

# Tincture Journal

Issue One

Autumn 2013



# **Tincture Journal, Issue One, Autumn 2013**

**ISBN** 978-0-9874983-0-4

**ISSN** 2201-7593

**Editor:** Daniel Young

**Email:** [editor@tincture-journal.com](mailto:editor@tincture-journal.com)

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

Individual contributions © the contributors 2013

This collection © Tincture Journal 2013

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher.

A cataloguing-in-publication data record is available from the National Library of Australia.

# Editorial

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Tincture Journal, produced in Sydney, Australia. Tincture was founded with the aim of providing space for new writing in a cheap and widely distributed e-book format. I was initially unsure as to the quality of submissions that a debut publication would be able to attract, but these concerns have thankfully proven unfounded. I hope you will agree.

I love print literary journals and magazines and subscribe to many of them, but they are expensive to run and produce. Australia's Wet Ink magazine recently closed down, stating that going digital was an option they had considered, but for them it was not a “meaningful alternative”. This is understandable. Wet Ink was a professionally and beautifully produced magazine which paired fresh writing with exciting design, artistry and layout—an effect which is not feasible in most e-books. In a move to digital, something profound would have been lost.

Tincture Journal focuses purely on the text, specifically targeting e-ink devices, but is also readable on mobile phones, tablets and desktop computers. Hopefully you will find the e-book to be well produced and the quality of the selected works can speak for themselves. This is a not-for-profit venture, funded solely by myself, with the aim of always paying writers for their work. Unfortunately it is a small payment, but I hope this at least provides some level of push-back against the proliferation of online content that expects writers to submit their work purely for exposure. If you are interested in supporting new creative writing in all its forms, rest assured that buying this journal is going at least some way towards that.

Issues of Tincture are unthemed at this stage. So what can you expect to find in Issue One? We open with the first instalment of a regular column by Meg Henry, “Inferior Bedrooms”—inspired by *The Hills*, cult YouTube hit *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and Bret Easton Ellis' *Imperial Bedrooms*. The column takes experience from Meg's own life and parallels them with scenes from fictional works.

We have five poets, hailing from Melbourne, Perth and Mornington to Memphis and Sacramento, and covering broad themes that include the contemplative, the astral and the

domestic. Non-fiction submissions were the hardest to come by, but we have selected the work of four writers, also scattered both locally and globally. This issue ends with a trio of epistolary memoir pieces by Fayroze Lutta, evoking and lamenting the vast distance between Sydney and Paris.

The core of the journal is clearly fiction—my greatest love—but for future issues I would like to strongly encourage more creative non-fiction submissions, or pieces that deliberately blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Linda Tzoref, an MFA graduate from Atlanta opens proceedings with a story about an unfortunate sexual awakening. Amy Han of Melbourne writes of “A Funny Girl” and her devotion to a defunct air conditioner. Guy Salvidge provides a disturbingly true-to-life piece of dystopic fiction. A paired duo of flash fiction comes from Angela Meyer—and of course, there is much much more.

I hope you enjoy reading this first issue of Tincture as much as I've enjoyed producing it. All feedback to [editor@tincture-journal.com](mailto:editor@tincture-journal.com), or hunt me down on Twitter. Publishable letters to the editor are most welcome.

enjoy,  
Daniel Young,  
Editor.

# Inferior Bedrooms

*Regular Column by Meg Henry*

I wake up naked from the waist down wearing the Best Man's shirt. The room stinks of sweated alcohol and the four-poster bed, romantic last night, does nothing to filter the dusty sunlight, reminding me cheap champagne is just a gateway drug to aspirin. When a hand creeps across my stomach I know I'm in trouble.

The scene is familiar and like Chandler's Marlowe, trouble is my business. The reality is I've already lived the most socially abhorrent scenes in fiction. My life unintentionally mimics art to the point that it could be 1940s Santa Monica and the Best Man my heart-broken and misplaced Moose Malloy.

I'm *that* girl and he shouldn't be here, but his eyes are bluer than I remember and when he tells me he's going to throw up I know he won't survive any of this. He leaves the door ajar as he staggers to the main house for the bathroom.

When I sit up I'm not alone. The ground is littered with groomsmen, slain by single malt and our best friend's marriage to a retired female jokey. Post-wedding debris covers the floor but neither my dress nor knickers are among the discarded ties and wallets. Knees pressed together, I make my escape.

My quest for pants leads me into the gruesome aftermath of a Gen Y wedding. In the gazebo, amongst dozens of abandoned plastic cups, a Macbook still drones a loop of power anthems. I find my dress by the pool and don't attempt to put it on. Back inside, I accept my long-forgotten purse from the surly proprietor who tells me there are no taxis in Bay City. I'm twenty-seven and I need to leave.

§

I'm walking on the roadside, high heels in hand, when Nutly pulls up and tells me to get in. We're not friends and I don't trust his Lexus, but sometimes the help of the groom's real estate agent is as good as it gets. I let my pride take the hit and soon Nutly is idling outside the Paradise Inn where my luggage has spent the night alone on twin-singles.

When Nulty asks me what I'm doing, I wish I could tell him I'll make it right. But we both know Malloy isn't escaping this. Two months from now he'll be on a plane to Europe to live with his international girlfriend, and I'll be the one saying Farewell, my lovely.

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

# Fold

*by Sam van Zweden*

*Sam writes that “‘Fold’ is about the feeling that David Foster Wallace describes often, but particularly well in his short story, ‘Good Old Neon’. It’s that feeling of being unable to communicate things fully to anyone, because the very fact of our existing as individuals stops us from truly connecting.”*

I had more poems, but I couldn’t find the words

I had the impulse to capture colour, to make a vision, to shutter-clamp down on this  
moment

I had the urge to box it and leave this precious parcel for you to find  
to open wide and be overjoyed, overcome by an instant of understanding  
but you couldn’t even comprehend the lid

I had a wish to sew curtains  
to muscle heavy drapery from mountain tops  
to cover our world in my precisely hemmed velveteen dream  
that we might open them and stand cheek-to-cheek either side of the windows they hid  
but their weight was too much to bear

I had the will to leap, careening, swinging from chandeliers  
to send light spinning to dizzy infinity  
to laugh, heady, dripping magical, together  
but all that fixture gave was a sliver of diamond  
not enough to catch the sunlight to signal to you

I had opportunity in my sight, in our visions of one another  
I had closed doors which blocked a lot, but not all  
I had strong fingers pushing moments through the keyhole  
but I soon felt a swelling ache in my joints  
and I stopped, because broken fingers are not useful.

*Sam van Zweden is a Melbourne-based writer, who loves creative nonfiction, good food, cross-*

*stitch, and the ache that happens the day after a really good run. Her work has appeared in publications including Voiceworks, Killings, The Big Issue, and The Emerging Writer Online Journal. She blogs at [www.littlegirlwithabigpen.wordpress.com](http://www.littlegirlwithabigpen.wordpress.com).*

# Family Traditions

*by Linda Tzoref*

Grandma said she wanted to take us to the casino to play craps, but first we had to go to the beauty parlour and have our hair and make-up done. My sister and me needed to pass for twenty-one to even be in the casino, let alone gamble. Grandma's friend Maureen worked in the beauty shop at the Desert Inn where we were staying. According to her, this woman was a beauty expert, so we were to let her work her magic without any commentary, no questions asked.

“You girls need to behave and listen to Maureen.”

“We will,” I answered for both of us.

“Now, I'm going to teach you how to play once we're at the table, so just do what I say and don't ask any questions.”

She was shaking her index finger at us while she spoke, the way she did when she was either frustrated or trying to make a point.

At fifteen I had already been to Las Vegas many times, but this was the first trip without my parents. It was our winter break, and Mom and Dad decided they wanted the house to themselves for a while. So they dropped us off with Grandma and Grandpa who were spending the winter in Phoenix. We would all drive to Vegas together in Grandpa's van. For a girl from suburban Milwaukee, it was thrilling to be able to swim outside and sunbathe in December. We'd be able to go home sporting golden tans while everyone else was still deathly pale. Thinking about how all my classmates would be jealous made me smile. I was about to enter Paradise.

You could say it was a family tradition. Grandma would only stay at the Desert Inn, the same hotel her father used to take her to as a teenager, along with his third wife. A few of her children from a previous marriage were included in the entourage as well. He gambled the way other people played tennis or golf. So, when Grandma was sixteen he taught her how to play craps, his favourite game. For thirty years he spent the winters in

Vegas, always in the same suite, 502. We were all staying in a suite, too, 818. The powder blue carpeting smelled brand new and there was matching wallpaper. All the furniture was white, accented by gold bamboo. On the glass table in the living room sat a huge fruit bowl, compliments of the hotel. It looked so luscious and enticing, but I was hesitant to disturb such an exotic composition. A pineapple crowned the top like a spiky jewel, a fruit I had seen before and even eaten, but it was rare to find one in the supermarket. Lenore and I shared a room as always, just like at home. Since we were only eighteen months apart, everybody treated us like twins. I never heard my name spoken without someone also saying Lenore. After a while it became one long proper noun, NitaandLenore. We even got the same presents for our birthdays and Chanukah. I didn't like being treated like one person, especially since we were so different, but too much pouting would spark my father's temper. Complaining was forbidden by him, and only led to punishment. In my household, you learned quickly to become invisible if you wanted to avoid pain.

The beauty parlour was like any other I had seen, except for the fact that most of the clientele were older and wore tighter clothing than many twenty-two year olds. All of them had heavily applied make-up on their faces that was thick as sugary icing on a store-bought birthday cake. Coral lipstick and blue eye shadow looked garish to me, a far cry from beautiful. They wore a lot of jewellery too. Mostly it was gold, and some stacked bangles nearly up to their elbows. I wasn't used to so much decoration and adornment. My mother didn't wear any make-up at all. Grandma would always say that a little rouge and some lipstick enhanced a girl's features. Just a little.

“See how beautiful those girls are, Nita?” Grandma pointed. “Don't you want to look like them? Maureen can make you up like that. Those girls really know how to apply make-up.”

I didn't know what to say, but figured it was better to keep quiet. Saying what I really thought would only upset Grandma. Finally, Maureen came over and introduced herself. She looked a little like some of her customers, but I could tell from all those wrinkles that she was much older. My grandmother was easily ten to fifteen years older than Maureen, yet she had smoother skin. The only part of Grandma that looked old (besides her helmet of teased auburn hair) was her hands, the tangles of blue veins raising the skin. After our introduction, Maureen handed us plastic-covered books filled

with photographs of hairstyles and told us to pick out one we liked. She leafed through, tapping the ones she liked with a long red nail, but Grandma warned her not to listen to us, that she should just do what she thought was best.

“You’re the expert,” Grandma said. “Make these girls beee-yoo-tiful!”

“Go change into smocks over there,” Maureen said, directing us to the changing room in the corner. “Nita, you can go first.”

This was one of the few privileges given to me as the older sister. Normally I was just an appendage. You see, Lenore was everyone’s favourite, the sunny child who would entertain you with song and dance while I preferred reading and solitude. Adults weren’t comfortable with a little girl who refused to placate them with monkey-style tricks.

It was the usual old-lady wash and set, after which came thirty minutes of sitting under the dryer, then teasing and fluffing, finished off with copious amounts of hairspray. The sharp smell made me nauseous, but again I kept quiet. Grandma wouldn’t appreciate any complaining, she was doing something nice for us. After Maureen finished with my hair-do, she began applying make-up, a task she appeared to take quite seriously. It was very difficult sitting still through so much fussing. As she moved around my face, she gave me directions: close your eyes, purse your lips, look up, now down, okay, don’t move. Lenore also had a hard time keeping still, and once in a while she couldn’t help but squirm. Somehow we were able to manage and finally the job was finished. Grandma oohed and aahed, told us how gorgeous we looked and that we would definitely pass for twenty-one. I thought I looked horrible, and was shocked at what I saw staring back at me in the mirror. Some strange, made-up girl had taken my place. I did look a bit older than my actual age, I suppose, but it was still jarring. This girl looking back at me almost looked like a mannequin, except she was able to move on her own and didn’t have a tiny, upturned nose. As soon as we got back to the suite, I’d wash everything off immediately, I told myself. It would be impossible to go around in public looking so frightening. Realistically, I’d probably have to wait until we got back from the casino, but not a moment later. Lenore smiled and posed in front of the mirror, giggling. Obviously she didn’t feel the same way I did, but she was always happy no matter what, especially if someone was paying attention to her. Grandma was

disappointed with our silence.

“Don’t you girls like what Maureen did?”

“Well, Grandma,” I said, “we’re not really used to this. Mom doesn’t allow us to wear make-up at home and Dad said we have to wait until we’re at least sixteen.”

“I like it!” Lenore chirped, still staring at herself in the mirror.

Grandma waved her hand up and down as if batting something away.

“Your parents are too strict.”

After paying for our afternoon of beauty, we went to find dresses in the boutique across the hall from the gift shop. All they sold were skimpy cocktail dresses, some of which looked like nightgowns, but Grandma said we needed to show a little cleavage. Problem was, I didn’t have any and neither did Lenore. I came out of the dressing room with something fuchsia and strapless, ending a couple inches above my chubby knees, and Lenore was modelling a dress the colour of fake emeralds. She could wear anything, being so skinny from all that dancing.

“Wonderful!” Grandma exclaimed when she saw us.

Back in our room we carefully changed into our new dresses. One wrong move and all those hours at the beauty parlour would be worthless, and Grandma would get mad. After we zipped each other up we slid into our high heels. Neither of us could walk, we just wobbled back and forth and stuck our arms out like trapeze artists trying to keep our balance. Between the fitted dresses and high heels, it was practically impossible to move. When I looked in the mirror I didn’t think I looked grown-up at all, but Grandma was pleased and nodded approvingly then smiled, her thick lips pressed together.

“You girls look smashing. I don’t think they’ll give us any trouble at all. Now just stay right next to me and don’t ask questions. We’re going to go straight to the craps table. Grandpa will meet us there. He’s just finishing his golf game.”

We nervously walked behind her trying to sashay in a way that suggested a familiarity with such goings on, while secretly I worried about being arrested and taken

from my family. It was crowded and there was hardly an empty space in the whole casino, much less room for the four of us at one table. Old women in brightly coloured trousers and blouses were playing the slot machines and squeezing plastic buckets filled with nickels between their legs. Anytime one of them won, the clanging of so much change spitting out was accompanied by screaming; sometimes even jumping up and down once the precious container was safely resting on the floor. The men mostly congregated at the blackjack and poker tables; you rarely saw them by the slot machines. It appeared that out here people liked alcohol and drank a lot of it, but the grown-ups I knew back home never did.

The bright lights were hot but the air-conditioning was blasting, cooling my body everywhere except my face and behind my knees. When Grandma wasn't looking I rubbed my arms with my hands to try and warm up. She was always nagging us to bring cardigans whenever we went somewhere air-conditioned, but of course we never listened. Grandma was very superstitious about which table to play at, so we circled the room. Lenore and I huddled against one another, trying to warm up while we learned to walk in our new shoes. We found Grandpa at one of the blackjack tables with a cigar clamped between his teeth. He winked as we ran towards him.

“Hiya girls.” He put his cards down and hugged us.

Grandpa was handsome like Omar Shariff, and looked more like an Indian than a Russian Jew.

He looked us up and down and laughed.

“Did Grandma take you girls to the beauty salon?”

We nodded.

“Mort,” Grandma said, “come with us to the craps table. I want to teach the girls to shoot.”

“Just a minute. Let me finish this hand.”

He pushed his cards towards the dealer and gathered his chips. We were back to searching for space at a craps table, and finally found one after circling the casino a few

more times. Lenore and I stood in between Grandma and Grandpa trying to look like we had done this before, but I felt so awkward and couldn't stop looking around for security guards. What if they were watching us? Would they know we were under twenty-one?

An older man whose cologne I could smell from across the table was shooting. He glanced at me then picked up the dice gently, holding them in his palm like jewels, blew on them, then threw them. After a few rolls he casually tossed me a five hundred dollar chip. I picked it up nervously and smiled, wondering why he would be so generous for no apparent reason. Grandma snatched it from me, looked at it, and stuffed it in her purse.

“You brought him luck. I'll give you a hundred of that later.”

The stick boy gathered the chips with a long wooden device that looked like one of those cheap back-scratchers you could get at the mall. Then he placed a round white plastic marker on one of the numbers painted in the green felt. Grandma kept whispering loudly in my ear, trying to explain everything, but it didn't make sense. Those two small dice held a lot of power. You could win or lose large sums of money with just one roll.

It was Grandma's turn. She elbowed me.

“Now, pick up the dice and just shoot, okay? I want you to shoot for me.”

“Okay.”

“You can do it Nita! Come on!” Grandpa and Lenore cheered me on.

I picked up the dice and looked at Grandma. My hand was trembling.

“Just shoot them Nita. Throw them as far across the table as you can, all the way to the other end.”

I did it and rolled a six. For a moment, the possibility of disappointing Grandma became scarier than getting caught. The point marker was on four.

“That's okay, just shoot again.”

I threw the dice again and this time made the point. Now everyone at the table

cheered, and Lenore was grinning. I rolled for another five minutes and then crapped out. Along with the rules, I was learning the lingo too.

“Atta girl,” Grandpa said, patting me on the back.

“That’s okay, it happens,” Grandma added. “You did a good job darling.”

Now it was Lenore’s turn. She wasn’t nearly as nervous as I had been, and shot for a much longer time. After each toss of the dice she’d twist her upper body back and forth as if there was a hula-hoop around her waist. Even when she wasn’t in dance class she danced. Grandma and Grandpa were raking in stacks of chips during her turn.

“Beginner’s luck!” Grandma exclaimed, and Grandpa grinned while he sucked on his cigar.

I decided that after she was done I’d go to the ladies room and explore a little; I was anxious to see what else was around. May as well take advantage of being dressed like a grown-up. After all, when would this ever happen again? Lenore looked crestfallen when her turn was over. My sister always did love the spotlight.

“I have to go to the ladies room,” I whispered to Grandma.

“Okay, but hurry back. And don’t get lost.”

I still wasn’t used to walking in heels, so I took smaller steps thinking it’d make things easier. It did, but it also had the unintended side-effect of causing my hips to swing back and forth in an exaggerated fashion. As I attempted to perfect this new method, I touched my hair gently, wondering if it was still in place. It felt tangled and sticky, like a big clump of cotton candy. As I continued towards the bathroom, I glanced over at the bar lounge and noticed a man winking at me. I smiled shyly then looked down at the floor. Was he really winking at me? It didn’t seem possible. In the powder room it reeked of perfume and I checked my hair then examined my face from every possible angle. The harsh fluorescent light revealed everything. My mascara and eye shadow were smeared, and the lipstick had completely worn off. I tried to clean my face and freshen up without having any make-up with me, but mostly this just meant wiping off the black streaks from underneath my eyes with some tissue. So much fuss hadn’t enhanced my looks exactly, but it did make me look a little bit older, and this could work to my

advantage. I took one more look, adjusted my dress, and left. As I was about to head back towards the bar, or at least pass by it, there was Lenore. The cute guy was still there sitting in the same place.

“Lenore what are you doing here?”

She looked even more ridiculous than I did. Blonde and skinny, her rangy body could barely hold onto her dress.

“I wanted to see what you were doing. Plus I had to go to the bathroom.”

“Use the bathroom, and then go back to grandma and grandpa. Are they still playing craps?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Just go back to them, and I’ll see you later.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, leave me alone, okay?”

“But I want to be with you.”

“You’re too young to be with me. I’ll see you back at the craps table.”

My whole life she followed me around, I could never just play with my friends without her tagging along. But really I wanted to talk to the cute guy, and didn’t want her spoiling it. I hoped he hadn’t seen me talking to her. That could give my age away.

Never had I seen a guy like him back home. He appeared to be in his early or mid-twenties I guessed, and had brown curly hair with streaks of gold. He was wearing a hot pink polo shirt tucked into white pants.

“Are you lost?” he asked me.

There were the beginnings of a smile on his round handsome face. He looked Latin to me with those dark brown eyes and light brown skin, but maybe he was just really tan. I couldn’t tell.

“No. Why do you think I’m lost?”

“You look a little confused.” He winked. “So, what’s your name?”

“Nita.” I checked my hair again with my palm.

“I’m Rene.”

He took my hand lightly and kissed it. The gesture made my spine and shoulders blades tingle.

“Would you like to join me for a drink?”

“Okay. Yeah.”

I needed to figure out what to tell Grandma and Grandpa; I couldn’t just disappear.

“First I need to go tell the people I’m with where I am. But I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Sure,” he nodded. “No problem. I’ll wait for you right here.”

