

# Tincture Journal

Issue Seven: Spring 2014



Tincture Journal, Issue Seven, Spring 2014

ISBN 978-0-9874983-6-6

ISSN 2201-7593

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# Editorial

Thanks for buying and reading Issue Seven of *Tincture Journal*. It was deep in the editing phase of this issue, while pondering the various style and spelling differences between Australian and American English, that I realised the unique position that e-journals like *Tincture* are in. We do have a strong focus on emerging Australian writers, but we also publish a lot of international writing and intend for the journal to have a global audience. Without a print edition, there are no shipping constraints: readers can download and enjoy the e-book wherever they are. Also, e-books never go out of print, so it will always be possible to go back and hunt down a back-issue (we sell these for just \$5). While most writers still hunger to see their writing in a print book or magazine, we hope that the other benefits of our e-book format make up for this.

This is an exciting issue for a number of reasons. We have a couple of longer submissions from US writers: “Children Without Faces” by Jeffrey Meisner is a story about a young girl named Penny and her relationship with her brother, her parents and her psychologist; “Chasing Hemingway in Havana” by Barbara Lane is a non-fiction essay that reflects upon Hemingway’s life and Barbara’s own pilgrimage to Cuba. Our cover art for this issue was built using a photo provided from Barbara’s time in Cuba. Our non-fiction line-up is stronger than usual, which is very pleasing. Alongside Barbara’s essay are two other non-fiction pieces: “Negative Space” by Bint Arab, who was born in Baghdad, raised in Brooklyn and currently lives in Texas; and “We, the Second Generation Immigrants” by Calista Fung, who also had a non-fiction piece in Issue Six. Don’t hesitate to submit your own creative non-fiction writing or pitches, as we’re always looking for more.

On the local front there is so much to choose from, including a short piece by Ben Walter and some longer short stories by Rebecca Howden, Merran Jones and Elisabeth Murray. Elisabeth’s novella, *The Loud Earth* was published by Holograms Books earlier this year, so if you enjoy her story it would be worth stepping up to the novella. There is poetry from serial contributors Tiggy Johnson and S. G. Lerner, and two poems by Benjamin Dodds, whose first collection *Regulator* was published in February this year. This issue contains an interview I did with Ben Walter, but we are simultaneously publishing interviews with Tiggy Johnson and Benjamin Dodds on our website. The entire interview series is freely available online at [tincture-journal.com/category/interviews](http://tincture-journal.com/category/interviews).

I can’t mention everything in the editorial, but there is one more piece that I’d like to highlight: for just the second time, we are publishing a one-act play, “Every Movement Is a Sound” by Kayla Pongrac. Kayla’s is an experimental play with an emphasis on sound, and it features just one on-stage character. I hope you enjoy reading it and that we can continue to publish plays in the future.

It’s a lot of hard work but also great fun to produce each issue of the journal, and we hope you can find a number of interesting and surprising things to enjoy in these pages. Thanks so much for your support. As usual, we’ll get things started with Meg Henry’s “Inferior Bedrooms”, where we find Meg in love, touring the Australian writers’ festival circuit, skinny-dipping and drawing inspiration from Keith Gessen’s *All the Sad Young Literary Men*.

Happy reading!

# Inferior Bedrooms

## *Regular Column by Meg Henry*

It was October and I was in love. I'd escaped my state for five days on the coast north of Sydney. A writers' festival was in town and I wanted to return to musty motel with a notebook full of devastation. For me, to be in love was humiliating. But to be reckless—to be reckless in love was divine.

If you'd seen me then, outside the theatre after four-too-many boutique beers, wild with ideas and levelling a fellow writer with an iced vernacular, you would have left me to it—but on the evening of the awards ceremony JD arrived in a hired sports car. Wearing shorts and a hoodie, he was all tanned skin and blue eyes and heartbreak.

“Just skip it,” he said, surprising me in the park outside the motel. He didn't understand why I'd left Queensland, and I didn't understand why he would drive twelve hours of coastline to follow me. I'd been seeking rebellion in paperbacks and masterclasses, now here it was in the flesh.

He let me drive. North through the national park to the sweeping bay of the port, with the top down and a case of beers resting between his knees.

“When you said you were a writer,” he said, twisting a cap off with his teeth. “I didn't know you meant *a writer*.”

We swam naked at the spit and made love in the dunes. The sunset pulling a tight blanket over us. I didn't want to believe I could be this happy. I was a cliché. And worse.

When I resumed festival duties, he drank cappuccinos and read the paper at a café overlooking the ocean. On stage I argued over cultural policy. I wore a leather jacket and a smirk. It felt like home.

Waiting on the street outside after a session was a skinny-armed writer from my past, and on the corner opposite, with bare knees and Wayfarers, was JD.

“Let's get a drink,” the writer said, taking me by the elbow. I knew where a drink at eleven am would finish with him. I was too familiar with his smoke-haze and fondness for fairy lights and over-juiced cocktails in fake jam jars.

As JD crossed the street and said, “Meg, you all done here?” I knew I had him. And I hoped—more than anything, I hoped—I could quit All the Sad Young Literary Men.

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

# Teething

by *Ben Walter*

I can hear the terracotta shards scrape. The wild, lawnsaped pots with their spent compost; grass seeds harvested by sou'westerlies and winnowed in the surf. Breached forts mapped from the shack's back door: the herbs we tended lovingly, the parsley, oregano and mint, our fingers coaxing and encouraging their flimsy leaves. Scrabbling at the sandy weeds singing in the grey soil.

When she was young, we kept a key hidden under the largest of the pots, and as her body grew and strained under the clay weight she would find it, opening, closing and locking the door, sliding it back and forth.

The key hasn't been there in years; locked away somewhere on a lank ring. Our shack town turning suspicious, as though there had been something more trustworthy in brief stays, the days overflowing with good spirits, remembering our own holidays as children. Towels parked on the beach and an annex for the television slumped on the yellowing grass. But the lower prices, the short commute have attracted settling; our sky-blue shacks, furnished with leftovers at garage sales (the carpet couch, uneven cutlery, a chipboard floor and the dog panting under the house) are now square, unfinished homes. Winter residences, Autumn and Spring. I can never remember coming here in the grey panes of July; do surfers slice the waves, the peel of wetsuits clasping at their skins?

My daughter has given up searching and is knocking on the door again, the glass panes resonating like thin timpani. I tiptoe over to the old bookshelf, Agatha Christie novels, car magazines from the 90s, the detritus of forgotten shell collections, and clench my worn hands around your teeth.

"Mum," she calls, "just open the door, could you?" She hasn't been here in years. I wonder what she felt as her car channelled the ruts in the yard, stalks tickling its belly; the old wattles, homes for the aged, bent over the low brick barbecue, the offset slab of cast iron. The shed, the iron water tank: metallic statues. Did she look, did she notice them at all? When I listened to her message and knew she was coming down, I wondered, would she draw a line straight to the old shack, or wander a while in curves and circuits?

She had locked the car and strode directly to the door, tried the handle and knocked. And now our stand-off holds.

But I have your teeth.

"Mum," she calls again, "they need to go." Half her face, an eye and cheek hovering where the curtains reach to meet. I cover them protectively with my palm; will there be imprints? Her eye opens wide, her brow beseeching. She looks to both sides, yells a little louder. I can see the corner of her lips and then her whole mouth; she places it in the gap as though speaking into a receiver.

So many photographs, everyone smiling, the measure of days: a walk to Mount Murchison, her shiny graduation. Your lopsided grin stretched out for the camera. On display! Or resting in their liquid sheets beside our breathing bed. I have kissed these teeth when they nested in your mouth, I have tiptoed their rises and falls with a gentle tongue. I have fed these teeth with dense soup catching on their rapids, with bread twice kneaded, blended in turn.

"Mum, I just want to bury them. He needs to be whole."

Before her eye resumes its station at the glass, I unwrap my hands and face your teeth steadily.

Then I slip them in my mouth and hold them close.

# Interview with Ben Walter

by *Ben Walter and Daniel Young*

*Editors Note: the Tincture Journal interview series is freely available online at [tincture-journal.com/category/interviews](http://tincture-journal.com/category/interviews) and includes interviews with Benjamin Dodds and Tiggy Johnson, whose work appears in this issue, as well as our previous interviews with Nathanael O'Reilly, Stu Hatton, Angela Meyer and David Lumsden.*

*1. Ben, thanks for being part of our interview series. Could you perhaps start with a bit of background about yourself and how you came to writing?*

Reading was an escapist pleasure when I was young. For me it was similar to cricket; a detailed and stimulating universe of histories and possibilities that was simultaneously entertaining. I was troubled by relating to other people, so I used both of these as captivating diversions.

I wasn't so good at cricket. But writing evolved out of reading, and I played around with poetry and short stories in my teens. There were a few years in my early twenties when I did very little of either; I took the time to fail at a few things fairly spectacularly, and then around ten years ago I started dabbling with writing again as a kind of refuge, partly because I was living with my friend, the comics artist Leigh Rigozzi. At that moment, resuming a creative practice seemed as good an idea as any.

It's gradually grown in seriousness; now I feel it's kind of the lot I've been assigned, so I may as well keep doing it.

*2. Much of your prose is highly poetic, in terms of both rhythm and imagery. Does this come easily as you write or is it layered into the prose through editing and re-drafting?*

I'm glad you mentioned rhythm. The pleasures of rhythm are fundamental to writing fiction for me, and a lot of the editing process consists of matching the text to a series of internal rhythms that I don't quite understand. I find a lot of Australian fiction very flat. Part of this is the unadorned use of language and a thin canon of what is considered an acceptable literary voice, but part is also the lack of rhythm.

More generally, for me the editing process is truly fundamental and where the real pleasure in writing lies. There are stories I'll finish in a day, when it comes out pretty well and I'm under pressure, but most of my writing is a constant layering of edits—printing out the most recent version and reading it off the page, just to make sure the latest changes feel and sound right. Changing a verb and the structure of a sentence; printing it out again, reading it and changing it back. Heaps of that. I go through a lot of paper.

*3. In Issue Two we published your story "City Fish", which was a somewhat more traditional form of short story (if you don't mind me saying so). Has your form changed over time or does each story dictate its own form? Related to this, you write both poetry and prose, so I'm wondering how you choose between those forms and how they both fit into your writing process?*

I actually wrote that story a long time ago, but I came across it hiding in a file and I wasn't too shattered by it. I figured I could maybe polish it and send it somewhere, and I'm thankful that you published it. But it's very different stylistically to the way I've written over the last few years.

I think it took me a long time to work out how I wanted to write, and nowadays I'd say that my fiction fits within a certain approach, or even vision. In saying that, I'm tremendously interested in the possibilities of form, and I struggle to do the same sort of story more than a couple of times without getting bored. A significant motivator for me in writing is the aesthetic challenge of doing something interesting. I've got a story forthcoming in *Island* called "An Anti-Glacier Book"—it comes from a line in *Slaughterhouse Five*, when someone challenges Kurt Vonnegut on the apparent futility of writing an anti-war book. I wondered what an anti-glacier book would look like, particularly in this world of diminishing ice-sheets. And so there was a challenge, and a story.

Now, all of this clarity and direction applies only to my prose. With poetry, I don't really feel like I have a damn idea in hell what I'm doing, which probably explains why I've only written four or five poems over the last year or two. I'm spending more time reading poetry these days, in the expectation that this might become clearer to me.

*4. You've been published very widely in Australian literary journals, including Overland, The Lifted Brow, Island, The Griffith Review, The Review of Australian Fiction, The Canary Press, Regime and more. What are your thoughts on the Australian publishing landscape for writers of short fiction and poetry? Are you working on any longer-form prose pieces, or do you prefer the short form?*

I think it's pretty exciting, the number of new literary journals and magazines that seem to be springing up at the moment. When you think of *Tincture*, *The Suburban Review*, *Canary Press*, *Regime*—so many journals that have just snuck up on us. I've really grown to love the mixed bag that literary journals embody, and I subscribe to far too many of them.

But even then, the number of venues for literary work in Australia is pretty small; if you're a disciplined poet or short story writer, it's not that difficult to have something under consideration everywhere, and plenty of work to spare. I'd love to see more creative work featured in publications with bigger audiences. I think when *The Monthly* first started, they were publishing more fiction? Still, there's nothing to stop Australian writers from submitting overseas. I'm just dipping my toe in the water with this.

I've actually just finished my first long-form manuscript, an attempt to transfer a bushwalking guide into novelistic form. I found this an utterly fascinating and consuming experience; it's so different to shorter stories, much more than I thought it would be. Most of my fiction consists of an attempt to find a new aesthetic synthesis or set of consistent patterns in working out a creative piece, and doing this over a longer work is an appealing and terrifying venture. I'm about to start on another one.

*5. In reading your work I've found that nature and rural life are recurring themes, as is the human body (teeth, eyes, faces, noses). Identifying such themes is a somewhat fraught exercise, but I'm wondering if you'd like to comment on what inspires you?*

It's interesting that you use the word rural. In one sense, even Hobart has a rural atmosphere compared to Melbourne or Sydney. In Tasmania, it's also important to note that the bush in Tasmania is completely different from the rural. There's no smooth transition in the pastoral outback; we have lush green (or dead yellow) fields filled with poppies and cows and



spuds, and then there are wild, temperate jungles with jagged mountains. This wild country is generally the landscape that resonates through my writing, even if it doesn't inspire my ideas directly.

The rural, the urban and the bush really overlap in Tasmania. Twenty minutes from the city is the top of Mt Wellington and the beginnings of the wild south-west; twenty minutes in the other direction, you're mucking about in the kind of shack town where "Teething" is set.

I don't say that any of this inspires me as such. I think ideas and possibilities and tenuous intellectual connections are more inspirational in one sense; and yet the landscape breathes place into these cerebral spaces.

*6. How does living in Hobart influence your work? Can you comment on the Tasmanian literary scene in general?*

I can't imagine not living in Tasmania. From a literary perspective, I find it channels my work; there is a certain psychological freedom here to write what I want, and the relatively low cost of living gives me the time to do that.

Apart from being cut off from national networks, publishers and institutions, the Tasmanian literary scene suffers from the tremendous exodus of talented writers just before and after their university studies. This creates a gap between those who do stay, and the much older writers who have muddled along or moved down, and pretty much have their practice and habits established. This makes for a fragmented community, and a dearth of new and interesting projects.

While at times this relative seclusion can actually be beneficial for creative practice, it can also be very isolating, and in the absence of support it is easy for people to give up and become lawyers and things. In recent years we've seen the odd creative project, and I hope this continues to develop, but it could all fall over if a couple more of the wrong people move to Melbourne.

*7. I was very pleased to run into you at the 2014 Emerging Writers' Festival. Do you go to many festivals and other literary events? How important do you feel this is? Are you working on any new projects that build a sense of literary community, either physically or digitally?*

I don't go to many outside of Tasmania, which means that I don't go to many at all. I do find events like the EWF quite encouraging (though sometimes in the wrong direction, if there's a lot of talk about journalism, say). I haven't got a strong interest in bigger festivals; I feel they are great ways to make writers who aren't on panels feel foolish and disempowered.

Wherever you are, I do think it is important to find your community; partly because this is what it means to involve yourself in your industry, which is generally very important for writers, and partly because there is a level of support and encouragement that others can provide for you, and you to them. I've recently been Writing Australia's Digital Writer in Residence for Tasmania, and a significant element of that has been trying to build projects between Tasmanian and mainland writers.

*8. You have also published reviews. As a writer, do you feel that there has been sufficient critical engagement with your work? Do literary journals get enough reviewing attention? If you are reviewed, would you prefer to avoid reading it?*

Probably I've had about the amount of review coverage that my insignificance in Australian letters warrants; in fact, I've probably been lucky. The two books I've published (a short story and a craft/fiction anthology of Tasmanian writers) both got reviewed in literary journals, which I'm grateful for, and my own writing has been mentioned once or twice in reviews of such journals; and while it would be lovely to imagine someone taking the time to critically engage with my work in detail... well, in the current landscape, it's hard to ask for much more than I've received. Certainly it would be nice to see more reviews of journals, though I do find that these tend to be listy sorts of reviews without a lot of serious critical engagement.

Personally I find a lot of this can go on in more informal story exchanges. There are a few writers with whom I often share my work—I'm sure I get the better end of the deal, as they're always coming up with ways my writing can be improved—and I recently did an exchange with the Sydney writer and critic Tristan Foster, which was valuable and enjoyable for me.

After the number of rejections I've had, I like to think I have a fairly thick skin, and while I can imagine it being a little dispiriting to have Geordie Williamson pillory my first novel, at least it's thoughtful discourse.

*9. Who are your biggest influences as a writer?*

Most authors I've enjoyed reading, I suspect. Borges and Calvino taught me how an idea could be the driving force of a story, but it's writers like Don DeLillo and Gerald Murnane who have been more of an influence—or encouragement—stylistically.

There are writers whose influence I would love to incorporate intertextually one day, but haven't yet found a way, like those 1960s British spy writers like Hammond Innes and Alastair Maclean.

*Ben, thanks so much for your time.*

*Ben Walter is a Tasmanian writer whose fiction has appeared in Island, Overland, Griffith REVIEW and The Lifted Brow. His debut poetry manuscript, Lurching, was shortlisted in the 2013 Tasmanian Literary Prizes.*

# Save Them

*by Benjamin Dodds*

Watch them rise  
from plastic seats to luxuriate  
in darkbright drama of fire  
alarm or lockdown drill.  
Children crave death  
in all ripe forms.  
Endure their pressing questioning  
of the one and lonely adult  
from all sides—  
elaborate endgame scenarios  
search and survey your limits,  
chart and sound  
your shaky dominion.  
*What if the gunmen wore jetpacks?*  
How safe would they be then,  
crouched below desks in a third-floor  
Third-Class, shielded from baddies  
by one pane of glass?  
What lengths would you reach  
to keep small bodies alive?  
If flame held them here  
behind the paint-blooming door,  
all rescuers stuck saving  
others across town,  
what might be done to prove  
your dedication  
your professionalism  
your love  
(bearing in mind,  
terrorists have turned  
off the taps)?

## *Synopsis*

This 'teacher' poem is an exploration of the slightly macabre thrill I've seen running through classes of kids on emergency drill days. The subsequent conversation tends to breed a sort of paranoia about the role of teacher as provider of duty of care.

# Disturbance

*by Benjamin Dodds*

The lawless  
whooping  
involuntary riot  
born of this lost  
and panicked bird  
that's brought  
its wretched chaos  
into the classroom's  
straightened  
labelled void  
is one I recognise  
remember  
with my whole body  
yet I persist  
with the  
futility of  
quietening  
them  
down.

## *Synopsis*

This is another 'teacher' poem. There are so many times in the classroom when students react completely naturally to weird or exciting events, i.e., crazy chaos. Even though I sometimes feel like joining them, I know they need and expect me to play my predictable part.

*Benjamin Dodds is a Sydney-based poet whose work has appeared in a wide range of publications, including Southerly, The Sun Herald, various poetry anthologies and on Radio National. His first collection, Regulator, was launched by Puncher & Wattmann Poetry in February this year. An interview between Benjamin and our poetry editor Stuart Barnes can be found online in our interview series at [tincture-journal.com/category/interviews](http://tincture-journal.com/category/interviews).*

# Arena

*by Douglas W. Milliken*

The old man sleeps through the night and in the morning, remains in bed. The bunk above him is empty, as are those on the other side of his cell. No pictures on the walls. From the one high window, white light pours between the bars as a milky steam while down the block, other men stir awake. But they are quiet in their waking. The old man lifts his lined and tired face from the pillow just once, sees that everything is exactly as it's been, turns back toward the wall, and sleeps.

The boy considers himself lucky. Until now, he's never had to serve. Not too bad a streak. He'd taken the ferry over because he'd heard there were old military bunkers on the island's far side, tunnels and unlit chambers where he could squat and read books and occasionally wander into the hamlets for food. But the local constabulary picked him up almost immediately on charges of vagrancy. Which, he had a hard time denying, was precisely his arena of guilt.

The island's jail is huge given it's small population. It will only later occur to the boy that this is part of the facility he was seeking. The prison van rolls past the gates and he's led through the halls inside, where he is struck by the interior silence. Barely a sound above the echoing footfalls landing on damp concrete. He's deloused and given fresh clothes, blankets, and a bedroll, then is escorted to a cell with two empty bunk beds and a latrine in between, and it's only after he's heaved his roll onto a vacant bunk that he notices the old man, curled beneath a blanket and—with a startled “oh!”—now no longer asleep.

