someone was taking my break from that away, sending me back to an ocean of pointless forms, and I had no idea who would be that cruel. Then I walk in to the break room one day, and this cloud of terrible cologne overtakes me. I’m trying to figure out who released poison gas into the room we’re supposed to relax in, and who do I see but Roger Stansen, fumigating the room with the mere smell of his body spray and ferociously scarfing down my lunch.

Roger is the actual, physical and spiritual embodiment of overcompensation. It’s kind of impressive. You almost want to help him, tell him that that kind of presence probably doesn’t go over well with sales clients, but being around him for too long is like being in a room full of rotting food. It’s overpowering, seeps into everything, and makes you want to shower after a significant period of time. I’ve really got no clue how he got a job here. He works on my floor, and whenever he’s at work, he tries to make sure that everyone knows he’s there. And you know what? I did such a great job of not caring. There will always be Rogers out there, and for the most part, I chose to just ignore it and let him do his own thing.

But that was *my* lunch. I had to say something.

“Hey Roger, sorry to stop you, but I’m pretty sure that’s my food.”

He turned slightly, still not really facing me. “Sorry about that, just needed a quick-me-up.”

I moved closer, trying to force his attention on me. “But you see, that’s *mine*; I brought it, so I own it. And when someone else owns something, Roger, you can’t just decide that it’s yours. Have you been stealing it this whole time?”

“You know how it is, a guy’s just got to do what he needs to for survival. It’s the law of the

jungle. You're a sloth, and I'm a lion. If a scrawny, blank-eyed, dull-haired, pale little guy like you can't get to your own food first, then stronger guys like me will. We're entitled to it at that point. Keeps the universe in balance."

"... wait, what? You think the universe depends on you taking my leftovers?"

"It's the natural order of life. Think about it. Catch you later, Evan."

With that, he stood up, stuck the empty container in my hands, clapped me on the back, and strolled out of the break room.

I called after him, "And for the record, I'm not scrawny, I'm average. Normal people aren't made of steroids and hair bleach, but I can see how you'd be confused. Jerk." I stood there in the empty room, filled with pounding silence and the distant clicking of keyboards and ringing of telephones. I didn't want to go back to my desk and those reports. Anything but that.

I tried to go to the human resources representative, Marjory, to let her know what was going on, but wouldn't you know it, that little ray of sunshine was less than helpful. I told her everything that happened and offered to fill out a form about the incident. I knew it was a bit of a long shot, since she had this weird appreciation of Roger that made absolutely no sense. He probably could have sucker-punched me, and she'd still find a way to get him out of it on a technicality. But hey, I still had to try. Her eyes were glazed over with a fine layer of apathy, the kind you can only get from seeing all of the same types of people complain about the same types of problems on an endless loop. It was the kind that could snap a person and make them hungry for either blood or a nap. She asked me, "Has Roger assaulted you, Evan?"

"What? No, he's just stealing from me."

She looked back down at her desk and flipped aimlessly through some empty files. "When he 'stole' from you, did he threaten you?"

"No, I don't think so. He's just obnoxious, and it's insulting to have someone eat your lunch in front of you."

"Did he do anything to put the company at a liability?"

"I guess not—"

"Then I'm sorry, but I'm very busy, and I don't time to work out minor disputes like that. I really need to get back to work."

"But it's your job to take care of stuff like this!"

"And it's your job to submit reports, not to stand here harassing me. You get up every morning and choose to be a part of this office, and so you need to make a better effort to find satisfaction in what you're doing instead of picking fights over your lunch like a third grader.

Now again, if you'll excuse me."

"You know that none of those files you're looking at have anything in them, right?"

"Goodbye, Mr Dovers."

From then on, it didn't matter what I said or how I tried to avoid the inevitable. Roger always managed to steal my food. I even starting trying to hide it, but he was a bloodhound! He would eat so quickly that I never had a prayer of saving it. That was when it hit me: he was eating my lunch so quickly that there was no possible way that he was fully realising what he was eating. I mean, he hardly looked at the food, and each bite probably didn't even touch his tongue. So it didn't matter what I put in my containers, Roger would eat it. I realised at that point that I had a few choices: I could keep trying to confront Roger about the food, which would probably go nowhere. I could keep trying to file complaints with Marjory, but the chances of her stonewalling me at every turn and putting my job stability at risk were pretty high. Or, I could take matters into my own hands and have a little fun. If I made him *special* lunches every day in my containers, then he'd devour them all, wouldn't even be able to tell what food it was, and I'd have the satisfaction of watching a grown man eat whatever I wanted him to. Maybe he'd get some killer indigestion from it.

Roger stealing my food became the best excuse that I ever had to clean out my fridge. It was a great way to get a bit of revenge. Every day I'd bring in a new concoction of the weirdest stuff that I could throw together. Pears with cheese and teriyaki sauce; oatmeal with beef chunks; enchiladas filled with strawberry jelly—Roger would eat it all without batting an eye.

So one morning, I get to work with a wad of peanut butter stuffed into some lasagne and try to push my way through this huge crowd in the lobby. Network Infinite was changing over their security system supplier to this new group, Infratech, and were prepping to get rid of the existing cameras and their footage at 1 pm for the changeover. After seeing the flood of maintenance workers being briefed by Infratech consultants, I wondered if Roger would even show up that day. He might see all of the people and decide he could ditch work without being noticed. I get up to my floor, drop off Roger's food in the fridge, start passing through the rows to my cubicle, and there's Roger by the water fountain chatting up a new intern; looks like he decided to come to work after all. He was clearly telling her some kind of story that she wasn't impressed with, but he wasn't taking the hint. It was like watching a sub-par Michael Jackson impersonator in Times Square who won't stop thrusting and screeching at a tourist who is just looking for directions. He changed his stance, gave her a disgusting-looking smirk, and I could see a noticeable bulge by his pocket. She had a look on her face that said she was waiting for the sweet release of death, and I really couldn't blame her. Needless to say, I said a quick prayer for the girl's sanity and slipped into my cubicle.

The work day itself was pretty usual, until a particular conversation I had with Lisa, the girl in my neighbouring cubicle. I had told her a bit about the lunches I'd been setting up for Roger in the past, and we were chatting before my break started.

She asked me, “Did you see that Roger cornered another intern today?”

“I saw them on my way in. She was probably wondering what kind of terrible karma she had racked up that caused her to be trapped with that oompa loopa.”

She laughed, “His tan does seem a little intense this week ... but I’m sure she’ll be fine. When Roger does stuff like that, it’s always pretty clear that he’s just trying to hit on himself. He’s not really one for listening to other people.” Lisa then turned to face me. “So, I remember that you were telling me about that new job for an advertising writer that opened up across town. Did you end up applying?”

I shifted a bit in my seat so that I wasn’t looking her in the eye. “Yeah, that ... I just don’t know. I mean, they’ll probably get so many applicants, and maybe I should just keep looking for something perfect before I give this paycheck up ... ”

“Oh ... okay ... I guess that makes sense ... ” Silence hung in the air for a little too long, and she mercifully scrambled to change the subject. “So, what’s on the menu for today?”

“Lasagne stuffed with peanut butter. I had lasagne a couple nights ago, and I’m trying to clear it out of my fridge. May as well let Roger finish off my leftovers.”

“Oh, well I’m sure he wouldn’t eat *that* from you.”

“Trust me, he will. They guy has zero respect for boundaries, and you haven’t seen how he can put food away. He’s like an animal.”

“No, I mean he has this intense peanut allergy. He mentioned it to me once. We had to fill out new health insurance forms, and he was trying to use it as some kind of weird pick-up line. Something about how if I thought his muscles were swollen now, just wait until he had a handful of trail mix, or whatever. As if I’d really be impressed with some guy’s allergy; that stuff can be serious.”

“Oh no ... ”

I busted through the break room door, but it was already too late. Roger’s body was slumped over the table, puffy and irreverent. He looked absolutely horrible, his now purple tongue and patchy skin more swollen than his ego, and part of me knew he was dead before I even reached in to check his pulse. I tried to revive him anyway, shaking him and beating against his back to dislodge the food, but it was no use. It looked like he’d gotten down most of the lasagne, probably before the swelling stopped his breathing. Still, how could this even happen? I mean, Roger was stupid, but if he had an allergy that severe, then why didn’t he have some medica—

Wait a minute.