A handsome older guy was waiting for *me*. He wanted to have a drink with *me*. I could hardly believe my luck. Back at the craps table, Grandma and Grandpa were waiting for their turn to roll again. Lenore was playing with the stack of chips they had accumulated.

“I’m going up to the room to lie down for a little while.” I announced.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Grandma asked. It wasn’t as easy lying to her. Mom and Dad were a snap; they hardly ever asked very many questions.

“I just have a little bit of a stomach-ache, that’s all. I’m going to go back to the room until dinner.”

It wasn’t completely untrue. I was so excited about my potential date that I did feel kind of queasy.

She looked worried and I wondered whether she believed me. Grandpa raised an eyebrow.

“All right darling.” Grandma said. “I’ll come up and check on you soon.”

I frowned and clutched my stomach, then kissed her and Grandpa on the cheek.

Rene was waiting for me in the same spot where he had been a few minutes earlier, just like he said. I felt relieved that he hadn’t left. He motioned the waitress over as I walked towards him, and ordered a coke for me and a rum and coke for himself.

“So, is this your first time in Vegas?” he asked, smiling.

“Oh no, I’ve been coming here since I was a little girl.”

“Really? But you don’t live nearby, do you?”

“Oh no, but my family likes to come here a lot.”

Carrying on a conversation with him was a little tricky. I had to lie about so many things. Was he catching on? Where did he live? I tried, albeit briefly, to picture his life outside of the casino, but couldn’t. Here was another kind of person I had never encountered back home, but unlike the others he intrigued me.

“There are a lot of gamblers in your family? High rollers?” He winked again. Grandpa always winked too.

“My grandparents like to gamble. And they used to live here. Well, just during the winter.”

“So do *you* like to gamble?”

“Not really. I mean, kind of. Sometimes I do.”

He chuckled to himself. What did he find so funny? I didn’t understand. Maybe he didn’t like me after all.

“If you’re interested, I’d love to show you a part of Vegas you’ve probably never seen. Its natural beauty—the mountains and the desert.”

“Sure. Like, tomorrow? Is that what you mean?” He did like me.

“We could go tomorrow, but why not now? Do you have something else you have to do now?”

“Not really.”

I figured I had at least an hour before I'd have to be back. Going somewhere with him would be fun. This was new, and I liked it. Finally someone was paying attention to me and Lenore was nowhere in sight.

He took my hand and led me out back to the parking lot where he said his car was.

“I know this great little spot. It's not too far, just a little further down the strip. We could watch the sunset.”

I nodded.

Even though the sun was just beginning to go down, it was still warm outside. I immediately started sweating and wondered how I could dab my upper lip without him noticing.

“There's a nice view there of the mountains. I want to take you somewhere special, since you seem like a special girl.”

I nodded again and smiled while he opened the door for me. It wasn't every day that I was slathered with compliments. Such praise I never even heard from my own parents.

As soon as we got into the car he turned on the radio and the air-conditioning. It was a Spanish station and I wondered what the lyrics meant. A medium tempo usually indicated a love song of sorts. What else were pop songs about? He reached for my hand and I let him take it even though I was nervous about touching him.

“So what do you think? Can you see the mountains?”

“Barely.”

The sky was growing darker and darker, from purple to deep mauve, now nearly black. There were hardly any people out this far, not even tourists. We were out in the Mojave, far from the strip. Once in a while there was a liquor store or a Seven Eleven,

then nothing besides Joshua trees. It kind of reminded me of Phoenix, where my aunt and uncle lived in eternal summer. Wisconsin seemed like endless winter.

I glanced at the Seiko watch Grandma had given me for my thirteenth birthday. Keeping track of time was crucial, of course, and I loved my watch, never went anywhere without it. It was already nine o'clock, which made me nervous. Hopefully we'd be back soon, but Renee didn't seem very concerned about this. There wasn't anything I could do now. What would I tell Grandma and Grandpa when I saw them again? They had probably checked on me a while ago. If so, I was really in trouble. Maybe I shouldn't have been so mean to Lenore; she would've covered for me.

“Soon we'll be closer and you'll have a better view. Isn't the desert beautiful? Nothing like it.”

Renee ran his other hand through his hair and smiled. His teeth were very white, and I wanted to smile along with him but had a sinking feeling that something was wrong.

We pulled up to what looked like a motel, a squat, putty coloured building with a few cars parked outside, but there was no sign. It looked like some kind of hideout or secret destination. Rene rolled down his window as fast as he could while an old man ambled towards the car. They were speaking in Spanish, so I couldn't understand what was being said, but I knew that something wasn't right. I longed to be back with my family at the craps table, anywhere but out here in the middle of nowhere. My stomach really was hurting now. Rene handed the old man some folded up bills then pulled up a few feet, parked, and got out.

“Come on,” he said, waving his hand.

I followed him even though I knew something was wrong. What else could I do? Where could I go out in the middle of nowhere? It was as if my head and body were disconnected and someone else's head was attached to my body. As soon as he opened the door I saw that it was a motel room. What were we doing here? There was no television, nightstands or lamps—just a bare light bulb on a long, crooked wire dangling from the ceiling. The bathroom had a toilet and small shower but no door, only oily hinges protruding like dirty fingernails. Rene slammed the door shut behind us and immediately started kissing me in a way that I had never been kissed, not at fifteen. He

shoved his tongue down my throat and ran his hands all over my body. I turned my head to try and avoid him but he kept clamping his hands over my ears and turning my face back towards his. Then he pushed me onto the bed and I tried to get him off by kicking and pushing, but he pinned my wrists down. As he yanked my crisp white cotton underwear down my legs, the ones with a painted violet on the front panel, I stared at the dangling light bulb and the white ceiling with cracks running through it like tiny capillaries.

§

Slowly I gathered my clothes even though my hands and entire body were shaking. As I got dressed I tried to figure out what I was going to tell my grandparents and sister and what I would do with my bloodstained underwear. There would be questions, lots of them. Rene looked over at me and smiled. He was already dressed and leaning against the door, waiting. I silently followed him back to his car, scared as to where we were headed next. To my relief he took me back to the hotel, where he kissed me goodnight on my cheek as if nothing had just happened. As I watched him driving away I leaned over and clutched my gut. I watched the automatic doors opening and closing, the air-conditioning escaping like breath. When the doors opened I could hear the ringing and clanging and chattering and music from inside the casino, noises from people's lives and activities. Everyday life. How could everyone go on as if everything were normal?

Up in our room it was dark. I could hardly breathe for fear that someone would hear me. Were Grandma and Grandpa sleeping? I knew I was going to be in big trouble and still hadn't quite formulated a plausible explanation.

"Nita, is that you?"

Lenore had been sleeping but was now awake and sitting up in bed.

"Yes. Shhhhhhh." I whispered and put my index finger up to my lips.

"Where have you been? Grandma and Grandpa are so worried. They're down in the casino talking to the police!"

"The police?"

"Yeah, they thought maybe you were kidnapped or something. Where were you?"

"I—I—met someone."

"You mean a guy?"

"Yeah."

I needed to get out of my bloody underwear, but didn't want Lenore to see. Slowly I began making my way towards the bathroom without turning away from her.

"Wow! Really? So tell me about him. Was he cute? What'd you do?"

"Nothing. He just took me for a drive."

"That's it? Did you kiss him?"

"Of course. He's in his twenties."

"I can't believe it! French kissed?"

"Yeah."

"So you had a good time? What did he look like?"

"Tan, brown hair, cute. I'm really tired. Can we talk about this later?"

Quickly I took off my panties, balled them up and tossed them in the garbage, making sure the blood was hidden and that they were buried under the dirty tissues.

"When Grandma and Grandpa get back you're going to be in so much trouble. They were so worried. What are you going to tell them?"

"I don't know. While I'm in the shower, think of something, okay? You're good at making up stories. They can't know that I was with a guy and left the hotel. They'll kill me."

"They will. Don't worry, I'll help you. What if they don't believe you and tell Mom and Dad?"

"Oh geez, I can't think about that right now." Nita reached in the tub and turned on the water.

"You're going to shower now?"

"Just a quick one. It was kind of hot outside."

Lenore's eyelids were fluttering and beginning to close.

"Don't fall asleep yet! Not until I'm in bed too."

Mom used to tell me that because of Lenore's blonde hair, people would ask if she was adopted. She was the only one in the family with her hair like that. Now I was the marked one, except no one could see how I was different. Only I knew.

"You were with a guy in his twenties? Wow. Lucky."

*Born and raised in the Midwest but currently living in the Deep South, Linda received her B.A. in philosophy and an MFA in creative writing. In addition to Tincture, she's had work appear in such journals as Hot Metal Bridge and Diverse Voices Quarterly. You can read more of her short fiction in the Spring 2013 issue of Subterranean Quarterly as well. While she prefers the warmer weather*

*of Atlanta, she is occasionally distressed at the natives' inability to understand her fluent sarcasm...*

# A Funny Girl

*by Amy Han*

It just wasn't summer without the Elcon. The sound of it whirring, turning its head from side to side like a carnival clown, was as crucial as the always-heard-never-seen-crickets, the almost-never-seen-but-always-felt-mozzies, the oily discomfort of being coated in sunscreen, ice cream melting down our arms, performing rain dances around the sprinklers in our undies.

We slept in the lounge room on camping mats. Even when we got an air con for the central part of the house, we still kept the Elcon going. I needed the sound to fall asleep. I liked the predictable timing of the air across my face, then across the faces of my brothers, and back to me again. I remember feeling like we could melt into the floor.

One of my brothers, Frank, had nightmares and would hit people in his sleep; imaginary people that were trying to take us away, but sometimes if we slept too close he'd get us by accident. I hit him back once. He swore at me and I cried, but even then he didn't wake up. My other brother, Jimmy, told us both to shut up and go back to sleep. I tried to explain that Frank had been sleeping the whole time; that he woke me up by hitting me and then he swore. But by then Jimmy had already rolled over and continued snoring.

Mum and Dad had their own Elcon in their room. It was smaller than the one in the lounge, but worked just as well. When I was really little, I slept between them. I pretended to be asleep when Dad carried me back to bed, because I liked the way he tucked me in. If he knew I was awake, he'd have put me down and told me to go back to bed myself.

They put the house up for sale last week. Frank, Jimmy and I went back to help them tidy it up for real estate photos, and help them clear some stuff. I found a hair clip I had lost about twenty years ago. I put it in my pocket. It was a good thing, too—if I hadn't stopped to do that, I wouldn't have seen Mum out the window carrying the Elcon to the skip.

“Mum!” I called, rushing out the front door.

She was holding it over the edge.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” I said. “I want that.”

“It doesn’t even work anymore, darling. I should have thrown it out years ago.”

“I want it. Please, mum.”

Mum brought it down, and walked towards me.

“You’re a funny girl,” she said.

*Amy Han is a Melbourne-based author and the founder of Creative Write-it!, which is dedicated to inspiring and encouraging young writers. She published her first novel, Ru Dreaming, in 2011. When she isn't playing with words she can often be found practising circus tricks and parkour.*  
<http://www.amyhan.com.au>.

# Moon, Did You Get Fat With The Stars?

*by Ron Barton*

Nights ago you seemed slimmer;  
a slender thread of shimmering silver.  
Now you are round, rotund.

Did you get fat with the stars?

There seemed to be more of them before.  
Were you snacking while the sun was up?  
If I didn't know they were balls of gas  
I would assume they were chocolate wrapped in gold foil  
like those coins I used to get at Christmas.  
They would certainly help you  
pack on the pounds.  
I don't know the calorie count of gas  
but I've seen what it does to balloons.  
Are you simply inflated?  
If I breathed you in would my voice alter in pitch,  
getting higher in an attempt to match your altitude?

Now that you are obese,  
I wonder which Western civilisation  
you will become a citizen of.  
Your blood pressure has probably risen,  
like the tide,  
and you will now be susceptible to diabetes  
and other diseases.  
Sadly, you are more likely  
to grow fatter than lose what you've put on.  
The bad habits you've developed  
are now a part of your daily cycle

and will die hard.  
Not like you,  
you will die easily  
but not necessarily  
pain free.

# Hang Tough

*by Ron Barton*

We were street rats,  
junkyard dogs,  
real playas—  
we were whatever tough happened to be.  
Micky was a baller;  
knee high socks in pumped up kicks,  
baggy shorts, a closet full of jerseys  
and a head held high under a backwards cap.  
Jay suffered from early onset boganism;  
wife beater under flanno,  
jeans ripped at the knees,  
hair unwashed, untouched, untidy.  
I was a straight-up Salvos shopper  
swimming in oversized band t-shirts  
and baggy pants,  
bum-fluff moustache touched by side fringe.  
A rag-tag bunch of boys,  
we were lads out on the town  
looking to look tough.  
Chests out  
we swaggered through city streets  
starting on kids smaller than us  
then picking fights we couldn't win  
so we'd have battle scars  
to warn off the next thug.  
Later,  
walking past some store,  
we'd hear a certain song  
and we were like preteen princesses at a pony party.

But who cares?

What of it?

Even thorn bushes have roses sometimes.

*Hairy male with salt-and-pepper stubble (32). Likes long walks on the beach but prefers an afternoon of sitting on the couch watching football. Seeking readers aged 13-90 for intimate relationship with his neurotic, poetic self. Author of Ginninderra Press 'If God is a Poet, but modest despite this arrogant title. If you'd like to read between my lines, or just read the lines themselves, follow me [@Teacher2Poet](#).*

# Blue Swirls

*by Guy Salvidge*

I needed to get out of the city, find somewhere to dry out for a week or three. Somewhere I could close my eyes without being assailed by visions of mouths opening and closing, without bleak, bloodshot eyes peering into me. I informed Seeker Bureau that I was taking a leave of absence and that they could call it Absent Without Leave if they liked. The only Deviant whose behaviour I intended to monitor from now on was Tyler Bramble, forty-one, white male. I asked my landlady not to let out my apartment while I was gone, that I'd be back soon, but she didn't believe me. I had barely made it across the threshold of the Ballard's front step before I heard her picking up the phone. Humping a duffel bag over one shoulder, I shuffled off in the direction of the bus station like a man intent on checking himself into the morgue. There I bought the most expensive ticket they had—way up the nightmare coast—and contemplated life after drinking. I figured I was going to need a new hobby.

Kilgore was small, isolated and on the coast, so it had those things on the credit side. On the debit side it had at least three liquor outlets and it was deep inside what the squares in Seeker Bureau termed 'the Unpoliced Zone' and what I knew as the 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know Zone'. The only things the indefatigable fisher folk were likely to catch in the oily waves were vast plumes of mutated seaweed or a strontium salmon. My hotel was nice, if by nice you meant grimy, vermin-infested and malodorous. But I wasn't complaining. I needed all the friends I could get, even if they scuttled on four or even six legs. All I wanted was somewhere to stash myself long enough to decide whether suicide wasn't the most asinine of the many career paths open to me. In time-honoured fashion, I thought about this with the barrel of my .22 revolver in my dry, evil-tasting mouth. But then, my eyes having locked in on a cheap print of a drab cityscape that hung crookedly over the chipped wooden table, a dissonant thought pierced my gloom. I'd pushed so far down the path of pessimism that I discovered a pebble of optimism, like a single dark hair in a head gone white. The thought was simple and it was this: if I was going to kill myself, then there was absolutely no reason why I shouldn't have a drink first.

Out the front of the Kilgore Hotel there was an old, beaten up merry-go-round upon

which a bevy of undersized humans spun. I found their clamour oddly soothing, serving as a reminder that the world itself hadn't lost momentum, even if my own existence seemed to be spinning down. I buttoned my coat against the wind and took my first sip. The first whisky evaporated as if by some unknown chemical process and the second sat on the other side of the table where I had placed it, goading me into action. I would have reached for it momentarily but someone sat down across from me. A woman, not young, not old. "This for me?" she said, picking up the glass before I could protest. She tongued the glass in brusque suggestion but the only desire she stirred in me was for the rich fluid that was rapidly moving to a place where I could no longer access it. The woman misread my expression of longing as sexual interest in her. She knocked the whisky down and grinned. Her teeth weren't bad and nor was her complexion. "My buy," she said, on her feet at once and striding in the direction of the bar. She returned with another two whiskies and this time she sat down on my side of the bench. She smelled of perfume and cigarette smoke. I reached for my drink.

"I'm Jill, thanks for asking," she said.

"Tyler."

"All right, Tyler. I've had it with niceties so I'm going to put it out there. Let's get drunk and then you can bone me. Think you can handle that?"

"I expect so."

A flash of anger illuminated her face, making her look a little like someone I'd promised myself not to think about. "Don't sound so fucking enthusiastic," Jill said. "I've been told I'm an amazing root."

"I'm sure you are, Jill," I said, trying the word out. The sun was going down over the radiated bay. "To us," I said, and we toasted our fortune. Jill held my stubbled chin in her hand and we went from there. She was an expensive drunk and after a while she stopped buying. It didn't take long for her tongue to come a-probing more specifically in my direction, and I reciprocated more out of politeness than lust. She put her hand on my crotch but if she was disappointed with what she found there she gave no sign. "I want you inside me," she said, and I told her that I wanted her too. By that stage of the evening it wasn't even a lie.

The sun was gone and so were the children. The merry-go-round lay motionless and so I gave it a brief turn as Jill and I pushed past revellers numerous and disorderly. Jill turned to me, acknowledging this minute burst of whimsy, and she nearly lost her balance on the concrete steps. I steadied her, holding her around the waist. The lights of Kilgore were puny beneath the titanic sky, the entire human project manifestly wilting and enfeebled.

Jill led me to a darkened, two storey structure, once a holiday villa but now just another squat. The gardens were choked with weeds and refuse. ALM RESORT, the faded sign proclaimed. "Checking in?" I asked.

Jill giggled, fumbling in her handbag for her keys and spilling things everywhere. She fell to her knees and I bent down in assistance. It occurred to me that this was exactly the way in which women of various ages and inclinations met their fate at the hands of men they did not know sufficiently, in car parks dark and windswept. I helped her to her feet and she opened the door.

I wish I could say that I cannot recall what happened next, that the memory has been obliterated by drink, but it is another of my curses never to forget those things that are best forgotten. Jill went into the bathroom and closed the door. I sat on the unmade bed and listened to her as she urinated, letting out a great sigh. Then I heard the shower running so I lay down in my clothes, not even taking off my shoes. The sheets were sandy. The room was unremarkable and it was dark except for a weak battery-powered lamp that sat on the bedside table. "You can come in if you like," Jill called from the shower. "I like to be clean, don't you?" I started taking off my clothes.

Standing beneath the tepid spray as Jill sidled past me in the gloom, I cleaned myself as best I could despite the absence of soap. When I returned to her she was between the sheets. It wasn't cold but she had lit a little oil burner anyway. "I want to see you," I said, and I pulled the sheets aside to reveal her moist flesh. She was tanned and with half a roll of fat around her middle, and her nipples stood erect beneath my gaze. I went to work with my hands and mouth.

*"I can't go through with this," Laura said, her eyes wide and white.*

*"We can try again," I said, squeezing her hand. "We have to."*

*“What if I can’t get pregnant again?” she said, her wet hair clinging to her neck.*

*“You will,” I whispered, aware of the woman shuffling and sighing in the next bed in the cramped ward. “We’ll try.”*

*“And what if this happens again?”*

*“It won’t.”*

*“But it might,” she insisted. “The radiation...”*

*“It doesn’t always happen,” I soothed, knowing how frequently it did happen.*

*“I can’t kill him, Tyler.”*

*“He’ll die anyway. We’ll have a healthy baby, I promise.”*

“Aren’t you interested in me?” Jill said, holding my limp penis in her hands. She had sat up and her face was creased with annoyance.

“I am interested,” I insisted, looking down. “This nearly always happens. It isn’t you.”

“You could have warned me,” she said. She took me into her mouth.

“I thought it might not happen this time.”

She gave up and threw herself back down onto the bed. “Yeah well—it did.”

“Have you got anything I can use on you? We could both enjoy that.”

Jill crossed her arms across her soft midriff. “In the bottom drawer. Use plenty of lube.”

I did as instructed, driving into her with the hard plastic. She forgot her frustration and was soon satisfied. I’d had plenty of practice along these lines in recent years. “All right,” she murmured. “Good enough.” But as she drew the sheet around her, the light fell on Jill’s exposed left ankle and I saw something I immediately recognised. I bent across her for a better look. Faded but still clearly visible, just above the anklebone, was a

small blue tattoo in the shape of a swirl.

“Jill, just a minute,” I said, shaking her slightly.

“Fuck off,” she said. “I’m sleepy.”