High above the concrete box of the prison, seagulls turn lazily in the sky, wings outstretched and gliding. Only their gun-turret heads are at work, seeking any scrap to eat for which they will not have to work. The light of the sun paints the whole sky white and in some places the water shines pure and white as well. As if ocean and sky have become the same thing. An island afloat in flawless white. These are the things the boy saw before being led into prison. They're things the old man has forgotten.

The boy winces an apology when he sees the old man startled and blinking from within his woollen nest of blanket. Both men are dressed in grey pants and grey button-up shirts. The old man's clothes are more threadbare than the boy's. The boy unrolls his bedroll on the opposing top bunk, strips down to his white undershirt and clambers up into his berth, springs singing rustily beneath his weight. In motions synchronised and blindly incidental, the boy leans back and folds his arms behind his head while the old man sits up to press his bare feet into the floor.

One last quiet moment of aloneness passes in their cell. The boy fixes his eyes on the ceiling and sees neither concrete nor stone but a remembered girl, waded knee-deep from the shore and bent in half to splash salt water in her hair. The old man breathes deeply and rubs his eyes, itchy with sleep, and scrapes his bare feet against the concrete floor for warmth. Outside, the sound of flocking seabirds ebbs and fades through the window. Then the boy speaks, and their individual solitude becomes shared.

“So how'd you land here?” The question is not an idle politeness. He really wants to know. But the old man only

holds an extended finger to his lips and hisses. When the boy looks down at him, surprised, he winks.

The prison contains only a couple dozen men; most of the cells are empty. Those that are occupied usually hold two men. It's considered good policy not to keep anyone too alone. It is healthy, the warden believes, to have another man to whisper to. Whenever possible, an even number of prisoners is maintained.

Among the population, not one man feels he's been wrongly accused. Each is certain: this is where he belongs.

In whispers, the old man and the boy exchange names. But these are not the names they knew and used when these two men last met. Nearly twenty years have passed since either has seen the other, and they are changed, especially the boy. When he tells the old man his age, the old man just hums and nods. He does not speak his thoughts. Instead, after a moment's internal disambiguation, he says, "When I was your age, my pop caught me in the barn with my cousin Ethylene. Dragged me through the yard by my ear while I hollered and flopped like a fish. Then he tossed me in the compost."

"Seems to me you'd've been old enough to decide for yourself whether or not to plow that field."

"Seemed that way to me, too. Yet all evidence suggests I was wrong on that account."

"Your pop," the boy says, "sounds like a prick."

But the old man says, "I liked him," and both are surprised by this revelation. He really hadn't known he meant it until it was said. The old man smiles at his memory. "He taught me lots of stuff."

The boy had enjoyed being on his own. He liked travelling around. There were people everywhere and most were interesting and those who weren't could be walked away from. His patience and high tolerance for bad luck would have, in another life, made him a fine teacher. But he liked the life he'd chosen. He could always find work when he needed it because he was strong and learned quickly and didn't care how hard or dirty a job could become. His employers—mostly farmers or men who ran warehouses—were always sad to see him go. But isn't leaving what you know just as exciting as finding something new? He'd wander to the next town or the town after that and roost for a while in an empty barn or farmhouse forgotten by time. These places are invisible, he learned, and they are everywhere. He could buy food or steal food and it all felt the same. The money he had mostly went to books. Those, he believed, were a crime to steal, though he felt no qualms about leaving them behind.

"I came out here on some bum advice," he explains. He's moved his bedroll to the lower bunk so they can keep talking in lower tones. In this way—the conscious silence—the jail is like a library. As if it were a fine hard candy, the boy savours the whisper of their words. "I'd been told by this guy that I could live easy out here in the old Army barracks. But the cops picked me up almost as soon as I got off the boat."

The old man smiles but says nothing. The boy will figure it out. In his hand, the old man holds a yo-yo. Now and then he does a little trick.

“How about you?” the boy asks. “How long you been here?”

It’s the way branches move with the wind, the way the old man’s shoulders shrug. “Long enough to grow a beard, I guess.” He’d lived on the island for a while, having moved here after things stopped working with his wife back on land. He’d married late in a poorly-timed moment of forgetfulness, his memory of wilful solitude and drifting returning only after he’d sworn himself to the company of a quick and iron-eyed girl. It was a sad, ugly time between that remembering and when he finally gave up on land. He prefers to think the land gave up on him. He crossed the water and for a time held a job replacing shingles on the roofs of people’s homes. It was a task that appeared simple to those who’d never tried it: it took a certain finesse to do it right. Repairing a leak correctly without drawing attention to the repair. He enjoyed accruing that finesse. He became a master at a thing he cared nothing about. As a result, he did not have many repeat customers. And that was OK. A validation. But one day he didn’t feel like doing that anymore. What he wanted to do instead was drink brandy. It was a means to lie on a rock by the beach for days without feeling too guilty. He’d close his eyes with the bottle pressed to his lips and think “this is the life”. Then he’d fall asleep in the sun. Now and then, he wishes he could have made it last. But something must have happened because shortly after making the choice to drink instead of work, he found himself being led to a cell. He remembers: it felt right when they locked the door. He was grateful. But he doesn’t tell any of this to the boy.

The boy watches the old man make a sort of pendulum with the yo-yo. He watches its clutch skitter like an animal, tugging against its leash across the floor. Then he asks:

“So how long’s your sentence?”

The old man snaps the clutch back up into his hand.

“How long is yours?”

But to this, the boy says nothing. It hadn’t occurred to him to ask when they brought him in.

Through the window comes the sound of many seagulls crying all at once. Someone’s found something that everyone wants. The two men listen to the raucous storm of bird call build and reside, until only white light pours in through the window.

“I imagine,” the old man finally says, “we can leave when it seems we’re ready.” He dips his yo-yo down. He dips the clutch back up.

There’s an exercise yard at the centre of the prison, but the old man does not like to go out there. It’s better to stay inside. He’s not sure how he came to this conclusion—all his life, he has loved to work or laze outdoors, in the woods or by the water—but it’s unquestionable how right it now feels to stay in. As if maybe it’s a correction, something he’d always got wrong: running from the oppression of houses.

“I got a ma somewhere,” the boy says when the old man asks after his family. “I don’t know where she is. I doubt she’d’ve stayed put waiting for me to come home. Or if she did, she’d’ve gotten tired of waiting and moved on years ago. She’d stick around somewhere for a good thing, but if something wasn’t good, she’d go. I can’t imagine waiting for me was anything she’d consider good.”

While the boy speaks, the old man bumbles a trick. Now his yo-yo's a mess.

"No," the old man says. "I doubt she would." He likes the way this woman sounds. The sort of resolute personality with whom he could easily spend some time.

"How about you?" the boy asks. "You got anyone out there?"

The old man thinks for a moment with the yo-yo's string tangled in his hands. It's like the knots contain an answer, the way he studies their cinches and loops. But when he speaks, all he says is, "I had a boy".

In a while, the cells are opened to the faint scent of food threading through the air. It is lunchtime in the cafeteria. Slowly, the inmates shuffle into the corridor. They concur without words: it'll be good to eat and see their friends eating. This is the guiding impulse when the boy and old man stand to go, and in the narrows of their cell their bodies are all but touching. They are nearly the same height but of course the boy, being younger, is less bent, less worn down by time, and so looks taller. Standing so closely, they look at each other and smile, their bodies in proximity expressing some sort of agreement. Just as easily as we lose each other, we find one another too. How much does it matter if we know who it is we've found? The old man and the boy walk out together to seek their lunch. Neither notices that the other is also duck-footed while outside in the white, where sea and sky fade mercifully one into the other, the seagulls holler, and spiral, and fall.

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# A Miko Coda

by *Michelle Cahill*

The borders of yesterday and tomorrow are surely abstractions. Last night I fell asleep at Mochizuki's desk. This morning I am the same person. How can I be sure of my last words? Goodbye dear not-at-all-dying thought-object, goodbye imaginary pen. You are my tightrope, Shinto page, my transmission, my infinite possibility of hypertext, my open diary, not excluding hybridised epistle. If I feel a need to sequester, who knows why?

The English novelist, Virginia Woolf, fathomed the daring calamity of writing, pronouncing: *So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say.*

Do I know the whole anxiety of incompleteness? Or if it is possible to forego a new-fangled project, split my love? We had been left in the care of Shingen, our warlord killed. From reportage, acquaintances, address book, Facebook, we are censured. We take risks with our seductions. We break rules, blue-pencilled, scarcely approved, exorcising winning and losing with each word, giving over to the mask until all that is left is the shell of who we once were.

A few weeks ago, I had tea with a stranger then we walked to the park. A storm was brewing, darkening the sky and the park appeared so beautiful; also poignant, painful. There is a pathway you step into from the pedestrian crossing leading to a thicket where I could feel my heart suddenly calm. I had missed the plum blossoms, the damp soil. We sat on a bench, the stranger spoke to me though I hardly felt present. He said that I was a pretty woman on the outside. He was talking of things that felt as if they were in another world: desires, hopes.

I confess I am an orphan, a page, perplexed by the elusive lettering. I think it comes down to instinct (for want of a more precise description), a certain context infused by layers, excavating territories unknown. I've charted this with kanji. It was my pearl, more than almost every other part of me. Writing was a shapeshifting, sometimes the only way it felt as though I would connect from a life bereft to the world, unapologetically. But that is no circumstance. No. I was always a ninja, plain-clothed, nonviolent, discovering the ruptures, saving passwords, observing secret things, starting a little arson here and there.

For a woman or a wife this path in life is fraught with compromise if she chooses to write. I'm apprehensive about missing her in a strange way. Isn't that a no-brainer? Nevertheless, I think some readers would recognise her. There can never be a closure without death—that's the ultimate pose. If you are passing through me for the first time please enjoy my characters, disguises, sabotages and micro-prose. I offer you my candles and my bowl. It is here that I whittled away at my perspectives amid the mayhem and stupor of the world. Now I need to ask you the question: Do you have someone else in mind?

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# Chasing Hemingway in Havana

*Non-fiction by Barbara Lane*

Gazing across Havana on the rooftop terrace of the Ambos Mundos Hotel, I felt like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* when he is looking at "yellow windows" in New York City, a casual watcher both "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" around him. I was standing where Fitzgerald's close friend Hemingway surely stood with a mojito or daiquiri in hand on many nights long gone—feeling the spent heat of a dead day collapsing into me—but I was outside of the Cuban life going on all around me. I yearned for a way to eavesdrop on the conversations in the glowing rooms into which I could see from my high perch, but then I realised even if I could hear what those spied-upon Cubans were saying, I would not have understood a word of it. Now they are forever frozen like paintings in my mind: those scenes of people arranged on furniture inside the windows that hung on the crumbling buildings of Obispo Street as if they were all put there for the sake of decoration... as if they were themselves mere pieces of art hanging in a museum.

Later, when I visited room 511 where Ernest Hemingway spent much time writing in a single bed with a great view of the city—my fifteen or so minutes looking around costing me basically the same fee "Papa" would have paid to have had the place for an entire night—I had a similar feeling of being "within and without". I could stand in the same place as Hemingway—see his things as he might have once seen them—but it was much harder to pull from the arrangement of the room any real sense of the once-inhabitant's true essence. I could only visualise the placement of his ghost: a shadowy wisp with no substance among idle objects. Looking at the small, single bed tucked into a large niche on one side of the room, I imagined Hemingway writing chapters in longhand, his knees pulled up under the covers to serve as a makeshift surface for his notebook, before he would get up and bang out revisions on a typewriter he kept handy on a wooden desk which is now encased in plexi-glass. I knew Papa spent most of his mornings working. Many people who knew him said he let nothing interfere with his writing, not even drink, and by all accounts he was an exceptionally heavy drinker.

As I snapped a couple of pictures, the museum's curator explained to me that items in Hemingway's room were rotated in and out monthly so that visitors could always come back to this virtual shrine and see something new. The theme upon *my* visit happened to be Hemingway's fondness for imbibing. He once wrote, "When you work hard all day with your head and know you must work again the next day what else can change your ideas and make them run on a different plane like whisky?" There was a book open in a display case that showed the ingredients of his favourite daiquiri, which he would often get at the Floridita on the corner of Obispo and Monserrate, which is within close walking distance of the Ambos Mundos.

As I scribbled down the recipe in one of my notebooks, the curator of 511 asked me if I had been to Hemingway's favourite watering hole, and I nodded enthusiastically. I had visited in the afternoon with several other students to "research" the "Papa Doble" daiquiris, which Hemingway described as having "no taste of alcohol" and feeling "as you drank them, the way downhill glacier skiing feels running through powder snow". Four of us had huddled together at a tiny table—the air thick with smoke, the red velveted room packed with people talking in the languages of multiple nations—and listened for a pleasant while to music. It had been too crowded to get anywhere near the life-size statue of Hemingway that forever wears a relaxed smile in one corner. The statue has long been a draw for tourists who want to snap their picture with Papa before plonking down money for drinks on the long bar where the writer so often sat and held court with his many admirers.

Though this bronze figure is further evidence of the Cuban capitalisation of Hemingway, it is ironic to know one of the main reasons the Floridita was so attractive to Papa was that he could enjoy the company of other Americans like the Navy personnel stationed at Guantanamo Bay and myriad businessmen who also liked to gather there, not necessarily to interact with the local population. During WWII, it was a good place to pick up information. Additionally the bar was located in a conveniently central area for Hemingway to entertain other celebrities in town like Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn and Spencer Tracey. He often did such entertaining into the wee morning hours while Cuban music filled the space with the rhythm of the Caribbean, and the stars twinkled white outside.

Of course, there were no famous patrons anywhere around when I was running up my own bar tab on a hot May day, Jay-Z and Beyoncé having long finished their anniversary vacation weeks before my arrival. However, when I tried to leave the Floridita, I ran into a rather memorable black transvestite who would have been quite at home in Hollywood and who blocked my exit with his towering body positioned strategically on the sidewalk outside, a foot or so in front of the doorway to the bar.

“What do you want, lady?” he practically cooed with a fat cigar still crunched between his broken teeth, cheeks glistening with sweat. “I need a *CUC* from you.” (A *CUC* is the Cuban equivalent to a dollar.)

His red lipstick was smeared across his sloppy smile; his belly as big and smooth as a watermelon spilled out from under his shrunken shirt, and white whiskers flecked his chin like spittle. His head was wrapped with a kerchief in the style of a mammy doll, and his eyes were shrewd and penetrating when assessing the possible size of my wallet. Shrinking in the shadow of his bulk, the smell of his musk, I quickly decided “what I wanted” was another daiquiri, so I turned back into the Floridita! Yet I could not help but wonder what the hyper-masculine Papa would have made of this guy if he’d barred Papa’s way back into the street after a night of carousing.

Hemingway had a deeply entrenched reputation for being hostile towards homosexuals. Tennessee Williams once wanted to avoid a meeting with his fellow writer because he had heard “Hemingway usually kicks people like me in the crotch”. But Papa had also been closely acquainted with many gays and lesbians in Paris in the 1920s, had expressed sympathy for the role sexuality played in poet Hart Crane’s suicide near the Cuban coast, and had often played with traditional gender roles in his work. Following the posthumous publication of *The Garden of Eden*, some critics have even pointed to Hemingway’s preoccupation with transsexual fantasies and posited that his need to nurture a reputation for virility was rooted in his complicated relationship with his mother Grace, whom Hemingway often described bitterly to be a first-class “bitch”. While the reasons for his antipathy are mostly only a matter of speculation, when Ernest was a child, Mrs Hemingway would dress him up as a girl, insist that he wear his hair long, and pretend in public that he and his older sister Marcelline were identical twins. This is surely the very definition of emasculating. Furthermore, after his father’s tragic suicide, Hemingway felt Grace dominated her husband and drove him to self-destruction.

If Sigmund Freud could have ever gotten the writer to lie down on a couch and pontificate about his problems, the father of psychiatry would have surely concluded Hemingway’s mother had thus put many indelible marks on Hemingway’s psyche. These marks would have influenced Papa’s sexual predilections and ultimate sense of identity, which are inevitably reflected in a machismo attitude as well as the characters that inhabit his work. But Hemingway absolutely resented and despised any such attempts to analyse his writing through the psychoanalysis of himself. Responding negatively to a book written by Phillip Young, Hemingway said, “How would you like it if someone said that everything you’ve done in your life was done because of some trauma? Young had a theory that was like, you know, the Procrustean bed, and he had to cut me to fit into it.”

In Hemingway's mind, such approaches to literary criticism detracted in an unfortunate way from that which always mattered the most to Hemingway: the stories he wrote, the words themselves. The fact that he'd been put in dresses as a child didn't have anything to do with the people he dreamed up or the believability of a plot line. Furthermore, if one were given the opportunity to directly discuss with Papa what he was thinking about when he chose to shave his female heroine Maria's head in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or when he put Catherine in the "male position" on top of her lover in *A Farewell to Arms*, I suspect he wouldn't cite any conscious feelings about imposed gender confusion he may have experienced as a young boy. Rather I think he would have argued as others have argued that good writers need to be able to slip into the feelings of characters of multiple genders.

Additionally, while many of his detractors have suggested his need to be a "man's man" was really some sort of front—F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife Zelda called him "a pansy with hair on his chest"—biographer Jeffrey Meyers wrote, "there is not a shred of real evidence to suggest that Hemingway ever had any covert homosexual desires or overt homosexual relations". It is also impossible to say how Hemingway might have reacted to knowing that his youngest son Gregory, a man who had married the exact same number of women as Papa had married and who had fathered seven children, would end up becoming a transsexual who was arrested in his final week of life wearing a choker and trying to pull up his underwear on a public sidewalk, carrying his pink summer dress and high heels.

Looking at Papa's more staid clothing hanging in the closet of his old hotel room, I mentioned to the curator that I was surprised by how small the shirts seemed to be. I always think about Hemingway as a rotund man, larger than life, big as an elephant, strong as a lion that topped well over two hundred pounds. Pointing to the EH monogramming on the side of one vest as proof of authenticity, she reminded me Hemingway was relatively young once and athletically fit. He used the *Ambos Mundos* over the course of years, not just during a small period of time.

She raised one eyebrow with obvious appreciation. "He was a handsome man. He had many women."

This I knew. This is part of the legend. In 1925 when he was still very much a part of the Paris circle that would be further immortalised in *A Moveable Feast*, he wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald:

*To me heaven would be a big bull ring with me holding two barrera seats and a trout stream outside that no one else was allowed to fish in and two lovely houses in the town; one where I would have my wife and children and be monogamous and love them truly and well and the other where I would have my nine beautiful mistresses on nine different floors.*

When he dreamed up this "heaven", Hemingway was still married to his first wife Hadley Richardson. She was spending most of her time caring for their young son Jack while he worked on his craft as a writer and became deeply engaged in an inappropriate flirtation (if not something more tawdry) with the glamorous Lady Duff Twysden.

It is important to remember that since being in the care of an older nurse with whom he fell in love after sustaining serious leg injuries during World War I, Hemingway long retained a burning attraction for older women. Even so, Hadley, who was eight years older than her husband, grew too stout after delivering a baby and seemed too maternal to keep Hemingway's interests. Worse, he had never forgiven her for what he saw as a gut-wrenching betrayal of his own person. Travelling to meet her husband in December 1922, Hadley had made the mistake of putting the bulk of his manuscripts into a suitcase, which was then stolen from a train's compartment when she wasn't looking. Even the carbon copies of years of creative work were suddenly gone, and an irreparable rift appeared in the union. In Hemingway's mind, Hadley had been revealingly careless with the very things that would always matter most to him: the words he committed to

paper. This negligence was worse in the marriage than any base sexual infidelity. The carelessness itself had been an unforgivable betrayal.

Therefore, when pixie-petite Pauline Pfeiffer became a fashionable fixture on the European scene, she had no trouble turning Hemingway's gaze in her direction. Despite a Catholic faith she said she took seriously—to which Hemingway converted—she made a hard, harlot-like play for him that would result in divorce for Hadley and marriage for her in 1927. This coupling would move Hemingway from the old world of France and back to the new world of the United States as he and Pauline looked to make a clean break with the past and settle in a new residence in Key West near the ocean. Though Hemingway certainly seemed passionate about his second wife—his boat, which he loved as much as he would ever love any woman, was christened with her Spanish nickname, *Pilar*; the name he had wanted to give a daughter—F. Scott Fitzgerald made a prescient observation about what inspired Hemingway's ardour for any of his mates. Fitzgerald had a “theory that Ernest needs a new woman for each big book. There was one for *The Sun Also Rises*. Now there's Pauline. *A Farewell to Arms* is a big book. If there's another big book, I think we'll find Ernest has another wife.” In fact, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which was partially written in room 511, is dedicated to Martha Gellhorn, wife number three.