I looked down to see his bulbous hand half-stuck in his pocket. I pried it out and slipped my own hand in until I felt it. Oh God. The bulge from the intern earlier ... I pulled out an EpiPen

from the bottom of his pocket. He must have not been able to get it out in time.

I thought to myself: Oh man, I'm sorry, Roger ... but I labelled the container; you knew it wasn't yours. How many times had I tried to get you to stop? Still, what a terrible way to go. What's the first thing to do in a situation like this? I guess I've got to call 911 and get a doctor down here. This is so gruesome, I just can't believe that—

“Evan?”

I spun around to see Marjory standing in the doorway. Her eyes were huge, and I could see that her body was visibly shaking. Worse, she could see MY lunch on the table, ME standing over Roger's dead body, and HIS EpiPen, his only way of survival, in MY hand.

She scrambled over and started trying to revive him, puppeteering his lumpy limbs like a huge Stay Puft doll. Trying to turn his body over, she cried out, “Evan, don't just stand there, help me!” I tried to shake off the shock of whatever the heck was happening and lift him, but his body slipped out of our grasps and flopped like an orange beached whale over the stark white tile floor. She threw herself at me and grabbed the EpiPen from my hand, screeching out, “Give him the pen, maybe he's still alive!” She snatched it, and with the cry of an Amazonian warrior, stabbed it into the side of his neck. The pen stuck out of him like a fork in a golden Thanksgiving turkey, and his head lolled over to the side from the new weight. We both stood panting for a second, trying to catch our breaths over the corpse of our co-worker.

Marjory began to panic and snivel, “Oh Roger, not you ... ” Then she snapped to me, “I knew he annoyed you, but I never thought you were capable of something like *this*! I mean, withholding an EpiPen from a dying man!”

“Now hang on a minute, Marjory, this isn't what—”

“How *could* you, Evan?!”

“I didn't!!”

“I have to tell someone ... I can't let you get away with this ... I have to—oh God, I have to—” She began to violently wheeze and gag. “Oh God, just look at him, he's so *puffy* ... I'm going to be sick ... ” She clasped her hand over her mouth and whirled around, taking off down the hall towards the bathroom. In that moment, I was slapped in the face with three fundamental truths: first, Roger, a guy whose drives and personality could not be stopped by blatancy, pleading, or a general sense of human decency, had been killed by some chunky peanut butter in day-old lasagne. Second, my HR rep now held my future in her hands and was currently puking up her own stomach in the bathroom. Third, my life was definitely over.

My brain went into overdrive, and all of these thoughts flooded into me:

This is bad ...

This is bad ...

This is *so bad!*

How is any of this happening to me? I've worked hard; I haven't rocked the boat around here. All I was trying to do was to have one thing, just *one thing* to myself, and it ends up getting my co-worker killed. I've been rotting away in that cubicle, and now I'm going rot in prison because ROGER COULDN'T KEEP HIS HANDS OUT OF MY SAD, PATHETIC LUNCHES!!

Okay. I have to think. Once Marjory is out of the bathroom, she'll go report what she saw, and it will be her word against mine. And since I told her about what a pain Roger was, that doesn't bode well for me. There has to be some way out of this. I just need definitive proof that I wasn't here when it happened.

I started scanning the room for anything that could help, until I finally noticed something in the corner up by the ceiling.

Jackpot! The security cameras! They had to have picked up the accident, and looking at that footage would prove without a shadow of a doubt that I wasn't in the room. People could blame Roger's death on a lot of things: not having a holster for his EpiPen, gluttony, maybe a clinical inability to look at what he was eating before he shoved it in his pie hole, but *not me*. If I can get a hold of that tape, I'm golden. Oh no, but they're clearing out the system footage today for the switch to Infratech! Well, no sweat ... I just have to get down to the security station in the east building before they clear out the system at 1 pm, and that gives me ... eighteen minutes! No! I have to get down there NOW!

I flew to the break room door and glanced back at Roger's bloated body one last time. "I'm sorry about this, Roger, just give me eighteen minutes, I'll be right back with some help—oh my God, he's dead, what am I even saying?"

I zipped across the hall and stood outside of the door to the women's bathroom. I could hear Marjory's gags through the wall, and I called through to her.

"Marjory, I'm going to need you to call 911 to get some people for Roger, okay? I can prove that I didn't do anything, but I just need to make a quick run to the security station."

She took a breath between her heaves and spoke back through the wall, "Oh no you don't, you'll wait right there, Evan, or I swear I'll—"

"No time, Marjory, I'll be right back!" With that, I took off running towards my only chance at salvation.

The first thing I had to do was get out of the west building and down to the parking lot. I could cut across the parking lot towards the east building from there. I barrelled through my

floor and boarded the elevator. Since I was on the eighth floor, I figured it had to be faster than taking the stairs. I smashed the lobby button so hard that I'm shocked I didn't punch a hole through the wall, but just as the door was about to close, Dennis from customer relations boarded.

"Evan, there you are! I've been looking for you! I've a new batch of evaluations, and I would really love it if you could have them in by this afternoon."

"Dennis, now's not a really good time."

"I get it, we've all got a case of the Mondays, but it would really help me out."

I could see Roger's body in my mind's eye, and I wondered how long he'd be laying there, bloated and sticky on the break room floor before someone tripped over him on their way to the coffee machine. I glanced at my watch. Sixteen minutes left. "Look, you can stick them on my desk, but I'm kind of in the middle of something *really important*, and I just don't know if I can today."

"I completely understand. Why don't you submit them for me, and we can talk about it afterwards? Thank you so much!"

Grabbing him by the shoulders, I started shaking him. "Dennis, really try to listen to what I'm saying. My life is at stake. Get it? My life! *I have no time for your pointless evaluations!*"

The elevator reached the lobby, the door opened, and before he could recover, I bolted towards the glass doors at the main entrance. The parking lot was a long stretch between the buildings, but with all of my adrenaline, I swear I was like an Olympic runner. I was pounding across the asphalt, the sun pressing down on me, and my heart pulsing with each tick of my watch. That stretch was like the stairway between me and heaven, and if I didn't make it across in time, I'd be doomed. I whipped around the corner, and a car pulling in screeched to a stop, smacking me across its windshield. I rolled over the hood, and the world shook like a snow globe until I slumped onto the asphalt. I was covered by a bright light, and I thought how terrible it was that my life was ending with me smashed in a parking lot after having a guy steal my leftovers that I didn't even want. I opened my eyes to see the face of God, ask him why he'd been messing with me all these years, but instead I saw a long, red smear across the car's windshield like the guy hit a giant red bug. I touched my face; my forehead was bleeding. The driver shrieked and asked if he should call 911, but I knew it was only a matter of time until they'd come for Roger, so what did it matter, anyway? They'd bring help, they'd bring ... *the police!* I snapped back into reality. There was no time! I pulled myself up, stumbling and full of adrenaline, kept running, and yelled over my shoulder not to bother, because they should already be on their way.

Finally, I got across to the east building, and began to make my way through the curving corridors. I was getting closer, until I turned a corner and saw Susan Kranstein at the end of the

hallway. She was one of the worst people that could possibly have been there. Susan was a sweet person, don't get me wrong, but she loved to talk with whomever she could find, and when she got going, she wouldn't stop for anything. She would tell a story, and then eight more stories related to that one. She'd show you pictures of her kids, pictures of her friend's kids, pictures of random kids that she thought were cute, and it would never end! In a time so dire, there was no possible room for Susan Kranstein. I froze like those kids in Jurassic Park when they're cornered by the T-rex. I thought that maybe if I didn't move, then she wouldn't see me. She was still chatting with someone and hadn't looked up. It was too late for that lost soul, but I still had a chance to get away. I got up against the wall and slipped into a janitor's closet to think of my next move. Checking my watch, I saw that I only had nine minutes left. That was it. With Susan in the hall, there was no way I could avoid her and make it in time. I took a deep breath, and a chill ran down my spine.

Then it struck me; I thought: wait, a chill?

I looked up to see an air-conditioning vent above me that had kicked on. That was it! I could climb through the vents to the security station! It should only be a few rooms away. So I had two options: I could try to squeeze through the dark, dusty vents and hope that I could find my way to the station, or I could just be reasonable and face the music in the hallway, trusting that Susan would let me stop the conversation if it was an emergency. I looked towards the door, and I knew what I had to do. I grabbed a couple of boxes to hoist myself up, pried off the vent cover, and pushed myself straight into the vent.