“Your tattoo, I’ve seen one like that before.”

A pause, then she sat up holding the sheet around her in protection. “That’s the problem, is it?” she sneered. “I’m too old for you?”

“No, I work for Seeker Bureau. I’m not a paedophile. I can prove it.” I reached for my wallet.

“I’m not interested, it’s in the past now. I’m twenty-eight years old, for fuck’s sake.”

“Just listen to me for a minute, would you? I worked on a case a few years ago, a Deviant named Tenenbaum. Reece Tenenbaum. He was caught trying to abduct girls from an orphanage in Melbourne. Three or four had gone missing already and we found one—dead, her throat cut—with that tattoo on her ankle. Ten years old.”

“What happened to old Reece?” Jill said dully.

“He tried to run but we got him. He’s dead.”

“You shot him?”

“No, but I saw the body.”

“Did you spit in that fat fucker’s face?”

“So you knew him.”

“Reece? Yeah, or maybe I should say he knew me. Several times. From when I was, oh, maybe eleven.”

“Jill, we knew Tenenbaum was running a child sex ring but we couldn’t figure out where from or who the other players were. You might know something that could help us.”

“I told you, it’s over for me. I don’t like you Seekers and you don’t have any jurisdiction up here, do you?”

“What about the other girls? There must be ten year-old girls being stolen from their beds all the time. Girls just like you were.”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice tiny, the child within exposed. “And not only girls.”

“So you’ll help?” I talked and dressed at the same time.

“There’s an old fish barbecue place out on Willard Street, run by an old vet named Finnegan. Crazy old coot, he was in Afghanistan or something. That’s no excuse for what he is though.”

“Finnegan knows something about the child sex ring?”

“Let’s just say old Finnegan still has his hat *in* the ring,” Jill said.

She rolled over and I let myself out into the blustering dark. I wanted to go up to the cliff edge and feed myself to the ravenous rocks below. I wanted to scatter my ashes to the glowing deep. This was just the kind of pitiless night when I might even do it, except that I couldn’t get the image of that swirling tattoo—like a maelstrom—out of my mind. I shuffled back to my lodgings and fell into an unfamiliar bed.

## §

The room was full of unwelcome light and my head began to pound when I tried to sit up. My pulse was racing. I was in poor shape any way you chose to measure it and on top of that I had a sharp pain in my left temple. Clutching at the various zones of distress I loosely termed my body, I staggered out into the bathroom. There was a mirror that I tried to avoid looking into, but curiosity won out. I looked like shit. It wasn’t the kind of look you could remedy with a razor unless you took it to the wrists and not the whiskers, but I did the latter. I even brushed my teeth. It would be wrong to say that I felt better after that, but I had the inkling that I might turn my sour soul toward some altruistic purpose, such as collaring a nasty sort of person and making them pay what would almost certainly be a heavy price.

I went back into the bedroom and tipped the contents of the duffel bag onto the bed.

It was a sad collection of items: two shirts, both heavily creased; one pair of briefs; one pair of socks; a scuffed handwritten journal; two cheap pens, one red, one blue; twenty or so loose revolver shells, some of which had grains of sand sticking to them; one unopened bottle of generic unbranded rum; and the thing I was looking for, one scratched Seeker-issue comm-box. I picked it up and tossed it from hand to hand, deciding. I still hadn't made my decision when it started to ring, a blue LED line pulsing down the side. I opened it.

Garrick, in his ruddy benevolence, filled the room.

"Tyler," he said. "I see you haven't popped yourself yet. That's good."

"You sound disappointed."

His eyes and his words didn't match, but they never did. "Give it time," he said. "You've only been off work for, what, two days now? I give you a week."

"Is this a courtesy call or are you just trying to torment someone suffering from mental illness? As you can see, I've got some important agenda items to attend to here."

Garrick peered down at the items on the bed. "You can finish beating off in a minute. Didn't anyone ever tell you that you're supposed to leave your room every once in a while? You know, take in a show?"

"It's early yet."

"Early in the evening. Tyler, I'm pleading with you. Can't you hear me pleading with you? Go out and enjoy life while you can. And for chrissakes put those bullets away. Anyone would think you really *were* about to pop yourself."

"This *is* a courtesy call," I said. "Do the bad guys miss me?"

Garrick snorted. "I just wanted to tell you, *in person*, that you have about a hundred RDOs up your sleeve. I never realised before, but you don't take days off as such, do you?"

"Crime never sleeps," I said.

Garrick made an ambiguous sound in his throat. He may have been passing judgement on me. “Look at you, my finest Seeker. Did I ever tell you that? Sorry, I’m embarrassing you. You look like a hunk of junk, incidentally.”

“I appreciate it.”

“I want you to take a fortnight off. Full pay. You should be able to get a nice nuclear tan in that time. Let me know how it pans out.”

“Garrick.”

“I’m all yours for another two minutes, at which time I have some secret Seeker honchoes’ business to attend to.”

“I want to run a name past you,” I said.

“You’re on *leave*, Tyler. That’s the problem, isn’t it? You just can’t switch off that big tub of unhappiness, not even for five minutes.”

“Reece Tenenbaum.”

A pause. Garrick’s look said it all. “You know the score there.”

“And a vet named Finnegan. Tattoos. Blue swirls. Little girls.”

“You’ve got a lead on *that*? Tenenbaum’s been in the ground five years.”

“Old guy named Finnegan runs a fish barbecue place here in Kilgore. I have a witness. Child sex slave herself, all grown up now.”

“Any evidence? At all? You know Seekers can’t operate up there.”

“Unless...”

“Yeah, unless. You think Brother Finnegan might still be active?”

“So says my informant. I just wanted to run it past you before I try to pistol whip anyone.”

Garrick leaned back in his chair, the tips of his fingers touching across his chest. “You’ve got no backup. No evidence. Just the word of some floozy you fell in.”

“I didn’t fall in her.”

“Not my business if you did. Well, thanks for the information, Seeker Bramble. I shall consider myself informed. But don’t think you’re getting double pay if you turn anything up. As far as I’m concerned these are *rostered days off* just like it says on your payslip.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t crawl up to me, Seeker Bramble. It doesn’t befit you.”

“Solid, pops,” I said.

Garrick looked at me through our banter for what seemed a long time. “Stay well, Tyler,” he said, flashing out.

“Yeah,” I said to the wall. The clock said 4.42 pm, so I’d slept the day almost through. I needed coffee and maybe some barbecued fish, and I knew just the place.

It was blowing a gale again and the slick waves hammered the bay, spraying the alfresco area of the café where I sat. Figuring that I couldn’t absorb any more toxins, I lit up a cigarette and flicked ash quixotically into the wind. The barista scowled at me from inside the café, glancing up at the clock that read closing time. If I had wanted a glass of hot, brown milk I would have asked for one, but I sipped at it nonetheless, fingering the loose bullets in my coat.

It wasn’t far to Finnegan’s from there, nothing in Kilgore being out of shambling distance. It was early so there weren’t many customers, but it was still too late to bump into Finnegan on his lonesome. Besides, I hadn’t eaten in more than a day. The front of Finnegan’s was a dirt car park with rock pillars and the restaurant was open air. The place was loaded with nautical kitsch: antique lifesaving rings; wooden oars; replica fish; and even a battered fishing trawler next to the smouldering log fire. There was more of the same in the kitchen area, but my eyes locked in on the chef, aproned, standing behind his grill. Sixtyish, weather worn and sporting a black ponytail, Finnegan

barely glanced up from his work long enough to ascertain that I was a lone diner, leaving his assistant to take my order at the till.

“Red emperor and chips,” I said, reading from a chalk board. “Please.”

The assistant, a thin-faced twenty-something, rang up my order, her bracelets and rings pattering on the till’s plastic rim. I paid and stole a glance at her ankles as she swished away, but I saw nothing through the billowing layers of her dress.

“See something you like the look of, cobber?” Finnegan said, scraping the hotplate.

I sidled over. “Maybe,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. More diners were coming up the stone steps. “You still get some decent fish up this way, then?”

Finnegan grinned at me. His mouth was full of gold dentures and black teeth. “It won’t kill you,” he said, flipping the fish over. “If you catch it far enough out,” he added.

“This place BYO?”

He looked up. “Providing you can spare a drop for the chef.”

“I’ll bring you a glass. And the men’s room?”

“Dunny’s around there,” he said, nodding to his right. “Past the container. Grub’s up in five. I’ve got a feeling it’s gonna be a slow night.”

I went around the side. Finnegan obviously lived on site as there was household junk scattered everywhere. The wind picked up sand, stinging me, and everything rattled. The sea container was rusted and painted with Chinese characters, and it was locked up. I found the toilet and saw nothing enlightening there, no girlish effects or other items I might regard as clues.

“Number four,” Finnegan bellowed as I rounded the corner. I poured him a measure of synth rum and took my plate loaded with fish, chips and rice from the counter.

“Is it safe?” he asked, sniffing at the clear liquid.

“It won’t kill you,” I said, hard at work with the pepper grinder.

Finnegan knocked it down and staggered back a step. “Drunk me fuck,” he said, wiping his mouth.

I took my dinner and sat down near the fire. The night closed in and I didn’t drink nearly as much as I might have. No one sat near me. There were a few couples, one of which had a clutch of children. The kids entertained themselves by tearing around and standing on buckets in front of the elderly coin-op arcade game, long since powered down forever. I even managed to chew through my entire plate of food. The food sat stolidly in my gut, as though my innards had forgotten the art of digestion. Finnegan’s assistant eventually came over to collect my plate. This time, in the flickering light, I spied the thing I was looking for in the place I expected to find it. “Hey,” I said. “Quick question.”

Her arms loaded with dishes, she considered me. “Shoot.”

“Where’d you get that tattoo?”

The young woman opened her mouth to speak but no words came to her. She shut her mouth.

“I see,” I said. “I’ll have a quick word with the boss.” She started to shake her head. “It’s all right,” I soothed. She stole away without looking back at me. Through the mesh separating the dining area from the kitchen, I saw the two of them in congress and I knew that my message had been delivered. I drank another glass of the rough stuff and waited for the other patrons to leave. Finnegan and his assistant went about their closing routine, the latter occasionally glancing in my direction. When there was nothing left to clean, she came back to where I sat before the cooling ashes.

“We’re closed now,” she said.

“Then you can go home, can’t you? I have business here.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“But I do,” I said, doing my best to leer at her. “Where does he store the meat?”

It did the trick. The woman shook her head and backed away. She took her things

from the kitchen and hurried down the steps. I walked over to the counter, where Finnegan was waiting. He didn't pretend to be surprised that I was still there.

"Hit me again," he said, his forehead beaded with perspiration. I poured him a large rum and this time he took a more measured sip. "That is...nasty," he said.

"But you still drink it."

"Can't help myself. Nor can you, by the looks of it."

"They don't age it as well as they used to," I said.

"True that. I think we're reading from the same song sheet. Let's talk terms. Two hundred up front and another hundred when you're done. And the key word here is *gentle*."

I opened my wallet and passed him the money, which Finnegan put in the till before reaching down beneath the counter and retrieving a large key. "She's in the container. Quiet as a mouse, she is."

I went around to the sea container, through a swirl of sand and the cacophony of banging objects. I turned the key in the heavy padlock and slid off the chain. The lever opened easily, revealing a cramped room with a dirty bed and a frightened child huddled in the far corner. There was a tiny lamp on an upturned bucket and the floor was littered with debris. Though I wanted to reassure the girl, I couldn't even begin to set foot inside. "Run and hide," I said and went back around to the front, where Finnegan still stood beneath a single oil bulb. I held the revolver inside my coat.

"Lost your nerve?" he said. "Don't think you're getting a refund."

"I've been having suicidal thoughts just recently," I said. "One minute I'm up, the next down. This is a down moment."

I opened my coat and showed him the .22. He reached down and was half way toward levelling his concealed shotgun at me when the first bullet ripped through his fingers and buried itself in his side. The shotgun dropped to the sand and I leapt the counter and was over him, pushing him down.

“You shot me, you cunt!” he bellowed, clutching at his side.

“Get up,” I said, kicking him to his feet. His blood made an interesting pattern in the sand. “Over to the container.” He cursed me with every step. “What’s her name?” I demanded.

“Frances.”

“Frances,” I called. “I hope you aren’t in there. Get out quick if you are.” No reply. I glanced inside the container but I couldn’t see the girl. “Where is she?” I asked Finnegan.

“Done a runner, I imagine,” he said.

“Get in the container,” I said.

“Fuck no, you psycho.” He started to turn. I shot him in the foot and the sound of splintering bone was awful, even to my ears. He hobbled up the container step and turned back toward me. “What now?”

“On the bed.” He scrambled up, blood and urine pissing everywhere. I raised the pistol and he lowered his head. My first bullet missed and embedded itself in the container wall, but my second shot smashed the lamp. I levered the container door closed and padlocked it. Finnegan started thumping on the wall but the noise was nearly lost in the general din.

I looked around but I couldn’t see the girl. “Frances,” I said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

A small, grubby child in a torn dress moved into the light. I couldn’t help but notice the blue swirl tattooed on her ankle. I handed her the key and went back into the kitchen, where I opened the till and took back my two hundred dollars. What was left over I pushed into Frances’ faltering hands.

*Guy Salvidge is a Western Australian writer and English teacher. He is the author of the dystopian novel Yellowcake Springs, which won the IP Picks Best Fiction Award in 2011 and was shortlisted for the Norma K Hemming Award in 2012. Yellowcake Summer, the sequel, will be published by Glass House Books in 2013. “Blue Swirls” is the second story to feature Seeker Tyler Bramble. The*

*first, “The Dying Rain”, will be published in Tobacco Stained Sky from Another Sky Press later this year.*

# Apocalypse

*Flash Fiction by Angela Meyer*

The admin officer puts rubber bullets in the staple machine. No one seems to notice she's carrying a pillow around the office. They continue to discuss football around the old gas pump where the water cooler used to be. She sets up homing pigeons on the roof (but they seem to blow off course), and she blares Gershwin from tinny computer speakers on her lunch break. As long as she does her work, no one says anything. And she does do her work, just in case it's not the end of the world. But the others don't seem to pay any attention to that either: the fire she extinguished last week in the stairwell; the storms. She supposes the zombies aren't far off, if popular culture is correct (and how often has it been?). When it finally comes—if only, if only then—she might make her whole office dance. With or against the rhythm of the earthquake, she's not sure.

# Glitch

## *Flash Fiction by Angela Meyer*

Daniella has always heard the devil in machines. As a child, the vacuum cleaner would growl and try to suck her to hell. When her parents were late getting home, the alarm clock told her it was beckoning her parents to the fire. When she was old enough, she escaped to a commune, but at night would hear the doom-laden rumbling of a forbidden TV. Hitching a ride to the nearest town, the engine hummed an epistrophe of belligerence: new combinations of words and sounds she'd already heard.

It was the wrong season for picking, so she decided to be brave and take the job her friend Sandy had lined up for her. Sandy was the only friend who knew, and who called them “auditory hallucinations”. She said she'd had the same thing, briefly, on a bad acid trip four years ago. She encouraged Daniella to face them, rather than run away; to talk back.

In her new job, Daniella fetched coffees and transferred phone calls, trying to ignore the hiss of Beelzebub behind people's voices. She was also responsible for the new machine, the facsimile. She would tear off sheets, decipher their messages and deliver them to the correct desks.

One morning there was a glitch and the paper became stuck. Danielle steeled herself, prayed, and then reached into the dark maw of the machine. As she pulled out the piece of paper, the world went quiet. On it was an illustration of an owl, addressed to no one. She smoothed the crinkles and looked into the owl's voluminous eyes. The voices had gone. Was it—finally—her talisman? The protector? The machine had tried to destroy it but she had rescued it from the brimstone.

That night, the new refrigerator hummed quietly and Danielle slept in owl-patterned pyjamas under her new owl bedspread, with a stuffed owl tucked under her arm.

*Angela Meyer is a Melbourne-based writer and reviewer. Her work has appeared in The Lifted Brow, the Australian, Crikey, The Big Issue and many others. A chapbook of her flash fiction is to be published by Inkerman & Blunt in early 2014, and she's currently editing an anthology of*

*creepy short stories for Spineless Wonders.*

# The Subjunctive Mood

*by Rhys Timson*

Pat tilted his chair back and surveyed the workings of a newsroom for the first time in ten years. He watched the young reporters with a crooked smile as they ambled to their desks, imbibing their morning coffees and whispering about the stories they were going to write. It made him think about the good old days, the days before the fall.

He was grateful to his old friend James for getting him work on the magazine—a news weekly called *Seven Days*—grateful yes, and jealous. At the far end of the newsroom was a shuttered office, and inside was James’ chair—the editor’s chair—which Pat knew he could have been sitting in had life turned out differently. Instead, he was working a subbing shift, editing copy and laying out pages; a stage hand when he should have been playing the king.

At 9 am everything was quiet. The journalists were still arriving and no stories had been written, so there was nothing for Pat to do. He sat back, sipped a mug of tea the chief sub, Teresa, had made for him (lots of milk, three sugars) and day-dreamed about the course his life could have taken. His fantasising was interrupted by the arrival of the news editor, a twenty-something with Harry Potter glasses and a scraggly beard. He was carrying a guitar case and wearing several hundred pounds worth of designer clothes. Pat had other people’s names on his clothes too, but they were written in ballpoint and sewn in to the lining.

“You must be Pat, the inimitable Pat. The Big E’s told me so much about you. I’m Max—Max Beasley.”

Max sat on the edge of Pat’s desk, his skinny denims almost bursting at the thighs and coming down at the waist to reveal just enough of his underwear to demonstrate it was Calvin Klein. Pat proffered his hand.

“Ah yes. Heard all about you too.” They shook. “Max Bylines they call you, isn’t it?”

Max smiled and folded his arms. “The green-eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on.”

“Evil thing, envy.”

“Guess I don’t need to tell you—you were a veritable Woodward and Bernstein all rolled into one.”

“Woodward and who?” Pat took another slurp of tea.

“You know? Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein? They were the journos who broke Watergate in ’72?”

“Think I remember them...”

“Right.” Max straightened out his Ben Sherman shirt and pulled it a little looser around the collar. “So now you’re on the subbing desk. What happened?”

“There’s a certain grace to subediting.”

“I mean you could have had the Big E’s job.”

“Spinning you reporters’ wordy base metal into reporting gold, sorting the journalistic wheat from the overwritten chaff, negotiating through syntactical quagmires—sifting out the verbose and the literary.”

“Not to mention the mixed metaphors. But seriously, you broke the Tate-Jones scandal. I remember reading about it when I was a kid. You should be running a place like this. Instead, you’re writing standfirsts and pulling in the tracking to fit stories into the right-sized boxes. What digs man?”

“Are you aware,” said Pat, “that I can almost see your rectum?”

Max stood and hiked up his jeans. “Well. We’ll shoot the shit some more later. Time and deadlines wait for no man. I’ll be sending over the front page story today. Just so you know, I like to write my own headlines. Some people let the subs do it, but most of them aren’t real journos.”

“Whatever you say cap’n.” Pat smiled and finished off his tea, using the mug to cover his face and hide how quickly his expression soured.

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Max, and he patted the older man on the back before striding to the centre of the room and calling out: “Alright people, The Big E has asked me to relay his sincerest apologies, but he is unfortunately stuck in Edinburgh because of this ash cloud nonsense—no flights—so in his absence, as news editor, I’m in charge. So treat me like you treat him, fear me like you fear him, and get those stories in on time. Also, we have a new sub in today, Journalist of the Year 1999 Pat McCulloch. So make those stories sharp people, this cat is old school.”

“The Big E?” Pat whispered to Teresa.

“He’s the only one who calls him that. Everyone else just calls him James.”

Pat grimaced and fumbled in his pocket for a heartburn tablet.

## §

At 10.30 a story came through from one of the junior reporters. It was about a ministerial initiative to combat gang culture in the inner cities. It was also about 300 words too long and riddled with bad style. Pat stood up and shouted: “Which one of you is Jean Orry?”

A sallow-faced girl a few desks down raised her hand, and Pat strode over.

“Hello Jean. I’m Pat. Pleased to meet you. Got a few issues with your story, I’m afraid. Firstly, it’s way too long. Don’t you write to fit around here?”

The whole room went quiet, and Jean Orry was staring from the edge of her coffee mug with glazed eyes.

“And you also use the phrase ‘big up’, which is not really appropriate language to describe the actions of a minister of state. Also, you’re not hyphenating anything: online, email, cooperation...”

“Pat, Pat,” Max tapped him on the shoulder and he turned round, only then realising how much taller the younger man was—about a foot and a half. “Problem?”