Though Hemingway would continue to pick up his mail at the Ambos-Mundos for many years, it was Martha who first found and rented the Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm) in 1939 when all hotel rooms proved too small to serve as a comfortable love nest for yet another affair. Once remodelled, the dilapidated Spanish-colonial in the village of San Francisco de Paula just a few miles outside of Havana would provide a secluded setting in which one could write as well as gain easy access to the great outdoors. Ironically, Hemingway's relationship with this restored farm—a place that protected him from the outside world—would last longer than his relationship with Martha. This piece of property is what truly lay the foundation for Hemingway's more permanent relocation to Cuba, and I could not wait to see it for myself.

After several days in Havana proper, my group finally loaded back onto the Chinese-made bus for tourists to drive to the Finca Vigia. On the way we stopped and had a delicious lunch of Spanish croquetas, which were filled with chicken paste; fried yellow plantains; salty whole chickens served family style; empanadas de pollo, which reminded me of a Cuban version of Cornish pasties; and Chilean sauvignon blanc to wash it all down. Knowing Hemingway was a man of great appetites, I wondered as I ate if any of these foods had been among his favourites. He once told a friend in Idaho that his preferred breakfast of marinated herring and beer was “good for the kidneys”. His large staff at the Finca had included a spirited Chinese cook who would sometimes threaten other servants with a carving knife while preparing lunch each day at 1.30 and dinner at 8.30. Surely this cook dished up plenty of traditional Cuban fare during his tenure as well as an ocean of the fresh fish the master of the house was so fond of catching.

When out for the night—perhaps to see the cock fights—Valerie Hemingway said Papa also liked the inexpensive dining options available in Havana's Chinatown where I had taken the time to stroll under the tall grey entrance gate with its orange eaves that was erected in 1999 as a gift to the Cubans from the People's Republic of China. It seems Hemingway would have doubly appreciated any authentic fare he might have found there, as he had travelled extensively throughout Asia in 1941 with Martha Gellhorn: she working for *Collier's* magazine and he working for *PM*. Apart from gaining the satisfaction involved in participating in a bold undertaking to witness yet another region of the world in upheaval, Martha wrote in *Travels With Myself and Another* that her husband had loved the cuisine and was an adventurous eater who “would try anything, including snake wine, the snakes presumably coiled and pickled in the bottom of the jug”.

My solitary ramble through Havana's Barrio Chino was not nearly as exciting as it must have been for Martha and

Ernest to meet Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek or his Communist rival Zhou Enlai while the Japanese were slowly trying to conquer a continent. There was little apart from the “Portico del Barrio” on Dragon Street that distinguished Chinatown from other parts of the city. There were only more crumbling buildings to see as I walked through a tangle of squalid side streets, past a dog with such bad mange that rusty bloodstains looked like a cheetah’s spots all over his backside where fur was missing, and beside small urban parks filled with shirtless boys kicking deflated balls, lounging in the dirt. No one I saw looked particularly Asian even, and I did not stop to eat so much as a single wonton, which I now regret. Ironically, I had patronised instead a Chinese restaurant much closer to the Plaza de Armes on multiple occasions even though there was nothing authentic or cheap about it, and the only thing off the menu that I ever had any desire to order was not the snake wine but the white rice, which was most often served sticky and burnt.

Like Hemingway, who wrestled in solitary confinement with words each morning but yearned at all other hours for the companionship of others, I sought company at mealtimes regardless of where that company was located. Sometimes this served me well, and I happily wiled away many hours, playing cards and drinking in the pleasant swelter of the Cuban evenings, as bearded men smoked cigars and the moon grew larger and larger above the bay. At other times I experienced the tedium of travelling with people who—however lovely they could be—seemed incapable of shifting their American expectations to the standards of a country without toilet seats, and their constant disillusionment with their own banal choices for food began to feel comedic as I started to record their dialogue for my derisive amusement... something else Hemingway was not above doing when he got frustrated with other human beings, especially literary rivals whom he was famous for caricaturing in print, some of whom would never forgive him for his caustic observations (and distortions). In a room decorated in the red and black of thousands of bad Chinese restaurants that have but the veneer of an Asian clime, the soundtrack that was on a constant loop of American accented complaints during my travels sounded much like this:

“But we got great service the first night.”

“Did we?”

“This waiter moves slower. It’s not the same one.”

“They *all* move too slow in this country.”

“Talk about a hot day... *Holy mother.*”

“Are flies biting you under the table?”

“God dammit.”

“It’s sticky.”

“Where are our drinks?”

“Does that guy even speak English?”

“No, but who cares? She speaks Spanish.”

“The first guy spoke English.”

“Finally.”

“Each time I order the same thing. Each time it comes different.”

“At least it’s not fish or shrimp. I hate fish and shrimp.”

“Didn’t he say they were out of piña coladas? Why’s that table got piña coladas?”

“I hate cooked carrots.”

“What is that stuff on the side of your plate?”

“Cooked carrots.”

“It’s not good tonight, is it?”

“How do you define *good* exactly?”

“You are hil-AR-i-ous.”

“Fucking flies.”

“You’re eating rice again? I’m so sick of stinking rice.”

“It would be nice if he got our check.”

“Maybe he’s outside chasing someone else’s chicken.”

“I wish we could get some Mexican.”

“Wouldn’t you just love some cheesy nachos right about now?”

“Or a drink that doesn’t taste like sugar water?”

“I *swear* it was good the first night.”

*Could they hear my internal screaming?*

But no one complained about the Cuban feast on the Finca Vigia day. After dessert, our guide herded us back to the bus, and we drove by a blur of mango trees with orange and purple and green fruits in different stages of ripening, fruits dangling from branches like so many Christmas ornaments, until we were moving through the farm’s gate, up the long driveway to the house, which was rented in 1939 for \$100 a month until Hemingway ponied up \$12,500 to buy it in 1940 with proceeds from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Two women—Martha then Mary—would eventually decorate it, but Martha paid for the initial restoration with her own funds.

As he transitioned into living full-time in Cuba, Hemingway would change more than just his address. He permanently put aside his Paris set of friends, which had included men like F. Scott Fitzgerald, the author who did as much to launch Papa’s early career, in my opinion, than anyone else because of how he had generously opened essential literary circles for the less famous American. In fact, Fitzgerald, whom Hemingway had said worked with the raw talent of “an angel” until he destroyed his gift with drink (an ironic criticism coming from Papa); James Joyce, whom Hemingway had respected more than any other writer who was his contemporary; and Sherwood Anderson who had

told Hemingway to go to Paris in the first place, all died within a short time of each other. Their company was replaced with different sorts of men: men of sport, people with whom Hemingway could compete outdoors on a cordial basis without any sense of professional jealousy to nibble at his ego.

Today a memorial bust of Hemingway stares happily out to the sea beyond where the *Pilar* was so often docked in the tiny village of Cojimar. Commissioned by local fishermen, this piece of bronze statuary is a tangible testament to the great affection that was held for a man who liked to share rum and swap stories with the common people who lived near him, but Papa's best friends on the island were actually wealthy Cubans. They were not the type of men who walked in blind ideological lockstep behind him—one of their fathers had raised money for Franco during the Spanish Civil War—but they were not literary rivals either, and they were well known to be unwaveringly devoted friends. Sadly, Elicio Arguelles and Mario (Mayito) Menocal, two of Papa's most beloved and constant companions, were forced to flee from the Castro Revolution in 1960, their lives in Cuba completely destroyed by the new regime.

During World War II Hemingway pulled together his many new friends and organised a "spy ring" which he called the "Crook Factory" to gather intelligence about Cuban fascists who might sympathise with the Germans. Some of these close cronies also joined Papa on the *Pilar* to patrol for Nazi subs, which were circulating widely in the Caribbean. Hemingway was motivated by patriotic fervour and a need for action, but he also openly referred to members of the FBI as *Franco's Bastard Irish* because he never approved of the American government's or the Catholic church's position in Spain and would remain loyal to what had been the communist cause lost there. Therefore it seems to me that Hemingway held what was a healthy scepticism for *all* people in power, even when those people were from the nation of his birth or were associated with ideals he theoretically championed. For instance, though Martha Gellhorn's friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt served Hemingway well—and he cared deeply for people's struggles with poverty—he was never a fan of many of FDR's economic policies. But Papa's sobriety (or lack thereof) while running the Crook Factory seems to have been as much of an issue of contention for the FBI as any sense of conflicting loyalties the writer may have had about American government. J. Edgar Hoover, at least, was no fan, and a file was opened and carefully maintained on Papa until his death.

Interestingly, when visiting her former home almost fifty years after the Cuban Revolution had forever changed the country her former boss and father-in-law had loved, Valerie Hemingway was told the Finca Vigia had become the most popular museum in all of Cuba. Though—shockingly—one of the younger university students on my research trip did not have a clue as to who he was, Ernest Hemingway is surely better known on the international stage than any of the men and women who have played a role in the governing of Cuba. I would think his words are also much more widely read than any of the writings of another imported Ernesto who has become a flat image stamped onto a million leftist t-shirts. Regardless, in the game of tourism, it seems Fidel Castro understands the score. Hemingway's the heavy hitter when it comes to attracting the hard currency of visiting foreigners. Therefore, though I saw the canvases of great paintings warping in a state art museum in Havana because of the lack of climate control and a broken air-conditioning system—what must have been a perpetual condition whatever our guide claimed as evidenced by the extent of damages—the Finca Vigia is kept in pristine condition.

Since the masses aren't allowed inside the buildings, when we finally began our tour, we moved from window to window to peek into the rooms. I was again like the aforementioned Nick Carraway in New York, looking in but feeling out... able to see objects but incapable of really penetrating what life must have been like for the man who had once sat drinking in the living room, calling his wife "kitten" and thinking about the stories he'd get up and try to write each morning. However, the things that struck me the most about Hemingway's home—the things that seemed to tell me



something more intimate about him—were not the liquor bottles that remained where he had left them half full on a serving tray, the strange animals stored in glass jars in the bathroom to protect him from bad mojo, the various hunting trophies or art painted by men as notable as Pablo Picasso that hung on the walls. Rather, I noticed the functionality of the open floor plan—a perfect place to operate the “Crook Factory”—the vast collection of books that fed the writer’s mind, the beauty of the grounds laced with bougainvillea and twisting ficus tree roots, and the hill top location that kept the family above it all: above the squalor of Havana, the turmoil of revolutions, the prying eyes of those who would like to invade the privacy of the famous writer and tarnish the machismo image he put so much energy into cultivating with the petty realities of his day-to-day existence, his writing of his fluctuating weight on the wall above his scale like a menopausal woman.

I also laughed when I heard the writing tower—built for Papa by his last wife who would get *The Old Man and the Sea* as *her* big book per Fitzgerald’s theory, the work of fiction that some would call the *best* bit of angling with language Hemingway had ever done since it hooked that giant fish called the Pulitzer Prize in 1953—was not often used as an office despite the desk and typewriter proudly displayed on the top floor. Very fond of felines, Hemingway allowed his cats to multiply to the point of taking over his home. The writing tower was really a cat tower where these creatures could live in comfortable splendour once Mary Hemingway ejected them from the main house.

In addition to his many cats, Hemingway cared deeply for multiple dogs, as evidenced by the fact that he buried these under gravestones beside the pool where he liked to read his newspaper. Looking at those gravestones lined up in a row did more to humanise the writer for me than anything else I saw at Finca Vigia. I have always loved dogs—noble, loyal creatures—and I understand in a deep place inside myself why someone would put these sorts of friends to rest in such a prominent place on the grounds of one’s home. After all, red Georgia clay cradles more than one dog I have sadly had to wrap limp in a favourite blanket and put under the azaleas growing in my yard. Mind, this does not mean that I would ever build an entire extension onto my home for furry members of my family, but I connected to Hemingway’s need to treat and remember his pets well.

Of course, the thing that Papa cared the most about in Cuba was his boat. The *Pilar* has been carefully restored and sits in dry dock for viewing at the Finca Vigia. It is impossible to overestimate how much Hemingway connected with the Gulf Stream. I recall how I reread *The Old Man and the Sea* while in Cuba. I sat one morning in the Plaza de Armes where I had bought a used copy of the novel to take home as a souvenir. There was a young couple braiding their arms and legs together and kissing three benches over from me in the hot shade, lost in their own world, each other’s bodies. A woman with a deep and melodic voice walked through the square calling “Mannnni! Mannnni! Mannniseru!” while waving her white tubes of peanuts. Dusty-looking people sat still and silent as the trees, their hands idle and gnarled in their laps, as alone looking as I really was amid their neighbours.

But I blocked out all of these realities as the spray of the ocean spilled off the pages of my book and into me. I was with the old man who “always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her”. I was moving through the currents of Hemingway’s text, feeling the struggle of life that ebbs and flows inside of every great protagonist... every human being. I understood the old man’s joy in the flying fish that broke the surface of water and delighted not just the character in the novel but the author who often chased after them as he wrestled with the monsters of his own deep. I think the *Pilar* gave Ernest Hemingway a freedom from himself that he could not find on land.

Finally done looking at all that the Finca Vigia had to offer, I followed my group to the obligatory shack set up to sell tourist tat at the end of the drive. It struck me again how Cuba has capitalised on the writer who has been gone from

her shores for more years than I have been living. I pulled out four CUCS as a man poured what looked like two inches of rum into a glass for me—two inches of what I would learn was mostly water as soon as I took a sip—to mix me a sugar cane drink that he promised would be refreshing. (Papa would not have approved of the bait and switch with the liquor.) I sat at a table as our guide shared a joke about why Hemingway had married each of his wives: the first for money, the second for love, the third for entertainment, the fourth for habit. I smiled, thinking I was about the age Hemingway had been when he and Martha Gellhorn first made a serious commitment to Cuba. The other students chattered like birds about the many things they'd purchased, but when the conversation began to lull, when our guide's drink was completely drained, he stood and said, "Before you pass out like chickens in the sunset, we must get going."

I closed my notebook and gathered my things.

Suddenly I was feeling very sad about leaving.

I could not imagine what it had been like for Hemingway to say goodbye.

Bitter sweet.

Like my drink should have been.

*Barbara Lane is an American writer with an MAT in English education and an MA in History. Last May she travelled to Havana to study Hemingway. Her work has appeared in a wide array of publications including The Palo Alto Review, Reader's Break, Shine Brightly, descant, Delivered and The Amethyst Review. To learn more, visit [www.barbaradonnelylane.com](http://www.barbaradonnelylane.com).*

# Walking Through

by *Darrell Lindsey*

walking through  
the burned out winter house  
her urn on a shelf

*Darrell Lindsey is the author of Edge Of The Night (Popcorn Press, 2012), and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize (2007) and a Rhysling Award (2014). He won the 2012 Science Fiction Poetry Association Contest (Long Form category), and has garnered numerous international awards for his haiku and tanka. One of his poems is included in Haiku In English: The First Hundred Years (W.W.Norton & Company, 2013).*

# geology

*by Mark Roberts*

walking up an imagined staircase  
a moment of balance at the peak then  
you fall  
there's a meaning  
in the way you twist  
that escapes me  
a flash of sunlight  
through developing clouds  
a subtle flutter of feet  
anticipate a perfect  
two point landing

a silence descends  
from the east a breeze  
suggests  
an approaching change  
the sound of ancient grinding  
rocks splintering  
& now I understand as  
landscapes twist a metaphor  
for an uncertain  
future a global  
choreography

*Mark Roberts is a Sydney-based writer and critic who has been widely published in journals and magazines since the 1980s. His book Stepping Out of Line was published in 1985, and his a new chapbook Six Months was published in 2013. He is currently editor of Rochford Street Review and P76 Magazine. His "poem in orange hues" was published in Issue Four of Tincture Journal.*

# In a Doorframe

by *Elisabeth Murray*

I caught up the green satin. A rush of soured perfume, cigarettes. I wedged it into the wardrobe. The room was so cold I wanted to fold myself into bed and wait for my blood to get me warm. But I would only have to get out again. And maybe the only thing keeping the hot bubbling inside my stomach was the cold.

It was Sunday. There were beads in my bedside drawer, the card with the picture of the Virgin. Even the thought raised the nausea to my throat. I ran down the stairs. The bathroom tiles were the same colour as the satin. I looked at the bathtub. There didn't seem any point. I felt as if there was a boat reeling inside me. I fell over the toilet. There was no climax. It reeled on. I leaned on the counter. In the mirror my face was bleached except for dark stretches of make-up under my eyes. I drove soap into my face, brushed my teeth and went in to the children. Cassandra had her head in her doll's house, Benjamin had his legs through the bars of his cot, mumbling to himself. I took them downstairs and got the bacon and tomatoes and toast and jam and orange juice. We were eating when Will came in. His hair was blown and shining and he was wearing a green sweater with a hole in the sleeve and he had his fishing bag on his shoulder.

"Morning little Cercopes," he said to the children. He took out two slate-coloured fish. "We can have these for lunch, but there's not much."

"I'll go to the market for some vegetables and potatoes."

"You must have got back rather late." His voice echoed in the icebox. "I thought Veronica might lend you a hand."

He put his hand on the back of Cassandra's head. His fingers knitted her curls. I cut Benjamin's bacon. He twisted away from the fork.

"I thought I'd get some work done this morning."

"Of course."

He stroked a curl off Cassandra's face and went out. Benjamin struggled. Cassandra jabbed at the bacon on his plate.

"That's a piglet," she said to him. "Little baby piglet." She jabbed at it.

"Cassandra, hush." I stood up and took the plates.

Veronica came in in her dressing gown. Her hair was loose and dark. She kissed Benjamin, touching his hair, picking some toast from his mouth. Cassandra grabbed a handful of her dressing gown. I lifted Benjamin and nudged Cassandra. Veronica stood at the counter. Her breath kept raising one piece of her hair. I dressed them for the cold day and went back downstairs. I held Benjamin close. He was better warmth than a bath or a sweater.

"I can't believe you would do that without asking me."

I sat the children in the living room with Cassandra's Modern Kitchen Set. It was made of thick plastic, yellowed as if by decades of hands. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

“You don’t even have classes tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you always nagging me about discipline? I’d rather teach than try to write after a night of cooking and drinking and gossiping.”

“That’s discipline.”

“It isn’t. It’s discipline to say no. You know what I’m like after one of those nights.”

“I’m taking the children to the market,” I said. I was too sick to be discreet.

“Oh, Nora, I’d better go,” said Veronica. “Seeing as Will has decided he’s having a dinner party for his friends tonight.”

He went to stare into the percolator.

“So I’ll have to go this morning,” she said, “and correct the rest of my papers and tidy up this place and get ready for the friends and on three hours’ sleep.”

“If you give me a list—”

“It’s too complicated. You must be as tired as I am, you were knocking around terribly late.”

“I didn’t mean to disturb you.” My voice was torn by nausea. There was a bubbling sound that could have been my stomach.

“God help me, Will. You expect me to prepare a dinner party and you can’t even boil a pan of milk?”

“What would you like me to do today?” I said.

“Lie down? Nora, you look lousy.”

“Veronica,” Will said.

“Oh I see, you’re going to defend *her* now.”

“Drink this.” He put a china-glass bowl of coffee on the table.

“Would you like some Nora?”

“Oh—yes please.”

Veronica smirked. She was a collection of dark lines in the corner of my eye. He took a long time to put the coffee down. He smelled of fish and coffee. He gripped the back of my chair or just laid his hand there—his every movement was strong and hard, an inch from crushing or busting or throttling, but his hands could have moved in an instant to tenderness. He stood like an anxious cook. The bowl burned my palms.

“Will, what have you done?” Veronica said. Coffee sloshed on the table. “It’s poison.” He scooped up the bowl, his arm catching her chest. He took a sip and made a face.

“I must have used it wrongly.” He looked at the machine.

“You didn’t read the instructions, did you?” she said. “Just like a man.”

He pulled a drawer out. I sipped the coffee. It was bad, but maybe it would shock my nausea away.

Will leaned on the counter. “I’ll fix it while you’re at the market.”

“We can’t have your friends in here if we can’t brew anything short of poisonous.”