It was dark, but I tried to find my way past the few rooms that I thought were between the closet and the station. I popped open a panel on the side of the vent tubing, climbed out, and found myself standing on the gridded boards between the ceiling tiles above a room. It was so quiet, and maybe the car accident was catching up to me, because I was starting to feel disoriented. I wasn't sure which room I was hovering over, and there was a chance I'd already passed the security station with no way of knowing it, or I could have made a wrong turn somewhere and was nowhere close to where I needed to be. Then, I heard a voice floating up through the ceiling tiles. It was soft at first and I had to strain to hear it, but my stomach dropped when I realised who it was.

I was above the security station, and it was one of the guys from Infratech.

I could hear him telling one of the guards that he was ready to start clearing the system. My brain was screaming, "Evan, we're out of time! You have to do something! ANYTHING!!" I had to get in that room to get the tape, and so I took a deep breath and did the only thing I could. I aimed for the ceiling tiles in the middle of the grid, and I jumped.

The tiles came crashing down from the impact, everyone in the station screamed, and I landed sprawled out on a heap of rubble. For a second, I just laid there taking in the light of the room. I had been blamed for murder, hit by a car, plummeted through a ceiling, and my body was about to give up on me. I managed to grab the edge of the security desk and pulled myself

up so that my head peaked over the top of the counter.

I looked at the guard; he stared back at me like he was challenging me to even try to come up with an excuse, and all I could do was choke out, “I’m just a man who brings his lunch to work every day. Please don’t throw out today’s tape from the break room yet. My life depends on you seeing a grown man steal food from me.”

He said nothing, just sat and stared into my eyes. The world stood still, and my heart stopped beating until the man who held my fate in his hands finally spoke.

“Give me a twenty.”

I blinked and sat up a bit higher. “What?”

“Give me twenty bucks.”

“Are you kidding me?!”

“Times are tough, and if this tape is as important as you say it is, then it’s got to be worth twenty bucks, so give me a twenty.”

“You mean to tell me that my future is on the line, I could go to ACTUAL prison, I ran all the way here, got hit by a car, climbed through air vents, and then broke through the ceiling, and YOU want money?! NO! You’re insane! Just give me the tape!!”

“ ... ” He stared me down, waiting.

“Fine. I’ve got ... ” I reached into my pocket and pulled out everything that I had. “... seventeen bucks on me. Just take it.”

“Thank you.”

After he plucked his blood money from my shaking hand, the guard stood up, grabbed a small flash drive from his desk, and disappeared behind a small door in the back. He came back a minute later with the drive in hand and said that he had just copied over the footage from earlier that day. At that moment, Marjory rushed into the room with a few police officers looking for me, but I was already saved. After sticking it into his computer and rewinding to the accident, everyone could clearly see that I was an innocent man. I let out a sigh of relief and collapsed back down on the floor.

Marjory stood there completely dumbfounded. Little Miss Sunshine must have been ready to put me in handcuffs herself, but now she was just silently fuming. I managed to stand up, brush myself off, and walk over to her.

She began to stutter, “Evan ... you can’t just ... this is still your fault! Someone DIED! I’ll file complaints to corporate! You’ll be drowning in those stupid customer reports! On Monday,

I'll make sure—”

“Marjory, I’m done.”

“—you never get to go into the break room again! You’re a menace! Everyone will—”

“I’M DONE!”

She finally stopped sputtering. “What?”

“Marjory, I don’t think it’s healthy for me to work in a place where anyone could get so bored that a co-worker accidentally gets killed. That seems reasonable, right? And I didn’t really kill Roger, we all saw that, but maybe I am to blame for part of it. I’ve stayed here for too long because I haven’t had the guts to just get up and walk out. You were right. This job is a safety net, but it’s doing nothing for me. And clearly it’s done way too much to Roger. It’s time for me to get out of here while I’m still alive.”

“So you’re quitting?”

“Yeah, I really am.”

She tried to collect herself a bit, but her voice was still sharp. “Well ... okay then. You’ll need to send in a formal letter of resignation.”

I started to leave, but I could still hear her jagged breaths. I turned and saw her staring at the screen showing the bland, empty break room and Roger, until she slumped into a chair. Her face had always seemed a bit sunken, but right then it was different. Her whole body seemed to be pulled down, like weights were on her shoulders, and I finally understood why she had liked Roger so much. That place was beating down on her, too. I had to give Roger credit, he was the most absurdly outrageous *thing* in the office. She must have appreciated that, like he was a palate cleanser.

I called back to her, “Hey, Marjory.”

She didn’t look up and quietly breathed out, “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about Roger. Really, I am.”

She looked up at me. “I know. Thanks.”

“You know, it’s not too late for you either.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just saying, I can’t be the only person that Network Infinite is unhealthy for. Maybe you should think about going somewhere else that’s a little more positive.”

“Maybe.” She took a deep breath and looked back down, but her face had lightened a bit.

I went through the door and didn't look back. Warm sunlight flooded over me, and all of the noises of ongoing life helped to bring my brain back into reality. Or at least, I think it helped to keep me from passing out; my forehead had been slowly dripping blood through the whole fiasco. Slipping through the parking lot filled with the ambulance and crowds of onlookers, I watched them load Roger's body into the back and drive away. I may have hated the man, but I owed part of my new-found freedom to him. The most stable, boring job I'd ever had disappeared behind me, and it didn't even matter. I had my whole future ahead of me, and there were so many new things to focus on.

From Dallas, Texas, Lauren Floyd is currently a student at Southern Methodist University. Studying theatre and English, she is a new writer who has had a passion for creating short stories with a variety of characters from an early age.

Baggage

by Amir Safi

I take my hair
and tuck it in the drawer
with the beanies.

I exhale onto my eyes
wipe them clean
with the end of my t-shirt
and put them on the stand by my bed.

I grab my skin
pull it over my head
slide it onto a hanger
and suspend it in the closet.

I take the Qu'ran
and place it on the bookshelf
with all of the other blessings.

I open the cabinet
with the fine china and stack
my mother's tongue on top of the serving spoons.
I will not take it out again until other Iranians come over for chai.

I do this because I cannot rest
until after
I have unpacked
all of my foreign baggage.

Amir Safi is from College Station and based out of Houston, Texas. His poetry is the result of a fusion between his Iranian culture and Texan upbringing. He is a 2017 Houston Poet Laureate Finalist, and his work has been featured in Texas Monthly, Whataburger, Huffington Post, Upworthy, BuzzFeed, Texas Standard, Total Frat Move and more.

Under the Rip

by *Regan Lynch*

The city, by midnight, is still as a stagnant pond. My cab's the only car on the street. The flight was late—a temporary reprieve—but I did, unfortunately, arrive. I'm clammy, itchy, and when my luggage wheels clack and scrape up the hotel steps behind me I feel as if I'm broadcasting my whereabouts to the whole city in morse code.

I catch the lift to my room, open the curtains and stare out at the half-familiar skyline. I haven't been home in eight years.

I start work the following night while the streets are mostly empty. It would be easier—safer even—to do what I need to do in daylight, but these kinds of activities have always elicited strange questions. From crumbling riverbanks I dunk my hands, globules of meat-fat resisting the water, into brown currents; I stand in mangroves and, rope tied tight about my waist, wait.

Nothing ever comes, but as the nights pass I start to think there's nothing here to catch.

§

“So what brings you to town?”

We're at a café. His fringe is longer than it used to be. I twirl a sugar into my cup.

“Nostalgia.”

It's hard not to stare at the changes in his face. The wrinkles from that final rage are still being borne out about his mouth, as if a fatal contortion did irreparable damage. I remember, suddenly, how our noses touched on cold mornings, and how the heat of his breath is the most intimate contact possible. I want to reach across the table and wipe those new-carved crevices away; I want to make it as if he'd never known me.

Instead I say “I've got to go.”

He gives me his number on a napkin like we're teenagers again. His fingers almost touch mine as he does. I say I'll call him even though I won't, then go back to my room.

§

I sit by the rooftop pool and stare at the sunset. I fold and re-fold Michael's napkin until its creases are sharp as razorblades.

It seems like the longer I'm in this city, the more I feel I'm moving in a slip-lane of time. Like the river I stand by each night, the past runs beside me, silent and dark, and its surface breaks in unexpected places. Shop-fronts and streets I've worked hard to forget leap from lanes

of chain-stores and unsold apartment blocks. Homes I've lost are returned to me, wounded. I want nothing more than to leave, but I can't—not until I find what I'm looking for. And, if I'm brave, kill it.