“Nothing I can’t deal with.”

“How many words over is it?”

“About 300.”

“Well, Jean can you cut it down?”

Jean nodded.

“But big up is a perfectly acceptable expression Pat. In modern English.”

“It’s slang.”

“It used to be slang, now it’s in the OED. Roll with the punches, dude. And the hyphenation—we take the opinion that hyphenated words all started as two words, and sooner or later they’ll all be one word. So we just want to be ahead of the curve. It’s a modern style.”

“But it’s wrong.”

Max snorted, the left side of his lip curling up. “It’s style, Pat. And besides, you’re not breaking Tate-Jones now, you’re subbing.”

Pat nodded and headed back to his seat. Max was right about one thing, this wasn’t Tate-Jones. Tate-Jones was a captain of industry selling a Mayfair flat at a knockdown price to the Minister of Defence in exchange for a weapons contract. Tate-Jones was three other ministers who were proven to have known about the deal but had never spoken up. Tate-Jones helped bring down a government. This story, Jean Orry’s story, was the regurgitated press release of a minor ministerial fancy. It was nothing.

At lunchtime, Pat sat at his desk and ate a limp ploughman’s sandwich he’d bought from Tesco that morning, washed down with some tea that was more milk than anything else. At the other end of the office, Max was regaling three or four of the reporters, including Jean Orry, with dumb sub-editor stories that seemed deliberately designed to provoke.

“We had one who asked me: what’s our style, Iran or Iraq?” His audience doubled

over.

Pat put down his sandwich and called across the room: “I had a reporter once who wrote a profile about a bloke who owned a chain of pawn shops. It was only the sub that picked up we had him down as a P-O-R-N baron. Would have been a libel.”

None of the coterie reacted until Max did. He shook his head and wheezed out a laugh. “Is that why you quit being a reporter Pat, to be a super sub?”

Pat shook his head and returned his gaze to sandwich. The wholemeal bread was leaking brown pickle goo onto the desk.

“Seriously man,” Max hopped off his desk and ambled towards him, his minions close behind. “Why aren’t you editing The Guardian or something?”

“Not my style.”

“...Or in the Big E’s chair? You two worked together right? He was on The Tribune when you broke Tate-Jones?”

Pat nodded.

“Seriously, where’ve you been for 10 years?”

“Extended holiday. Excuse me a moment—nature calls.” Pat dropped the remains of the sandwich in the wastepaper bin and made a controlled dash for the exit. In the toilet, he rested his hands on the sink and looked into the small, rectangular mirror. He looked at his neck, sagging and scrawny as it poked through a charity shop shirt, at the puckered dot on his left ear which used to anchor an earring, and at his yellowing eyes and drooping, overhanging eyelids. He had to grip the sink to stop his hands from trembling. His throat was dry and his head pounded. Sixty days without a drink, that was a record, but he had to ask himself why he was working so hard to keep himself together if the best he could hope for was correcting some twenty-something’s punctuation. He took a long draught of stale air, held it in his chest for ten seconds, then exhaled.

Max was right, Pat had broken one of the biggest stories of the past decade, he had followed the trail doggedly, obtained audio evidence which perjured a minister, caused

the near collapse of a major weapons manufacturer, he should have been editing a national by now. He should have been knighted. He could feel the blood pooling in his head, his wrinkled face becoming hot and ruddy. He ran the tap and splashed himself with cold water.

At 2 pm the rate of stories coming in to the subs desk had increased and no one had a moment to spare. Another freelancer, a thirty-something man with a retreating hairline and an expression that made him look permanently puzzled had taken the vacant desk and was working quietly but industriously on the remaining pages. Pat had picked up the front page lead and he was taking it apart. When he had finished, he took a print-out, covered in the red ink cryptography of proofer's marks, over to Max.

“You need to learn how to use commas properly I'm afraid. There's not a single properly formed sub-clause in 600 words. You're also ending sentences with prepositions.”

Max sighed and stood up, placing one hand on the paper Pat was holding and putting the older man in his considerable shadow.

“You know what Churchill said about the preposition rule: ‘This is the kind of English up with which I will not put.’”

“And you use the subjunctive mood a lot. Do you know that?”

“Whatever works best.”

“And the expression is ‘another think coming’ not ‘another thing coming.’”

Max pulled the paper out of Pat's hands. “No it's not. It's thing. Another thing coming.”

“It's think, why would it be thing?”

“You've got another thing coming. That's the expression.”

“If that's what you think, you've got another think coming.”

“That doesn't even make any sense. Why would it be another think?”

“Because, bird brain, you’ve had one think, and if that is what you think, the reality of the situation I am relaying to you requires another think. Do you see?”

Max scrunched up the paper and threw it over his shoulder. “Can we have a word in the Big E’s room?”

He turned and headed for the door to the editor’s office. Pat followed. Max closed the door behind them with an ominous click. The room was basic, furnished with a black, wooden desk, a high-backed, plush leather chair and a bookcase. But behind the desk was a series of framed photographs that made Pat’s guts twist. One of James with the current prime minister, another of him with Prince Charles, one with President Clinton, another with Nelson Mandela.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Max stood directly in front of him, just inches away, his arms crossed and a thunderous expression pulling at his face.

“I’m doing my job.”

“No you’re not. Your job is to fix little problems with punctuation and grammar, make sure we’re all adhering to the magazine style guide, and put those stories on page in time for us to be home before midnight. That is your job. Telling me how to write is not your job. No one needs to tell me how to do that.”

“What’s a matter, can’t you take advice?”

“I don’t need to take advice from you. You haven’t written anything in, what, ten years?”

“So what?”

“You’re a has-been, Pat. You’re only in this job because the Big E took pity on you. You’re yesterday’s news.”

“Fuck off,” Pat spat, “Fuck you. You jumped-up little prick.”

Max unfolded his arms and took a few steps back. “Jesus man, what’s wrong with you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. What’s wrong with you?”

“Do you know you’re one of the reasons I got into journalism?”

Pat closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face. “Don’t take the piss.”

“It’s true man. You broke that story single-handed. Lord Tate, peer of the realm and merchant of death, taken down by one man. And Percy Jones, a minister, one of the most corrupt motherfuckers the Tory party has ever produced, sent to prison because you got the evidence that proved he lied in court, all by yourself. That’s amazing. That’s what journalism is.”

“Don’t be a prick.” Pat could feel tears forming at the edges of his eyes. His legs felt light and his knees like they were about to buckle. Hearing it all from another’s mouth, it brought it all back to him, every detail.

“And then you just disappeared. Turned up at that awards ceremony drunk as Oliver Reed on his birthday, slagged off a room full of people who just gave you one of the biggest awards in your profession, then you vanished. Was it what happened to his wife?”

Pat kept his eyes closed. In his head he heard the voice of Percy Jones, calling him when he had heard what they were splashing on the front page that Sunday, telling him he could print what he liked but begging him to omit one tiny detail. The detail being that he had used the Mayfair flat he’d bought from Lord Tate in the dodgy deal for hook-ups with his gay lover. His wife had suffered from depression, Jones said, and if she found out about the affair it would kill her and destroy his family and, besides, his infidelity was not the story, it was not the reason why he would go to prison, it was the perjury that mattered to the public. “I’m sorry Percy,” Pat had replied, in the most patronising voice he could muster. “I have a duty; I have taken a solemn oath. The truth will out, and it’s my job to out it. Tough luck, me old mate.” He had put the phone down and, since he was in the habit of taping his calls, played the minister’s ten minutes of begging and pleading to the entire newsroom. Everyone had laughed and Pat had run a victory lap around the office. The next day, The Tribune’s front page was all anyone was talking about and the police were knocking on high-profile doors. A few weeks after that, Percy Jones’ wife took several bottles of sleeping pills and never woke up. Then her husband went to

prison for 15 years and two young children were left without parents.

“So come on Pat,” Max said again. “What happened? What’s the story?”

Pat opened his eyes and looked again at the editor’s chair. Then he gave Max the thinnest of smiles before turning and walking away, across the grey carpet tiles, between the canyons of piled-up folders and beyond the hum of computer screens and cooling fans, to the exit of the newsroom for a final time.

*Rhys Timson lives in London and has previously been published by Aesthetica, Opium, and Literary Brushstrokes. He also has a story forthcoming in 3:AM Magazine. He is working on a novel, though it sometimes feels as if the novel is working on him.*

# Pet

*by Corey Mesler*

A small dog came to live  
with me. I can't remember  
when or where he came from.  
I named him Fear. He is a  
mix, as they say. Sometimes  
he is the size of a pony  
and sometimes a rat. His tail  
is loose and his teeth bad.  
When I say, "Stay, Fear," he  
looks at me the way Jesus  
looked at the Safeway. I want  
everyone to meet Fear when  
they visit. I get few visitors.  
Yesterday, Fear showed me a  
new trick. He pulled my heart  
out onto a newspaper he'd laid  
down. It sat there beating, al-  
most exactly in time to the  
wagging of Fear's careless tail.

# Aged and Wanting

*by Corey Mesler*

I give up  
and I give up.  
The joys,  
the small joys,  
so many left  
behind like  
spoor. I will  
no longer  
do this, no  
longer have this.  
Yet, today,  
just as I shook  
the clock,  
a ray of light  
appeared, settling  
on the dog's  
white ruff.  
Ruff, I said. And  
my dog answered,  
there will be  
time and there  
will be time and  
what will be  
will seem al-  
most insanely proper,  
your adjusted total.

*COREY MESLER has published in numerous journals and anthologies. He is the author of six novels, three books of short stories, three full-length collections of poetry, as well as numerous chapbooks of poetry and prose. John Grisham once blurbed one of his novels, as did Lee Smith,*

*and Marshall Chapman. He and his wife own Burke's Book Store in Memphis TN, and she tells him which shirt goes with which pants. He can be found at [www.coreymesler.wordpress.com](http://www.coreymesler.wordpress.com).*

# The Worth of Love Letters

*by J. J. Steinfeld*

Randall liked riding the bus, especially on Saturdays. In fact, bus-riding was not only a form of recreation for him, it provided him the opportunity to write. He even considered a bus to be somewhat of an office. This Saturday, which seemed extra special to him because it was exactly a year since his heart attack and he was feeling better than ever, Randall sat next to a window and wrote sentence after sentence on the new pad of yellow legal paper he had bought that morning. When he reached the bottom of a page, he flipped the sheet over and began on the next. He always wrote longhand on yellow legal paper, as if he were incapable of being creative unless it was on this type of paper, and on a moving bus. Maybe, he had considered on several occasions, he was incapable of writing anywhere except on a bus. He attempted to write on other types of paper and in other places, but he could never sustain any sort of creative thought outside his moving-through-the-city writing office. These thoughts were soon cast aside by the surge of creativity he was experiencing, the beautiful love letter he was writing, to Theda Bara, whose picture he had found on the internet. He had been quite taken with her, even though he had never seen one of her films. Earlier he had attempted to write letters to other long-ago film stars, Mary Pickford and Mae West, but both of those letters had faltered. Theda Bara had stirred something within him. This was the hundredth love letter he had written on a bus and he intended to put them together in a collection to submit for publication. He had already chosen a title: *The Love Letters of a Broken-hearted Bus Rider*.

Now the words were flowing and he stopped only occasionally to look out the window at the city passing by. He tried to imagine the love letters the people he saw would write. He imagined letters that were sweet and almost innocent; others that were lascivious verbal romps. And, he thought, every emotion and desire from one end to the other of the love-letter spectrum. Randall felt good as the ride continued.

At first Randall didn't sense the woman who sat down next to him. In an aisle seat, she read a magazine, glancing once in a while at Randall as he wrote. When he paused from his intense, almost frenetic writing and looked down at the floor of the bus, he first

noticed the woman, or rather her shoes. They were open-toed sandals and her nails were painted bright red. He thought of the colour as blood red, and then cringed, not liking the connotations. He turned to look at her, as if a magician had made her magically appear out of nowhere. She was perhaps nine or ten years younger than he, that was his guess, and she was reading an issue of a magazine that he had seen the cover of at the convenience store where he had purchased his legal pad. He also remembered thinking that the person on the cover of the magazine had an unkind, severe face and would have written the most inept, unloving love letters, if he had ever been in love.

As Randall was looking out the window, the woman said, "I've never seen anyone write so fast."

Randall smiled and said, "The words rarely flow this quickly for me, but my creative juices are bubbling deliciously this afternoon."

"Deliciously, indeed," the woman said and smiled. Randall started to compose a love letter to her in his head. He was leaning more toward the sweet and innocent, when she said, "I'm amazed you can write so well on a bus."

"Not always. Creative juices aside, everything seems to have come together today."

"What you writing there?" the woman asked, squinting at Randall's legal pad, and Randall, making no effort to hide his words, said, "Love letters."

"You must be in love big time," she said, arching her eyebrows ever so slightly.

"No, not presently. But I like writing about love...love letters. You might call it a literary hobby."

"You have an unusual hobby."

"Bit of an obsession of mine."

"How can you have a bit of an obsession? Obsessions are obsessions."

"You have an excellent point, I admit. Do you have any old love letters lying around?"

“I wouldn’t show them to anyone.”

“They have a life of their own if someone else reads them. The love continues, so to speak.” He looked at her feet again, the bright-red toenails, and he noticed for the first time that each of the little toes were not painted, as if she had run out of polish. How could he have missed that before? He began to alter the direction of the mental love letter. It became more about the physical and desire, almost erotic.

“There are as many good memories as bad memories in my love letters,” the woman said, closing her magazine.

“I think I understand what you mean. My grandfather on my mother’s side proposed to my grandmother in 1931 while they were dancing to the song ‘Love Letters in the Sand.’ I adored that story, all the different versions that my grandparents used to tell when I was a kid.”

“That qualifies as a good memory of love.”

“The connection gets more incredible and loving. My parents told me they were necking in a car and listening to ‘Love Letters in the Sand,’ the 1957 version, sung by Pat Boone. My mother is still alive, but my father died a few years ago.”

“That’s lovely synchronicity, isn’t it?”

“I’m divorced now, but when I proposed to the then love of my life, it was at a beach and I wrote the words ‘Will you marry me?’ in the sand, and whistled ‘Love Letters in the Sand’ as I was doing it and waiting for her reply.”

“I’ve been married twice—and twice divorced. Probably didn’t have the right love song to help me through either marriage.”

“Despite your marriages ending, I’m sure you’ve received love letters in your life.”

“Nothing all that memorable.”

Randall liked to tell people he had the world’s largest collection of love letters. He put ads on the internet offering to purchase any particularly passionate love letters people might have in their possession. Of course, most of the letters he was offered

weren't authentic, but that didn't matter to him. They were genuine love letters if someone, for whatever reason, claimed they were. He used them to help with the writing of love letters for the book he was working on. All of a sudden he changed the working title of the book to *The Imaginary Love Letters of an Unimaginable Bus Rider*. He caught himself being a little too explicit in his letter, the lustful overtaking the affectionate, and crossed out several words.

“A well-written love letter is a joy to read. Furthermore, even a poorly written love letter by someone famous or villainous, let's say, has an intrinsic worth.”

The woman stared at him without saying anything and he felt she was questioning his thinking. “The villainous can write love letters, can't they?” he said.

“I'm certain they can,” the woman said and absently flipped the pages of the magazine on her lap.

What he wouldn't give for a love letter by Mata Hari, Randall said, resisting an impulse to stop the woman from flipping the pages of her magazine. He said it would be priceless and the woman sitting next to him said everything in the world had a price. No, Randall argued, some things were priceless, had to be priceless, or else why was life worth living. The woman said that was an idiotic argument. Randall thought briefly about moving to another seat, but he noticed that the bus was now full. The woman said she looked upon his obsession with love letters, the love letters of others, as compensation for something lacking in his life. Randall said that nothing was lacking in his life, each day was a gift, not only because it had been exactly a year since his heart attack and he was feeling energetic and amorous, but because it was his intention, his plan, his destiny, to be the recipient of the most love letters, after writing the most passionate, interesting love letter ever. According to who? the woman asked. According to whom, Randall said, and began to laugh more vigorously than he ever remembered laughing. The woman shook her head at Randall's laughing, saying love makes a person silly, but she had never realised the thought of love letters would bring on such silliness. Randall stood up from his seat, still laughing, and got off at the wrong bus stop.

*J. J. Steinfeld is a Canadian fiction writer, poet, and playwright who lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published fourteen books, including *Disturbing Identities* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), *Should**

*the Word Hell Be Capitalized? (Stories, Gaspereau Press), Would You Hide Me? (Stories, Gaspereau Press), Misshapenness (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), and A Glass Shard and Memory (Stories, Recliner Books). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over forty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in North America.*

# Snapshot

*Non-fiction by Bill Vernon*

I waved to stop my father. He was mowing but wouldn't look up. He was watching for stumps. I'd ruined a crank shaft and two blades on them, and this was our third riding mower in less than two years. The unbroken one couldn't pull him and mow in thick or wet grass, or on inclines. So he'd traded it in on this one.

I crossed the front lawn, jumped off the limestone retaining wall I'd helped him build, and crossed the gravel drive. Where the grass was greenest, above our sewer line, I yelled. He of course couldn't hear me. The engine and the blades were hammering.

When I reached where we'd buried the septic tank, I noticed the mower's black engine had a rosy glow. A few steps closer, and I saw it was fire. Grass and leaking gasoline had probably ignited. It wasn't the first time either. Dad mowed on unaware, despite the fact that his weight had depressed the mower's wire mesh seat so much, his backside was just inches above the engine.

I ran to warn him and flames shot up through the seat. He leaped off patting the rear of his trousers. The mower continued moving, the front wheels and handles jerking back and forth, the engine burning wildly, so I veered off towards it.

"Stay back," Dad yelled, finally seeing me. "It could explode."

He was right. I couldn't have reached through the flames and turned it off anyway. We stood there helplessly. The motor died within minutes. The flames disappeared a few minutes later, so we went over. The motor was charred and looked ruined.

I remembered the other mower incidents. "Will insurance cover this?"

He said, "I'll talk to Fred McKenzie about it. Might not be smart to put in another claim."

McKenzie was an insurance adjustor for the company with whom Dad had our house insurance. Dad also sold the insurance. I said, "You mean they wouldn't pay for the

damage?”

“They might, but they wouldn’t like it. Another claim from us on a mower wouldn’t make them happy.”

“What good’s insurance if you can’t use it?”

He shrugged. “Like everything else, you have to use a little common sense.”

I shook my head in disgust. “By the way, I’m out here because you have a phone call.”

He looked at me. “Who?”

I shrugged again.

While Dad was on the phone, I told Mom what had happened. When he hung up, she had him turn around and bend over. Then she brushed off his pants and stepped away. “Looks like you’re all right back there, Pete.”

I said, “You should have seen how high he jumped.”

Mom laughed. “I wish we had a picture of that.”

I do have a color photo of Dad on that last riding mower we owned. My brother Tommy at two years old is on his lap, Dad’s left hand is holding the child close, his other is gripping one of the bicycle-type handles. The motor looks fine. No hint of the fire to come. No sign this was his last summer as well.

*Bill Vernon served in the United States Marine Corps as an infantryman (three years) and a Short Airfield For Tactical Support (SATS) technician, then studied English literature at the University of Dayton and Miami University (Ohio). These many years later, he is still recovering from those experiences. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. His poems, stories and non-fiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and Five Star Mysteries published his novel OLD TOWN in 2005.*

# The Cancelled Birthday

*by Matthew Dexter*

It is the eighth anniversary of the boy's birth and all he asked for was that nobody would wish him a happy birthday. For weeks he had warned his parents that any congratulatory nonsense was not to be tolerated, and they promised to oblige. The boy saw birthday greetings as verbal graffiti and he wanted no part of it.

When he turned seven, the boy spent hours in the company of friends and family, the centre of their affections. In this mindless absence from his day-to-day affairs—during the convivial festivities of water balloons, piñatas and chocolate ice-cream cake—the boy forgot to feed his saltwater fish. The next morning they were floating, rainbow fins stuck to the tank. The boy requires his birthday this year to be a remembrance of the dead, a day of normalcy.

He jumps out of bed and slides down the banister. Then he remembers the date, the significance of the anniversary. It knocks the wind out of him as his scabby legs buckle on the carpet. He brushes his bruised kneecaps and enters the kitchen, solemn in demeanour. His mother is cooking scrambled eggs and his father is reading *The Arizona Daily Star*.

“Morning, Charlie.”

They smile and hug him. His mother kisses both cheeks and rubs his shoulders until she realised the bacon is burning. He waits for them to congratulate him on being alive. The boy munches his monotonous birthday breakfast and trudges out to the backyard. He is satisfied and everything is going smoothly.