There was a shout from the living room. I swallowed too much coffee. Veronica leapt up. I heard her taking the children upstairs. I sat there coughing. I knew if I went up Veronica would be by the wardrobe in her bra while the children crawled around the bed and she wouldn’t care that she was half-dressed, she’d find something to say to me. I sipped the coffee. Will tipped Veronica’s down the sink. The bitterness rose in the room. The steam spread over my face. I didn’t need Veronica to tell me I looked lousy. She didn’t look so swell this morning either.

I tipped back my head to get the last of it. He was bent over the percolator. I wondered how long I could sit there pretending to drink before he left. I had to wash the dishes. I had nothing else to do. Sunday meant nothing in this house. I hadn’t been to Mass in a long time.

“Why don’t you go up and work,” I said. “I’ll have a crack at it.”

He straightened up and looked at me as if through mist: I had to colour and solidify. I thought he was trying not to laugh. I looked at the pans on the stove, one black and greasy, the other creamy and getting a skin. There were plates and forks and knives and glasses.

He glanced at the ceiling. “I’ll go up soon.” His nose was sharp. His chin was sharper, almost a slip of the line of his profile.

“No.” He looked about the kitchen. “Yes. I’ll take the children to the market.” He made a fist on the counter and went out.

## §

That evening I remembered Donna as more than a blonde shape with a halo of cheerfulness. Being with Veronica made her seem yellow as grapefruit, rich as a spring riot. The naked smoky trees, blunted blue and red rooftops, shining-cold tar, wind cupped in the lamplight and tinged green like mould or sickness—it was a world away from the open house where the lawn sloped down to the sea. I’d never seen the sea before I went there and if I ever went out to the coastline of my homeland I wouldn’t know it as the sea. Nothing could be the same as the clean rocky coast of Honey Village. My skin the colour of caramel and my dress the colour of cream. I felt much older than Donna because I was employed around the clock to look after the children like a mother and she was only called in for dinner parties. I’d travelled God knew how many miles from home, I was untethered in another country, money that belonged to me in my purse and no boy trying to take me out every Saturday night and then marry me. We’d stand up there, wind blowing salt on our tongues, stripping our faces of everything redundant. We’d lie on the stones and the sea’s rhythm was heavy and uneven but it was inside us, it was the pulse of our dreams and the zest of our waking. I was tiny, the slope and sea and sky were huge. I was anonymous, unimportant, but it seemed the most important thing in the world to be. Now I couldn’t remember what that thing was. If it was a person or an idea.

Honey Village was only two hours away but it seemed as distant as my home country. The sea was nowhere to be felt. It may as well have been a dream, one that bled sometimes into a nightmare from which I was dragged up hot, confused, prodding my skin. Those afternoons by the sea were so distant in this house, yet the nightmare came in on me, closer and closer, as if it stood at the windows prodding. I didn't want any of it back, not even the sea, not even Donna.

"This should turn out a little better than Will's sturgeon, shouldn't it?" said Veronica. She was standing over a pan of swordfish. She wore a red dress with a collar, a gored skirt and a daisy-printed apron.

"I s'pose so," I said.

"Oh I see, you've made a pact to defend each other against my bitch-blitz."

A laugh fell from my mouth. We looked at each other. Colour rose in my neck. God, when I'd first met her in Honey Village she'd been more like Donna than I had. When I moved in I thought I'd followed her too close and now I was only seeing her shadow, out of proportion and misfigured. Then she was back, glittering things in her hair, speaking like the most beautiful member of the intelligentsia, so fast you both got breathless and could only laugh. Now it had returned, curses and tiredness and hard outlines. I wanted to shake her, I wanted to tell her I liked the other Veronica better.

She was watching me with one eyebrow raised and the corner of her mouth tight. I seized some cutlery and went out. The furniture was pushed to the walls, except for the maple table. It was covered with a yellow woven cloth and candles and crystal glasses. The rugs were smooth. The fire moved on the walls. Everything was in order against the cracking wind outside. There was a knock at the door and Veronica bumped into me as if I was a piece of furniture in an unfamiliar place. She opened the door to a jangling woman and a cigar-smelling man. I went to the kitchen when the other couple arrived. They were complaining about a lazy-as-sin babysitter. I was reading a book Veronica had lent me that I didn't understand. I was eating boiled swordfish and sour cream and broccoli and hollandaise with a napkin in my lap and reading a paperback under the electric light. Could there be anything lonelier? I almost wished for another July afternoon on the stones.

Veronica brought in the dinner plates. Her dress was fitted tightly with dart seams above the belt and her skirt sprang out over her hips. I had on a respectable green dress in case I was noticed by the guests. She pulled more wine from the icebox and opened it and opened another sitting on the counter and pulled a glass down from the cupboard and poured it full, quick but taking pleasure in it, and I realised now efficiency and grace could come together in a woman but it was a fine balance.

She put the glass by my plate. I put it over my bottom lip. The rim clicked on my teeth. As I swallowed my eyes caught on hers. My tongue curled under the bitterness.

"You can go to bed," she said. "If you wash the dinner things I can do the dessert and with luck I won't be up until dawn."

She went out, her skirt like a flag of wine. There was a painful gulf between drinking wine in a living room with laughter and a fire going and drinking it alone beside a sink of dishes. Last night I'd been drinking martinis paid for by a boy who worked at a gas station. The girl next door had introduced us. She was two years younger than me, though she seemed of another generation. The sickness I'd brought on myself last night was at the back of my head, and so was the feeling of that unwieldy aqua dress, like a hug at first but then a strangle. The boy's hand was like something that would



leave blood. Sure enough, the sickness was at the front of my head now. All over my body. I drank the wine. I needed to put it out. Or they'd have to explain to their guests that their maid was hungover and yes that was a wine glass, but they'd only given her the one, though perhaps she'd had a little more they didn't know about.

I rested the glass in my bottom lip and ran my tongue over the rim until there was no more bitterness, no more red. I went to the sink. I washed slowly, warming my hands in the water, listening to the chatter. I couldn't make sense of it. I looked at the stick of darkness between the curtains. They must have been experts at pitching their voices just below the hearing of maids. Then I thought, I don't even figure in their heads. It's just that I am too stupid to comprehend the conversation.

When Veronica came in I was struck by the light and her scarlet dress after the dark window. She held up her lemon meringue pie, all white and yellow-white crust. I wondered what gave her more pleasure, a pie or a poem.

"There's nothing interesting to eavesdrop on," she said.

"I can't hear anything. Who are they?"

"Joseph Britt's a writer and I think his wife tries to be and Henry works at a radio station. He's asking me to do some recordings."

"That's wonderful!"

She pulled down a glass and opened another bottle. "Oh, I need to get drunk," she said but when she'd taken the dessert she didn't come back for the wine.

I took off the rubber gloves. I looked at her glass. There was rum in the pantry. I went out with the paperback to the stairs.

"Well Joe, you should be grateful your wife does it. Veronica won't sew a button on a shirt if the only other thing she's got to do is scratch grease off the oven."

"Oh, surely not!" Mrs Britt jangled. "I don't mind sewing." She jangled. "It gives me something to do while I'm thinking over my next story." She jangled.

"She'll hide shirts before she takes a needle to them. She rips up torn socks. I don't know what happened to the old New England frugality."

I thought Veronica must have gone to the kitchen because she said nothing, but then Mrs Britt said, "Surely not, Veronica. I always had you as the picture of a housewife."

I went to the children's room and stood by the paraffin heater. It lit the tips of the curtains that were patterned with country cottages, churches, fir trees. I touched them. My fingernails glowed red. The children breathed more evenly than the sea.

I continued up to the attic. It was as cold as an expanse of land the wind just rips through. I turned on the heater and kicked off my shoes. My bedside drawer opened with a sound of emptiness. The Rosary beads and white-covered Bible lay like secrets. I scraped the paper with my fingernail and jabbed it open. The Virgin looked up bluey. The drawer shut with an empty sound.

I ran down to the bathroom. I was hot and cold and crying as if these were emotional instead of physical paroxysms. I pushed the handle and sat on the floor while the rush of water carried my sickness away. All day I'd carried it around. I washed off my makeup. The sweat vanished. I turned out the light and pulled in the door a fraction.

Will's voice came up the stairs. "I thought that would make you do it."

"Oh, you thought you'd shame me into it, get me under your thumb?"

"Well, if it does make you ashamed—"

"You stand there so god-damned smug, like, like—Could you not even comb your hair before they arrived? Darling, if you think you can seduce every woman who steps in here—"

"For God's sake, Veronica, go to bed. I'll clear up the kitchen."

There was silence and then she was coming up the stairs. I gripped the door like a burglar. Of course she would come into the bathroom before she went to bed. I was a burglar out to steal arguments. To store them up, to feed off them, sweeter than treacle. I could feel the rasp of red fabric on stockings.

"Nora." Her hand pushed at her breast. "Jesus. Nora."

"I'll go down and clear up," I said.

"Be careful Will doesn't fall in love with you for that." Her eyes were very dark in the light from below. There was a crumb of mascara on her cheek.

His cardigan seemed dark beyond the stick of night between the curtains. There were the warm sounds of water and dishes.

"Why don't you go up to bed," I said. "I'll clear it up."

He turned, dark and sharp, his hands on the china strong and effortless and gentle. I stepped into the kitchen, colouring and solidifying. I wished I'd kept my shoes on but it was all right. I gave him room to go out. He moved away from the sink.

"What do you think of this," he said. He went off on a description of a violent master of the house whose standpoint is death, a foundling foster-sister whose is life, who is a priestess of the Virgin-goddess, and a lodger wedded to his study of the law, only half-conscious of everything, neither dead nor alive, the master assaulting the foundling, provoked by an oncoming army and his stepmother's attempts to seduce him and his loathing of the foundling's endless optimism but the lodger realising this loathing comes out of love and then that he, the lodger, loves the foundling.

I stared at the dishes. Yellow smears and crust.

"It sounds wonderful," I said.

His smile made me into a stupid girl. "The lodger is adrift—do you see?"

"I see."

“But the difficulty is in managing the ideas through the physicality of a play. There’s one stage, one closed world. The arrangement of bodies is as important as any abstraction.”

“I see.” I judged there was enough room before the sink.

“Come here.” His fingers were fast on my arm. My sleeves mist-thin. He pulled me as you would a broom. “I want to see how a woman can be placed in a doorway.”

I laughed. There was a flash of scarlet, coffee-darkness, milk-whiteness. I could feel my mouth still open: it was a tableau poised between comedy and disaster and time was gathering, about to spill over, hot, rancid.

“Veronica, it’s me,” I said.

Will stepped into the living room. Nothing of him touched me. He opened his mouth, shook his head, went to the stairs. He stopped and held his hand out to the landing. I looked at Veronica. Her cheekbones were hard under her skin.

He had Cassandra in his arms. Her hands were small and white on his black sweater. She watched him while he watched Veronica. She was too big to be held like that by anyone but a father.

“Sure, hold our daughter like that so I look like the worst mother in the world.”

His face was shadowed and hard, his hair darker than the poisonous brew. Cassandra was small, white, her hair the softness of babyhood but her eyes creased at the edges like her father’s. He was looking at Veronica. All of a sudden he was the tired one.

“The worst wife in the world?” She must have replaced the lipstick. It was red as her dress, a frame of rage around every syllable. “No, darling, of course I don’t mind that you were standing over the maid in the doorway and she was gawking up at you like a godhead.”

“I wasn’t gawking at anybody,” I said.

He kissed a curl on Cassandra’s forehead. “Bedtime, love.”

“No.” She looked at him. “No.”

He carried her to the stairs. She twisted in his arms and looked over his shoulder. “Mama.”

Veronica looked at the carpet. Her lips pushed up. We could feel him at the top of the stairs. A man enraged is a field of energy. Or was it just tiredness? Cassandra’s whimpering stayed up there. He came down a couple of stairs and put his hand on the wall and said, “Get into bed.”

She moved as if she only wanted a command. She tried not to touch him but the stairs were narrow. He came to the bottom and watched her go. She was a field of energy.

“Should I go after her?”

“Do what you like.” He was probably cursing the day Veronica asked me here. God, I didn’t even know if he knew about what had happened to me. Veronica must have told him. Maybe it no longer figured in her head. I went up. She was kneeling on the bed in her scarlet and heels, tearing up a sheet.

“Veronica.”

Her eyes were black and wet. The lipstick was blurred.

“He was telling me about his play.”

“How can you think of telling me that when all along I’ve known better than anyone that you’re only a slut.”

The sheet was like snow shovelled slapdash. The wind had the hoarseness of sleet. She was a poet. Her sentence was tipped towards that word, a tilt slicked by meanness, and it fell hard.

“He wanted to see how a woman looked in a doorway.”

It was my word that caught me this time. It wouldn’t have worked for him. Maybe to tell how a girl looked in a doorway. Not that wife. All that rubbish about the foundling foster-sister, priestess to the Virgin-goddess. What the hell had I been used for?

“Well, let me tell you it’s a radio play.” She leaned close to me on her hands and knees. Her dress looked rough close up and her breasts loose. She was motherhood embodied but there was something distorted in it.

“And he took what that blousy giddy lip-biting girl sees in the mess from one of my stories. The desecration of the woman as the Inquisition. He seems to enjoy the pert optimism. My story is surreal as a dream—no, a nightmare—but dead real. Doesn’t he see?”

I shook my head. The word was still there like a sting. I hadn’t thought I was the type to provoke insult, but maybe every woman is. Her legs were twisted under her. The sheet was like pieces of fog. She smoothed it in her palm as though it might be mended by kind fingers. I was going to ask her if she ever told Will about what happened to me.

She said, “I have to clean the kitchen.”

I went to the window. It was a screen of dark. I knew I could be seen from outside, clear as a gem. Probably there was no one looking. It was Sunday. They had gone to church and had dinner and sat by the fire listening to the jazz hour and feeling blue about Monday. If I cracked open the window a whole world would come rushing up to me, it didn’t matter how cold, maybe it would flay me clean; now that I’d got rid of my insides I needed something for my exterior, and I could go with it into the night, like I’d planned when I left home. I drew the curtains the way Veronica had told me so she wouldn’t be woken by the sun. I took the torn sheet from the bed and went to the hall cupboard and got another and made the bed and turned out the light and put the torn sheet in a box of rags in the cupboard.

I heard them in the living room, a valley of dark and light that I couldn’t keep my eyes from. If they wanted to speak like this where they could be heard, why should I go running?

“You use any excuse to nag me.”

“Anything you don’t like to hear is nagging.”

“No, you’re just like your mother.”

“Oh, hell, Will!”

“You’re just like her. You say you hate her, you don’t see you’re exactly like her.”

“Will, please, you tell me that whenever I say something you don’t like.”

All I could see was a wedge of light. I put my hand on the wall, feeling the shadows around me, holding my dress.

“You’re the victim, aren’t you? One minute the victim, the next a priestess, a prostitute, a girl, a bitch, the wronged wife.”

“Will, please.” I’d never heard her voice so high. “Just admit it, you say I’m like my mother because you want a reaction.”

“Yes I want a damned reaction.” He always spoke in the same low tone, like a man whose world is one room. “What man wouldn’t, when you won’t get out of bed, when you can’t treat guests civilly, either shut up like a clam or throw thinly-veiled attacks—”

“Oh, you’re joking!” Her laugh was sharp. I thought if I’d been up in my attic I’d have heard it. “You’re not telling me you were trying to impress them? They died last decade. Joseph is one big rotting cigar, his wife is a simpering alcoholic, Henry flits from one party to the next, he’s lost any judgement he ever had and Irene, I hate to break it to you, she has got to be a lesbian, that brown dress and the way she looked at me whenever I moved—”

“Save your imagination for the women’s magazines.”

“Just because a man can sit there and eat the dinner his wife has prepared and find everything amusing.”

“No, I was being civil. Sometimes you’re so gushing I want to bring the dinner back up. But this might be worse.”

“But they—You know how I hate those types. They go on about this or that scintillating idea they have, all the while drinking like the old poets who’ve pickled themselves in gin. Why don’t they stop talking about what they’re going to write and stay home and write it?”

“I know, but Christ, Veronica, do you have to—You’re tired.”

“Yes, I’m tired.” Her voice was muffled.

“You’re going to call Dr Knight tomorrow.”

“I’ll go and clean the kitchen.”

I heard the rasp of fabric and hair and skin. I slipped back into the bathroom and he was coming up the stairs, dark and strong but less frightening than Veronica’s loose scarlet shape. He was coming up the stairs, he was on the landing. Hadn’t I stolen enough arguments? Sticky and sugary under my tongue, worse than wine or martinis. He was in the hall, he was turning... into the children’s room. I slipped around the door and down the stairs. I was dressed to go unnoticed.

The kitchen light was huge. Nothing could be seen beyond the window. Her shoulders rounded over the sink. She hadn’t taken her heels off. I was barefoot in the doorway like an urchin. I could still slip up to my attic, undress, fold myself as small as possible for warmth.

She’d helped me when no soapy water could clean me, no step inside a church, no forgetfulness. The hem stirred

as she shifted her feet. I went in and picked up a cloth and a bowl from the rack. She came out of her head slowly. Her face was no longer hard and shadowed but something remained that made me uneasy. I was tired as hell, that was it, and I'd vomited in my employers' toilet. I felt as if the dishes and cutlery were bones and organs I was drying and returning to my body. She dropped the last spoon on the draining board. She rested her hip on the counter. I put the spoon in the drawer and hung up the cloth. She stood in the door with her hand on the light. This was how a woman looked in a doorway: full, red, something in her face that made you uneasy. I went into the living room. The light went out. A cloak of dark around the living room, the sinking fire at its heart. She stood in front of it. Her shadow was thrown on the wall, mammoth, faceless. She nodded. The shadow nodded.

"I'm sorry." The voice was repaired, deep and clipped. "About what I said."

"It's OK."

"I envy what you've done."

"Me?"

"I was too scared of what they'd say, my mother, my girlfriends, professors, eligible bachelors, myself. I stood there watching them do as they pleased. I was too scared. You're not a slut, Nora."

"Thank you," I said. I'd just rearranged my insides. This seemed very close to an insult. Oh, I'd left the Virgin staring up at the dark empty drawer. "But I didn't... It had nothing to do with me."

"I know," she said. I wanted to ask if I was going to end up in a story for the slicks, a girl-woman with sass and an ice-pick mind. Whom I would not recognise.

"Because I would have taken your side even if it was you and Will to choose between."

"You don't know," I said. I stepped up to her. Her lipstick had come off. "Will isn't like that."

"No," she said. "But I would take your side."

I couldn't thank her for a lie. I wondered who she saw in front of her. What was that girl wearing? Did she have my accent? My memories? I wondered where the woman was I'd met on Sunday morning in Honey Village when I was nothing but a girl away from home on a deck lounge in a white dress browning my legs while the children were at church with their parents. And she'd stopped with the pram and the little girl with soft curls and she'd told me she'd worked at that house one summer long ago with a different family but maybe it wasn't so different. Where was the woman who only a couple of weeks ago had poured out ideas for the slicks to me, a fat packet of stories of girls and women she was going to write in the summer? She pulled at the neck of her dress. She put her finger in the corner of her mouth as if to erase the last piece of lipstick. She was all of that and all of this, but not in the way people are a truss of contradictions and turnings-back and slips of the lines of their profiles. It was huger than ordinary quirks, it came in cycles, I was beginning to feel it, like the sea. Only it wasn't inside me, it was outside the window, black.

"Will's waiting for me," she said.

"Good night."

I watched her go up the stairs, full, red, tight, the way heels pull up a woman's body. I sat on the carpet before the

fire. It had nearly burned out. I'd have to be careful going up the stairs in the dark. I watched my shadow on the wall. Yes, I'd miss the children. I'd miss Will. I'd miss Veronica. I might even miss the huge black cold and the wind that was more akin to snow—No, I wouldn't. I'd been sick for home long enough, blurred and pale and uneasy long enough. My shadow raised itself big as a tent and sank as I went. My dress made a little glimmer on the stairs.