I fold the napkin again. I know I shouldn't call him. His shade has haunted me for nearly a decade, slipping between my sheets, whispering hot into my ear about how I've ruined him forever, leaving a bit of ballast in my heart with every visit, leaving me heavier and heavier. But I'm starting to think that nightmares can't be trusted as prophets. With his almost-touch across a table, the weight's begun to shift. Begun to melt. I wonder how much more effective an actual touch would be, and then about a whole host of other ways to be touched.

I keep folding the napkin. I feel like this town is turning me into salt.

§

We meet at a Turkish restaurant near his place. I bring a bottle of wine and buy another: both are less than ten dollars. While we walk to a park by the water we swig and soliloquise about after-tastes.

We collapse by the roots of a tree; his thigh presses against me. I must be drunk because I move my hand to rest on his.

"I'm sorry I left when I did," I say. "I should have waited until you were better."

"Well," he says. "I'm better now."

The sound of the river rushes between us. A lone curlew cries from the opposite shore.

"Do you still have nightmares about it?" he asks. "The beach?"

"Yeah. I do."

"I do too." His head falls, carefully, onto my shoulder. "Is that why you never came back?"

§

We take off each other's clothes as if each garment's sacred, though he keeps his socks on. When he goes on all fours to wrap his mouth around me, I'm entranced by the lamp-light capturing the soft hair that spreads from his belly-button down to his crotch. I stroke it, then push him onto his back. I lather him with lube and sit hard onto him, so wanting him inside me that no pain registers at all. I come within seconds, and so does he. We fall asleep with my arm under him, just like we used to.

§

"Gorgeous," Michael says, voice smothered by the wind.

“The water?” I ask.

“No, you.”

I laugh and tell him to fuck off.

Michael is crusted with so much sand it looks like he’s about to be deep-fried, and my back burns an ominous red. We’ve climbed over dunes and crackling-dry bush to find this spot, away from our parents, where no one will see. He reaches out for my hand, and when I reach back he pulls me off balance and tumbles with me down the beach.

He runs his tongue down my neck, and I shiver. Against my sunburn it feels like ice. Our mouths meet, and I’m so hungry for him I almost lose breath. Sitting in the car for two hours, our mothers in the front seat, is a unique form of torture; the lascivious looks we throw each other while they’re occupied only makes it worse.

“Look,” Michael says when we’re done. “It’s so calm.”

It’s a cove, almost. On either side rise dunes of ugly, stunted trees framing the best-looking water I’m sure I’ve ever seen. The breakers down the middle have hushed to a gentle lullaby, and there it seems a deeper, cleaner blue than the rest.

“Race ya!”

Michael dashes to his feet in a spume of sand and scrabbles for the water. I’m not even on my feet when he dives. I raise my hands in surrender as he chants *loser, loser*. I crouch by the wavelets and splash my face, my body. I feel I’m radiating heat like a little sun. Like the ocean would sizzle into steam if it touched me.

When I look up, Michael’s gone.

§

“What happens then?”

I don’t respond. I squint out into the afternoon light while she takes some notes.

“And how many times have you had this dream?”

“Every night.”

“Since it happened?”

“Yes.”

“And what was it that happened?”

I don't know how to tell her that everything ended. That I cracked like earth without rain. That there's a part of me I want to cut out except I don't know where to start because it's all of me.

"He got dragged out to sea and drowned. They had to revive him. When he was in hospital we had a fight. When he looked at me I had this feeling he hated me, you know. And even when he was talking to me—"

"What?"

"I thought he was still dead."

More notes.

"Is that where the dream ends?"

"No. It's before that."

She waits.

"In the water. When I go out to help him. I see something."

"Under the water?"

"Yes. In the current. It's deep down. And I can't really see it. It's more a feeling. Like suffocating. But it's there. It has eyes, like two candles drowned in the sea."

She's looking straight at me now. I keep her just at the edge of my sight. I can smell the liquor on her, I always can. She keeps it in a drawer under her desktop monitor.

"And just to be clear—did you see this on the day, or in your dream?"

There's a pond outside. A kind of duck I've never seen before is paddling on the surface. I wonder if it's happy. Or if it, too, has felt something in the water.

"I don't know. I can't tell the difference anymore."

§

Michael comes over to the hotel. It's as if eight years hasn't passed between us. He wrestles me on the bed and I kick him off with a laugh. He rolls over and ducks behind the coffee table, eyes flickering.

He sees the notes, the mythology books, the maps.

"What are these?"

"Nothing."

I clear them into a pile and throw them into a drawer. He looks at me closely, then his eyes pass around the room. A grin.

“And what about *these*.”

He picks up the ropes I’ve been using by the river. He twirls them around and runs out into the hallway giggling like an imp. I run after him.

We knock over several deck chairs before I wrest my things from him. I toss them across the tiles then pin him to the ground. It’s still warm, warmed by the sun. I kiss him there. We lie side-by-side, holding hands.

“I think,” I say. “That I’m love with you all over again.”

He squeezes my hand.

“I feel the same.”

We watch the sun go down, replaced by stars. I stare at the blackness between them.

“I’m afraid, Michael.”

His head turns to me.

“Of what?”

“I don’t want you to go. I don’t want to miss you. It hurts.”

“Hey.” He folds me into him. “It’s all right. I’m here now.”

“No. No you’re not.” I pull myself back, stroke his hair then grip it. His eyes, I see, have turned to a deep amber in the half-light. “You’re not him.”

§

“Do it, then,” it says.

My fingers, like a vice in its hair, relax again. My hand slips to its cheek.

“I don’t think I can.”

It stares back at me, cold, all likeness to Michael stripped but its skin and tissue and muscle and bone. It extricates itself from my embrace and stands by the pool edge, its back like a tower. Its candle-flame eye flickers at me over its shoulder.

“Race you.”

It jumps into the pool.

I sit up and stare into the water and I feel it. The suffocating. It spreads through the pool like an oil spill, its lambent orange irises glinting up at me. I'm standing with a foot in two different worlds, two warring currents snatching me out to sea. It is, it is there, crouched right there beneath the surface, unrelinquishing until the lifeguards come to pump my boyfriend to life again on the beach. But there's also the other one, the other thing, the worst thing, the cold, cold body and my warm sun-burned hands pressing against it, and the screaming, the suffocating, the screaming.

I run to the room and take Michael's backpack. I pour his things out across the rooftop. The lube will have to do. I strip naked and lather myself in it from head to toe, then pick up the rope and wrap it three times around my waist and ankles. I secure the other end to the pool fence.

I hobble forward, step by step, to look into the water.

For a moment I remember the things that I forgot. The staying up 'til dawn, the slow, shy discovery of each others' bodies, the confession of what we were, of what we hid from the world, imposters to everyone but each other. It's a story, I realise, I've always known by heart. I just haven't heard it in eight years.

It's enough to make me smile, briefly, before I jump in.

Regan Lynch is a writer and theatre-maker based in Melbourne, Australia. His work is interested in the queer, the occult, the weird, camp, kitsch, and genre. His writing has appeared in Homer, Overland Journal, AustLit, and in Tincture Journal Issue Fourteen, with a feature out now in the 'Spaces' issue of Archer Magazine.

beau pres(id)ent for George Washington

by *Dave Drayton*

Generations start with this
Ego, ergo their wont
Orate now into a nation
Registering thirteen states as one
Granting regions a share
Engineering an entente

Witnessing this great show
As it starts anew
Stir their hearts, George
Hasten to greatness
Interest grows at rates
Near those who wager

Dave Drayton was an amateur banjo player, Vice President of the Australian Sweat Bathing Association, a founding member of the Atterton Academy, and the author of P(oe)Ms (Rabbit), Haiturograms (Stale Objects dePress) and Poetic Pentagons (Spacecraft Press).

Directions

by Sarah Hoenicke

They had dinner in bed. Up to that point, being with Carol had felt familiar, like the nights growing up when they'd sat pressed stickily together in his blue beanbag chair, watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*. The show had been Carol's favourite, because she wasn't allowed to watch it at her house—it was too sexist.

It wasn't until she, his childhood friend who'd flown all the way to Paris from California, put her tongue in his ear that he realised things had changed. Her hot breath on his neck made him squirm inside his skin, but he didn't want her to know his aversion any more than he himself wanted to feel it.