There will be no presents. In lieu of this, the boy will get double the Christmas gifts; his parents shook on it and the boy has begun drafting his letter to Santa Clause. He knows the fat bearded man isn't real, but it is a way to make his mother happy and for his father to ascertain how much money the gifts will cost. The boy is happy with this agreement.

He remains outside, stomping fire ants, stoic and remorseful until he's hungry. The boy feels guilty for forgetting about his fish and wondering if there is a birthday cake hidden in the basement refrigerator as usual.

“What do you want for lunch today, Honey?”

The boy wonders what the fish would have wanted, but then decides to go for hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. It is a compromise that satisfies both parties. The boy smiles at his mother, who winks through the steam of boiling water. She is zipping crimson lips with turquoise fingernails, pretending to throw an invisible key in the sink.

After lunch, when his mother is putting on her bikini to take him to the pool, the boy swaggers downstairs to the basement to pee in the sink and check the fridge for a cake. There is no cake. The boy grimaces at the empty ice trays. This must be a clandestine day for his parents—maintaining his wishes until the privileges of secrecy wash away with chlorine. Certainly, their visceral desire to celebrate and acknowledge the anniversary of their greatest accomplishment must be bursting from their loins?

At the pool, his buddies play along, laughing but refusing to announce the annual rite of passage. His skin wrinkled, the afternoon growing cooler, the boy begins to get tired of thinking about dead fish. After all, they did nothing but swim, shit in the bowl, and eat.

His father meets them at the pool. The boy asks him to do a cannonball and the father complies, borrowing a swimsuit from the lifeguard shack. Wrinkled fingers gripping cowhide steering wheel, the father asks his son where he wants to go for dinner. Sushi being the obvious answer, the boy spits it out before he can indulge other options. He knows the waiters will be bashing dishes with spoons and chopsticks, and sparklers will fill the restaurant with celebratory clapping, and the famous song shall be sung with his name amended to the third verse.

The boy can be patient. Before sunset, he pays a visit to the backyard cemetery with all his favourite pets and leaves some flowers he yanked from the front yard of the old lady with Alzheimer's who lives next door.

The family showers then piles into the Volvo. It smells of fresh leather and clean bodies—the fusion of shampoo and soap and deodorant. The father allows the boy to

choose the radio station and rap music blares from speakers as they cruise the neighbourhood. The boy wishes somebody would jump out and congratulate him for being alive. The back window is rolled down as far as possible and he sticks his head out to look hard at husbands and housewives, in order to hear any distant greetings of the anniversary of his ascent to the world through his mother's womb. He begins thinking dirty thoughts as they pull onto the expressway.

They are greeted at the sushi restaurant with Japanese hospitality. The boy is confident he can see a glimmer of recognition of the significance of the occasion on their waiter's face. The hostess winks at him. That must mean something, right? Could be code for birthday boy?

His father goes to the bathroom and the boy is sure he is speaking with the manager, informing the kitchen about the glory of the evening. This is going to be something for the ages. Pastry chefs have probably wasted all afternoon baking a cake, his father being able to anticipate the restaurant of choice from logical deductive reasoning and paternal clairvoyance. This explains the empty basement refrigerator.

His mother excuses herself as the chef stands at their table flipping shrimp toward their faces. She must be checking on the cake, counting the candles, making sure everything is perfect. The sushi is wonderful. The boy begins cursing his gut for holding so much fish. He hates himself for making stupid decisions, for exerting so much effort cancelling his birthday. How the hell could they take him seriously after last night when he sprinted around the living room with his favourite rocket ship underpants on his head for the better part of an hour?

They should have known he was going to miss his birthday—the accustomed connection between the number and the recognition from individuals who are seldom so friendly. A world without birthdays is no special place. No hangover is too menacing to be conquered with slices of leftover cake and ice-cream from the basement refrigerator.

The room explodes with jubilation from a parade of waiters worshipping a flaming cake. The procession picks up busboys and servers as they waddle toward the boy's table. The boy is counting candles. He can taste the coconut frosting.

The waiters do not look him in the eye. Their faces are an illuminated orange. The

boy is certain they are following instructions from his parents. They are orgiastic. This is a fine way to remember the fish, the confusion of the previous birthday and all its ensuing sadness. The percussive of dishes and spoons and chopsticks in the air and the parade passes the boy's table searching for its final crescendo. They serenade a freckled girl with verses, sparklers so close they are bouncing off the sharp edges of the boy's well-polished table.

What the hell has the world come to that his table is being bombarded with sparks and his left ear is ringing because the sushi chef is smashing plates with such festive energy? The lights flicker. The entire dining section and bar is clapping, laughing—even his parents. When the wrong name is sung, they wave their arms as if conducting an orchestra, their green tongues in the air curled against the roof of their mouths as if tempting the boy to fill in the blanks. Their symphony lacking sympathy, the boy stares at them blindly.

The song finishes and both ears are ringing. The waiter delivers the check and the boy's father pulls out his crummy wallet. The boy excuses himself to the bathroom, where he spies on the kitchen and eyes the sweaty chefs with curious speculation. Roman Emperor Valentinian I died of apoplexy when German ambassadors did not pay him sufficient deference; must the Happy Day Sushi Factory suffer the same fate?

The boy is ushered into the Volvo. His mother suggests Dairy Queen for dessert. The boy holds hope but the teenage employees are tired, eager to drive home and get stoned. They sculpt waffle cones with vanilla, mint chocolate chip and rainbow sprinkles as if decorating a Christmas tree. The manager comes out and works the register. There are no metallic balloons hovering with helium. There is nobody hiding in the bathroom ready to jump out from behind the urinal. The boy ducks beneath the stall to see if one of his buddies is standing on the toilet seat. He is too discouraged to eat his ice-cream.

On the way home the boy promises never to mess with occasions which once brought him such joy. Holidays are common, but birthdays are the comet that collided with the planet where our souls drift when the body dies. The boy slumps over in the booth, his parents exhaustedly sharing a banana split sundae.

The boy falls asleep in the cumulonimbus leather of the back seat. He is woken by the familiar melody of tires on the pebbles at the end of the driveway. The house is dark

and the boy is headed to bed. He doesn't stop to wander and wonder if the living room ceiling is full of balloons, their strings hanging in the air just out of reach.

*Like nomadic Pericú natives before him, Matthew Dexter survives on a hunter-gatherer subsistence diet of shrimp tacos, smoked marlin, cold beer, and warm sunshine. He lives in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. He can be found here: [matthewdexter.com](http://matthewdexter.com).*

# The Machine

*by M. K. Richards*

Jesse raced through the woods, back towards the house. The sun was setting fast and he knew he would really cop it if he got in late again. As he ran, leaves and small branches flicked past his face. Jesse hardly noticed. His mind was racing faster than his feet. “What is it...where did it come from...what does it...do?”

He emerged from the trees and in a few bounds was at the back gate. As he ran across the flat grassy yard he saw Tommy waiting for him on the porch. It always surprised him just how small his little brother looked, especially from a distance. Tommy was eight now but not much bigger than most six year olds and Jesse put this down to two things: their father’s terrible cooking, and Tommy’s luck. The kid had horrible luck. Of course, fate would have it that Tommy would not only be the smallest kid in his grade, but smaller than most of the kids in the grade below as well. This and his quiet nature made Tommy an obvious target for just about every bully in the school. Jesse did his best to protect Tommy and for the most part succeeded—being an average sized twelve year old gave him intimidation of size, and when he needed a little more edge he would close his eyes for a second and channel their dad. He’d puff up his chest, sneer and put on the deepest, angriest voice he could, in which he would curse and threaten all manner of mostly physically impossible violence. Threats that if unsuccessful he would, if need be, follow with real violence. It only got that far once—with the only boy in school considerably bigger than himself. Jesse knew he was going to lose that day, but he also knew he couldn’t back down, not with Tommy watching. Tommy had to know he’d fight for him, even if odds were he would lose. Its not like it would be the first time Tommy saw him take a beating.

As he got to the porch Tommy silently handed him a baseball glove. Jesse took a deep breath and they headed into the house. “You’re late.” their father growled as the boys passed the kitchen. “I’m not...I was just in the yard, we were playing catch.” Jesse tried to sound as convincing as he could. John turned around and saw both boys standing with baseball gloves in hand.

“You were playing catch? In the dark?”

“It only got real dark a few minutes ago, we were having fun so we kept playing ‘til we couldn’t see the ball anymore.” Jesse kept his voice steady and sure as his father stared.

“That so?” John barked as he quickly shifted his gaze to his younger son. Tommy nodded.

John paused for a moment. “Sit your arses down and eat your dinner.” The boys scrambled to their chairs and John dropped two plates on the table, picked up his beer, and mumbled to himself angrily as he left the room.

“Do you think he believed it?” Tommy half whispered across the small round table.

“I don’t think so, Tom.” Jesse sighed.

## §

When Jesse was sure Tommy was asleep he slid out of the bottom bunk, picked up his shoes and torch, and crept out the door. He could hear the television in the lounge room at the end of the hall. As he slowly made his way past the doorway he could hear John snoring and see the empty beer cans scattered all over the coffee table. He knew he was safe and headed for the back door.

Jesse sat down on the porch steps to put on his shoes. After a few seconds, he heard the screen door creak behind him. He froze in fear, closed his eyes and held his breath in anticipation of his father’s hand grabbing the back of his hoodie. But it didn’t.

“Where are you going?” He heard Tommy’s voice behind him.

“Jesus Tommy, you scared the shit out of me! I thought you were him.”

“I’m sorry! Where are you going?”

“I found something in the woods just before dark. I’m gonna go back and check it out. I won’t be long.”

“What did you find? I wanna come with you.”

“No Tommy, just go back to bed”

“Don’t leave me here alone Jesse, please.”

“Okay, fine. Go get dressed and bring your torch—and hurry up!”

A few minutes later Tommy emerged from the house ready to go, and the boys headed toward the woods.

As they made their way through the trees Tommy questioned Jesse incessantly about what he had found. Jesse answered every one of his questions with “I don’t know”. He wasn’t trying to be mean, he just really didn’t know. After what felt like the longest five minute walk of his life, Jesse saw it in the distance. The light of their torches flickered off its blue-grey metal surface

“What is that?” Tommy exclaimed as they reached the small clearing where it sat.

“I told you! I. Don’t. Know.”

It was almost a perfect cube, except for the top, which looked like it had been busted open somehow. Jesse walked up to it and put his hand on the cold blue-grey metal it was made of.

“What’s it feel like?” Tommy asked from behind him.

“What it looks like,” Jesse replied, “metal.” Tommy came forward to touch the cube while Jesse began to circle it, shining the light of his torch along the surface. He could make out faint symbols engraved in the metal. They were in vertical columns and unlike anything Jesse had ever seen.

“I think it’s a spaceship,” Tommy finally broke the silence.

“It’s not a spaceship.” Jesse said dismissively.

“How do you know!?” snapped Tommy.

“Think about it doofus—how would it fly? It’s a brick.”

“I dunno,” Tommy sounded thoughtful, “space technology?”

Jesse rolled his eyes.

“Maybe it’s a transformer!” Tommy tried again.

“No.”

“A time machine?”

“Don’t be ridiculous”

“Well you don’t know what it is either.” Tommy barked at his brother.

“Just come and hold my torch so I can climb up over here and have a look inside,” Jesse instructed. He climbed to the top of the cube and Tommy threw him his torch.

Where the shell was broken he could see right down inside.

“What do you see?” Tommy called up.

“I’m not sure. Like gears and mechanisms I guess.” Jesse replied.

“I told you, it’s a transformer!” Tommy said excitedly.

Jesse ignored him. From the broken top of the cube where he was looking in, he could see a strange gap inside. The edges of some of the mechanisms looked broken, and frayed wiring was sticking out and hanging down in parts. It was like there was a missing piece that had been somehow ripped out. But how? And by who? And where is it? Jesse turned to climb down. Not looking properly at where he was grabbing, he somehow caught a jagged piece of the broken metal instead of the smooth edge of the cube with his right hand. As he felt the metal cut into his flesh, he quickly let go and fell to the ground with a thud.

“Jesse!” Tommy cried, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jesse groaned as he sat up, “I just cut my hand.”

He grabbed the bottom of his hoodie with his gashed palm and squeezed, hoping the pressure would slow down the bleeding. He and Tommy sat there quietly for a few minutes, then he lifted his palm up to examine the wound. “Looks like the bleeding has

stopped.” he said.

Tommy shone his torch on Jesse’s palm and as he did something in the cut flickered. “What’s that?” Tommy said.

Jesse looked closely at his palm in the light and could see the blue-grey metal.

“You must have gotten a piece stuck in your hand.”

Jesse had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He looked for an edge to the metal, a piece that he could grasp to pull it out of the wound, but he quickly realized; “It’s not in my hand, Tommy. It is my hand.”

A faint blue glow started to emerge from the cube. The symbols on the sides were lighting up. It caught the boys’ attention for a moment, and then Tommy looked back at Jesse and froze.

Jesse had never seen so much fear in his brother’s eyes. That was when he felt it. He felt cold, and heavy. He looked back down at his hand and saw that his whole right arm was now solid blue-grey metal. He could feel it spreading across his chest and down towards his legs. He put his left hand on the right side of his face and could feel the cold hard metal. The last thing Jesse saw was Tommy’s face frozen in fear. Then everything went black. He felt his body start to walk. He tried to fight it but had no control. He felt himself climbing upwards, into the cube. The broken wires and mechanisms formed to Jesse’s metal body and the broken shell of the cube sealed itself around him.

Tommy watched from the ground as, in an instant, his brother was swallowed by the cube. The shell of the cube was glowing even brighter now and once it had completely closed it began to lift slowly from the ground. When it got a few metres above Tommy’s head it seemed to stop and hover for a minute. The cube erupted in a sudden flash of blindingly white light. Tommy couldn’t see anything, and then the light was gone. And so was Jesse.

*M.K. Richards lives in Sydney with her fiancé and their beloved staffy, Izzy. She spends most of her days reading, writing and crocheting; and her nights awaiting the zombie apocalypse.*

# Traffic Jam

*by Shawn Aveningo*

{Red Light}

I watched a girl in a white car  
obstruct three lanes of traffic,  
doors locked, fingers locked  
on touchpad keys,  
blocking out a world of people  
with their own place to go.

{Green Light}

I listened to the man  
in the black car,  
tinted windows, honking,  
tapping out his Morse Code  
Blues.

{Red Light}

Yellow car momma  
turned up her radio,  
sang along, window open,  
Macarthur Park melting  
on the asphalt.

{Green Light}

An epidemic of oblivion  
to the siren's plea  
& flat-line buzz  
that followed.

{Red Light}

*Shawn Aveningo is an award-winning poet whose work has appeared in dozens of publications*

*including Pirene's Fountain, Obsidian, Poetry Now, Featherlit, Convergence, Survivor's Review, POETZ, Cliterature, Savage Melodies & Last Call Serenades, WTF, Wait a Minute, I Have to Take Off My Bra, and Seattle Erotic Anthology. Shawn hosts a monthly poetry show in Folsom, CA ([VerseOnTheVine.com](http://VerseOnTheVine.com)) and has featured in Sacramento, San Francisco, Sausalito, Seattle and St Louis, and hopes to entertain audiences in more cities that start with the letter 'S'. Shawn is also a founding member of the performing group, Poetica Erotica ([Poetica-Erotica.com](http://Poetica-Erotica.com)).*

# I.was.alone.

*by Jeremy Johnson*

The car leapt into fifth and we flashed across the highway like a lightning bolt tearing open the sky. The road wasn't busy so we had room to swerve and stretch, to overtake and take over the slower cars, to show off, to have fun. Our car was red: it went fast.

Adam was yelling at me from the dark passenger seat while someone in the backseat laughed manically. I turned and roared at my passengers, hands strangling the wheel.

“Wanna see this thing fuckin’ fly?”

“Hell yeah, man!”

I pushed down until I felt the throbbing engine beneath my bare foot, grinning like a skull as the engine kicked us forward. My gut gurgled, nothing inside but the pills my father had given me, which didn't work, and the booze I'd stolen, which did. Rain was falling outside. The road was already cold, now it was watery, blurred, fluid. I drove on, Adam cackling in my ear. I could hear him—his every fucking snort—but I swear to God I never saw him properly. It was dark in my cramped old car, the lights didn't work, not even the dashboard neon. Still went fast though.

A black car entered the highway. The driver pulled in from the left and confidently moved over into the far right lane.

“Who the Hell does this punk think he is?” I shouted at Adam, jutting my chin at the already-speeding black car. Voices answered me, Adam from my left, some girl in the backseat, the radio, a cloud.

“He's a cop. Undercover.”

“He's a thug, sent to kill you.”

“He's a doctor, he'll drug you!”

“It’s your father, here to help.”

I shook my head. Hard. The voices stopped. I glanced at Adam who seemed to be staring at my wild black hair, my throbbing head. He had the family pistol in his hands—I watched him unload it, then reload it, then put it away in the glove box.

“Well, who the fuck is he?!” I screamed at my passenger.

“Dunno mate,” he sounded calm, undisturbed. “Probably just some boring fucker, driving home from his shit job. Wanna go give him a scare?”

“What? Why?” I asked, but I already knew.

“You know, race him a bit, liven up his day. His car’s pretty sweet.”

I looked over at the gleaming black beast. Its twisting wheels blinked at me, its wing-like spoiler seemed to bend. My eyes rolled over his tinted windows, his shiny silver door handles. I wrenched away and drove straight for a bit, my eyes on my hands, my hands turning white. His car was pretty sweet.

“Sweeter than yours,” whispered Adam, an inch from my ear.

I swore. He sniggered. I looked at the black car, looked back at Adam’s silhouette, switched my gaze between the two. Then I stuck my eyes on where I thought his eyes were and pushed down until my bare foot was almost on the floor. We clawed nearer to the speeding black car.

He was still in the far right lane so we raced alongside him, going the same speed, but with more guts. I turned the wheel and our red car slid out in front of his black one, but only by about a metre. I pulled it back before we cut him off and he honked twice. Adam squealed with delight and I turned the horn into a jazz trumpet. Keeping my eyes on the black car’s turning wheels, I dropped us back a bit. We pulled in behind him—Adam baying for blood like a hunting dog—and I pushed us forward until the two cars were touching and the metal screamed. We remained there for a stretch, exchanging sparks. The man in the black car honked in terror and drove faster, trying to escape. We followed, hyena-cackling.

Then the bastard changed lanes three times—indicating like a boy scout for each—and took the next exit off the highway. I kept up with him. We slowed our cars and moved into quieter, darker streets. Adam was silent now, tense. We'd abandoned the highway and were no longer idiot P-platers. Something had changed. There was a new tension in the car. A girl from the back whispered something to her friend. I glanced across at Adam; his shadowy face was staring straight ahead, unceasingly.

The man in the black car took side-streets and a back-alley. We followed. Just as I became lost in the darkness of twisting suburbia, he turned into an empty car park. We turned too, of course. The driver parked his black beast close to the far wooden fence. We pulled up next to an old willow tree in the centre of the lot. Its green curtains surrounded us. Both cars idled for a moment, quivering like tired horses in the night. Then he turned the key and the lights went out. Voices exploded in my cramped red car, all loud, all clamouring to be heard:

“He’s gonna fuckin’ kill you!”

“If he gets outta that car...”

“Where’s your gun? Get your gun, just in case. You loaded it before, it’s in the glove box, it’s—”

“Lock your door! Lock your door! Lock your door!”

“Here he comes! That fucking cop—crim—doctor—Dad.”

His door popped open and a long figure stretched and shifted its way out. I snapped open the glove box and scratched around for my weapon. Fast food menus and clackety pill boxes fell out. They poured on top of the silent Adam; I could just see his pale feet, gleaming in the dark. He wasn't wearing shoes either. Then the gun, the ink-metal-grey loaded-gun, was in my hand and I was sitting up like a choir boy, hands slightly shaky, sweat trickling down my singlet.

The sound of footsteps crunched out.

I looked at Adam who pointed at the window; I looked out the window and gasped at how rapidly the man was approaching. I heard car doors locking. I turned to mine and

tried to push the old-fashioned door lock into its hole. My sweaty finger slipped around a bit, but the lock made its sound so I snapped my hand down and gripped the gun two-handed.

The footsteps got closer, smashing into the gravel, ringing in the night. I heard the unmistakable click of a pistol being cocked. A dark shadow spread over the car and I turned to face it, my gun-hand low. I felt Adam flinch and looked where I knew he was looking. Fuck. My door hadn't locked.