*Elisabeth Murray is a Sydney-based writer, currently studying at the University of Sydney. Her novella, The Loud Earth, was published by Hologram in 2014. She has had fiction and poetry published in Voiceworks, dotdotdash, Contrapasso magazine and several University of Sydney anthologies.*

# Monochrome CITY

*by Mary Chydiriotis*

*This city will screw you over  
advice comes in a yellow bubble  
a man with an ashen smile  
To live here is hell*

Transaction is interaction  
at dizzying speed green confetti conceals

I become colour blind  
billboards rush toward me  
sun shines at strange angles  
sky is closer to the ground

over and over in my head  
*you're welcome, you're welcome*

along the high line  
fleeting serenity in the chaos  
around me in black and white  
A child releases a balloon

*Mary Chydiriotis is a social worker and aspiring writer living in Melbourne.*



# Cassie's New Clothes

by Ashley Goldberg

Cassie wakes up and collects her glasses from her bedside table. Gradually, she slides her legs over the side of her double bed and, with a heavy groan, sits herself upright in front of her vanity table. She puts on her glasses and looks at the ruffled mane of light tangled brown hair devouring her face. She yawns and takes the time to study the shallow craters on her cheeks and the prominent dimple on the tip of her nose. *Bum nose*, she mouths to herself. She stands up and roughly pulls her cupcake-patterned pyjama top over her head, pulls down her matching pyjama bottoms, and then kicks them off her feet and over the edge of the bed. She looks down at her thighs. She hates the way they look when she's sitting down, pressed against the bed's surface. *Fatty boomba*, she mouths, moving her legs apart so that her thighs are no longer touching. She lowers her head and examines the three long, white lines which adorn each of her upper legs. Slowly, she strokes each one with her right index finger, as she often finds herself doing unconsciously at night. She smiles to herself, thinking of the looks she gets when she wears short shorts in public. She is unashamed of her suffering. She stands up and makes her way to the full-length mirror opposite her wardrobe, stepping on the mounds of clothes that litter her bedroom floor. *Gross*, she mouths as she looks at her reflection—there are two creases visible on her stomach. She pushes her stomach outwards and giggles at the sight of her faux-pregnant belly, before remembering that she binge-ate a block of cooking chocolate last night before bed. She retracts her stomach and begins to feel sick. She swears that she can still taste the thick, rich cooking chocolate in the back of her throat; it's nauseating. Half bent over, she moves hurriedly, clamouring for the wastebasket by her bed. She grasps its edge in the nick of time, retches into it and finds herself already feeling much better. She collects herself, wipes her hands on the bedspread, gathers the cotton bathrobe that hangs on the back of bedroom door, and makes her way to the bathroom.

Cassie has always loved showers. She feels as though she can lose herself in there, as she closes her eyes beneath the curtain of warm water and lets her mind wander to a place where she is no longer herself. Only when the hot water runs out and she reluctantly turns the taps does she remember who she is and that she is a part of the world. Often she even forgets to wash herself. Out of the shower, Cassie turns on the fan and dries herself as the mist gradually lifts from the bathroom mirror. The middle portion of the mirror clears first, exposing only the reflection of her breasts. She assesses their shape and size, both from the front and the side. They're not that bad, she thinks to herself, remembering the pictures she sent her ex, John, the other night in response to the ones he sent her of his erect penis. The remainder of the mirror clears and she can now see herself in full. *Saggy*, she mouths as she looks at her breasts in the context of her complete reflection. She wraps herself tightly in her towel, opens the door and marches out of the bathroom with her head down, expressing her exasperation with heavy stomps and wet footprints. She takes no notice of her housemate ducking into the bathroom, also wrapped in a towel.

Back in her room, Cassie ploughs through pile after pile of clothing, tossing aside dresses from Cue and H&M, dissatisfied with everything she owns. She tries on the boat neck printed dress she bought at Zara the week before. In front of the mirror, she turns to the side and is horrified by what she believes is a distinctive paunch in her profile view. She tears off the dress and banishes it to a corner of the room amidst a clump of other rejects. Desperate, she opens her wardrobe and decides on a floral-printed dress she bought from Shag on Degraeves Street this summer. She puts it on and upon closer inspection decides that it is definitively hideous. But she can't bear the thought of getting undressed again and has conceded to wear the dress. She begins the arduous task of teasing out her knotted hair and applying layers of foundation to fill the crevices on her face. She completes her routine with mascara and lipstick before the vanity table and

gets up to view the finished product in her full-length mirror. Yet, when she does, she sees only a frumpy, fat girl who looks like a child playing dress-ups in her mother's clothes. *Ugly*, she mouths and bursts into tears.

Lying on her bed, sobbing softly into her pillow, Cassie pulls out her phone and deftly posts the same message on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr:

*today is shit, everything is the worst. that is all.*

Almost instantaneously, Cassie's phone is inundated with vibrations. A nervous flutter enters her stomach as she picks up her phone, swipes to unlock it and anxiously bites a nail as she waits for the responses to load:

*r u ok?*

*Whats wrong luv?*

*Your beautiful! xx. 1 person likes this.*

*YOU'RE AMAZEBALLS SO STOP IT! 3 people like this.*

Respectively, the comments are from a girl she met at a hostel while travelling in India, a boy from high school whom she hardly ever spoke to, a university friend she has lost touch with and a girl she has never met but used to exchange poetry with on deviantART.

Delighted by the immediacy of the responses, a warm gush flows over Cassie as she writes a single catch-all response with rapid fire fingers:

*dw feelin a bit better, so lucky to know so many great ppl, LOVE YOU ALL! xx.*

Visibly happier, Cassie returns to the full-length mirror in her room, quickly fixes up her mascara, re-examines her dress and decides that she actually looks quite pretty. She picks up her mobile, places it above her head at just the right angle, pouts her lips, takes a quick selfie and uploads it onto Instagram with a Valencia filter. She grabs her handbag from her bedroom and heads out the front door, late for work, again.

*Originally from Melbourne and now based in Canberra, Ashley Goldberg works in the public service by day and dabbles in short fiction by night. He has had work published in BMA Magazine, Miles to Go Poetry Collection, Purely Dicta, and The RiotACT. He currently writes music reviews for The Music.*

# Negative Space

## *Non-fiction by Bint Arab*

1. I love dots. Each one is dimensionless until I plot it on an  $x$ - and  $y$ - axis or assign it numbers like longitude, latitude and elevation. They stand alone, but I can connect them by lines, colours, dates, figures. A dot only exists in one spot at a time. It is restricted in size only by the sharpness of my pencil. The big ones with a circle around them are capital cities while the small ones have random claims to fame: this one is home of the largest teapot in the US, and that one marks the birth of human civilisation.

The same holds true for triangles: I love triangles of all kinds. There are red ones beside the words “YOU ARE HERE” on the backlit screen at the mall that point to the dots that I love so much. A little bit over, a border with diagonal yellow lines marks the outer wall of a department store, a wall that has an exit from “Trident Sportswear” to “Parking Lot A”. Beyond those yellow lines—the parking lot, the world outside the mall—everything is black, non-existent, inconsequential negative space. All that matters, really, is the little red triangle and the spot it points to, the place where I’m standing.

Triangles, defined by three dots in the corners. They tell you where you are so you can figure out where you are not. With a bunch of dots and triangles, I could map the whole world for you.

Or so I used to think, but I was wrong; Nadia taught me that. There’s a lot more to those triangles and dots than “YOU ARE HERE”. The spaces outside the dots and triangles *are* the world.

2. I’d been living in a dorm in Amman, Jordan for a couple of months already by the time I had the chance to ask Nadia about her home country, Eritrea.

It wasn’t the official women’s dorm at Jordan University but a private one right across the street from the north gate of campus. Out of a dozen private women’s dorms in the area, I chose this dump because it had the best set-up for me to do my ethnographic research for my Fulbright fellowship. It was filthy and roach-infested, with a cheap proprietor who ran the hot water only three nights a week and with a constant drip in the communal kitchen that made the whole place stink of mildew. There were a hundred things wrong with the place, but one thing right that trumped them all: the lounge. The small bedrooms opened out onto one main lounge area where about forty residents spent most of their time. Half of the young women were Jordanian, and the other half came from other Arab countries to attend universities in Amman, hailing from Yemen, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco and more. And it got complicated for many, like the Palestinian sisters from Yemen and the Mauritians who had grown up in Saudi Arabia. *Where are you from?* was a loaded question. Even the Jordanian women were displaced; if their families had lived close enough to Amman to make a daily commute to the university feasible, they wouldn’t have been living in the dorm.

They were all Arab women, speaking their own dialects of Arabic, wearing unique national dress, with political and moral convictions formed by their individual histories. They mingled in the lounge, confronting their differences, convincing each other to invest in new realities. They ate, watched TV, socialised and studied together. In my mind’s eye, triangles led from the cramped bedrooms and pointed to the lounge: “YOU ARE HERE”.

It was the perfect site for me to do my ethnographic research.

3. Most of the women were very open, eager to share their perspectives with me. Not Nadia. She was aloof and intimidated everyone, myself included. A dark-skinned black woman with an aquiline nose, she chain-smoked whenever she was in the dorm but never smoked in public. I worried that one night she'd fall asleep with a lit cigarette in her hand and burn us all to a crisp. But Nadia was very cool, very collected, and uber-competent. Only about twenty years old, she seemed twice as mature as the other young women, and her body language screamed, "Don't bother me with your nonsense."

So I didn't. I talked with the more outgoing women and watched them interact with each other. I wrote pages of field notes every night, trying to process what I had witnessed that day.

One night, I couldn't sleep. At some crazy hour of the morning, I finally gave up and went to the lounge, field notebook in hand, to see what was going on there. The little red triangle compels us all, even field researchers.

Only Nadia was there, watching TV, ubiquitous cigarette in hand and a full ashtray beside her on the couch. A captive audience! Maybe now I could get her story.

"Where are you from, Nadia?"

"Eritrea."

"I thought you were from Saudi Arabia...?"

"No, my family lives there—I grew up there. But we are from Eritrea."

I had no knowledge of Eritrea. Was that considered an Arab country? Where was it?

"On the East coast of Africa," Nadia told me, but this didn't help much; it's a long coast.

I opened my notebook to a random page, handed her my pen, and asked her to draw it for me.

She didn't take the book from me. "I don't understand."

"Just draw me a map. Show me where Eritrea is." It wasn't such a bizarre idea, I thought. Other women in the dorm had responded eagerly to the same request: Zaynab had sketched her home in the north of Jordan, and Fatima had drawn me a map to show me where Mauritania was.

But Nadia wouldn't take the book from me so I decided to start her off, knowing that whatever I drew would bias her. I sketched a small outline of the continent of Africa, so small that it could have fit in the palm of my hand. I had reduced 11 million square miles to the size of a Monopoly card. What's more, it looked more like South America than Africa.

Nadia glanced at it, but still refused to take the book. "What do you want me to do?"

"Draw a dot. Show me where Eritrea is."

I pushed and prodded, and finally Nadia took the book. My relief was short-lived when I realised that she was drawing on the *southwest coast* of my cartoon-ish outline of Africa. Not only that, she wasn't even using dots!

She wrote in the name Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, but didn't assign it a dot. Massawa International Airport got a

dot, but Addis Ababa got an X to mark the spot. She explained as she wrote: that was the airport her family had used to flee the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia to come to Saudi Arabia where her father was a guest worker.

When she labelled Sudan in the space that I thought should have been the Atlantic Ocean, I finally got it. She'd completely re-oriented the map from what I'd intended. In her interpretation it wasn't the continent of Africa in that vaguely triangular shape I'd drawn—not land, but water. She'd interpreted it as the Red Sea, effectively enlarging my map by a factor of ten. Her conceptualisation had placed Saudi Arabia where I'd intended the Indian Ocean to be and put the very southern tip of Jordan right above where I thought Egypt would be on my map. She'd triangulated all three major geographies in her life: Eritrea, where she came from; Saudi Arabia, where she grew up and where her family still lived; and Jordan, where she was studying for her bachelor's degree.

4. Not land, but water. An expanse you could fly over to escape a war or to get to your university. The water represented movement, the connection between the dots. And all that white space inside and outside of the triangle, the “negative space”, the empty space?

It was all just as important as the dot the triangle pointed to.

I'd drawn an Africa unconnected to any other land mass, remote and isolated on the page like the mall directories that delineate hair salons and department stores while everything outside the bounds of the mall is blank space, unimportant and irrelevant. Nadia changed that by making it all connected and yet unbound: the expanse of Africa extended indefinitely to the West, beyond the label “Sudan”; Saudi Arabia wandered off the Eastern edge of the map; Jordan barely touched the northern tip of the Red Sea and bled into the unlabelled space above it. No lines marked the borders between one country and the next. I finally understood that Nadia existed in three places at once—“back home” in Eritrea, in Saudi Arabia with her family, and in Jordan.

I finally understood triangles.

*Born in Baghdad, raised in Brooklyn, and living in Texas today, Bint Arab is perpetually out of place and comfortable with that. She is an emerging writer, with stories published online at Expanded Horizons, Toasted Cheese, and in print in Best New Writing 2013. She administers the writers' forum at [www.bibliophilia.org/forum](http://www.bibliophilia.org/forum).*

# Heat, Flies and Cane Toads

*by S. G. Lerner*

Summer at Christmas was  
heat, flies and cane toads.  
We cousins raced  
down the rickety wooden steps  
edged with frogs  
like a moss-robed choir  
an overture for a tempest.  
We hunted cane toads,  
our mothers yelled but we  
put them in ice-cream containers  
then set them free again.  
They said we'd get warts  
and eventually I did.

Some days we could smell the heat and  
we played cricket  
on the blistering grass  
while the adults drank beer  
and wine in the shade,  
hurling belly laughs  
that split our ears.

We drank coke and ate lollies and chips  
and Grandpa's fresh-caught barra  
that Grandma crumbed,  
everything smelled like  
claret and sunshine.  
The undercurrents went over my head.

Sometimes after the cattle had been dipped  
we had to pick ticks  
out of the chenille bedspreads  
as the mass crawling exodus  
invaded the house.

The storms rolled in  
thunder rumbled  
and the lightning—  
shards of electricity, flung by angry skies  
to make the sugarcane shiver

while we inhaled ozone  
and shrieked with glee.

And then it rained:

tap-dancers on the corrugated roof.

The hypnotic drumming

drowned the chorus of frogs

singing on the stairs,

the cane toads

trysting in the thirsty grass.

Safely tucked in our de-ticked beds,

we dreamed of endless days

and tried to pretend

we would never grow up.

### ***Synopsis***

My maternal relatives live in North Queensland and a lot of my childhood nostalgia is tied up in heat, flies, and cane toads, not things I generally love!

*S. G. Larner is a denizen of sunny Brisbane, where she wrangles three children and several chickens. She revels in exploring the dark underbelly of the world in her works. You can find her at [foregoreality.wordpress.com](http://foregoreality.wordpress.com) and on Twitter [@StaceySarasvati](https://twitter.com/StaceySarasvati). Her fiction has appeared in Issues Five and Six of Tincture Journal.*

# Every Movement Is a Sound

*A One-Act Play by Kayla Pongrac*

***Character:***

SHEILA, 24

***Setting:***

An apartment in a busy city

***Time:***

The present

The purpose of this mini-musical is to bring attention to the music we create. Moreover, it is a tribute to the music all around us that reminds us that we are never alone.

***Production Notes***

The stage décor shall make Sheila's apartment appear as modern-looking as possible. There shall be two parts of the stage: a kitchen on stage right, including a sink, table, chairs, drawers, and cupboards, along with a medium-sized bedroom on stage left. There must be a small window in each room. A wall and door shall divide the two rooms. The main entrance to the apartment is located on the far side of the kitchen. It shall be apparent that Sheila lives alone, and the director is advised to use his/her imagination to make this as obvious as possible. A fish bowl containing a live fish shall be placed on a sturdy stand in the bedroom (if the director so desires, the fish/fish bowl can be given away to one lucky, harmless-looking audience member at the end of the play). An eight-by-ten picture frame containing a photo of Sheila and her boyfriend shall hang on a wall in Sheila's bedroom. Every movement that Sheila makes on stage shall be amplified sound-wise—but not exaggerated—and the director/sound manager must be aware that nearly every action written in the stage directions creates a sound.

(When the curtain rises, the audience will begin to hear the faint sound of traffic, including motorcycles and cars passing by, along with a few brief, interspersed honks of a car horn. They will also hear the sound of birds chirping. These background noises keep playing throughout the entire play. They never stop. It is morning. Meanwhile, SHEILA can be seen sleeping in her bed. She is snoring. Suddenly, the alarm clock goes off: the sound is that of a bicycle horn, followed by two “quacks”. This sound repeats until SHEILA reaches her hand toward the alarm clock and punches it rather violently, causing it to fall off her nightstand. SHEILA sits up, yawns, and stretches.)



SHEILA

(sighing) Ugh.

(SHEILA lazily climbs out of bed and rubs her eyes. Her floor creaks as she walks over to her mirror on the other side of the room. She looks into the mirror. She coughs. Suddenly, her alarm goes off again. She runs across the room.)

SHEILA

Stupid alarm!

(SHEILA picks the alarm clock off the floor and slams it on her nightstand. She proceeds to look out the window and open the blinds before opening her bedroom door and closing it behind her. SHEILA is now in the kitchen. She opens one of the cupboards, pushes a few glass mugs aside, chooses a glass mug, and closes the cupboard. She sets the mug on the table, walks over to the refrigerator, opens the refrigerator, retrieves a gallon of milk, and closes the refrigerator. She opens another cupboard, retrieves a box of cold cereal, and shakes it. She closes the cupboard, sets the box of cereal and milk on the table, and opens the cereal box. She pours the cereal into the mug, pours the milk into the mug, and then her phone rings: the sound is that of a human voice repeating the word “hooray”. SHEILA places the mug on the table and answers her phone with a smile.)

SHEILA

Hi. I love you. (pause) What do you mean? You know I always say that I love you at the beginning of every conversation. (pause) What do you mean I’m supposed to wait until the end of our conversation? What if I don’t want to wait? (pause) No, whatever. All you’re trying to do is pick a fight with me. But you know what? You’re not going to pick a fight. Nope, there’s no piece of fight hanging from this tree for you to pick. (pause) No. Stop talking. Goodbye, David.

(SHEILA hangs up the phone and slams it on her table. She pulls out a chair, takes a seat, and then looks at her mug full of cereal. She pulls the chair toward the table. She pounds her fist on the table. She gets up, opens a drawer, takes out a fork and a spoon, and closes the drawer. She sits back down with a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other. She pretends that David is the fork and she is the spoon, and holds the utensils as if they are action figures.)

SHEILA

(pretending that the spoon is walking across the table, humming) La-de-da. Wanna spoon? What’s that, you say? You’re a fork? You can’t spoon? (fork runs up and smashes into the spoon, knocking the spoon down)

(SHEILA proceeds to bend the spoon, and then throws the fork and the spoon across the room. She stands up, picks up the mug, and pours its contents down the drain. She puts the milk back in the refrigerator and the cereal back into the cupboard. Her cell phone rings from across the room. SHEILA walks toward it, reads the screen, and hangs up. She then appears to change the settings on the phone and sets it near her sink.)

SHEILA

Stupid jerk.

(SHEILA opens the door and slams it behind her. She is now in her bedroom. She walks over to the fishbowl and lightly taps on the glass.)

SHEILA

Can you hear me?

(SHEILA waves her hand in front of the bowl, then opens a bottle of fish food and feeds her fish. She walks over to her bed, treats it like a trampoline for approximately one minute, and then flops down on the bed. She is breathing heavily and trying to catch her breath. Her alarm goes off again. This time, she unplugs it and throws it across the room. SHEILA looks under her bed and retrieves a notebook and pen. She tears a blank piece of paper out of the notebook, throws the notebook under her bed, opens the door, and walks into the kitchen. She sits down at the table and repeatedly clicks the pen until the clicking turns into a slow rhythm. She puts the pen to the paper and begins scribbling violently. She puts the pen down, walks to the window, and looks outside. A dog barks. SHEILA's phone rings. Instead of the word "hooray", it now repeatedly says, "I'm a jerk". She throws her head back in laughter, opens a cupboard and throws the cell phone in it before slamming the cupboard shut. SHEILA opens a drawer, retrieves a piece of gum, closes the drawer, and sits back down at the table. She starts blowing bubbles. There is a knock at the door. SHEILA ignores it. Another knock. Another knock. The knock does not stop, but it does eventually fade away.)

SHEILA

Hmmm. I should make some French toast.

(SHEILA gets up, walks toward a cupboard, retrieves a bowl; she opens another cupboard, retrieves a pan; she opens the refrigerator and retrieves an egg, butter, and milk; she opens a drawer, retrieves a butter knife; she opens another cupboard, retrieves vanilla extract and cinnamon; she opens another cupboard and retrieves a loaf of bread. She places all of the items on her kitchen table. She closes all the cupboards and drawers, one after the other, as she walks toward the stove, opens it, closes it, and then turns on the burner. She puts butter in the pan. She walks to the table, cracks her egg into the bowl, and then adds milk, vanilla extract, and cinnamon. She whisks the mixture quickly. SHEILA dips two

pieces of bread into her mixture, and then places the bread in the pan.)