So, he went through with it. He was surprised by the hot grip of her vagina on his fingers, by the warm smell of her open legs. She faced the wall, and he closed his eyes and came.

She fell asleep afterward, his arm draped over her waist, her ass backed into his crotch, but his eyes didn't close. He leaned the back of his head against the wall and tried to feel normal.

At one in the morning, he whispered that he had to go—the people at the hostel wouldn't let him in after two. He didn't want to leave his stuff alone in that room full of people all night, he explained, and didn't mention that his pack had a lock on the zipper.

She put her wet, open mouth on his mouth at the door to her hotel room. They walked to the elevator, her bare feet padding the burgundy carpet.

The doors closed with a cushioned clunk, breaking off her stare and letting Adam relax against the wall, release his breath. As the elevator descended, he thought about how he'd stuck his head out the window of her room. He'd seen the pulsing light atop the Eiffel Tower. The monument shimmered, even through the brown haze. She'd stuck her head through the window beside his and marvelled aloud at being high enough above the street that the cigarette smoke couldn't get to them.

The elevator reached the ground floor and he stepped out.

Walking to the metro, he looked around, conscious of being alone in such a big city at night. It felt like the world went on forever in every direction.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his jacket, his fingers rubbed against his closed pocketknife. The night was cold enough that he could see his breath, but not cold enough for snow.

Down into the metro he went, into the train that would take him zigzagging beneath the streets and bakeries and water fountains, under the trash in the gutters—all the way across the city.

Really, the hostel manager locked the doors at three o'clock. A small lie. He had been thinking about his bed. Or maybe just about being away from Carol's bed.

He leaned his head back against the window and questioned his decision to relinquish himself, finally, to her. Of course, she'd known he was a virgin when he went into the military, but he'd been embarrassed when, over dinner that night, she'd asked him if he still was. Maybe she saw her advance toward him as a favour, a way of making him familiar with a part of the world he hadn't yet experienced. But he had no interest in her, and he'd had no interest in the women he'd met in the service while on assignment, or at squad parties—none of them had made him want to take them to bed. Kissing them had felt wrong, like the times when he went in to kiss his mother's cheek and she turned exactly at that moment, causing their mouths to meet.

He'd gotten hard once Carol turned and faced the wall, spreading her cheeks for him. As he closed his eyes, her body disappeared, and it was like an enhanced masturbatory experience. He'd kept his eyes shut until he finished, his fist pumping over her back.

He settled his body into the hard-plastic seat for what would have been a twenty-minute metro ride, but then the blinking lights on the map-panel across from him went dark, and the train slowed, stopped.

A voice came from the overhead speaker.

He understood enough French to gather that the train would be going no further. He needed to walk back up into the night.

Was this karma? Punishment for what he'd done? Or maybe less for the action itself than for the less-than-sincere intentions behind it? But, now that he considered it, had Carol been sincere?

He looked at his watch.

He didn't think she had feelings for him—she'd spent most of their evening together talking about her boyfriend in California, whom she lived with and who was going to fly in to meet her in Paris the next day.

The train was closing a half hour earlier than it should have.

He would have to set thoughts of Carol aside and devote all his energy to getting back to his hostel. With focus, he could do it. The military had taught him that, at least.

His hands began shaking before he felt the mass of air whirling down from the street above. He scaled the stairs neatly, two at a time, trying to look as though he knew where he was going, though he'd never disembarked at this stop.

The street was dark. He chose to head to the left, hoping the surroundings would prove familiar. It had rained while he was on the train, just enough to make the sidewalk black and shiny under the street lamps, and just enough to make him cautious in his dressy, impractical shoes.

He walked for twenty minutes, avoiding the places that seemed most dangerous: the gaps between some of the buildings, the corners where a person might hide behind a fence and wait for anyone who looked foreign or lost.

He thought of all the stories he'd heard about women being kidnapped and forced into the sex trade. He felt secured by his masculinity, though most of his life he'd been dissatisfied with his height and hopeful that he'd grow out of his awkward thinness.

With each step, the memory of what had happened with Carol lost detail. He wasn't forgetting, he still knew what had happened, but this would be a memory he wouldn't seek out, one held by his mind and only called up by a smell, a spoken reference, the bubbling of champagne.

He came to an intersection and stopped. In the middle of the circle ahead of him was a statue he didn't recognise: a man standing in front of a horse, holding the reins.

Five streets branched off from the circle, laid out like the arms of a star. He pictured his location as he thought it would look from the sky: everything dripping, glistening black and grey. A spot ripe for a chase scene: all those empty streets ahead of him, no one awake to hear him yell.

§

If he were going to recognise anything, he would have by now. He aches for his iPhone, tucked inside the locked pocket of his pack, useless in Europe and left switched off.

Turning on the heel of his shoe, he likes the way his coat spins in his wake.

The likelihood that he'll reach the hostel in time to get in diminishes as the seconds tick on. He's sweating, and the disjunction between his hot armpits and freezing hands makes him feel ill, as though he's drunk too much black coffee on an empty stomach: his mind races and cramps up as his stomach lining burns and sours.

Voices speak directly into his ear and the whole of his body jolts, his hand flying to pull his non-existent gun from its hiding place. But the voices are echoes, issuing from around the corner. He speed-walks and then slows his steps and breathing, integrating himself with the

picture he holds of composure.

The Gare de l'Est looms dark. He knows the train station is where he'd first arrived in Paris, just days ago, but is thrown by its transformation. The lines of taxis have disappeared. The many rounded windows of the station reflect black night rather than bright day. The fence surrounding the station, which he hadn't noticed before, is closed. A big lock, strung on the end of a chain, fastens the gates.

Again: voices and husky laughter, but the street resounds with emptiness, and no eyes meet his search.

He knows it exposes him as a tourist, but he stops to look at the map on the back of a sheltered bus stop. He finds himself, a tiny imaginary dot amidst the map's curving and colourful lines. He finds Rue François le Premier, on which his hostel sits, between the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Clemenceau metro stops, where he would have disembarked and walked five minutes to the Adveniat hostel. He traces a rough route between his location and his destination.

He begins to walk and his mind spirals out beyond the immediacy of the streets: his location is Paris, his destination unsure. His location is France. Europe. Earth. The Solar System. The Milky Way galaxy. How can modern people know so much and so often be utterly unprepared for their immediate circumstances?

After spending four years in the army, and before that, having risen to the rank of Eagle Scout as a teenager, how did he allow himself to make the choices he'd made this evening, landing him in his here and now: without money, without language, without bearings? He knew it had been a bad idea to get lunch, then drinks, then to pay a visit to the catacombs, and then to get more champagne to bring back with their dinner things to the hotel. He'd known it with each transaction, even as he paid. He could see that he'd been subconsciously delaying going back to Carol's hotel room. He must have known what she wanted, on some level, and tried to get as drunk (and resultantly cashless) as possible in preparation.

He could see now that she'd been attempting to goad him into an admission of some kind throughout the day—her raised eyebrows and elbow-nudge every time an attractive woman passed them on the street; her suggestion that he let her buy him his favourite porno magazine at the newsstand. Their night together had been the ultimate challenge she put to him. He wasn't sure of the outcome.

Walking back to the bus stop, he aches as the occasional taxi pulls up and then away from the curb, empty. Clusters of young men speak in a sing-song French, huddled beneath the overhangs of shuttered shops. They laugh; many pairs of eyes follow his movements. He cannot discern a reason for anyone to be out after two in the morning on a street where all the businesses are closed.

The tension in his chest grows into bile-laced panic as he realises the image of the route he

has compiled while looking at the map is gone. He must look again. Feeling the gaze of those in the group nearest to him, he forces his sore eyes to focus on the names of the streets, printed in tiny letters.

He uses his sleeve to wipe water droplets from the plastic protecting the map so that he can better see through it, but then a shadow dims the streets and names.

The man is dressed all in black: a black leather jacket over his hoodie, his hands in the pockets of his black pants.

“As-tu besoin d’aide?” The man asks, and smiles.

His teeth and the whites of his eyes reflect the lights lining the street. Adam’s poorly accented French seems enough to convince the man—Deni—of Adam’s story of Canadian citizenship.

Deni says he’s from Tanzania. Adam thinks through every phrase before slowly speaking. This gives him time to examine Deni’s face, which is youthful—he’s barely a man at all. Yet he’s thicker and taller than Adam. He could easily grasp both of Adam’s wrists in one of his hands. Deni’s presence registers across the surface of Adam’s body: small hairs stand up, the flesh beneath them rising.