The driver side door was torn open by a strong hand. For an instant there was a man, a tall man in a suit staring down at us through round, terribly reflective glasses. My mind flashed faces, all the authorities I'd ever known: a primary school bully, the principal of my high school, the boss from my first crappy job, and, with clear finality, the face of my father. Then the man fell back, tripped, landed awkwardly and sprawled onto the gravel. Only after did I hear the cracking bang of my own dark gun. I shook the sweat from my hair and sprang out of the car. I leapt around the long body of the man with the father-face; I looked away and swung my arms up at the moon. I looked back—he was still there—I swore and cried and spat.

A dying voice drifted up from the car park's gravel. Then, silence. I stood there for a time, expecting Adam or someone to get out of the car and help me. He didn't. I looked down at the body; the man had wild black hair a lot like mine. He had missed a spot shaving, had five o'clock shadow, looked like I would one day look. Looked like a father. Driving home after a day at work. A father. From work. Probably had a wife waiting at home. Maybe a son like me.

I felt salty water fill up my eyes as I lurched to the old red car, shouting out strange animal noises. I shoved my head inside, gun still in hand, swearing intensely at—

No one. The car was empty. Adam wasn't there. No one in the backseat. The locks weren't down.

Adam wasn't there.

I swore and shook for five minutes more. Then I heard distant sirens so I got back into the blood red car—because it still went fast—and headed for the highway.

I was alone.

*Jeremy Johnson is a writer-fighter; he lives for words and warfare, usually in that order. Jeremy graduated from RMIT's Creative Writing degree in 2012 and has trained in shukokai karate for fifteen consecutive years. He writes everything from e-publishing factsheets to slam poetry to fantasy novels. In all his worlds, Jeremy is trying to make an impact.*

# Name Trouble

*Non-fiction by Merlin Flower*

The civet in the garden is a hope, defiance in the face of the morbid advancement of rubber trees in an increasingly monopolised landscape. Sometimes I don't know who's to blame for the back pain: the computer, my awkwardly tiny laptop, or poor posture. Blaming others is therapeutic; a reason why having God around is good. (Murder! Why God, Why?). After lecturing on the ill-effects of soft drink, I am offered a can of it—what do I do? I am thirsty, for anyone's sake. Yet I don't know where to place the blame for my name: my parents, who could have made it worse, naming us after numbers, 1 2 3 4; or me for not changing it? I can't help but wonder what my parents were thinking or not thinking when they named me; was it a case of novelty having worn off with the arrival of the third born? I did ask them. It was one of those times when you get signs and rhetoric platitudes instead of a genuine answer. Yes, you will still survive with such a name. But...

What is it that makes people crack a joke, or attempt it, as soon as I say, "Hi, I am Merlin Flower." It ranges from the relentless, "you look like a Flower" to "Flower, Flower, on the plain, how do you do?" uttered with a bubbly gale force, followed by a pause for me to laugh at the amazing sense of humour on display. The metonym also reminds people of the magician, causing jokes at both our expense. To hell with it.

Often I try to get away with just Merlin. It sometimes works, yet at times it doesn't, such as when—in the sixth grade—there were five Merlin's in the class. Talk about recurring nightmares. It's like people asking you to check the striking image of the pyramid on a link. You click it, and—voila, tricked you. Wait, no. A similar analogy would be having four people with the same first name at home. True. Which means the surname is my actual name. No escape.

I'll never get it. I say I am a writer, and people ask me, "Fine, but what do you do for a living?" Eh, write. Dormancy is healthy—the bank account, the volcano. I am happy to be unhealthy on the first account, though. Or, the ignominy I feel when people in their forties call my Mum "Grandma". Any job which demands reference letters, I am

out. I am so lucky, I step out of the house to miss the bus by a second and get drenched in a torrential downpour. Or, when I manage to get inside an Indian bus, we get free a massage, plus acupressure treatment—a perfect excuse to spend the next five days in bed. Editors find it hard to edit my copies, as I contradict every statement with the preceding one. When the literature prize is announced, there aren't any familiar names—ever.

If survival of the fittest was true, I'd be gone by now. I switch on the TV to land on an avalanche of products promising to defy gravity with younger skin at—gasp—twenty-five. What? And so, can you imagine being in a Botany class, with “Flower” uttered every other second? And how effective would a ‘look out’ notice work in a newspaper? Name: Merlin Flower. Enough.

The web has unilaterally decided that someone with my name must be a spammer. Half of my e-mails end up in the spam folder, I'm told. I still use the same ID with my name in full, and half a dozen other variants with just the first name. True, with such a name you don't need any other vitiating factors. Okay, reading your own diary exempted. I read mine—written years ago—recently, and was bemused to find the past me so egotistical, serious and condescendingly boring. I am never writing a diary ever again. This definitive promise, I am as convinced to keep as the promise of not attending the umpteen invites to art exhibitions, unless accompanied by a plane ticket.

Before I forget, this name (mine, you idiot), goes down well with people from the UK. I've had some genuine compliments: while on Twitter; while working for a company based there; while meeting artists; and elsewhere. (Guys, you don't have any idea of the nicknames and incisive innuendoes I get.) On the other hand, mail from the US can be easily distinguished when they begin with, “Mr. Merlin Flower”. Every time, I have to find a way to step in (without stripping), to say, “Hey, I am a woman.” There are ancillary colours to this name story; including some nice ones. More details: I realised the effectiveness of my name while searching for lost friends in some of the social media sites. If you type “Tess Brown” (no offence to Tess), you get 12,345,600 results. My name can be located easily. Yet apparently this name isn't as insular as I've imagined. Courtesy of social media, I've found that there others. Aren't we having fun? So if the population of the Earth reaches 15.8 billion in 2100, I presume there may be even more “Merlin Flowers” around. Seriously, would the population grow so high?

With war-mongering politicians around, anyway?

Back to me—I couldn't drink the soft drink, you know, in case you are wondering. It may be the repercussion of decades; or maybe the purity of detestation; maybe the “like” counteracting the “like not”; maybe the familiarity of the myoclonic jerks. I am sticking to the name. Meanwhile, the civet on the tree has dived to the next. His name?

*Merlin Flower is an independent artist and writer.*

# Sparkin' Up

*by Miro Sandev*

yeah anyway but she's a mad lost cause or that's what her brother told me anyway when we were hanging out the other day & shit & what do I care about it anyway if he's lyin or whateva cos I just mad use him & that cos he's a bit older he can get us ciggies & some drinks like last week when we stole all dis booze & went to that farken mad preppie party on the other side of glebe point road man & we just rocked up & we didn't even know anyone or whatever & you should've seen the cunts just shit themselves when they saw us looking sick as mad fucken trackies all laced up boots, real tight, air max, fucken strap hats strapped back longies in the back pack & me mate Dabs is just like shit son when we all clocked the farken platter these cunts had served up crazy shit man like so many types of cheese it was rat city or sumthin & just about every foreign beer the bottlo stocked was in this back yard man couldn't believe it & half these pussies couldn't even open a twist top let alone skull that thing & so course we had to show a thing or two nah what ah mean cuz & so we started slammin these bevvies back like they was middies or shmiddies or some shit like that ya know for real none of those pussies even batted a fucken eyelash cos they was still shit scared of us they just sort of slinked away to the other side of the yard you know like little lizards & tried to pretend like we wasn't there or they couldn't see us or sumthin retarded like that & we're drinking their beer & perving on the girls & clowning round & they not doin shit til someone smashed some faggy ceramic vase & the dad he come out from dis epically huge house all puffed up in his vest like he was gonna get hard core on us you know like he starts striding over real fast & then clocks us all with bumbags hanging & just eshay swagger right & his face change from being all angry to just heaps meek bro like his striding become all slow & shit & he come up to us & say some pussy nervy shit like canyouguysleavenowplease & we all laugh, spit up in his cunty garden & Dabs calls him a preppie with a faggyvest & Rickie does this mad funny voice copying him that's got all of us falling over in a second & then outside we start tagging up the front of da house get the Montana sprays out, graff it up proper good cuz like I got that new stylo I bin workin on ya know like I was tellin ya heaps fat lettering with like wicked fluro as background & big bold outlines for the borders heaps sick ay & the dad just walks away saying something about calling the

cops fucken pussy if someone pulled some shit like this at my dads house they'd be lying on the ground bleeding by now & he'd probs be cracking away with a trolley pole not like these meek cunts that live around here now & go to their gronky cafes full of uni students who don't actually fucken learn anything bra you know just mostly sit around smoking rollies & talking shit about pretty sunsets & some of them aren't even arsed to give you a ciggie when u walk past even tho their fat red-faced dads probs own half dem skyscrapers in the city or all the hotels or some shit & they don't have to fucken work a day in their lives, real work ya know, like when Dabs & me clock on down at the shop serving shit cunts all day for fucken bullshit money dealin with dodgy guys stealin shit & if we don't catch em they dock it from our pay which is BS or when mum is passed out again & nan needs a hand & im out somewhere & shit getting lairy & i gotta be back home to help nan with some of the kids, cos she good to me nan, she good like dat, they probs don't have to deal with any of dat & have time to actually sit an read so shit's real easy for dem not like when im tryin to open those TAFE books & all this hollerin in the kitchen & little Kevo crying & I cant hear shit so I just up & out of there meet a couple of the boys up on the corner few blocks away & spark up some green you know or try see Rich's sister Kayla who is super smooth you know tasty man but he won't let me say that he gets mad touchy about it but she is man I don't care if she's his sister & like I told you the other day we was just sparkin up in the park & I was just blarin some shit on the phone probs Ja-Rule or Akon or some sick shit & she was wearing them fucken tight black leggings bro so hot her legs bobbing up & down & she was full smilin at me & so I pulled her over & we macked out & she felt I got dis chubbs in my pants & she was still smiling just full mad starts rubbing it there just under that tree we was playing footy the other day & man it was a fucken sick handie ay & I was like you wanna suck it too but she just rubbed it off & you know that was still eshay & im smiling you know bro fucken great day that was & later we went off & hooked up some nos canisters yeah bro nicked dem from the IGA & when mum saw dem I told her Kayla was baking a cake or some shit & she bought dat line, so we rounded up some of Kayla's friends & my cousins came down to the park & we was all just full cracking the nos bottles open into balloons & then just punching dat shit man over & over we got so fucken ripped on that shit you know I heard its like doing acid or sumthin I was just like giggling & crazy floatin u know not even at the park anymore bro but on Mars or some shit & dipping into these moon craters just proper letting go of shit & flying up over through the dust bowls & all past the houso towers with their washing lines & balconies, flying out over the

brothers at the skate park, past the youth centre, felt like I could control everything with just my noggin man, where I went, what I was seeing, felt like I could do anything & like I was coasting out of meself bro you know I was flying high but my body was still way down below man or like I was a cruiser up on top of the water & I was dragging my body on the floor of the ocean you know like an anchor or some weird shit like dat, it was the best feelin man you gotta try it & then in the end we ran out of nos & I was fucken coming down hectically when I got home & dad caught me & he's yellin at me I stolen his drink the night before which was true but he couldn't prove it cos anyone in the house could've done it like his brother is staying wif us now & he is a mad drunken derro ay he is already trashed when I wake up in the morning so could've been him or one of my cousins they both bin droppin in heaps lately cos their old man finally kicked dem out & busted the jaw of the older one & fuck you know mum can't keep her hands off the bottle more than she can off the pokie lever but me dad just don't let up his full layin into me like im some little leech who sucked his life away like he lost his freedom & he hates me for it & I see it in his eyes & he knows I seen it but he don't care anymore man he gave up ages ago & im fucken yellin back cos everytime something missing he point the finger at me, never at Rosco, he loves Rosco, always me & I says he's being an unfair cunt & he just cracked me hardcore on the chin man clocked me proper like u wouldn't know & I smashed my head on the table bleeding all over the joint got my mum & nan yellin & cryin & it's all a mess so I just busted up out of there got my head strapped now & haven't been back a few days ay

*Miro Sandev is a poet, short fiction writer and reviewer, based in Sydney. His poems have appeared in Regime Magazine, Red Room Company Disappearing, Hypallage and Dissent. He reviews theatre and literature for ArtsHub. His essays have appeared in Arena Magazine and New Matilda.*

# A Way To Go

*by Craig Hildebrand-Burke*

At the beach they would be happy. At the beach they would sit on the edge of the pier jutting out over their horizon, and glimpse the future. And the waves would wash their feet, taking the dirt and sand back out into the surf, and take their names with them. They'd leave everything behind, at the beach.

He woke her at the half light. She had told him to call her with one ring first, and then tap on the window second. The second woke her.

Time to go?

He nodded, just visible enough for her to see.

There was fog at first, until an hour later when they hit the freeway; he knew they had to keep the sun in the mirror. Away, drive away. Head west. His father's key-chain swung idly from the ignition. She fell asleep smiling. He knew how much this first step meant to her. Leaving was the only thing she could talk about, these last few weeks.

Later she woke again, this time in the passenger seat.

How long until the border?

A while.

Didn't realise it was so far.

Early in the morning things were always far away. As he drove he thought about how seeing something made it possible. Seeing a finish line made it achievable, a practical goal, a horizon within their grasp. In the dark all was possible, and nothing. As he drove he would put his hand on her leg, cradling the curve of her knee. She'd smile and clutch his hand, or stretch and yawn, or drift in the comfort. He liked to feel her thoughts.

Halfway to the border they pulled over at a truck stop. They went and sat at one of

those wooden picnic tables. She brought a blanket out from the car and wrapped it around her. They passed a sandwich between them for breakfast.

Should we get married?

He hadn't thought about that.

I don't know. I suppose so. Do you want to?

She didn't answer. The wind was picking her hair up and whipping it around her face. This was the first time he'd seen her with it down and loose. In school with the uniform it was always tied back, like all the girls. He thought he could see traces of her mother in her face. Were they older, now that they'd left?

What?

She had caught him smiling.

Nothing. Let's keep going.

Later, he looked back on this moment as the time when he first felt comfortable. He was gasping for breath since he met her, gasping at the edge of a chasm. But he remembered this one moment as the time when he let go and breathed with comfort. She was here with him after all, and nothing would change that. It was her plan, and she had left him in control.

After lunch they passed a lone motel on the highway. Littered around the grounds were plaster models of marsupials, weathered and faded and all slightly askew on their wired frames. She made him slow down.

We could stay there?

There?

We could get a room. They had a pool.

You said you only wanted a motel after the border. He thought about the marsupials. They were like some over-excited class project.

It'd be fun. I always wanted to stay in a motel with a pool. Swim after dark.

There's probably a curfew.

He flipped the indicator on, punctuating their conversation. The car was on the side of the road, steadily breathing. He thought about his parents at home, his father frantic and calling him every hour. They had left their phones in a bin at a service station. Later, when they were set up somewhere, she said they'd reconnect with everyone back home. Let them know how things were. But for now they just had to keep going, find the fresh air.

As if to confirm this, she only smiled and he pulled back out onto the road.

We can swim at the beach, he told her.

That night they ate dinner at a small diner just over the border. They had struck up a conversation with the family seated near them, their first real interaction in days. He watched her as she seemed to welcome the interaction, talking at length with the mother and father. He was impressed at her ability to be so at ease talking to strangers. They had three children, the eldest only just younger than he was, but they up and left to the pinball machine in the corner. He thought it unusual to see three siblings so comfortable spending time together.

And then she was dancing; at first with the children, and then with others. They formed a small writhing group, bending their way through the bar-light and varnished music. The father had bought him a drink and was elbowing him up on to the floor.

Go on, he was saying. Go on and dance.

He swigged the beer and joined her, feeling the sweat on her palms coat his fingers. She was laughing and smiling and his feet moved badly, always trying to match the steps she was making. He spun her around and saw the mother now sitting on the father's lap back at the table, and the mother was kissing her husband long and slow, forgetting the dancing and the children around them. He was drawn to this scene, he continued trying to focus on it through the spins, but by the time his eyes settled, they had stopped.

She pushed her mouth up to his ear.

They're not like us, are they?

No. No, I don't think they are.

We're doing it, aren't we?

She drew her arms tight around his neck and he felt her feet lift off the ground as they spun again.

§

Later that night he woke and found her crying. The car was cold but the breath and the blankets were warm.

What's the matter?

Nothing. We'll see them again won't we?

Yes.

Promise?

I promise. I said so.

§

Along the highway, great pillows of dust gathered and washed across them, across the car, right to left, pushing them towards the coast. Keep driving straight, hold the wheel firm and they wouldn't slip off. She trusted him, he knew that. She wasn't comfortable driving yet and she trusted him to take them the whole way. He liked that. Her faith in him, and his body, to withstand things. To keep them going forward.

It was at these times when she would ask him.

Tell me about when you first saw me.

She liked the story, even though he couldn't remember the first time. The story he told her, though, was when he first noticed her. Saw her outline and realised - this is her. He had been late to class, rushing across the ovals. Her PE class, nearby, was practising high jump. A snaking queue of girls looping their way through stuttered steps and over

the bar. She was steady on the rubber tracking, her steps even and matching her ponytail. And there she was, her white sneakers cutting the air as they paused in an arc across the bar, chin jutting upwards and then down onto the mat.

She's not even good, the boys joked. She'll be alright when she's older.

Fuck that, he said swearing for their benefit. I'm going to ask her out.

She doesn't even know you.

She looked at me.

So fucking what.

Two weeks later, after their first kiss, she had told him her plan and about the beach. They had kissed again.

Back in the car, she was looking at him closely and talking again. Let's go to a motel.

She kissed him now and this time, safely across the border and two days from home, he agreed.

## §

They found a place at the far end of the next town. He had become used to the pattern of these places along the highway, where motels and bed and breakfasts littered the way into the town centre. It was as if they were warming you up to the place, before you even got there. But he wanted to get through the town and to the other side before finding a place to stay. It was stupid, probably, but if someone came to look for them here he hoped they'd have to work their way from motel to motel. At least he could buy them some time this way.

Outside in the thick heat he was calm. The lady had given him the key to the room without any questions. He wasn't sure whether to make out like he was picking it up for someone, but in the end not saying much did the trick. The keys were cold in his hands. First his dad's car keys and now these. He looked over to her, still sitting in the car. The windscreen was glinting in the mid-afternoon but she was there, hovering behind the

light and reflection.

Perhaps they had driven enough. Maybe it would be alright and they could stay here a while.

She was turning her head now, looking at him. She smiled.

Back in the car, he pulled it into reverse and edged it through the driveway to the room. It was one of those motels that existed in a long sliver of land off the main road, thin and stretching back so that by the time he parked the car at their room, the sound of the traffic had faded almost completely.

All okay?

All okay.

He would prefer to have the car tucked around here, less cause for them to be walking around in the open. In a couple of hours it'd be dark and they could walk a stretch into the town, find some dinner.

They carried their bags up the steps to the first floor room. He was halfway up before he realised he should have offered. But he didn't say anything and she was too tired to even notice. Already he could hear the wall-mounted air conditioning unit whirring away, anticipating.

Inside was a mix of reddy-brown bricked walls and fake wood panelling; the typical motel room. He wanted that. Nothing that stood out, or that was beyond their means, or too much a secretive affair. Normal, he wanted.

She sat on the edge of the bed, running her hands over the coverlet.

Sheets are cold.

He flicked the air conditioning off.

Thanks.

This was just a stop, a brief pause along the way. Keep driving until we can't drive

any more, she had said, until we see the water. There was no water back home; they felt they were forever stuck inland. At home, at school, everyone rose like waves around them as reminders of how stuck they were.

She was yawning now, stretching her back out over the bed, her still-too-thin legs pointing upwards, into the air. They had a way to go, but they could afford to rest. Be off tomorrow. Break of day, he had said to the lady, who told him to leave the keys on the bed, door unlocked.

Her face in profile, now cast green through the curtained light. Her eyes looking across the bedspread, across the room, to the door.

I didn't dream last night, she said.

Hmm?

I didn't dream.

Just uncomfortable probably. It'll be better tonight.

The television was one of those sets attached to the ceiling, like he had seen in hospital rooms. He was sitting on the carpet, his back against the bed, cycling through the channels for distraction. She rolled over on the bed towards him.

It's too dark, she hummed. And, as if to reassure him: Nobody will see us.

He got up and stretched out the curtains. Particles of dust flicked into life, and then sank back towards the carpet.

She showed him how to take her clothes off. There was an order to things, a procession of unveiling this new place. Now he could see into the corners, see what the room was really made of. His breaths were short, but he relaxed more at her touch. She traced the neckline of his t-shirt and lifted it up.

They had swum to each other through their naked and new bodies, breathing short bursts of air before diving back beneath the surface, beneath the light that settled them on the bed.