SHEILA

(singing) Syrup, syrup, syrup... where are you?

(SHEILA opens and closes a few cupboards in search of her syrup. When she finds it, she places it on the table, checks on her French toast on the stove, opens another cupboard to retrieve a plate, closes the cupboard and sits down at her table. Her phone rings again. This time, she walks across the room and answers it.)

SHEILA

Hi. I hate you. (pause) Yes, I do mean that. (pause) No, don't send me flowers. Why would you send me flowers? They die. Just like our relationship has died. Rest in peace, Sheila and David's relationship.

(SHEILA hangs up the phone, places it on the table, walks to the stove, turns the burner off, and puts her French toast on a plate. She picks up her plate, walks over to the garbage can, and throws the French toast away. She picks up her cell phone, dials David's phone number, and waits for him to answer.)

SHEILA

Hey. One last thing. I know you're sitting outside my door like some kind of freak. Just leave. (pause.) What? No, I'm not alone. I'm hanging up now. Nice to know you. Take care. Buh-bye.

(The audiences will hear the sound of a car screeching to a halt. SHEILA hangs up the phone, puts it in her pocket, walks into her bedroom, takes down the photograph of her and David, and throws it out her open bedroom window. Next comes the sound of shattered glass. SHEILA picks up the fishbowl, brings the fishbowl into the kitchen, and places it on the kitchen table.)

SHEILA

(addressing the fish) Thanks for listening.

(SHEILA sits at her kitchen table and stares at the fish. She stands up, walks to a cupboard, chooses the first glass that she sees, walks to the sink, fills her glass with water, and sits back down at the table. She clanks her glass against the fishbowl.)

SHEILA

Cheers.

*Kayla Pongrac is an avid writer, reader, tea drinker, and vinyl record spinner. When she's not writing creatively, she's writing professionally—for two newspapers and a few magazines in her hometown of Johnstown, PA. To read more of Kayla's work, visit [www.kaylapongrac.com](http://www.kaylapongrac.com) or follow her on Twitter [@KP\\_the\\_Promisee](https://twitter.com/KP_the_Promisee).*

# Children Without Faces

by Jeff Meisner

Penny admired her brother's uniform from where she sat in her apartment on East 21st. He was standing at the window, looking down on Gramercy Park, shaking his head. Spring sunlight poured through the window, almost washing out Jake's hard, chiselled features.

"I like your army uniform," she said.

"I'm in the navy, Pen." He spotted a couple with a stroller admiring the rose bushes and tulips in Gramercy. "How the hell can you afford this place? You're an art student for Christ's sake."

Penny sighed in frustration. "I *told* you. It's not mine. It belongs to a friend. Her dad's a big time executive on Wall Street or something. She lets me stay here during the summer."

He turned to her with a grin on his face. "Art chick, huh? Is she single?"

"She's way out of your league, soldier boy."

"I told you, retard, I'm a sailor."

"Come here and hug your little sister then, sailor. I need one."

Jake went and gave Penny a hug, then sat in the chair beside her. They held hands. "Now, tell me this guy's name," he said.

"No way. I know what you'll do."

"I won't do anything."

"Jake, you have to stay out of trouble. How many arrests will the army put up with?"

"The navy, moron."

"Right. Seriously, I'm OK. I've just been down a little."

Jake looked at his sister's gaunt appearance. "A little? Are you kidding me? This one really did a number on you, didn't he?"

"He was just another asshole. They're the only ones I attract."

"Maybe it's your taste in men."

"Oh, *puh-leez!* You're going to lecture *me*? At least I don't have to *pay* for my boyfriends."

Jake went a little red. "Shut up."

"Hey, I don't care how you spend your money. I just think it's a waste. You're a great looking guy. You don't need

those whores.”

“Whatever. I’m a sailor. It’s expected.”

Penny looked at her watch. “Look, I have to go soon. Mom and Dad will be here in an hour.” She closed her eyes. “Thank *God* they didn’t tell Charlie and Miranda. I really couldn’t stand to hear another lecture from those two.”

“Where is this place anyway?”

“It’s in Connecticut somewhere. It’s supposed to be real nice.”

“I hope it’s better than the last place.”

*Yeah. No kidding.* “I saw a brochure.”

“And what are you going to do with *that*?” He pointed to the tiny Pomeranian sitting asleep in a dog bed with lace frills and a maroon, satin cushion.

Penny made a face. “Ugh. I *hate* that horrid little thing. It’s a total nipper too. Look what it did to me the other day.” She showed Jake her forearm. There were two scratches and a small bite mark right above the wrist. Just below the wounds was a thick, three-inch scar. Jake ignored that one.

“You’ll survive. What’s its name, anyway?”

“Claire calls her Lucy the Wonder Dog.”

“Claire sounds sexy.”

“Forget it. She only sleeps with black guys.”

“Why?”

“Probably to piss her father off. Last Christmas, she brought home this black guy named Justin and her dad went ballistic right there at Christmas dinner. And this guy was so sweet too. Just another student from our school. It was way ugly.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Anyway, her housekeeper is coming to get Lucy in a while.”

Jake stood up. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk. Show me Gramercy Park.”

“OK. Hold on, I have to pee.” She got up and went into the bathroom. It had a claw foot tub and floors made of Italian marble.

“Close the door, Pen, will you?” Jake asked when he heard the distinctive tinkle of her pee.

“Oh, don’t be such a priss. What kind of navy man are you anyway?” She closed the door.

Jake got up and looked around the room. A roll-top desk made of mahogany sat next to the window. It was

covered with books about painting and art as well as a collection of stationery. He looked to the bathroom and rifled through the correspondence. At the bottom of the papers was a note written in a graceful hand on letterhead from the School of Visual Arts. Jake stiffened as he read the bottom of the letter, stuffing it into his breast pocket when he heard the toilet flush. Penny came out of the bathroom.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

They walked through Gramercy Park for about forty-five minutes, then took a quick jaunt over to her campus, stopping for chilli dogs from a street vendor along the way. Then, they returned to the apartment building. Their parents, Jack and Joely, were waiting for them in the lobby. They both stood when they spotted Penny and Jake.

Joely gave her youngest daughter a hug. Her voice brimmed with concern. “How are you, sweetie?”

Penny rolled her eyes as she returned the embrace. “I’m *fine*, Mom.”

Jack shook hands with his son. “Jacob.”

“Dad.”

Penny and Jack hugged and Jake planted a kiss on his mother’s cheek.

“We expected you twenty minutes ago,” Joely said. “We were worried.”

“I was showing Jake Gramercy Park and the campus.”

Jack looked at his watch. “Well, do we have time for lunch? There must be some nice restaurants in this neighbourhood.”

“We just had chilli dogs, Dad.” Penny said.

Jack shook his head. “Great.”

Joely shot her husband a dirty look. “They were hungry, alright? It’s no big deal.”

“I didn’t say it was a big deal. You did.”

“No, I didn’t. I said it wasn’t.”

“Penny needs to get her stuff,” Jake interrupted. “Should we go up?”

“Yes, let’s go up,” Joely said.

## §

Penny sat with a copy of *People* in a quiet waiting room, reading a story about Princess Diana’s death, which had shocked the world a week earlier. A door opened and a woman stuck her head out and said, “Penelope Doyle?”

“That’s me. You can call me Penny.”

“Come on in, Penny.”

She got up and went into the woman’s office. The woman was dressed in a sharp grey pant suit. She offered Penny a seat and then sat down across from her.

“I’m Dr Sheila Montgomery, but please, call me Sheila.”

Penny drew her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. “Hi.”

“Are you getting settled here?”

“Yes, it’s really nice.”

Sheila had a file resting in her lap. “What were you reading in the other room?”

“Oh, just a copy of *People*. My dad says it’s trash.”

“Well, what does he know, right?”

“Right.”

“Was it the issue about Diana?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty sad. I remember watching her wedding to Charles.”

“Me too! I was only a little girl at the time but I’ll never forget that super-long dress trailing down the aisle after her.”

“Every little girl’s dream, I guess,” Sheila said. “Like I said, a sad story.”

“Yeah, it’s sad, but I hate the hypocrisy of it all.”

Sheila frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the same people crying at the gates of Buckingham and leaving all those flowers and everything are the same ones who ate up all those British tabloid stories about her and the royals.”

“I see.”

“I just think it’s hypocritical. It’s sad the way we all feed off of one another.”

Sheila settled into her chair. “That’s an interesting observation. I haven’t heard anyone look at it quite that way before.”

Penny nodded and a silence ensued.

Sheila opened the file in her lap. “Well, why don’t you tell me why you’re here.”

“I tried to kill myself.”



“Why did you do that?”

“I can’t paint.”

“Pardon?”

“I can’t paint. I haven’t been able to paint in six months.”

“You’re an art student,” she said, perusing the file. “At the School of Visual Arts. That’s impressive. You have to be pretty good to get into that school.”

“I’m not that good.”

“It says here you swallowed a bottle of pills.”

“Yeah.”

“And this wasn’t your first attempt.”

“The first time was two years ago.”

“Tell me about that, if you want to.”

Penny shrugged. “I just got tired of being depressed. I can never stay happy for very long. My brother found me. Jake.”

“Are you two close?”

“He’s my favourite person in the world.”

“I never had any brothers or sisters. That must be nice.”

“Jake is really sweet.”

“Tell me about this second attempt. What was going on around the time you stopped being able to paint. Were you depressed? Trouble at home? Boyfriend problems?”

“All of the above. But the last one, mostly. I was seeing someone and he dumped me.”

“Who was he?”

“One of my professors. He’s married.”

Sheila nodded and took her glasses off. “Well, that’s a zero-sum game right there, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means it was doomed to end badly, no matter what you did.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“Why did you do it then?”

“Sleep with him, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I liked him. He said I was really talented. I don’t know, he paid a lot of attention to me.”

“OK.”

“Are you married, Sheila?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it nice when your husband says nice things to you? When he pays attention to you?”

“Of course it is.”

“I guess I wanted the same thing.”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“No. And now I can’t paint. I can’t focus on anything. Nothing inspires me.”

“Are you behind at school?”

“Way behind. That’s why I’m taking time off. My father is pissed.”

“Do you want to talk about your dad?”

“No.”

Sheila was quiet for a moment. “I see a note from the ER doc here that says you stopped taking your medication about a year ago. Why?”

“That’s when I met Allan. I felt great. I didn’t think I needed it anymore.”

“Was that the right decision?”

Penny shrugged.

“I’m going to ask you to start taking it again. Will you do that?”

“If you think it’s important.”

“Penny, you’re manic depressive. It’s important. You know that.”

“I know.”

“OK. Well, that’s enough for now. Let’s talk again in a few days.”

Jake leaned over the billiards table with a cue and snapped the twelve ball into the corner pocket, then looked around the hospital's games room. "Pretty nice digs for a bunch of mentals."

Penny swatted him on the rear end with her cue. "Eat my butt, jerk."

"Whatever. Fifteen ball in the side pocket." Jake gave the white ball a gentle push with the cue and the fifteen rolled into his intended destination. "How's the new doctor?"

"I like her."

"That's a surprise. Usually you think they're all useless."

"Not this one. She's... direct."

Jake sank the ten ball in the corner pocket, then took a slug of his Coke. "Good. You're feeling better?"

"A little. I'm taking the medication."

He circled around the table. "Thirteen ball in the corner." He drove the thirteen home.

"Hey! When do I get a shot?"

"When I miss one. Fourteen in the side pocket." He tapped the white ball a little too off centre though, and the fourteen missed the pocket by a few inches. "Your turn, squirt."

Penny punched him in the arm with a tiny fist. "Don't call me squirt, ass face." She lined up the white ball with the two ball and sent it into a side pocket. "Where are they sending you?"

"I can't say, Pen. You know that. I ship out day after tomorrow."

"When will you be back?"

"Six months."

Penny missed her next shot. "Shit."

"Go ahead, take another."

"Really?"

"Really."

She missed the next shot too. "I hate this game."

Jake went to the opposite side of the billiards table. "Eleven ball, corner pocket. By the way, I have some news that should make you happy."

"Yeah?"

“I ran into your prof friend, Allan, the other day.”

Penny froze. “Jake, tell me you didn’t.”

“Oh, it was just a few shots to the gut, Pen. He’ll survive.”

“And you thought this would make me happy?” She dropped her cue on the table and sent the remaining balls into a sprawl. “You’re an idiot.”

“Well, what did you expect me to do? Let him use my little sister?”

“I *expected* you to mind your own business, Jake! God, I can’t even look at you.” She left him there in the games room.

§

“Something’s wrong.”

“How can you tell?” Penny asked.

“You aren’t very good at hiding your feelings, Penny. Don’t worry, that’s a good thing. It makes you honest,” Sheila said.

“My brother visited me a few days ago. He beat up my ex.”

“The professor?”

“Yeah.”

“How bad?”

Penny puffed out her chest and did her best Jake imitation. “Oh, it was just a few shots to the gut, Pen. He’ll survive.”

“And that upsets you.”

Penny sat Indian style on a couch. “Yes and no. Part of me is glad he roughed up Allan. And part of me still cares for him. Is that messed up?”

“No. I think that’s a pretty normal reaction. How are you feeling otherwise?”

“OK.”

“Have you been able to paint at all?”

Penny shook her head. “I haven’t even tried.”

“The nurse says you’ve been taking your medication though. That’s good.”

“It doesn’t seem to make me feel any different.”

“It will take some time to work. You’ve only been here a week or so. Have you had any more thoughts about suicide?”

“No.”

“Good. What else are you feeling?”

“I’m scared.”

“What of?”

“That I’ll never paint again. That I might try to kill myself again.”

Sheila nodded. “Those are very natural fears.”

“I’m scared I’ll always be this way.”

“Do you *want* to be this way?”

“No.”

“What do you think you could do to change it?”

Penny drew her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. “I don’t know.”

“You should think about it, Penny.”

“Why?”

Sheila uncrossed and crossed her legs. “Because I think your suicide attempts are more than just cries for help. I think you’ve been serious in your efforts to end your life. And I think you’ve just been lucky that you haven’t been successful yet.”

Penny was quiet for a moment. “You’re different from the other doctors I’ve talked to.”

“Oh? How so?”

“They never talked to me that way. Sometimes I got the feeling they were trying to save me.”

“Do you want to be saved?”

“It would be easier if someone would.”

“It might. But it’s not going to happen. I can’t save you, the other doctors can’t save you and Jake can’t save you.”

“He thinks he can.”

“I know he does. But he’s wrong. I think you know it too.”

“Maybe.”

Sheila glanced at the clock on the wall behind the couch. “Time’s up. Think about what I said. Keep taking your medication. I’ll see you in a few days.”

§

“How old are you, Sheila?”

“Forty-three,” she replied. She had a brown paper bag in her lap.

“You don’t look it.”

A thin smile formed on her lips. “Thank you. I found something interesting.”

“What?”

“This,” she said, taking a thick hardcover book out of the bag. It was the annual compilation of student art put together by the School of Visual Arts. “I hope you don’t mind, but I was curious about your painting, so I ordered this when you first got here a few weeks back.”

“I don’t mind.”

Sheila flipped to the middle of the book. “Tell me about this. It’s beautiful by the way.” She handed the book to Penny. On the left-hand page was a print of a painting Penny had done during her first semester at school. It was a watercolour of a little girl in a summer hat with a light blue balloon in one hand. Her other hand was held by a grown-up, but only the grown-up’s arm was visible. A caption below the print read, “A day at the fair—Penelope Doyle, freshman.”

Penny studied the print for a moment and then looked back to Sheila. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“The little girl has no face.”

“It’s a watercolour. She isn’t supposed to.”

Sheila remained quiet.

“You want me to say that the little girl is me, right?”

“Is it?”

Penny turned away.

“Penny?”

“God, I don’t know. Maybe, maybe not. I don’t think about stuff like that when I paint. It all comes from a place I don’t try to understand or interpret.”

“OK, I get that. That makes sense. You’re an artist. You don’t want to taint the creative process by asking too many questions.”

“Yeah.”

“But the painting’s done. The creative process is over for this particular piece. What do you *think* this painting is about? Just take a guess.”

“I told you. I don’t know. Sometimes my paintings are just jumbled memories and feelings I stick together as I work.”

“OK. That’s a start. Let me ask you this. The grown-up in the scene. Who is it?”

“The little girl’s father.”

“Did your dad ever take you to a fair?”

“Sure. What kid hasn’t ever been to a fair?”

“Do you remember this particular day?”

“No.”

“Why doesn’t the girl have a face?”

“No one in the piece has one.”

“Yes, but the only people visible are children. What do you think that means, all those children without faces?”

Penny closed the book and handed it back to Sheila. “I really don’t know.”

“We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to.”

“OK. Can we talk about your family?”

“No. There’s nothing wrong with my family.”

“Well, what would you like to talk about?”

“Why do I have to talk about anything?”

“You don’t.”

Penny shifted in her seat. “I mean, I feel fine. I don’t even really know why I’m here anymore.”

“You’re here because you tried to kill yourself. The reason you feel fine is you’re back on your medication. And you don’t have to stay here, Penny. You can go any time you want.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Well, then what are you going to do?”

Penny shrugged. “I just wish I could paint again. My parents sent me all my supplies from school a few weeks ago, but every time I try, I’m like an empty well. There’s nothing there.”

“You’re stuck. Like writer’s block.”

“My brother Charlie’s the writer, but yeah, like writer’s block.”

“OK. Let’s stick with that for a minute. How do you usually get unstuck?”

“I drink.”

Sheila laughed. “That’s one way to go. The tortured artist. I like that. Does drinking work?”

“Yeah. But usually I get so blitzed that I can’t think for a few days. I just sit in my bed puking and crying.”

“Crying?”

“Yeah. It’s almost like once I start drinking, I have a key to a door that’s usually locked, only I can turn the key now and see what’s behind the door.”

“That makes sense.”

“Are you saying I should get smashed?”

“No, Penny. It’s against the rules for one thing and for another, I’d like to see you unlock that door, as you put it, without the aid of alcohol.”

“I can’t do that.”

“No, you *won’t* do that. There’s a difference.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“I’m not going to tell you. You think about it and get back to me in a few days. Time’s up.”

§

“Penny, you can’t stay there forever. I can’t afford it.” It was her father on the other end of the line.

“I thought you said your insurance covered it.”

“It does, up to a point, but you’ve been there going on four months now. It will only cover another few weeks and then it’ll have to come out of my own pocket and that place is really expensive.”

“Great. So, you’re saying, get better in the next two weeks or you’re out of luck, right?”

Jack sighed. “Be reasonable, peanut. Your mom and I aren’t made of money. I thought you’d be out of there by now. Hold on, she wants to talk to you.”

Joely came on. “Honey, forget what your father said. Stay as long as you have to, we’ll find a way to make it work.”

Jack’s voice rang in the background. “Don’t tell her that! We can’t keep doing this, we don’t have the money—”



“Penny, are you OK?”

Jack’s voice again. “Give me the phone—”

“Penny? Are you there? Pen?”

The receiver dangled from the wall phone where Penny had left it.

§

“Your parents called me the other day to check on you. They were very upset.”

Penny balled her hands into fists. “What did you tell them?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“You’re my patient. I can’t discuss what goes on in here with anyone, not even your parents, without your permission.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Penny tucked her legs against her chest and rested her chin on her knees. “Nothing major. Just stuff.”

“But you’re upset.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You only sit that way when you’re about to tell me something that makes you uncomfortable.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Shit.”

“Gotcha, so you may as well spill it.”

“Fine. My dad says I can’t stay here much longer. Finances and all.”

“This place isn’t cheap. But this is OK. This could be a good thing.”

“How’s that?”

Sheila closed her file and tossed it on the table between them. “Penny, I’ve taken about twenty pages of notes since you got here. I’ve read and re-read your file. We’ve had some great, interesting talks. But I don’t know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you refuse to open up. You have too many closed doors. We’re not allowed to talk about your family, unless it’s about how great Jake is. You won’t talk about either time you tried to commit suicide. You won’t talk about your painting, unless it’s about how you can’t paint. We’re going in circles. And you’re running out of time here.”

“You’re not being very supportive. I thought you were my friend.”

“No, I’m not your friend. I’m your doctor. And as your doctor, I have to tell you that I am very worried about your chances once you leave here.”

“You’re scaring me, Sheila.”

“You *should* be scared.”