Adam will only confess the name of a street a few blocks from his hostel, and Deni says he’ll show him the bus that would get him home.

After this exchange, Adam extends his hand to shake Deni’s, his fingers bare, stiff and straight in the cold. Deni looks down at it, understands what Adam intends, and slips his hand into Adam’s. They turn beneath the streetlamps and walk a short distance together in the direction Deni points out.

Approaching another bus stop, Deni, who’s walking a few inches ahead of Adam, reaches his forearm back without looking and stops Adam gently, his palm to Adam’s chest. Adam looks down at the hand, thickly veined, too warm to be real, covering what seems like the whole of his chest.

Deni walks to the bus that’s just pulled up and banter with the driver. The temperature, as Adam rocks, balancing on the edge of the sidewalk, reminds him of boot camp, of rucking with fifty-plus pounds of gear on his back, through shallow rivers and the frigid, heart-pausing Missouri air.

He wiggles his toes inside his shoes, looking down as a shadow dims their black leather tips.

“That driver wasn’t my friend,” Deni says, switching to English for the first time.

“Did you think he was?”

“Maybe.” Deni shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks beside Adam, their sleeves brushing.

“Are we waiting for another bus? I’m sorry I don’t have any money.” Then, feeling it necessary to dissuade Deni from any impression he might have been gathering about what Adam wanted, Adam continues: “I was with a girl.” He takes out his wallet, opens the section for paper bills—a wide gaping mouth. “She spent all my money.”

He nudges Deni’s shoulder, suggesting the same has probably happened to him. Deni cracks a brief smile and steps away from Adam, flicks his gaze over Adam’s body.

“So, why are you in Paris?”

“Your English is really good.”

“Movies.” Deni smiles, broader this time, and his eyes shrink above the apples of his cheeks.

“Yeah, movies are great.” Adam doesn’t know what else to say, and looks around for another bus, for any other vehicle or person, but the street and sidewalk are wide and vacant. His stomach empties.

“Why then? Why are you here?”

Adam sweeps his hair back away from his face with his fingers, and fastens the top button of his imported Italian shirt. The fabric is rare cotton, soft and slick like silk against the balled skin of his nipples.

“I got out of the military a few months ago, and have been doing some travelling.”

“Canada has a military?”

They chuckle.

“We do. America to the south, Russia not so far away, we have to hold our own somehow.”

Adam feels his senses ping as he perceives the minute movements of Deni. Does this person truly have nowhere else to be? And how did all those other kid-men disappear into the mist?

“Did you like it?”

“Canada?”

“The military.”

“Yes. It was hard—no girls—all those men, all the time.”

“Funny.”

“What is?”

“It’s funny that that is what was hard.” As Deni says this, he steps forward, and Adam’s heart leaps. Another bus approaches.

He would no longer be able to make it to the hostel before they locked their doors for the night.

He doesn’t tell this to Deni, who might suggest they find an all-night bar or club.

The stranger stands so close that Adam’s misting breath seems to touch Deni’s face, the tiny beads of it gathering on Deni’s black eyebrows and thick curling lashes.

Adam speaks, and Deni puts his ear so near to Adam’s mouth that Adam steps back, his heart fluttering, his breath catching, the smell of Deni’s cologne sharp in his nose.

§

Their bus comes, and Deni puts his hand on Adam’s shoulder and squeezes.

“This is ours,” he says, and leads Adam through the rear doors.

The bus is crowded in back, though there are several open seats in the front. Adam remains standing, deciding to trust Deni despite feeling his chest seize with the urge to flee.

They hold onto the same pole. Adam looks down at his fancy shoes and Deni’s battered imitation-leather army boots. The toe of one peeling shoe almost touches the front of Adam’s right foot.

At the first stop, three policemen with small clipboards come aboard and ask to see tickets.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak French,” Adam says, his palms raised to the questioning officer.

Deni steps in front of Adam, plants his feet wide apart and flexes his legs so that he can take out his wallet and keep his balance in the moving bus. He gestures to Adam as he speaks in rapid French and hands the officer his ID.

She takes it, writes him a ticket, glances at Adam and turns to follow her colleagues off the bus.

At least, Adam thinks afterward, Deni willingly took the fall.

The ticket serves as their pass, and they ride in silence. Every time Adam looks Deni’s way, Deni’s eyes are already on him, and a closed-lipped smile slides onto the stranger’s face.

They get off the bus at the bottom of the Champs Élysées.

“The Christmas decorations were so much better last year,” Deni says, his hand raised toward the purple ribbons and garland roped between the streetlamps. He laughs. “Though I suppose that exposes me as a—” he thumbs his nose and finishes: “Parisian.”

“What did they look like last year?”

Adam’s hands swell and he knows they’re bright pink. The warm bus to the chill of outside is an unwelcome shock to his tired system. Deni seems unfazed. Happy even, jubilant.

“They were white. There was white everywhere, and it was beautiful against the green of the trees and with the snow.” He passes a hand over his face. “I’m not so good with describing,” he says, and smiles.

It’s strange to pass the Disney store, the Gap, Banana Republic, Abercrombie & Fitch. America’s cultural ambassadors are everywhere.

“Someone always makes a fuss about them.”

“About what?”

“The decorations. There’s always something wrong. I guess I’m Parisian in that way, too, since I don’t like them this year.”

The two fall back into a silence that tugs at Adam’s tongue, urging him to fill the void.

Deni gets closer as they walk uphill, and touches Adam’s shoulder. Adam steps away, feeling the warm imprint left behind on his body.

They reach the top of the street and stand in front of a large gated building, the square stones that form its walls the same worn, tan colour of most other Paris buildings. Adam’s back brushes the cold iron fence. He reaches as Deni steps towards him and grips one of the slick bars, pictures the condensation dripping down the pointed pikes.

Deni lifts the hood of his sweatshirt, shadowing his face. Over Deni’s shoulder, Adam sees the Arc de Triomphe de l’Étoile, and wishes he were standing beneath it on a bright day.

“Thank you for your help. I can go the rest of the way alone.”

Deni steps closer, grasps Adam’s upper arms, and rubs them up and down.

“You seem cold.”

Adam nods. He’s freezing. The shade of sleep wants to descend over his eyes, but the core of his body is rushing with blood.

“I should go.”

“You’re not going to give me anything for my trouble?”

Deni reaches out again, taking Adam’s hand loosely, rubbing Adam’s naked palm with the tips of his fingers.

Adam slides his hand from between Deni’s and puts it in his pocket, feeling the knife.

“I have nothing to give,” he says, and pulls his hands out, palms up.

He has only a used metro pass, his expired US Army ID, and his US ID in his wallet. He always locks his money in the top zipper pocket of his backpack before leaving it behind.

He had tried, at the beginning of his travels, to keep money in his shoe, but had torn one bill in half and lost another.

Deni takes the ticket he’d received on the bus out of his pocket.

“Why did I get this then?”

He waves the paper in Adam’s face, cinching his black eyebrows together.

Adam shrugs, shifting his balance from one foot to the other, and forces himself to meet Deni’s steady gaze.

“Thank you, really. I couldn’t have gotten here without your help.”

Deni pulls a lighter from his pocket and cups the paper of the ticket as he sets it aflame.

The paper burns green, and the wind catches the fraying grey edge. Pieces of it swirl and blow away.

“It means nothing to you, so why should I keep it?”

Adam’s armpits feel suddenly swamped—hot springs in the Arctic.

Deni could easily take him, in the shadows cast by the gate and streetlights, inside the fog. How would his body perform in the cold? His emotions feel tamped by fear, pressed on by lust. He might explode.

He leans forward and his breath comes back from Deni’s cheek to warm his own. The tip of his nose brushes Deni’s, two ice cubes dancing in a glass, and their lips slide together, their tongues grazing. Adam raises his hand to the back of the stranger’s neck, rubs his thumb over the bones there, and then breaks loose from Deni’s mouth with a sucking sound. Deni’s hand slides from Adam’s hip to his crotch and Adam turns and runs.

The air carries him. The whole world is lit. He swings right onto Avenue Montaigne and left down Rue Bayard to Rue François le Premier. He doesn’t look back until he’s reached the

hostel. He sits in the doorway, a shivering vagrant, and blinks at freedom until the sun rises and they open the doors.