At moments he thought he might be lost, might drown, might plummet beneath who she was and what they had done. She would leave him and take his memory away, leaving him alone in the camphored bedspread. He would forget his horizon, forget their goal, and begin to believe that here was the shore he had looked for. Here were the waves washing his feet, allowing him to walk on the pure, sandy coastline.

Then she gave a gentle laugh and he realised she was smiling and that his eyes had been shut and this ocean of light - now purple, now gold - was part of some extra sense she had given him. They were still there in the motel room, and it was still afternoon, and they had a way to go yet. He wasn't sure whether this was her first time, but he knew enough not to ask her. Sex was only clumsy and embarrassing for kids. He had to be better than that.

Let's draw a map, he had said in the quiet.

A map of where they had been, a map that looked forward to new territories, where new ground could be made and broken and coloured in. They would write their names in place of lands, and carve the borders with their voices. Her breath on his shoulder scattered the seeds of trees and growth would occur.

A new place was always new, no matter how many times you were there. It always retained that sense of the first, that glistening joy of finding and meeting.

He kissed her again, and dared to look in her face properly for the first time since they began. Here it was smooth, here it had hair, here it rose and then fell, and here he could pool the both of them as her face changed and aged and grew old around them.

Later he would forget all of this.

## §

He was surprised at how cold he became, lying in the mess of sheets. All the blood had come into his body, and then disappeared, leaving him shivering.

It was like she had taken everything with her to the shower. For a time he had sat there wondering if he should get up and join her. Whether it was something to do. Something that was done. But even now he thought that maybe that was a step too far

down the road. They'd need to take it together. Right now he couldn't even imagine her in there, washing herself. It was still the stuff of his imagination, a guess at the future. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what it was like having sex with her. How it felt, how she looked.

Later they had dressed, and walked out into the cooling evening.

Can I hold your hand?

She had laughed at him then, but smiled and drew into him close, her head tucked in the crook of his shoulder, and though she hadn't grabbed his hand her arms were now looped about him.

Here she was, her jump completed. She was over the bar and onto the mat, perfectly at ease.

Why did you want to leave? He was, for the first time, finally asking her.

What?

Why the beach?

They were eating as they walked and she stopped, bits of chicken from her sandwich spilling onto the concrete.

What?

She shook her head. Nothing. I just wanted to. Didn't you?

Yeah. It sounded good, from what you said. A good idea. And to go with you.

It was a good idea.

After dinner they had gone back to the motel room and back into the bed and slept young sleep.

§

The next night they went back to sleeping in the car. Neither of them wanted to spend

their money too quickly.

He had once again pulled off the highway, and found a park that had a few spots under some trees. It was windy, but the branches looked stable. He turned to her. When the sun gets up, the tree will still give us shelter. A bit more rest. Like curtains. Okay.

He knew that she liked it when he was clever. Thinking about things like this. Rolling towels into the tops of windows would be too obvious, it just had to look like an empty car. He still worried that they would be spotted by someone looking for them, even though they had left no indication to where they were headed. He didn't even like the beach, as far as his parents knew.

He leaned over and wound her seat back until it was almost horizontal. She tucked her tiny frame into the seat quite easily. He pulled the blanket from the back seat over her, and kissed the top of her head.

Go to sleep.

Will we get there tomorrow?

Maybe. Maybe the next day.

I hope it's tomorrow.

Go to sleep.

You remember those people?

What people?

The family. From before in the diner.

I remember.

They're not like us. Why did you drink that beer he gave you?

I don't know. What do you mean?

You shouldn't have. It made you look funny. That's not who you are.

Why not?

I don't know. It's just not. Not like us.

Okay. Go to sleep.

§

In the morning they reached a new town and she asked him to pull over.

In the rear-view mirror he watched her cross the road behind the car and walk over to a phone booth. He let the engine continue running. She placed some coins in the unit and waited, the receiver held between two hands.

Her face changed and she started speaking. Everything changed. She was not her any more. She was grey, and shadows and black on white. The sickly monochrome wave spread down the telephone cord and across the pavement. He watched, petrified, as the colour disappeared from the store fronts and their awnings. The muscles in his jaw slackened as the sky receded into a fallow grey.

She was back at the car, on his side. He wound down the window.

Where are we?

He told her.

As she carried the message back to the phone and to the end of the line, he shut the car off. The engine plinked and he sank back with it onto the chassis. He closed his eyes and tried to dream, tried to imagine the car floating forwards, carving out a wake of memory that belonged only to them. He felt that they had grasped a current in the green light of the motel room, and this would guide them forever onwards, floating, together or alone.

§

The next day he reached the beach.

He sat there in the sand and free air and thought about when he'd go back. If, like her, he would make the call. He wondered if he'd go back and see her again, if he'd tell

her about the pier, jutting out like an old broken bridge. And the tide, washing in and back out, picking waves up as they roll across the swollen wood, carrying hues of light from the low sun forwards, out into the future.

Maybe not. She had left it here, for him. After all.

*Craig lives in Melbourne and works nearby, teaching English and Creative Writing to secondary students. He'd like to say he is working on a novel, but to be more accurate the novel seems to be working on him. This is his first published story. He is on Twitter [@hildebrandburke](#).*

# The Roads Fell Apart Under Our Feet

*by Rafael Ward*

The roads fell apart under our feet

It should be a sign when the roads to your childhood  
crush three civilians, the height, they say, is considerable

but the cost of repair, is worse.

Though all you can think of is the times you went to school  
and imagined the highways being sucked into the sky.

# Every Love Story is a Glass Story

*by Rafael Ward*

Later on, when he was walking down the street still picking shards out of himself, he wondered what it was that made these people so afraid. They looked at him as he stopped at the bus shelter; at how he picked at his toes with fingers that were claws; they looked at him with eyes that were beaks and they said to each other, that boy is up to no good, and then they walked away, to forget him forever until they thought they saw him on the news or mistook him for one of the boys in the missing posters and they didn't know what to make of the fact that they'd almost certainly seen him the other day and what did this mean? They would ask their partners. At least, he flatters himself that this is what would happen. Most likely, their lives would continue on a course continually uninterrupted by him or his existence, however momentarily. And then yes, he would perhaps try to avoid the places, or maybe even go back to them and see what had changed; he still had a few bricks in his pocket.

When he got home his father was already there, waiting for him with a belt in his hands.

“I want your help measuring this,” he said, looking from the belt to the door frame, with eyes that said divorce had been strange. Not entirely unexpected, but still strange in the way that sometimes when you get dumplings at back alley restaurants and you don't know what they are and your waiter doesn't really speak English and you bite into them expecting sweet but getting something savoury—not entirely unpleasant, and you can't turn it back, so this is what you have now. And so he looked at his son, and his son, wary of his fragile feet, said yes, of course and the two of them stood under the doorframe, using the father's belt as a point of reference and trying not to laugh because the mother had taken the measuring tape for the new house that she was building.

They ran into each other at the hardware store and although it wasn't mortifying, that was only because they didn't have enough superannuation to make it worth dying yet. They didn't even look, but when they finally did, it would have been hard to say who had been looking at whom first. They made polite nods to each other and stood there for

a while to see who would make the first move. The father, timber doorframe heavy in his hands, placed it down with an exaggerated oomph and he didn't know if he was trying to impress his ex-wife, or show her how little he cared. She, for her part, placed the cans of paint down gently, knowing full well that her ex-husband knew they would be heavy. She stood up, her spine straight as a plumbline. The hardware store thrummed around them with families desperately trying to find something to do for those lost few hours of a Sunday.

“So,” The ex-husband said, rubbing his hands together because of the pain, and then stopping.

“Yes,” she responded, the answer to all questions except the ones he would ask. They shared some more silence, and despite both walking to the checkouts at the same time, they'd gone in different queues and it would have been hard to call across. There was a crashing sound, which they would later find out was one of the children playing near the window aisle, tripping and cutting their entire body up, not knowing what had happened and sitting there in traumatised silence until their parents had finished trying to find a new pot for the bougainvillea, finding their child sitting in a shining swimming pool of its own blood, people crowding around him it desperate and confused. But they didn't know that yet. They would read it in separate newspapers the next day. They both paid for their items then left.

## §

“Oh God!” she cried out at breakfast the next day.

“What?” her new partner, Phil said, moving into the doorway with his tie half on.

“A small boy, at the shops yesterday, fell into some glass. Oh God.”

“I'm sorry to hear that babe,” he said, lowering his voice which made him sound less like an American footballer and more like an American actor. “You okay?”

“I guess so. No,” she said, after some thought. She shook her head at the horror in front of her, a half-page school photo of the boy with bold type overlay, detailing his numerous injuries.

“How’d you know him?”

“What?”

“You knew him, right?”

“Don’t use past tense, he’s not dead,” she said, and he held up his hands to show surrender or disinterest. “And no, I don’t know him.” She noticed that she was crying, and was angry at this.

“Then why are you so upset?” he’d finished his tie, and stood there with it hanging limply over his bare chest. He always did this, said that it was easier this way. None of her previous partners had ever done it, and she suspected it was something that he did because he thought it made him look like a male stripper, and he liked that idea. He was so stupid. Why was she so upset? How dare he? Otherwise it could get folded up in the collar he had said.

“Sometimes you can get upset about terrible things happening to other people, you know. Just because they’re fellow people?” She pushed the newspaper at him, as if it was a manual on human suffering, and left the room.

§

The pages felt like tinder in his hands, and his armpits were cold. She’d gone off in a huff and in five minutes he was going to be late for work. He could chase after her, try to pretend to understand when she explained, or he could get in the car now and, traffic willing, be at the office before everyone else, maybe make a coffee. But then what would she be like in the evening? He couldn’t yet tell how deep this new argument was (was it an argument? what were they arguing about?). He loved her for her complexity, but he wished she would let it remain as such, rather than try to understand. People don’t change, his father had told him, and so if they don’t change, then what’s the point trying to make sense of them? Saying “this is simply because that’s how she is” seemed a much more accepting way of going about it. He looked at his watch and realised that his time to make a decision was over. As a compromise, he grabbed the sheets with the sad little boy on them, left the rest of the paper on the chair and walked to his car, holding the paper in the wind like he was crossing the road with someone else’s child. On the way to work he saw a crash on the freeway. Nothing unusual. No blood. But he made an

effort to slow down and look out his window, to try and witness the suffering of other people. But it seemed to him that they suffered invisibly. The humans in the wreckage were long gone. The car was sitting dead, with flashing lights from a tow-truck bouncing off its skin.

*Rafael's purpose is to give people glorious stories to tell. Some have appeared in Dotdotdash, Going Down Swinging and The Big Issue Fiction Edition. He also competes in poetry slams and giant-sized chess games. Graduated from RMIT Creative Writing in 2012, he often wonders what he'll do with the rest of his life, but the answer's always the same. Writing and falling in love.*

# The Best Policy

*by Terry Groves*

“Does this dress make me look fat?” John’s wife’s shoulders slumped as she stood in front of the store mirror, hands on hips, pelvis swivelling back and forth like a radar antenna. She curled her lip as she turned her gaze over her shoulder, nailing John to the courtesy chair he occupied.

John felt his fingers tighten into the red, naugahyde cushion of his seat. He concentrated to keep his face a mask of serenity, while on the inside, his mind, his hair, and his tongue were sticking straight out from his head. His eyes bulged out six inches and puffs of steam spurted from his ears. Outside of his head, gentle strains of muzak cascaded over him as he took in the mammoth flower print dress pulled drum tight across his wife’s backside. Above that incredible view, he could clearly see the shape of her bra where it pressed against the fabric, struggling to restrain mounds and pounds of flesh. She turned a little more to him, a halting, half pirouette that revealed bodice buttons straining to retain their purchase in the button holes. Inside his head, John continued to freak out.

Reality had slipped sideways that morning, leaving him stuck in a horror movie of his own direction. Yesterday he had told a small lie to cover up the fact that he had bought himself a new case for his cell phone. It wasn’t a big deal, but the budget had been tight lately and his choice had gone against their decision to buy only what was necessary until the finances settled down. He had wanted that particular case for a long time and then it had gone on sale.

His little lie, hardly a lie at all, more a teeny tiny deception, an eensy white stretch, had grown monstrous by bedtime as he fabricated layer upon layer of untruth to mask it. Her initial curious inquiry ended up feeling like an inquisition as he struggled to provide logical answers to logical questions about an explanation that only had substance in his mind. His last thought as he lay blinking into the darkness of their bedroom was “No more lies, not even teensy tiny white ones.”

Now it was really biting him. How could he answer her question without hurting her? His mind churned and raced to come up with an answer that was honest but wouldn't crush the woman who had taken his name ten years and one hundred and twelve pounds ago. He shifted his position on the chair, furrowing his brow as though pondering careful measurements. The whole shift was designed to give him a few more seconds of reprieve, of wedded bliss, of life. In that brief span of time John got his mind around the truth of the situation, the dress didn't make her look fat—she was fat—the dress just did nothing to hide the fact. The dress didn't lie.

“No dear,” he worked his mouth slow and smooth, “that dress does not make you look fat.”

“Oh honey,” she stepped toward him with her arms open. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” John said without hesitation, allowing himself to be smothered by her embrace. He smiled.

*Terry has been writing for most of his life and has enjoyed success with both short stories and poetry but his love is stories. Dark drama, humour and pure horror are his most frequent thoughts. He is currently working on a short screenplay as well as more stories. Like most writers, he has longer works on the go. Terry lives in Duncan, British Columbia. He writes for the love of the craft.*  
[www.terrygroves.com](http://www.terrygroves.com).

# Blinded Me With Science

*Non-fiction by Sue Stevenson*

*“Physicists tell us that the solidity of matter is an illusion. Even seemingly solid matter, including your physical body, is nearly 100 per cent empty space—so vast are the distances between the atoms compared to their size. What is more, even inside every atom there is mostly empty space. What is left is more like a vibrational frequency than particles of solid matter, more like a musical note.”—Eckhardt Tolle*

In 1976, I was five. The Australian music institution Countdown had been running for two years every Sunday night at 6 pm on the ABC. It was hosted by a passionate Molly Meldrum, with his enthusiastic recommendations to “do yourself a favour” and get onto the latest Supernaut or David Bowie offering. Once a fortnight we would visit Grandma and Grandpa’s place, and us kids would sit in front of the telly and indulge in a 70s feast of rotating disco balls and men in satin shirts open to their waists.

In stark contrast to the glitter that was fluffing up much of that year, AC/DC released “Dirty Deeds (Done Dirt Cheap)”. It’s a song about a hit man offering his services to a variety of people who could use his help—a teenage girl being forced to sleep with her high school principal, someone whose boyfriend is double dealin’ with her best friend, and a browbeaten bloke whose nagging wife is driving him nuts. A bargain-priced solution could be arranged using several different methods—concrete shoes, cyanide, and TNT amongst them.

Not for me. I was waking in fright in my bed at night and lying there crying, “Mummmmy, Mummmmy,” softly, softly, so no one else would hear except her, embarrassed already for my need, until she came and climbed into bed with me. Then, the depths of the dark night retreated, along with the monsters that peeped through the chink in the blind. I didn’t know anything about hit men. For me, that song was about two characters—Dirty Deeds and the Dunder Cheep. Dirty Deeds looked something like Mario or Luigi from Mario Brothers. But he wasn’t the important one. He was only the sidekick to the real star of the show, the Dunder Cheep, who was a giant baby chicken.

That was the song I loved, and the memory of that causes a jolt of pure, unadulterated, bittersweet what-it-felt-to-be-fiveness to flood over me. The same way it feels when you hear again a song you once loved but have completely forgotten. When I was twenty-five I recorded Counting Crows' "Recovering the Satellites" from my brother's LP onto cassette. If I hadn't lived through the technological changes of the past thirty years I would find it hard to believe that cassette recording occurred less than twenty years ago; somewhere in-between then and the advent of CDs I lost that cassette, and forgot all about that album.

Twelve years later I bought that Counting Crows album again, one of a bulk lot of someone's CDs they were getting rid of on eBay in favour of digitising their collection. Listening to those songs for the first time in twelve years, all of the lyrics of Angel of the Silences were coming back to me a split second before Adam Duritz wailed them out of the speakers and I loved that album twice as much as I had before; it had grown more precious from the forgetting.

## §

Last year I watched Brian Cox's Wonders of the Universe twice. As quickly as he fed the second law of thermodynamics and string theory into my wondering and awe-inspired brain, it just as quickly flooded out again. I don't think I will ever be able to explain physics; but I feel like maybe I could dance it. If no one was watching.

As is the irritating way of such things, when I was in high school I couldn't have given a shit about science. I was more interested in being in love with unattainable people. In 1985 I cried myself to sleep more nights than I can remember yearning for a Brian Mannix I could never have. Of course, the fact that I could never have him provided the safety net to pour out all of my grief, my angst, my yearning into my pillow every night. If I could have had him, I would not have known what to do with him.

I traversed the suburbs of Melbourne following after Uncanny X-Men. I went underage to over-18s gigs; I saw them at the Nunawading Skate Ranch, the Myer Music Bowl, and Festival Hall, where I once had to be taken, hysterical, out to the St John's Ambulance, so overcome was I for my beloved. My cousin Andrea and I caught the train to Oak Park and walked the streets to the house where Brian still lived with his parents. "Brian is in Adelaide," a sign said in the front window. I took leaves from his tree and

some moulting fur from his dog, for keepsakes.

The obsession with the lead singer aside, there was something about early Uncanny X-Men music that appealed to me. They wrote surfing parodies that made allusions to vibrators. They were politically incorrect. Before they were a squealy teenie band they were an irreverent pub band, a bunch of young guys from Melbourne. Before Brian was in the X-Men he worked in a tap factory. That was amazing to me. They were just normal blokes. And they were making music.

I was a suburban girl through and through and my musical tastes reflected that. I had fear running through my veins. There were so many bands going around then that would appeal so much more to me now—The Pixies, The Smiths, Cocteau Twins—that I had never heard of, or who flew over or under my radar. My brother was a relentless player of The Cure, but it was like they vibrated on a level too scary for me to contemplate at that time. The Sex Pistols were another story, but then they were safe by virtue of their distance in a way that, say, Nick Cave was not. That sort of music was too dark; far too close to my own barely understood feelings to contemplate.

I was now a teenager, and life had taken me light years away from the buffer of the innocence that had fostered the Dunder Cheep. I was screaming for a new story, to know where I fit into the new world. But there were no initiation rites, apart from the clumsy alcoholic ones we invented ourselves, and no songlines to map out the concrete earth I was living on.

## §

I was that most irritating of high school students—the smart girl throwing away her education. I would go to school having not done my homework and give lip to my teachers, only to go to the library after school and borrow great swathes of books. I felt traumatised and tiny on the inside; the outside was all fear masked as cool rebellion, mistrust and sneering contempt. Some of that contempt was well founded, when I consider the way science and history were presented to us. My high school had the stupendous ability to juice subjects and only hand us the skin. The facts without the narrative.

Teenagers are blind to plenty of things. On the other hand, some things are more

20/20 at that age than they'll ever be again: why do adults do the things they do—or don't do the things that they should? Why is beauty so lacking, and why does everything feel so dense and stultifying and boring? Is this really the best we can do? I hadn't come across Rousseau at fifteen, but his famous dictum that “Man [sic] is born free, but he is everywhere in chains” would have resonated. Not that I would have been able to articulate it.

Perhaps I would have been better off trying to dance my angst, instead. But I couldn't dance without fiery self-consciousness. Not like the other girls I went to the Blue Light discos with; I would join them to dance in a circle with our handbags in the middle. For some it was fun, but dancing was excruciating for me. I didn't even know I secretly yearned to do it—and other things like drama and music. Those things were for people who weren't genetic mutations. I wasn't free to dance; my feet felt frozen to the floor.

When a river gets a blockage upstream, everything congeals, and what is meant to flow becomes stagnant.

## §

Every recess and lunch break of my high school years I sat with a big group of friends up the back of the oval, as far away from the school buildings as possible and smoked cigarettes. Generally Peter Jackson Super Mild. Smoking was banned, of course. Out of all of my friends, I was the only one ever to be caught and suffer the indignity of picking up rubbish with Mr Walsh, the grumpy janitor, after school. It didn't stop me smoking, though. When I first began the habit I'd later struggle to quit, a packet of Alpine Lights was \$1.78. My friend Karen and I would go halvie in a packet, go to the park halfway up her street and sit on the swings and the seesaw and smoke one cigarette after another.

The only memory that survives almost thirty years after the interminably boring hours that made up my science education (apart from the time we had to cut up a squirting cow's eye) was the luminous day a volunteer was required. They were to take a long metal stick and move it through a metal contraption while touching the sides as little as possible. Then they were to go outside and smoke a cigarette and then redo the test to measure the effects nicotine had on the body.