“OK! Fine! I’m scared! Happy?”

Sheila was quiet for a moment. “Let’s go back to the painting, the one with the little girl at the fair.”

“That again?”

Sheila stayed quiet.

“You want to know about the faces.”

“Yes.”

Penny looked away.

“Come on, Penny. This is the only way. You’ve tried everything else. Alcohol. Drugs. Sex. Suicide. Has any of that made you happy?”

“No.”

“Then talk to me.”

Penny said nothing for a long time. Then, “I’m not going to cry like all the other patients I see coming out of here.”

“Good. Crying’s overdone. Be original.”

“The little girl in the painting? Yes, it’s me.”

“Why doesn’t she have a face?”

“Because that’s how I always felt with my dad. At least since I got sick.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He did take me to a fair once. A picnic actually, when I was in first grade. We had a great time.”

“So, you were about six at the time.”

“Yeah, around there.”

Sheila consulted her file. “And your patient history says you were diagnosed as manic depressive, hold on, it’s right here…”

“I was eight.”

“Right, eight years old. That’s pretty rare.”

“Yeah. And after I got sick, he never looked at me the same way again. I mean, my mom got totally overprotective of me, you know? Like I was made of porcelain or something. But my dad, he was different. He still spent time with me and stuff, but he wouldn’t talk about me being sick. He wouldn’t even say the word ‘depressed’ unless he absolutely had to, not even with my mom. I remember one time at Christmas when my grandma was over and when she asked him whether I was still depressed, he got up and walked away. All he said was, ‘Penny’s fine.’”

Sheila nodded. “You went from being the apple of his eye to…”

“His disturbed daughter. Even though he was in total denial, I always felt like he thought I was weird.”

“Maybe he did. That says more about him than you though.”

“Maybe.”

“So, that’s why no face in the painting. Your dad couldn’t see you. Not the *real* you.”

“Yeah. And after a while, I got used to it. I thought every girl felt that way.”

“But it still bothered you.”

“Yes. So, am I cured?” Penny asked with a sarcastic smile.

“Not quite.”

“Damn.”

Sheila considered for a moment. “OK, let’s switch gears a little bit. Tell me about Allan. What was he like?”

“At first, very attentive. It really turned me on.”

“Sexually?”

“Yeah, but in other ways too. He knew how to listen. Up to a point. I guess, as gross as it sounds, he was the father I never had.”

“It’s not gross. Sometimes, people seek out partners that fulfil them in ways they weren’t fulfilled as sons or daughters, or as wives or sisters. It happens.”

“Anyway, he lost interest in me after a while. He has a wife and kids.”

“How do you feel about that now?”

“Sort of used. But I also knew what I was getting into.”

“It’s refreshing to see you recognise that, Penny.”

“Do I have to talk any more today?”

“No. Go outside and relax. Watch *The Real World*. Get something pierced. Whatever you girls do for entertainment these days.”

Penny laughed. “I’m not into piercing.”

“Get a tattoo then. *That’ll* get your dad’s attention.”

§

Someone knocked on Penny’s door. She looked up from the television.

A nurse motioned for her to come outside. “Someone’s on the phone for you, Penny.”

“Who is it?”

“He says he’s your brother.”

Penny got up and went out to the area where the phone sat on a table between two armchairs. She picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me,” Jake said. “How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

He let out a long sigh. “OK, look, I’m sorry I hit your boyfriend.”

“*Ex*-boyfriend.”

“OK. I’m sorry I hit your ex-boyfriend. There. I apologised. Satisfied?”

“Wait a sec. I’m supposed to be jumping for joy because it took you three months to say you’re sorry for acting so stupid?”

“This is the first chance I’ve had to call you, Pen. They don’t give me two weeks’ vacation like in a normal job, OK? I said I’m sorry. I meant it.”

Penny didn’t say anything.

“OK?” Jake said. “You there? Pen?”

“OK.”

There was a pause and then Jake said, “Listen, I’ve got some good news. The navy’s sending me to Earle in a few months.”

“That’s right in New Jersey!”

“Yeah, about seven miles from Staten Island. I mean, it’s not a walk around the block or anything, but it’s pretty close. So, if you decide to stay in New York then we’ll be able to see each other more often.”

“It’s right near Asbury Park.”

“Where?”

“You know, where Springsteen is from?”

“Oh, yeah, I knew that.”

“Bullshit you did.”

“OK. Well, maybe I can set you up with the Boss.”

“That would be nice.”

“Are you doing OK there?”

“Yeah. Dad wants me to leave here soon though. He says he’s running out of money.”

“Want me to talk to him?”

“Yeah, *right*. That’ll just make things worse.”

“OK. I’ll stay out of it. I’m just sick of him pretending there’s nothing going on all the time.”

“Jake, let it go, will you? I can’t deal with the two of you being at each other’s throats.”

“OK, OK. I hear you.”

Penny changed the subject. “Met anyone yet?”

“Yeah. My bunkmate. Great guy. Carlos Hernandez. Very hot. I’m thinking of going gay.”

“Hernandez, huh? You like them exotic, don’t you, sailor boy?”

“Bite me, you little snot.”

§

“Do you think I’m messed up?”

“Completely,” Sheila said without looking up from her file.

“Thanks.”

“I was kidding. We’re all messed up, some more than others. You just happen to have a disorder that causes emotional problems. You have to learn how to manage it better.”

“I told you, I’ve been taking my medication.”

“Good. Keep taking it. It’s important.”

“I *know*.”

Sheila looked up from her file then. “Tell me about the first time you tried to kill yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

Sheila was surprised. “What, no fighting me on this? No resistance?”

“Come on. This isn’t easy.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. That was clumsy of me.”

“It’s OK. Like I said, what do you want to know?”

“Well, what was going on at the time? The ER report says you were eighteen.”

“I was depressed.”

“Why?”

“I’d just moved to New York for school and felt really out of sorts. Jake had gone into the navy the year before, so I hadn’t seen him in a long time, and my boyfriend from high school had stayed behind to go to Washington State. He was a really great guy. Next to Jake, I loved him more than anyone else in the world.”

“What’s his name?”

“Sean.”

“Do you still talk to him?”

“No. He wanted me to go to WSU with him, but their art program sucked. I don’t think he ever forgave me.”

Sheila scribbled down this new information in her notebook. “I’m sorry it worked out that way. In any case, what you’ve just described is a whole lot of change over a relatively short period of time. No wonder you were stressed out.”

“I couldn’t get out of bed. I felt like I was at the bottom of this deep, dark hole in the earth and I couldn’t get out, no matter how hard I tried. My roommate thought I was crazy.”

Sheila stopped writing. “You’re not crazy, Penny.”

“Sometimes I feel like I am.”

“I talk to crazy people all the time, and trust me, you’re not even in the same league.”

“No?”

“Ever hear voices?”

“No.”

“Feel like you’re being watched? Spied on? From another planet?”

“No, no and no.”

“Then you’re not crazy.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”

“OK, so you’re in this state of paralysis, right?”

“Right.”

“What made you decide to slit your wrists?”

“Well, Jake came to visit me. He was on shore leave. And for the first time ever, seeing him didn’t make me happy. It didn’t snap me out of it. I got worse.”

“Go on.”

Penny’s voice got quiet, her eyes on the floor. “I felt like I was never going to get any better. Ever. If seeing Jake didn’t wake me up, I was never going to wake up. So, I got in the tub and opened my veins while he was out. He wasn’t supposed to be back for a long time, but he’d forgotten his wallet. He always does that. I was really lucky.”

“Oh? Why?”

Penny looked at Sheila like she was nuts. “Because I wouldn’t be alive now if he hadn’t! Why else?”

“You feel lucky to be alive.”

“I do now, yeah.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to die anymore?”

Penny looked thoughtful. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Yeah? Why?”

Sheila closed the file. “For the same reasons anyone would want to know you, Penny. You’re smart. You’re talented. You’re pretty. You have a lot to say. The world needs people like that. It makes life interesting.”

“Thanks.”

“So, did you get a tattoo or what?”

“Uh, no. I’d like to stay the only girl at school who *doesn’t* have a gazillion tats.”

“Good thinking. Be one of a kind.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “Time’s up, kid.”

“Penelope Doyle?”

Penny looked up from her bed. She was reading a copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. “That’s me.”

It was one of the hospital’s staff. “You have a visitor. Out front.”

Penny frowned. “I’m not expecting anyone.”

“Why don’t you come out front, Penny.”

“OK.” She put the copy of Capote down on her bed and slid her feet into a pair of sandals. When she got to the lobby, she saw her mother sitting in a chair. “Mom? What are you doing here?”

Joely turned to face her daughter. Her eyes were red. “Hi. Let’s go talk in your room, OK?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Joely stood. “In your room. Please.”

Penny led her back to her room, a feeling of dread building up inside her. They sat down on her bed. Penny waited.

Joely held her daughter’s hands. “He’s gone, Penny. Jake’s gone.”

Penny knew exactly what her mother meant. She was silent for a moment. When she finally did speak, her voice was hollow. “How?”

“He was at sea.”

“Did he die saving someone? He probably died saving someone, right? Someone who was about to be swept overboard or something?”

Joely pulled her daughter close. “I don’t know. The navy hasn’t told us anything yet. He’s being flown home tomorrow, or the next day.”

“I bet they were in a storm or something. Even those big aircraft carriers get caught in storms, don’t they? He was on deck or something and he saw one of his friends in trouble, so he tried to help him and he was swept overboard too and his body hasn’t been found yet, so maybe he’s not really dead, right Mom?”

“Penny...”

“They haven’t found his body yet, they couldn’t have if it was only yesterday, the ocean out there is so big, it would take a long time to find him, so maybe he’s actually OK, you know? Jake’s really strong and he’s a real good swimmer. Remember when he won all those swim competitions in high school? I mean before he dropped out? Remember?”

Joely looked her daughter in the eye. “Penny, you’ve got to hold it together now, OK? Stay with me now. I need you to stay with me for when he comes home, OK?”

Penny fainted.



“What’s wrong with our daughter?” Jack demanded. Joely sat next to him on the couch in Sheila’s office. “Why won’t she talk?”

“She’s in shock, Mr Doyle.”

“For two weeks? She wouldn’t come home for the funeral!”

Sheila sighed. “Anger is not going to serve your daughter well here. She needs time.”

“Time for what? To become even more catatonic?”

“That is an exaggeration of the situation. Penny is hardly catatonic. She eats, sleeps, reads, showers, walks outside and she’s still taking her medication. What she won’t do is talk. Yet.”

“Well, when the hell will she?”

“Jack—” Joely began.

“No! I’ve had enough of this crap. She’s been here for months and she’s getting worse.”

“On the contrary, Mr Doyle, Penny was just starting to open up to me when her brother was killed. You can’t expect her to recover from something like this right away.”

“Well, none of the other kids are acting this way!”

“That’s because they’re not manic depressives, Mr Doyle. Penny will talk when she’s ready to talk.”

“And how many more goddamn trips will I have to make out here from Seattle?”

Sheila dropped Penny’s file on the table between her chair and the couch where the Doyles sat. “With all due respect, Mr and Mrs Doyle, I advised against your trip here. Penny made it clear she didn’t want to see you after Jake’s death.”

“She told you that?” Joely asked.

“I asked her if she wanted to see you and she shook her head no. You and your husband decided to come anyway. Now you’re disappointed that she won’t talk to you. I’m very sorry for your loss, truly I am, but you are not helping your daughter.”

“And you are?” Jack demanded.

Joely scowled at her husband. He threw his hands up in the air and went quiet. “Dr Montgomery, what should we do?” she asked.

“Go home. Let Penny deal with this in her own way.”

“What if she tries to hurt herself again?”

“This is a top-notch facility, Joely. I have her under twenty-four hour watch.”

“That’s *real* reassuring. Thanks, lady,” Jack spat at her.

“You’re welcome, Mr Doyle. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a patient waiting for me.”

§

Penny sat on the couch in Sheila’s office in silence. Sheila looked at the clock. Half of their session was already gone. When she looked back at Penny, she found that her patient was watching her. Sheila thought for a moment. “Let’s go outside. It’s a nice day.”

Penny got up and slipped her feet into her sandals. Outside, the day was bright and warm. It was high summer now and the sky was a perfect sheen of dark blue. Penny took her sandals off again and walked barefoot in the grass. The hospital’s lawns and gardens were perfectly manicured and the grass was warm between her toes. Sheila watched Penny work her feet around in the grass and took her shoes off too. Penny smiled and kept walking. The sunlight accentuated the blonde highlights in her light brown hair. They walked for another few minutes before they came to the edge of a meandering brook. On the opposite shore was an old saltbox colonial with a faux mill. The mill’s old wooden wheel turned as the water moved downstream. They sat there and Penny dipped her toes in the brook.

“I saw him the other day, you know.”

Penny’s voice caught Sheila off guard and she turned her attention away from her surroundings and back to her patient. “Saw? Who?”

“My brother.”

“Where?”

Penny pointed to a cluster of oak and chestnut trees. “Over there. By that grove.”

“Were you dreaming?”

“No, I was awake.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“He said, ‘It’s OK, Pen. It’s OK. You have to wake up now.’” She looked Sheila in the eye. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“No, Penny. It’s fairly common for people to hear and see things when they’ve undergone the kind of trauma you have.”

“You don’t think it was really him? Like, maybe he came back?”

Sheila dipped her toes in the water now and shrugged. “You know, the hereafter isn’t really my department, kid. I deal with the here and now. Let me ask you this though. Does it matter if it was his spirit or if it was just your mind finding a way to deal with the loss?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think both are possible, Penny. Really, I do. But I think Jake’s message is what’s important here.”

“So, you’re not worried I’m having a mental breakdown or something?”

“Are *you* worried?”

“A little.”

“In my honest opinion, you’ve been too lucid and functional since your brother’s death to be experiencing a collapse. It’s always possible, but I don’t see the tell-tale signs.”

“I guess. I’m still a little scared.”

“That’s understandable. This is a scary time for you. What do you think Jake might have been trying to tell you?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m talking now, aren’t I?”

“Fair enough.” Sheila put a hand on Penny’s shoulder. “You know, kid, I don’t normally do this with patients, but I wanted to tell you I’ve missed talking to you the past few weeks.”

Penny smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re a hoot. I missed that about you.”

“I was thinking about Jake. And why I tried to kill myself and why I can’t paint and my dad and all that stuff. But mostly about Jake.”

“What about him?”

Penny brushed her hair out of her eyes. “That he’s not coming back. That he’s over. It just seems so definite. I mean, it is definite, right? As definite as it gets.”

Sheila didn’t say anything.

Penny went on. “It makes me really sad, because I’m going to miss talking to him. I’m going to miss hearing about the new trouble he’s gotten into. Mostly though, I can’t stop thinking about how he’s just gone. I mean, one day he was here, and poof, the next, he’s gone. He ended.”

“What do you think of all that?”

“I think I don’t want that to be me. Not yet. I’m not ready for that. I thought I was before, and maybe then I was, you know? But now, something’s changed. I don’t know what exactly, but something’s changed.”

Sheila was quiet for a moment. “Penny, I think you’re going to be OK.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Sheila used her toes to splash Penny with some water and they didn’t talk any more.

Sheila walked past the receptionist, brushing snow from her top coat.

“Oh, Dr Montgomery, this came for you today.” The receptionist handed her a long cardboard cylinder like the ones used by architects to store blueprints.

Sheila looked for a return address and frowned when she couldn't find one. “OK, thanks, Barb. Hey, when's my first patient?”

“Not for twenty minutes.”

“Great. Thanks.” She went into her office, fixed herself a cup of tea and sat down at her desk. She opened the cardboard cylinder and a scroll of paper fell out. Sheila opened it and smiled when she saw what it was. A picture done solely in black pencil of two women sitting at the edge of a forest brook, laughing. Both women had faces.

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# We, the Second Generation Immigrants

*Non-Fiction by Calista Fung*

I'm five and I'm sitting on the floor. I am surrounded by naked Barbie dolls and selections of pink dresses. My mother pushes the bedroom door open and accidentally steps on a doll.

"Maaa..." I whine. My Mandarin sounds squeaky.

"Sorry," she apologises back. "Sorry."

She takes her foot away and backtracks.

"Dinner's ready."

I huff. I gather my dolls together, their naked, glistening bodies made of smooth, fair curves and blonde, blonde hair worn thin by excessive brushing. Their blue eyes are large on their face with a double row of eyelids and thick strokes of lashes. Their noses are tall. Their chins are pointed. I put them away.

My mother and older sister are seated by the time I come to the table.

"Hurry," my mother urges. "The food's getting cold."

There's steamed, white rice. There are eggs marinated in soy sauce with spidery veins where the sauce leaked through their cracked shells. The soup is watery and suspends vermicelli and fish balls. I pick up my chopsticks.

"Ma, what's for lunch tomorrow?"

"I'll pack you some rice and maybe some leftovers? Would you like an apple or a banana for fruit?"

"I want rice crackers," I plead. "I want those crackers in the foil packets like everyone at school has for morning tea."

"We talked about that. Those are expensive. I'll have to wait until they're on sale."

I throw my chopsticks on the table.

"I'm always waiting for sales! I'm always waiting and waiting. You keep promising me and all I ever get is cold Chinese food for lunch."

"Hey!" my sister interjects. "Can you just be quiet, please?"

"You don't understand," I tell her. "You don't care."

My mother says nothing. She keeps on eating. After a moment, I pick up my chopsticks and lower my head to my rice bowl too.

It's "Bring Your Father to School" day. My classmates line up in a row with their fathers gripping their hands. My palms are empty. I loiter around the back until my teacher calls me out.

"Where's your father?"

"He's not here."

"I can see that. Why isn't he here?"

"He's working overseas."

"Oh, I see. Why didn't you get your mother to explain this beforehand? Just sit down for now."

When I arrive home from school, I storm into my mother's room where she's folding laundry.

"I looked like such a fool!"

"What happened?"

"The teacher didn't know my father couldn't come. I was the only one not to bring my father. Everyone was looking at me!"

"You know he has to work overseas," she tells me. "He has to send the money to us."

She rolls up a pair of socks and tucks them into each other until they become a perfect sphere. They join a pile of more perfect spheres. There are checkers of underwear and layers of shirts.

"I know," I say. "But I don't have to like it."

I leave the room the same way I entered it.

That night, my father calls and I hear parts of his conversation with my mother.

"—she wasn't happy about it. I think you should talk to her."

There is a lot of sighing before my mother beckons to me and presses the phone to my ear.

"Daddy, when are you coming to visit us?" I ask into the mouthpiece.

"Soon," he answers, like he always answers. "I'm too busy now, but I promise I'll see you soon and I'll bring you a present when I do."

I consider the offer.

"Can I ask for any present?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation.

"Can I have a big pink dress like my Barbie wears?"

He's silent for a moment on the other end of line. I hold my breath.

“Yes, of course. Anything you want,” he finally says.

I tell him I love him and I miss him and I wish he were here already. He says goodbye.

He brings the pink dress half a year later. It’s beautiful. It has layers of skirts, cold and expensive on my legs, and an embroidered hem of roses and crystals on the sleeves. When I twirl in it, the hem flares out wide into a circle. My mother doesn’t smile when he hands it to me, but I do. I thank him over and over and rush to see myself in the mirror. My smile has lengthened out my mono-eyelid eyes. My eyelashes point straight and downwards and my nose is like a button in the centre of my face.

My father stays for ten days and then he flies back to his work. I cry all the way from the airport.

I’m stuck on my homework sheet for English. The page is filled with highlighted words in sentences and I’m supposed to identify which ones are adjectives, nouns or verbs.

I knock on my sister’s door and barrel in.

“Can you help me with the English homework, please?”

She looks at me from her position at her desk where her own work is spread out in a collage of diagrams and text.

“We have a dictionary. It’s in the study. Look up anything you don’t know.”

My mouth turns down.

“But it would be so much faster if you just helped me!”

“How are you supposed to learn anything if I tell you everything? I figured all this out myself too,” she snaps back.

I am rooted to the doorway.

“It’s not fair,” I say. “I’m Taiwanese. I bet everybody else gets help. All I have is you and Ma who doesn’t even know what an adjective is.”

My sister turns around until her back faces me. She picks up her pen and starts crossing things out so hard I expect the paper to rip. I leave.

I’m eight. My mother is crying and I reach my arms around her neck even though I don’t know what’s wrong.

“Your father’s business is over,” she whispers to the top of my head. “We’ve got nothing except debt and a mortgage.”