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Baby Doll

by *R.M. Fradkin*

I gave birth to a baby doll. I didn't want it, but you can't abort plastic. I knew someday it'd turn into a human baby, and then I'd be screwed. I'd always been smart about these things and looked out for myself, but this was just a freak accident.

I didn't even know anything was wrong until there was a bulge hard in my stomach. I went to the doctor, and he squirted cold jelly on the bump and did the ultrasound, and I guess I should've been glad it wasn't a tumour or something, but when he told me it was a plastic baby growing in my uterus, all I could think was how unfair, me always being so careful, and how uncool that no one ever told me this was a thing that could happen.

He said there was nothing he could do. It would come out when the time came. And then I'd just have to wait and see if it stayed plastic or turned into a real human child I had to take care of.

It came out alright, after I got tired of waiting and actually almost forgot about it. It forced its way out my cunt, just shoving its feet down until everything started to expand and the muscles pulled back. I fell onto the floor, writhing, trying to help it get out, jabbing my fingertips hard against the bump in my stomach, anything to get it out of there. Then the little plastic thing popped out and lay there on the kitchen tiles. It was a lot shorter than real labour, and there was no blood or liquid or cord.

The thing lay facedown a foot away from my spread legs. Finally, I got my butt into gear and crawled toward it. I pulled up the dirty underwear it'd kicked down to my knees on the way out. It was about the right size for a newborn, not that I'd seen so many newborns or remembered much about them. I flipped it face up, where it stared at me with its tough, painted eyes. It could've been a boy, just without his little wiener, the way they sometimes do dolls. In my mind it's a girl, but I don't wanna get too attached to that idea, in case it turns human and I was wrong.

There's no point dressing or pretending to feed plastic. I hadn't bought baby junk for it, cuz I had no desire to get conned into playing mom to something that'd just pushed its way in and out of my body. But leaving it lying on the floor also felt weird. So I put it on a chair in my bedroom and went to sleep.

In some ways, it was great. It never cried. It was never hot or cold or hungry. It got bigger, but it never turned human. You never really noticed when it was growing, either, but then suddenly, you'd realise, like, that its legs were a little longer, or its eyelashes were thicker. One time its eyes looked greener and I was pretty sure the paint was grey before, but the more I remembered, the less I was sure. Mostly I could ignore it, but it scared me also, when I realised I hadn't thought about it for days, and then suddenly I'd go slipping and sliding into my

bedroom to make sure it was still okay. But okay how?

What are the chances it'll turn human, I asked the doctor, but the doctor couldn't say. He said I was in an unusual position, which I knew already, but how unusual? I wanted the stats. I wanted to calculate what might happen to it next, and to me. I wanted to figure out my life, but the doctor was useless.

If it finally became human when it was a teenager or something, then I'd be totally fucked. How long did I have to wait until I was safe, and it wouldn't turn into a live, full-grown monster? Or could it wreck my life even when I was ninety years old and should be just drinking tea and eating cookies and totally done with everything? I wanted to survive to a certain point and then know that all I had was a piece of plastic and it'd never be anything more and that I wouldn't give birth to dolls ever again.

It was weird to have a naked, life-size six-year-old plastic doll in my house, but I didn't think about it until other people would come over and be like, "Why is that there?" I tried to tell them my story, but almost nobody believed that this was a thing that happened to people, especially since I'd always throw in some gory lie about how I'd gotten pregnant by shoving a plastic Sorry pawn up my vagina cuz I wanted a good origin story. I didn't want to tell them that there was literally no reason. No moment of conception. They just thought I had some weird doll, all big in the corner.

I started to be even surer it was a girl, but I still called it 'it'. The long hair didn't prove much, since I'd never cut the nylon stuff—I never wanted to stroke it—or the body at this age, if we're still assuming that dolls might be made without dicks, but the face was definitely a girl. It was a girl in my head, but I'd never be like 'her' or 'she' out loud.

Then one day, when the plastic was about seven years old, she disappeared. Did she walk off or did someone take her? Was my live, naked child wandering down by the canal or begging in chocolate stores? I was such a lazy bum for never bothering to give her clothes. Or did someone steal her and dump her somewhere? What if she ended up in a landfill but kept growing until she came to life, years later, buried in a hill of rotting garbage?

I paid much more attention to her now than I ever did when she was there. I put up signs, but 'Missing seven-year-old plastic doll' doesn't get many callbacks. I'd never taken any pictures of her, turned out. I'd basically ignored her for years unless she caught the corner of my eye. Sometimes, when she did catch the corner of my eye, I was surprised she was still there. I'd never moved her from the chair in my bedroom, even.

The police were useless. They said, ma'am, they had real missing children to find. My missing child was real, she just wasn't alive, except maybe she was. Thinking of her on her own in the streets, with cockroaches climbing over her bare feet, was scary, but worse to not see her now that she was alive, if she was alive. There were all different ways that each part of her plastic self could turn to human skin, like how her knees would have real bumps instead of

plastic dimples and her eyelashes would start falling out, and I shivered.

Mostly I hoped she was still a doll, but when I thought of finding that and dragging her back home, and putting her in the same chair, and letting everything fall back the way it was, it was so depressing. Like having another piece of plastic growing inside me, only this time it wasn't gonna come out after nine months.

I took a lot of dirty slush walks, going into every shoe store and deli, peering deep into the faces of seven-year-olds until they turned away or their parents dragged them off. But I never found her. So one day I married. He moved in. I had real children, three of them. I almost forgot about my first plastic child until a young man knocked on my door. He barged past me into the bedroom, where I had the same slimy green leather chair I'd always had. He sniffed it and cocked his head at me like a dog. "Mom?" he said.

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Get out as Early as You Can

Non-fiction by Kevin Brown

If people know Philip Larkin's poem, 'This Be the Verse', they usually don't know the title, only the opening line: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad." They might even know the second: "They may not mean to, but they do." Most people don't know the poem beyond that point or the first stanza, at best. They focus on how our parents, in fact, "fill you with the faults they had / And add some extra, just for you." What most people miss is the speaker's advice that comes in the closing stanza, ending the poem: "Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself." Of course, if everyone took this advice, we wouldn't last much longer as a species.

However, some of us (more and more, it seems) do take Larkin's advice. For me, at least, I've known since I was a teenager that I didn't want children. No matter how many people told me I would change my mind when I got older, my mind never wavered. During my college years, I often told people, "Wife and kids are four-letter words; marriage is an eight-letter word, so it's twice as bad." I was trying to be clever. After having told people in as many clear ways as I could that I didn't want children, I thought that being witty would help. It didn't.

People simply didn't want to believe that I wouldn't want children, no matter how often I made the point. Not surprisingly, the subject came up often when dating, though even then people didn't believe me. I was married just after I graduated college, though it only lasted a few years (and, yes, I know that my clever saying denounced marriage as well, yet I went back on that, so it might seem logical for people to believe I would adjust my views on kids; however, in my defense, I dated often in high school and college, but never interacted with children around me; my behavior supported my views on children, though not the one on marriage). It should have ended after six months, as that's when I realised I had made a mistake, but I was too cowardly to leave.

Whenever I talk about my first marriage, I make it clear that the fault was mine. She would have made someone else a great wife, but I was still trying to figure out who I was, and took my thought processes out on her in passive-aggressive ways that I'm not proud of. However, one point she should have been clear on was my views on having children. When we were going through pre-marital counselling, we were supposed to list our goals. Mine focused on education, as I was beginning a master's program that fall, and I hoped to ultimately earn a doctorate. She responded that she wanted a strong family. As soon as she said that, she turned to me and clarified, "I don't mean kids; I don't mean kids." I think she meant kids.

Near the end of our marriage, when we had already decided to get a divorce, the subject of children came up. She said she thought I would change my mind on children, and I was honestly baffled as to why she would think that. So I asked. She said that both her mother and my mother told her that I would change my mind. In fact, she said my mother compared me to

my father, saying, “He’s just like his father; he’ll come around” (for the record, my mother denies ever telling her that; I believe my ex-wife for reasons that will become clear later). I was angry at all three of them. My ex-wife should have known better than to listen to either of them, and I told her so. I was angry that my ex-mother-in-law would make such a statement, not really knowing me. I was really angry that my mother would say something, as I would think she should know me better. Overall, I was simply mad that they had meddled in what I thought wasn’t their business.