I was deliriously happy to be that volunteer. It felt delicious to lawfully practise my self-destructive habit. It felt like it did when I would read a book and come upon a word or phrase I hadn't met before. One of those good phrases, where the concept suddenly puffs out in front of you like a giant airbag that gives you not only a piece of the jigsaw puzzle that explains Why Things Are, but a buffer space between you and the world, in the same way that cigarettes create a smokescreen. With a new phrase or concept I could see a new horizon, sometimes an entire city that I could not see before. This was the way I felt standing outside having a fag, under authorisation from a teacher to do so. I wished for the principal and the janitor to come past and see me. Unfortunately, as is the way of these things, nobody did.

## §

Several years ago someone on the radio was talking about the evolutionary history of octopuses. He kept referring to the evolutionary process as if it was something outside of the octopus, something imposed upon it. "Evolution has done X, Y and Z," he'd say.

It was probably simply a shorthanded way for him to convey what he wanted to say, but the way he said it hit a nerve. Did the octopus have no say in its own unfolding—the world stomping down on its tentacles with its boots like late Western capitalism on the earth, insisting on it being this way? This version of evolution felt like simply another version of the dualistic god who lived far away in the skies, leaving his creation to rot. I prefer to think of the evolutionary dance of a million possible variations not only coming into the octopus, but also coming out of it, the way it came out of the stars, out of the Big Bang. Not like some boring, mechanical one-way sort of thing, but as Life dancing with itself. A myriad of possibilities that the octopus could have become, but now that it's unfolded the way it has, it seems so solid that we can't readily believe it could have turned out any other way than it did.

Of course, the octopus is a product of its environment. Its environmental homes over millions of years have shaped the way it has turned out. No octopus is an island, after all, any more than any one of us are.

Geez. Everything is so vulnerable; it's a wonder anything is here at all.

And in a way it isn't. At one level, the octopus is more not here than it is here. But

yet it is, as solid as any other creature. This thought is somehow comforting to me, like a cup of warm Milo at 2 am.

I wonder—if the best science teacher in the world had been able to convey to me the poetry of string theory, would I have had the ears to hear it back then? I fielded a don't-give-a-shit exterior, but I was desperate for someone to tell me a story, that there was a perfectly full void running through it all like a golden thread, and that it ran through me too. This was the story that I was looking for. I still am. A story that includes everything. A space that opens up wonder and beauty, and where people belong right in the centre of it.

That kind of space would surely, given a couple of millennia, start unfreezing stuck feet. Because not only are we made of barely nothing. We are also, after all, made of stars.

*Sue Stevenson likes to think she would have liked science in high school if Brian Cox was her science teacher. She would one day like to try living in a cave with satellite internet access. She blogs at <http://discombobula.blogspot.com>.*

# La Dame de Fer / The Last Day of the Year / My Heart Has No Home

*A Non-fiction Epistolary Trio, by Fayroze Lutta*

*These three works were sent by me to and from Paris. The Last Day of the Year is an aerogramme and My Heart Has No Home is a heart shaped letter. These two works are love letters sent to my dear Parisien Marocain lover Driss. He describes himself as, 'café noir mixed with French full cream milk and Moroccan spice'. I describe him when he is late as 'Arabe'. When I attempted to say his love making was, 'tellement Parisien', he stopped me abruptly and said it was, 'cent percent (100%) Arabica, comme le café, looks like a coffee'. The series of postcards sent to my exquisite Dresden doll Australienne writer friend Roxanne Groebel totalling 'La Femme de Fer', are love postcards about a city. It tells the story of Paris nowadays with La Crise in the cold, dark, dreary days of this winter ultimately a story of heart ache a broken love letter about a city.*

## La Dame de Fer (The Lady of Fire)

*Allez-Roxy bébé,*

Like a fucking tourist I was mesmerised by the view of the Eiffel Tower from the apartment. I believe it's because I don't have to walk the filthy-rotten streets or catch the stinking Metro hot with human-humidity to go see the beautiful lady. When I do venture out on the Metro I douse myself in parfum, GUCCI Flora to be exact, to protect me from catching some air-born Parisien virus.

From the seventh-floor balcony I can see La Dame de Fer—the Eiffel Tower—and La Meringue on the other side (Sacre Cœur). I feel like the two monuments are a tale of a woman's l'histoire d'amour. It begins at the church, le Sacre Cœur; the wedding day is here and she is dressed all in white, towering in her big hooped meringue. Then of course night descends and she is set ablaze by passion on her wedding night. She finds her man unfaithful and sets herself and her dress alight. She is burning, quite a spectacle to behold. Like her bridal waltz all alone, she is dancing—spinning around, drunk and dizzy. She lights up the night sky with her golden flames; for all of Paris to see the rage of her tortured memory each night.

The few times I've been to the Trocadéro, once with my lover Driss on his moto, we stood underneath at the foot of the big-skirted girl and I felt like a pervert standing there between her legs looking up at her cunt between her thighs. However, the first time I saw her I was with Renaud, an old lover, now a friend. I still recall what we argued about that night all those years ago. He made the point firmly that I was mistaken and that the old lady was in fact a man, who was lying back with his crowning glory, a big-phat-cut-cock with a long-hard-erect-triumphant-metallic shaft and adorned with a crowning glorious head. The nightly display a shower of golden sparkling champagne, like ejaculate all over itself, revelling in its own ecstasy.

I thought maybe now in these austere dark days autumn in Paris, the lady is a junkie. The form is no longer a dress but a heroin needle injecting, giving her a nightly show of exhibitionism, like the Moulin Rouge. Vegas-lights-rock-light. Each and every night there is spectral, a display of exultation from her cocaine high.

I am tired of these beautiful-old-decaying-rotten-dirty-wretched streets and then I think of St Germain. It feels like another world, another life. Set apart, yet now contained within the ever-encompassing open slums of austerity that have crept in from the outskirts of town, la banlieue. The heroin addict has scaled the beige city's walls. Not only les portes de Paris proper, but all of Europe. So the lady is a stripper, she does her nightly dance and at the end of her act, she burns her dress. She is left naked and in her short, mind-obliterating junkie high she trembles with the champagne-shower-ejaculate all over her body. Coming down hard from her drug addled heights, she has the banlieue bleues.

Walking up rue Marcadet to my apartment from the Metro Guy Môquet (my first mistake!), I asked the barkeep at the brasserie Christophe Colomb "if I could use the bathroom". He asked directly "if I would be buying a drink?" I answered "non." Then he replied directly, "NON!" How could a man deny a woman the use of a toilet? The French are fucking special, that is why Napoleon never had his victory march through the Arc de Triomphe and all that remains is just a cauchemar of a roundabout.

L'amour toujours dur... FUCKING L'AMOUR! What the fuck do I know about this emotion? Less than zero! Natta! NIX! Rien! Diddley-squat! Zip! Zilch! I slept alone last night, yet again. There is always a reason, always an excuse: a motorcycle accident, sick

siblings, a razor, a clean shirt, midnight meetings, or just plain old hustling. Me, I will sleep alone tonight like the two nights before. The wind blows, the rain falls, then darkness descends and I am left alone. Perhaps I too have the banlieue bleues?

Its morning here and dinner time in Sydney... Je vais chercher un croissant... Last night's candles snuffed out, empty wine glasses, his umbrella leaning against the bureau. I think to the Roman goddess Aurora; goddess of the dawn, she heralds a new day, carrying the flame to light the sun. She had a mortal lover as we all do, hers the Prince of Troy.

I would shake the colour off my skin for him and then for some reason I hope that he loves me always, down to my heart-beating soul. Oh, how I hope for la grasse matinée every morning together. He is here now in front of me and we will make love loudly, his heart-beating-pounding-body-and-soul on top of me, giving me what I waited for all night long in the lonesome sounded-out hours of the night before.

What to make of these moments of ecstasy, my happiness always fleeting, never permanent. Then it is my turn to leave and I no longer wait for him; I spend the days and nights without him.

Oh, how time marches on...

*Keep well my, dear young friend Roxanne,*

*Bisous ton amie,*

*Fayroze!*

## **The Last Day of the Year**

*Bonjour Mon Amant—Salaam Mon Douceur,*

*Ooh Mon Driss,*

Mon poulet d'amour, it was hot today with a bright blue sky, the sun hanging high up in the sky. I have nothing left to keep me here. I have not readjusted to Sydney. I am home but do not feel at home here in my city. This may be my last summer here—I am tired of these hideous streets. One thing I recall from university days is that aesthetics are ethics.

Architectural form and settlement patterns are physically built modes of that society. If all that is true, this city is morally bankrupt and devoid of any ethical integrity. There is little value put on beauty, so it is left out of the equation altogether. I am upset; my job is at stake. I am burnt out from the office. I was in a sombre-indigo mood and now I am brooding—seething like the smoke from the stem of my cigarette.

FUCK this postcard town! I don't know what I am doing here anymore or what I am holding on to. You are not here, always far...far from my gaze...far from my embrace...far from my bed. My mother is just a voice on the telephone. I am tired of life here more than anything. I can hear the buzz of cicadas and I know summer is here. But I do not know what the future holds for us. I have waited so long for you to be by my side under an Australian summer sun. I have hope...that is what I tell myself.

The world does not feel like it is opening up but closing in on me. I am thirty-one. I never imagined or planned past the age of thirty. I do not know what more there is...hoping to see you here...I dream of Tangiers, a city dressed in white. Sipping Rosé from Provence or French Champagne, a café Arabica, smoking le Marquise Methol. The waiter dressed in a white shirt and black vest lighting my cigarette. Sitting at an art déco café—colonialist of course—typing away, brooding, sweating...wondering where you are in that city of white...with a refreshing breeze from Gibraltar cooling the air...ghosts of Jack Kerouac and Paul Bowles haunting every corner of those colonialist haunts—the cafés, bars and restaurants. I imagine they still remain intact down to the table and chairs from that WWII époque.

Where would we call home? What would fill my days? Would I write relentlessly back home? Then again, from where? My heart has no home...my homeland is by your side, à ton côté, à côte de toi, somewhere, nowhere, nulpart. Maybe Paris, trapped in the misery of a bankrupt middle class...or left to turn mad 'folle' with my Middle-Eastern sisters...or pay the high rents of Sydney, to catch a glimpse of water and spit from the coat hanger (Harbour Bridge). To be at the mercy of the buses and sip fine soy cappuccinos at bar Milazzo...prepared by my dear Italian friend Claudio or spray-venom-politique with the other expat paysano, Andréa or Giovanni.

Most likely, I extract myself from this place and start anew in Melbourne. Drinking small beers measured in pots, not midis—a Sydney term. Where there are no steep rigid

inclines to climb, all the seasons in one day, no hard surf because the beaches are in a bay. Buzz around Fitzroy searching for old things in vintage shops, eating lentils at the Vegie Bar, buying flowers and putting my shopping in the front of my bicycle. Smoking clove cigarettes with arts students and to see my mother, an anchor for me in Melbourne. I am truly her daughter, of the same blood. Rent an old apartment above a federation style shop that has the original stained-glass windows. I would live near the station and welcome the ringing of the bells that the train was coming and the railway crossing closed. I can wait for you as I have now because I know how much I love you. I love you like my typewriter, an object I value more than others prize their diamond wedding ring.

*Typing from here to eternity*

*Typing from her to Morocco*

*Typing from here to Paris*

*Typing from here to be by your side*

The French waiter poured me a Rosé at The Spot. I am not sure what to make of drinking alone. I think it may be ill advised...my mind is still cloudy from last night's cocktails and champagne. I cling to this shrewd, miserable city, crawling with the nouveau riche. Like a city wearing an expensive suit but making it look cheap; money cannot buy you taste. The women may be beautiful—I rarely notice as the 1970s backdrop renders them ugly like a city bathed in blonde brick, concrete and bitumin sweating from the urban heat-island effect, sweltering bitumin underfoot. I miss you in the misère de Paris. Oh la misère de Paris. Colonialist-Imperialists: when they have been privileged for so long, there is a sense of entitlement and with “rien dans la caisse,” they are in the midst of a cold dark winter.

I want to be by your side, inside or out of any given city. Haiti if you prefer, or en Espagne with la pauvreté, we can start a samba line in the unemployment queue.

I am sweating. It is hot, stinking hot. My rusty metal fan hums in the background, the muffled tones of people talking on the radio. I am not here. I never arrived here back home in Sydney since last I saw you in Paris. My body is here but my thoughts are there with you in Casablanca. Will you ever leave? Come home to me and reunite my body with soul and your body next to me, on me in an embrace. Not sure if you can cross the Pacific as you never have before. I darken with all the broken promises, with all your

broken promises. FUCK I LOVE YOU! Tu le sais. Tu m'aimes? Je ne sais plus. Je ne sais pas si je peux continuer de t'attendre. I get so tired of an unanswered telephone. I get down. I live all the miserable jazz love songs I listen to on the radio. It makes this summer dark without you. I am still smoking, sorry to say... I am so healthy fighting fit when I leave for Paris and I return with my body devastated. I do not think I may see you again until I see you here in Australia. It breaks my heart to type those words.

J'ai dormi hier soir dans un rêve d'attente...I slept last night in a dream of waiting...I woke up doped out, breaking through to real life and reality comes flooding back to me first in sharp flashes and then I regain consciousness...I lie there listless...a cup of coffee...a dismal cigarette...I open up the sash window above the sink to let some light into the apartment...let in some air...I turn on the radio and it buzzes away without me, not caring about my dark mood...I look up at my wooden clock on the wall. It says it is 10.45am, but I know it is actually midday...The wind blows loudly, shaking my flat and I think to you maybe in Paris or Casablanca, trapped with your other compatriots. The metal fan turns. I know I have to rush. Someone is waiting for me somewhere in this city. I have to lift my mood...there is only some coffee left in the saucer now...

Long days of this wretched summer without you...I cannot escape the memory of you; I'm trapped inside it. Your words on the telephone, "envie de me voire," the tears well up in my eyes. I think to that great Anglophonic leader, Winston Churchill. He called these his black dog days. I am in freefall. Falling off the edge of a building, hoping you are waiting at the end to catch me in your embrace.

If only you could make an escape route, a plan to my heart. I sat at a bar looking up the sails of the Opera House; a rare object of beauty in this far flung city. I was there at dusk, the sun setting, the buildings dark, only illuminated by the lights within. I hold on to that, trying not to think of your unanswered telephone...

I get so down...way down...down low now. In these shady days of summer, I hope you will return to my embrace. I do not think you will reach these distant shores...too far...too long...too distant...to see me. It is late now and my fingertips sound like hammers on the keys in the late hours. Long nights of summer. Alone. When I came home tonight, as I came down the stairs, I hoped to find you waiting at the bottom of the

staircase. A secret wish...An empty dream. These days do not hold much promise. The clock's tic-tok...The day truly over...nearing ever closer to the last day of the year. I smoke a secret wish to die...ever so slowly. I breathe out and smoke escapes...maybe blissful indifference?

At the beach today, I watched the seagulls dance and soar above the sunbathers, gliding on the breeze. I watched them against the cobalt blue, which turned that island paradise turquoise at the shore. I watched a man swimming against the break waters...Pine trees line the beach...I know this is an Australian beach, a Sydney one to be exact. Women, foreigners dressed in bikinis in all colours, red, blue, pink and polka dot. A naked white breast, burnt flesh and I am golden. The quiet hum of people dialled down by the easing wash and crash of waves. Even the sound of children's laughter is rendered pleasant. The squeak and squall of the seagulls is high pitched. I still wonder where you are. Will you come find me in this city of five million? Find me sitting alone somewhere? The day gets hotter, the water calls like a spiritual ablution before I lay down in prayer once again on the sand.

I have vague ideas, ambiguous sentiments and thoughts of you. I feel like I burnt a cigarette hole through my heart. The lit end I put near my skin and I feel the heat of the glowing ember approaching, too cowardly to press it against my naked hand. Burn through skin, meat & veins—no brilliant flash of red. So instead I smoke continuously and endlessly to kill myself in a slow calculated death.

I'm not sure if I will ever see you again. To look upon you, your dark brown eyes, one with a *tâche*. Your *coiffeur* of swirling crinkled hair with flecks of grey. Your nose dignified and your lips, those two jewels, the bottom one sweet from your coffee. *Je t'aime sans cesse*, without falter. These long hot days of summer without you...to share my Australian summer with you, *seulemente une rêve*. I'm not sure where you are these long days, these long nights or what hours you keep.

I believe you will never see an Australian summer...too far...*trop chér...trop de decalage*. You will never set foot on my country's soil, never set foot in my apartment. Never feel the scorching sun on your face turning your caramel skin bronze, then to dip into the strong surf in the icy cool waters and welcome the chill on your burnt back.

You will never step foot in my bedroom and lay down next to me on my queen sized

bed. We will never make the bed bend and creak with our loud love making. Make love on every surface of my apartment; bless each surface with our naked passion. I sleep alone like yesterday, like today, like tomorrow and I am left alone with my dark thoughts turning wretched. I wished to spend the last day of the year alone. My friends will rescue me, armed with Champagne and Rosé. It may be ill advised for me to spend too much time alone. I can curl up in my misery, nurture it and stroke it. You may not know this about me...

I do not know if I have the strength or means to see you again in Paris. I know I will gather the force of spirit as I have done before somehow. I feel you are slipping away from me now. I may go somewhere; you will not be able to find me, but what difference would that make now? It gets me; down it makes me tired. I will fall asleep on the keys tonight, wondering where you are like yesterday, like before, like always.

I scowl...I skulk...I cry...Maybe you would prefer a woman whose smile never cracks, whose eyes are always dry, mascara never running down her face. A woman that is not so maladroit who never breaks glasses or wishes to throw them crashing against the walls of the apartment. You would lift me out of this darkness, you could hold my shining soul up high, just with the ease of your calming voice. Deep, baritone & virile—the way I like. You call out while making love, or tell me to quieten myself whilst in the act, or lay down par terre, mouille, more, harder just for you. A well placed slap with your long fine fingers. Your voice while I wax lyrical of beauty; your deriding sarcasm, then my laugh.

Lift me high into the scorching blue sky. Let my feet never touch the ground, wrapped in your love. Dreaming of a time I no longer need to write you to be by your side, but by your side, typing to everyone else, longing for friends and my mother's gaze. Take me far from here. Place me next to you. On top of you. Breathing you in...

*Lost in love's long embrace...*

*Je t'embrasse forte (I kiss you hard)*

*Fayroze*

**My Heart Has No Home**

*Mon Amour Driss,*

I feel forgotten by you, but I can't forget you. I can't bury you in the cemetery of the past. It's a hoax, this business of forgetting. It's high summer here in Sydney and yet the days are dark without you.

I walked over the Harbour Bridge yesterday; it has a view of the Opera House. All I saw was six lanes of metal and the roar of petrol but I'm comforted by the rattle of the train as it passes over the bridge. With work I feel like I pass the day in perpetual silence, chained to my desk, drowning in paper. My friend said, "It's just a job ... change your attitude." I don't know ... I'm going to continue to write to you and I will not get a reply. It will cost you 89 centimes for a stamp. It seems too much to ask...

I want to frame those first three months I was in Paris with you, and that month last year in Morocco. I want to hang it next to the wooden clock on the wall above my bed. Those hot nights of waiting, talking, making love with our words on Rue D'Aboukir. Waiting for you to return to my fourth-floor apartment with ice cubes for the Martini Rossato and the loud love making that would follow next to paper thin walls where I could hear the neighbours cough. Paper-thin walls never mattered in that hotel room in Morocco; Calling out "Oui", bent over the bed and the knock of the chamber maid on the door.

What to make of all those moments of ecstasy past? I want to unfold you again, not curl up in the misery of an unanswered phone, or worse, answered with a woman's voice. I want to smear my lipstick all over your shirt collar with my lips. I want everyone to see you are for me, like yesterday, like before and for always. I don't want to know another man's touch or form. I want you to keep me; to make love to me in the mornings before work. To make love so loud the neighbours blush. Oh mon objet d'amour, I will return to you and your embrace. What to make of all these frayed threads of my heart ...?

*Je t'embrasse forte, (I kiss you hard)*

*Ta chérie*

*Fayroze*

*Fayroze Lutta writes because she is far away and with only her Olivetti typewriter to communicate to those back home. Her only real home is her typewriter. She has had all the emotions over her typewriter; she has been blind drunk, smoked thousands of Galois cigarettes and on occasion sniffed an oily rag to keep her upright hunched, stabbing at the keys until she falls asleep.*