Even after the divorce, when I started dating again, the subject continued to come up, despite my telling women about that conversation. A few years after the divorce, for example, I was on a phone call to a woman in Kentucky whom I had met through an internet dating site (I was moving to Tennessee). I had clearly marked on my profile that I didn’t want children. She must have believed that category was flexible, though, as she brought the subject up, and I made it clear I didn’t want children. We had been having a wonderful conversation until that point, but it came to an abrupt and immediate end.

Such outcomes were fairly common before I met my wife, who also doesn’t want children. It’s taken us a while to convince friends and family that we’re not having children (telling them about my vasectomy has helped in some cases), especially because she’s still young enough to have children (she’s twelve years younger than I am; while I could certainly have children, I wouldn’t want to be in my mid-sixties trying to raise a teenager). She and I were recently in a bookstore, and I picked up a book I had been thinking about buying: *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids*. The title certainly caught my attention, but I’m also a fan of Meghan Daum’s non-fiction, and she’s the editor of this collection.

I read it on a trip to England this past summer. My wife and I, along with another faculty couple (with a seven-year-old and seven-month-old, for the record) took a group of students on a two-week trip to several cities. Since we spent the second week on a coach, I wanted something I could easily read on such trips. I will admit I felt a bit bad about reading it around the other couple, especially as they have adopted both of their children. I don’t know if that’s because they are unable to have children (I always feel guilty when I talk about not wanting kids around people who might not be able to have them) or they adopted for other reasons. I would always put the book face down when I took a break from reading, so as not to disturb them.

The title is clearly a reference to the accusations those of us who don’t have children have heard throughout our adult lives. In fact, one of my other ex-girlfriends said pretty much those three words in talking about her brother, who had chosen not to have children. She and I were no longer together at that point, but I had to wonder if she was not-so-subtly talking about me, as well. The fact that she married quickly after our breakup, only to find out that the man she married was not a good guy in a whole host of ways, was lost on her, though she did end up with a daughter, so I suppose she was happy about that.

What was interesting to me in reading the book was that none of the writers gave reasons for not wanting children that resonated with my thinking. The writers talked about three main areas: time, money, or travel. The first two centred on other ways they could use their time and money, ways that still helped others—sometimes relatives, sometimes those in need—trying to fight against the terms used in the title of the book. The people who pushed for travel or other cultural experiences argued that they were enriching their lives, which sounds selfish, but they would also push against that by pointing out that they had a wider view of the world, which helped them be more engaged citizens. Some, frankly, didn't worry about being called self-centred; they have their lives, and they're going to live them any way they want.

When I've thought about my choice not to have children, I've never considered time, money, or travel, though I certainly know that my choice not to have children has given me more of all three. My wife and I often talk about what we're able to do that friends of ours with children can't. We appreciate those opportunities, we definitely take advantage of them, and we're not ashamed of them. We try not to flaunt what we're able to do, as we certainly believe that people who have children should spend their money in ways that help their children. They made their choices and they don't complain about the necessary compromises; we enjoy our lives and try not to act as if they are somehow better because of it.

What drove my choice not to have children was much more basic: I simply never felt a desire to have them. When I'm being a bit more extreme, my comment is that I don't like children, which is largely true, but sounds much meaner than it is. I don't treat children badly when I encounter them. When one of my best friends and his wife had their first daughter, and I came to visit, he was surprised that I interacted with her. I told him then that I was actually much better with children than people thought; I just didn't much like interacting with them.

That has largely held true. My wife is much more interested in being an aunt than I ever have been in being an uncle, so we take her nephews and nieces on various outings. My job is mainly practical—I taking care of logistics. However, when the boys were younger, I was the one who had to take them to the bathroom and such duties (but, no, I've never changed a diaper, and I'll be happy to die without having done so). They're largely good kids, as far as kids go, but I'm mainly indifferent to them, which is a good way to sum up my feelings toward children overall.

When people talk about what their children can do and how they behave, my response, whether I say it aloud or not, is simply *meh*. I don't *ooh* and *aah* over baby pictures, since they all pretty much look the same to me. Children are like birds or trees to me; I know they exist and serve a purpose in the world, but I can't really tell the difference between them, nor do I care what they're up to. They're the background to the world I live in.

What amazes me is how people would continue to push me to have children after I tried to explain my feelings. I would state quite clearly that I just didn't have a desire to raise a child, and they would always respond by telling me that that would change once the child was actually mine. My response was often the same: *What if you're wrong? That's a big risk to take without any assurance*. I didn't (and don't) want to gamble a child's life on the fact that I would

magically change and become interested just because she or he was mine. There are enough children in the world who aren't wanted.

For the record, I think I would be a perfectly adequate parent, as I'm practical enough to do what needs to be done (see the nephews and nieces above). However, children don't just need someone to make sure they get their homework finished or make it to band practice on time; they need love and affection and interest from someone who truly cares about them. Otherwise, they have a caretaker—not a healthy life for anyone involved.

I had this realisation early on in life, but I've never really thought about where it came from, what it was that made me feel this way about children. Like most people, I'm blaming my parents. *Blame*, of course, is much too harsh, but I do believe my childhood played a role here. I grew up convinced my father didn't want children, and, based on my mother's comment (or *alleged* comment) to my ex-wife, I think I was right. It's not that my father wasn't supportive or around; in fact, he was more present than my mother in many ways. He taught driver's education at a university, so his schedule was much more flexible than my mother's, who worked as a secretary at the same university.

I would often come home from school to find him already home for the day, and he had most of the summer off, though he would often teach classes part of the day. He had played basketball in college, as well as baseball in the army (and he was recruited by minor league teams), so he interacted with me through sports, despite the fact that it was clear early on I hadn't inherited a great deal of his ability. He coached a couple of teams I played on, he would suggest playing catch on a regular basis, and he took me to the gym at the university to shoot basketball when it became too cold to play outside.

In all of this interaction, though, he seemed in some ways to be simply going through the motions. He taught me what he knew about the game, but there wasn't ever any warmth in it. He could have been teaching anyone, not just his son. I'm not talking about the generational shift in parenting, where parents today seem to want to be friends with their children more than their parents. Instead, what I mean is that he interacted with me on a practical level, one more task he needed to complete.

Unlike my father, I always assumed my mother wanted children, but, as I've gotten older and watched her interact with children now, it's clear she doesn't like them. Everything that makes them children seems to annoy her, and she interacts with her grandchildren and now great-grandchildren much as my father did with me. It's as if she feels compelled to spend time around them, but doesn't really want them to be there and is relieved when they leave.

Even if I didn't feel on a conscious level they didn't want children when I was growing up, I must have known it subconsciously. I almost never brought my friends to the house—it was more enjoyable to spend the night at their houses than invite them to mine, even though I should have felt more at home at my own house.

Again, it's not that they were mean in any way towards my friends. They knew them all and always treated them kindly. They just never exuded any kind of enthusiasm to be around them. They seemed to tolerate their existence until they were gone again. I couldn't articulate why I didn't bring friends over, as I couldn't have pointed to any behaviour that would lead me to think my parents didn't like children; I simply felt it.

Now that I'm an adult, I can't help but wonder if that feeling simply sank into my bones in some way. Even though I grew up in a neighbourhood with lots of children and enjoyed living there, I never had a desire to recreate that for someone else. In fact, as I've gotten older, the desire to be around children has lessened, not increased, as people argued it would. Since I don't spend my time around children on any kind of regular basis, when I do, I find that their behaviors all annoy me. I know why I have that reaction, but there's not much I can do about.

That might make me sound selfish or shallow or self-absorbed, but it's really just that I don't have any interest in children, and, in our culture, that automatically makes me a bad person in some way. We use children for political arguments rather than simply arguing that something is right or wrong (protecting the environment, for example), and it's almost always a foregone conclusion that people will want to procreate at some point. A desire to have children is still the default for most people, despite the shifting feelings on that subject, so choosing otherwise feels like a betrayal of the future.

People can call me what I want, but I'm happy with my decision not to have children. My wife and I do have more time and money, and we are able to travel much more than we would with children. People can believe that those are our reasons. I can't spend my time worrying about what they believe about my choices in life. I'll simply enjoy the life I have chosen, the one where I don't, for whatever reason, want children, and they can have their life with them. The human race will continue, and it will be fine having both types of us around.

Kevin Brown is a Professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry: Liturgical Calendar: Poems (Wipf and Stock); A Lexicon of Lost Words (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and Exit Lines (Plain View Press). He also has a memoir, Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again, and a book of scholarship, They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels. You can find out more about him and his work at www.kevinbrownwrites.com.