I don’t know what that means but I hug her tighter. She clasps my hand in hers. She tells me later what’s about to change. She tells me the business was already failing when he bought me the pink dress.

I'm twelve and I'm asleep in my mother's big bed. Sometime around the early hours of the morning I feel her inching around the room in the dark. I feel her slide under the blankets and tuck her cold hands between my arms.

Her shift's finished late again.

My sister is locked in her room and she won't talk to us.

My mother asks her first in her usual loud voice. Then, she asks gently, softly, the sound waves weaving through the cracks of the door until my sister finally opens it with swollen eyes.

I don't hear the whole story. There's something about the drama production she's involved in. There's something about the teacher coordinating the production. The teacher yelled at my sister for something she didn't do.

The next morning, my mother bundles me into the car and we drive to my sister's school. We enter the production set, lost and dazed, until my mother spots the teacher.

My mother is polite and she asks the teacher about the situation. The teacher doesn't understand my mother's turns of phrase and I step in to translate. The teacher pulls another teacher into the confrontation until we are a strange tetrahedral. The teacher crosses her arms and hunches her shoulders and glares at us. She does not apologise. My mother is lost by the rapid English. She gestures at the teacher.

"You hurt my daughter," she states without raising her voice, her accent thick and crippling, but the words are plain to hear. The teacher blinks. My mother walks away.

"When did you come to this country?"

"When I was three and a half," I answer.

"No wonder your English is so good! Can you still speak Chinese?"

"Yes, I speak Mandarin Chinese."

"Wow, that's pretty cool. How did you keep it up?"

"My sister never let me speak English at home. My mother wouldn't understand it."

"That must have been tough."

"No, it means I'm bilingual."

I'm sixteen and I see the light under the door. I open it and see my mother at the desk with a large file and letters with small, footed print and company icons. Her eyes are scanning the page too quickly to be reading it and I reach over to take it from her.

"Ma, do you want me to translate this for you?"



She smiles at me, her eyes seemingly smaller under her thick glasses. Her hair is freckled generously with white.

“So, what nationality are you?”

“I’m Taiwanese.”

The answer comes out proud.

*Ardent bibliophile. Full-time dreamer. Disiecti membra poetae. More of Calista’s writing can be found at her blog ([lady-rye.tumblr.com](http://lady-rye.tumblr.com)) or at Thought Catalog ([thoughtcatalog.com/calista-fung](http://thoughtcatalog.com/calista-fung)). Her non-fiction piece “It’s An Adventure If You Want It To Be” was published in Issue Six of Tincture Journal.*

# Douglas

*by Tiggy Johnson*

Twenty-seven years  
after a ute smashed through a red  
light into the door of his car  
his mother died.

While preparing for her funeral  
I realise that, once I have passed  
there will be nobody to remember  
his orange beard and paunchy stance;  
the way he spent his money before pay day  
yet found a way to ride the train; the way  
he held his cigarette; the tacky souvenirs  
he bought; or that he liked  
to play Pink Floyd in the morning  
while eating vegemite toast.

# Family Secret #7

by *Tiggy Johnson*

After escaping his grip, the sting of his palm fresh  
on her cheek, she kneels, arms outstretched, hands  
caressing carpet until they're found. Her glasses  
are not broken, but twisted enough that her mother,  
half a suburb away, might hear her screams before  
she calls, using touch to dial the familiar number.  
She knows how she sounds—loud, hopeless—  
imagines her mother holding the phone an arm's length  
away, but still, she can't stop. The words spew forth  
as she tells what happened, begs her—*come get me*—  
and waits.

Finally, her mother says *Put your father on the phone*  
and she does.

*Tiggy Johnson's poems have appeared in Cordite, Quadrant, Overland Audio II, Going Down Swinging and Black Inc's Best Australian Poems 2012. Svetlana or otherwise, her short story collection, was published in 2008. First taste, a poetry collection, in 2010, and That zero year, a poetry collection co-written with Andrew Phillips, in 2012. She is currently writing her family history in poetry and can be found online at [www.tiggvyjohnson.com](http://www.tiggvyjohnson.com). She has had poetry and fiction published in Issues Three and Six of Tincture Journal.*

# Transference

by *Rebecca Howden*

Every Thursday at half past five she goes to see the Professor. It's cold this evening, and she shivers as she closes the iron gate behind her, clack-clacking up the path in her heels. She rings the doorbell and waits, flanked by the two olive trees that sit patiently in their terracotta pots. There's a shuffle and he opens the door.

"Come on in, Faith," he says, his craggy face crinkling into a smile. He's all rugged up today, a grandpa cardigan over his shirt and tie. Paul, his real name is, but she doesn't like using his name much.

Inside it's still cold. It's always cold in here, but she takes off her coat anyway. He must keep it so icy on purpose, she thinks; that would just be the sort of thing he would do. Maybe being freezing makes you long for comfort, so you open up more. Or something. She sits down on the plush, burgundy-coloured couch and hunches forwards, her hair spilling over her face. Her hair is endless, a million different shades of birchwood and ash. The kind of hair that birds could nest in, hair that you'd expect to find bits of twigs and leaves scattered throughout. Paul sits in his desk chair opposite her, waiting.

"How are you today?" he says.

She shrugs, looks out the window. Raindrops cling to the glass like pearls. All day there have been growling thunderstorms, separated by odd bursts of bright, cold sunshine. When she left work maybe forty minutes ago, the sky was a sickly apricot colour streaked with silver. Now it's dark grey, sinking already into night. There's no getting around it; it's winter now for sure.

"It's winter," she says. "Winter makes me sad."

"Why do you think that is?"

She shrugs again. A tree branch rakes its fingers against the glass.

"Doesn't it make everyone sad?" she says, and he doesn't answer.

Faith sighs impatiently and looks around at all his books and folders, messily stacked on his big wooden desk. Those chrysanthemums always sitting in a vase on the windowsill, made of paper or some kind of stiffened silk maybe. They peek up tall and proud out of the glass vessel. A few months back, when it was summer, he suggested that she find a hobby, so she took an *ikebana* class to keep herself occupied. She liked it well enough, as much as one can like playing with flowers, fussing over the heights and colours as if it matters. She'd made him an arrangement of poppies and lilies, to say thank you or something.

"Well," she says, looking up at him at last. He has old-man glasses, the kind with rims you can hardly see. She told him once that everyone's wearing big thick frames these days, and he seemed to find that amusing. She guesses he's about her dad's age. Maybe younger, but who can tell? The silvery flecks in his beard catch the light, and she thinks, *whiskers*. "I hope winter finishes soon, anyway."

"There will still be a little bit to go, I think," he says, but he smiles kindly.

He'd kept her flowers in that same place on the windowsill for a week or two, until they shrivelled and died, the wrinkly skin of their petals hanging sullenly from the blackened stems. She tried not to feel hurt when he threw them out, but it still grates at her a bit now. "Well, nothing lasts forever, right Faith?" she remembers him saying with a rueful smile. Who gave him the fake chrysanthemums, she wonders?

"How is your joint pain today?" he asks.

"It's *fine*," she says, though as she says it she feels her wrists and fingers aching. He's scribbling something down on a notepad, so she looks down at her shoes. They're stupid, garnet-coloured things that cost too much and hurt like hell. She never normally wears heels in real life, but on Tuesday Jill took her aside at work and gently suggested she might want to try dressing a bit more like the other girls. "I'm not trying to be mean," she said. "It's just that, if you want to move up in this place, well..." Faith got it. She wondered if the directors had asked Jill to say something to her. It was no secret that they only hired pretty girls, but she thought just getting the job was enough. She thought her pencil skirts and cardigans were OK. She stretches her legs out in front of her, lets the shoes slip off her stockinged feet.

"Do you like my new shoes?" she asks, looking down at where they lie, brilliant red against the creamy carpet.

"They're nice," Paul says.

"Yeah, well." She leans back on the couch, smiles wryly. "A girl at work told me I should try to look prettier."

He nods, watching her face carefully. Her eyes are very small and very dark, always squinting, cat-like.

"How did that make you feel?" he asks.

"It felt like that game where you threw things at me."

Early on in their sessions, she'd told him that whenever she walks down the street or gets on a tram she is filled with this feeling that everyone is looking at her. So he'd made her do this terrible exercise, where she wrote down on big strips of paper each of the things she felt people were thinking: *she's weird, she's fat, she's ugly, she's stupid, she's boring*. When she was done he scrunched all the pieces of paper up into balls and told her to try to walk across the room. One after another, he tossed the paper balls at her, faster and faster. It was supposed to show how hard it is to get on with things when these thoughts are pelting at her all at once. Well, she knew that already. "How useful is that feeling?" he was always asking her. "What's the value of saying that to yourself?"

She stares at the damask curtains, tracing the dark pattern in her mind. He talks, and he goes through the usual questions. How is her appetite this week, has she been sleeping OK, is she managing to get things done at work. She listens and answers. And his voice washes over her, and she hears the heavy second hand of the clock schlepping in its circle, *clock, clock, clock*.

## §

The tram is crowded and slow in the wet. Umbrellas drip water all over the floor, which is streaked with shuffling footprints. She sits by the window, bunched up between businessmen and backpackers, all their various briefcases and sports bags and backpacks pushing her into the wall. Her hands are shaking again, she notices, a familiar tremor that might mean Parkinson's or maybe just nerves, matching the pace of her hummingbird heartbeat. She watches her sombre face in the darkness of the window. Her wide, bright mouth, her tiny cat-eyes. The reflection flickers in and out. Now I'm

here, now I'm not, she thinks.

When she gets home, her housemates Dave and Claire are in the kitchen making spaghetti. Everything's always a team activity with them, Faith thinks. They probably brush their teeth together. She kicks off her shoes and drops her handbag and coat on the floor, knowing how much it drives Claire insane.

"How was work today, hun?" Claire asks.

"Great," Faith says, opening the fridge and pulling out a half-empty bottle of cheap pinot grigio. "I resized fifty million images, played with a few hundred layouts, and I spilled my coffee all over my desk."

"Doesn't sound too good," Dave says cheerily.

Faith pours the wine into a glass and sits down at the bench next to where Dave is chopping zucchini. She runs her fingertips around the rim of the glass, staring intently at the wavering colour.

"I'm unhappy," she says slowly.

"You're *never* happy though," Claire says, not even looking up from the stove. *You're never happy*, just like that, all matter-of-fact. Like, *you never take out the rubbish*. Faith pushes her stool back loudly and stands up, feeling venomous.

"Enjoy your dinner," she says coldly. "I'm going to my room."

"Should we expect any gentleman visitors tonight?" Dave asks.

She looks at them both with dark, treacherous eyes.

"No," she says.

## §

Upstairs in her room, she lies on her bed and puts her hands over her face. God, she hates them sometimes. She takes her hands away and stares up at the light fitting dangling bright above her head. The room seems to shift a little. The thought of standing up and looking at her clothes, trying to find something to wear to work tomorrow that might be girlish and glamorous enough for Jill makes her feel weak. She closes her eyes and looks at the blotchy flower patterns the light makes on the back of her eyelids.

It's funny that the Professor didn't ask her about Alex tonight, she thinks. He was probably waiting for her to bring him up, but she didn't feel like saying his name. There's nothing to say anyway, it's been weeks now since she heard from him. It's all a variation on a theme. He comes and goes without warning. Stops answering her calls, stops replying to her messages. He's gone from the face of the earth, then days or weeks or months later he's back, knocking on her door late at night.

She thinks about the last time she saw him. They walked home together down rainy Carlisle Street. The wind whipped her hair all around her face and she smiled at him through the dirty blonde tangles. She was wearing her glasses, but the rain was leaving tiny spots on them, so she took them off and then he was just a blur of pale skin and dark clothes, draping his arm across her shoulders. By the time they got to her house, their clothes and hair and skin were

dripping. They took off their scarves and jackets and she went to pour him a glass of wine, but he put his hands on her hips and kissed her instead, and he pushed her so they fell onto the couch in a mess of damp limbs.

Well, it's Alex's birthday today. Faith's was last week, but in winter the days all become one. The mornings are dark, the evenings are dark, and in between there's only grey, so it's hard to keep any concept of time. She forgets where she is, what day it is. It's that feeling of walking into a room and wondering what you came there for. She'll find herself on a tram and have no memory of getting on it. She'll find a cup of coffee in her hand and wonder if she bought it from that barista she thinks is cute and if she even paid. She's never quite sure if she's spoken out loud. Alex let her birthday slip past without a word.

"Hey, hun?" Claire's voice at the door. Faith sits up in bed, but Claire walks in before she can even respond.

"Here, have you eaten?" she says, handing Faith a bowl of spaghetti and a tea towel. She places Faith's handbag down on the overflowing desk and hangs her coat over the back of the chair. Faith can see the red heels peeking out from inside the handbag.

Claire sits down next to her on the bed.

"I hope you weren't offended by what Dave said before," she says. "He didn't mean anything by it. You know we don't judge you."

Faith shrugs.

"It's fine," she says.

Claire looks around the tiny room. The floor is a swamp of clothes, pouring out from the open doors of the wardrobe. The shelves spit out books and picture frames and bottles of lotions and potions. A turquoise bra hangs over the floor-standing lamp.

"What you need is to meet a nice boy," she says. "We should set you up with one of Dave's friends. Maybe Tim—remember Tim?"

Faith groans.

"Please, Claire, don't," she says. "I don't need a nice boy."

"Well, you need to stop hanging around with Alex McGregor, and whoever else makes you so grouchy."

"I'm *fine*," Faith says. She places the bowl of spaghetti on the bedside table and lies back on the bed, covering her face with her arm. "Listen, I really have a headache. Can we talk later?"

Claire leaves, and Faith rolls on her side to stare at the wall. Her knees and ankles ache. When she focuses on the feeling it moves to her elbows, then her wrists, then back to her ankles. What would Alex be doing right now, she wonders, and then, what would the Professor be doing? She massages her left wrist with her right hand. Sometimes, the Professor told her once, people who fear abandonment become attached to people who fear engulfment. Yeah, well. She wonders what he'd say about the way she pushed Claire away just now. She imagines his pale blue eyes, his salt-and-pepper hair. What would he say about any of it, if he could really see inside the catacombs of her head.

The next Thursday she arrives at the Professor's house early. She waits by the olive trees, stamping her feet in the cold like a pony. Her long, unruly hair has been chopped into a bob, curling in a thick mop by her chin.

"You cut your hair," Paul says as she settles down onto the couch, her coat bunched up beside her. She just looks at down at her legs in their shiny black opaques. She's settled into a uniform now—black dress, black stockings, the red shoes. She doesn't have to think about it anymore.

"Why did you do it?" he asks. She shrugs.

"I felt like it," she says, rubbing at her elbows. "It's what girls do. I thought you had a daughter and a wife or something." Probably girlfriends as well, she thinks meanly. Not that she can really picture him being anything other than the perfect, doting husband and father. Still, who can tell with guys.

"I only wondered because cutting hair can be pretty symbolic," he says, putting down his notepad and pen. He leans forward. "You know that, I'm sure."

She rolls her eyes and stands up, pacing by the window. It's the same rumply, charcoal sky that's been there forever now. Is it the same sky?

"Well, let's see. It's not the 1920s," she says. "And I'm not a rape victim. So, what else? It was just getting in my way. There was so *much* of it." Like it could choke her somehow. Like it could suddenly grow into immeasurable lengths and get tangled around her while she slept, and they'd find her days later wrapped in a cocoon of brown and gold.

"How do you feel now, with it out of your way?"

"Well, don't you think I look pretty?" she says, turning to look him in the eye. He glances away.

"I'm more interested in what *you* think," he says. "Is it important to you that I think you're pretty?"

She keeps wandering around the small room, running her finger along the spines of books on the shelves. In the corner is a miniature wooden table and chair, strewn with coloured blocks and trinkets for his child patients. She tries to picture him talking to a little kid, crouched down to listen, his clumsy old-man hands trying to help out with a puzzle of some sort. They must do drawings here, some kind of art therapy. There are textas and paper that he's never asked her to use.

"Do you like working with kids?" she asks. He follows her gaze.

"Sure," he says. "Do *you* like kids?"

"Mm," she says. "I guess. My sister and I used to babysit for the little girl across the road."

He waits from his desk chair while she keeps pacing the room. Finally she flops back down on the couch. He clears his throat.

"Faith," he says. "How has this week been for you? Have you been more anxious than usual?"



She thinks back over the week, trying to peel apart the days. All she sees is a blur of colour, streaks of red and peach racing through an endless cloud of grey. Has it been a week? She got up, she went to work, she went to sleep. But remember—she got her hair cut. Saturday it must have been. She remembers the hairdresser’s laugh, the way the mirror reflected back her odd, pale face, the look of her wheat-coloured hair piling up on the floor.

“You texted me quite a number of times,” he says gently.

“Only a couple of times.” Yes, she remembers texting him once or twice. Well, maybe it was a few more times, she’s not sure. She just remembers a tightness in her chest, a clanging in her head that made her scramble for her phone, and the calm that came—for a moment—when he texted back a few kind words.

Her mind flits, moth-like. She looks up at the framed prints hanging on his wall. One of them’s a Monet, one of the garden paintings, with the waterlilies and the Japanese bridge. Agapanthus, or whatever. She supposes it’s meant to be calming, those soft, blurry colours. A small smile finds itself on her lips.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I’m just remembering something annoying Alex said once,” she says. “I have these posters on my wall in my bedroom. Like prints that I bought from the gallery, in the gift shop. And I said something once like, ‘Well, these prints are as far as my efforts at decorating go.’ And he kind of scoffed and said, ‘That’s not *decorating*. You’ve got *government advertising* on your walls.’ Because they’ve got a little logo saying National Gallery of Victoria at the bottom in the corner.”

“Can you believe that?” she says, looking at Paul with bright eyes. She laughs. “I mean, I like *art*, and he somehow makes that a bad thing.”

Paul stands up and paces over to the bookshelf. He looks down at her intently, with the same look he often has when she talks about boys. Like a stern uncle, dark with a kind of impatience, or maybe it’s pity. *Either you’re incredibly unlucky, he told her once, or you’re choosing the wrong men.* He clears his throat, but doesn’t say anything.

“What?” Faith says. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking...” he says, his silvery eyebrows furrowing. He takes off his glasses and looks at her directly.

“Why do you think it is that you keep spending time with someone who always seems to criticise you?” he asks.

For a moment, she looks at him and sees the softness in his eyes, the kindness in his grandpa face. And she stands up and wraps her arms around him, burying her face in his scratchy jumper. It’s probably against the rules, she’s sure of that, but she’s here now, and she breathes heavily into his arm, clutching to him tight. His body remains rigid, unresponsive. He doesn’t hug her back, but he doesn’t push her away.

## §

She meets Claire in her lunch break at a café near work. A sticky blackness is seeping into her head again, and she orders a double espresso to try to jolt herself out of it. Claire’s not so bad, really. Faith just wishes she’d stop looking at her like something that needed fixing.

“You’re fading away to nothing,” Claire is saying. She has a cappuccino in front of her and slicks a dollop of froth off her spoon, a dainty pink flick of tongue. “We should order something to eat.”

“I’ve got a sandwich back at the office,” Faith says.

Claire looks at her like doesn’t believe her, but she knows better than to push it.

“So, I was thinking we should go to a movie or something this weekend, just do something fun,” Claire says. “Unless you’re busy, with Alex or whatever.”

Faith suddenly feels bad about all the mean things she usually thinks about Claire, the little ember of irritation that smoulders inside whenever she speaks.

“I don’t care about Alex anymore.”

They both sip their coffee and let the lie hang there in the air.

“I have a date tonight,” she says.

“Someone nice?” Claire asks, all arched eyebrows.

“I don’t know. He’s a web developer. He might be nice.”

She watches as a paper coffee cup skips along the street in the wind.

“Sometimes I just get filled with this feeling. This terrifying urgency to get out away from myself,” she says. “Like I can feel myself inside my body and it’s not a part of me, and I need to get out. And then I panic and I feel like my brain could just explode and my skull would be in pieces.” Like being in a Munch painting, she thinks, where the landscape loops and wobbles, and the colours are all sallow, and there’s nothing but a terrible *aloneness*.

Claire is watching her face closely.

“What does your therapist say about this?” she asks.

“Nothing,” Faith says. “It doesn’t matter.”

## §

Instead of going straight back to work, she dilly-dallies. The city street is strewn with winter leaves, sticking to the pavement and people’s shoes. In her head, she’s talking to the Professor about love.

“It’s just a sickness I have,” she says.

“Being infatuated *can* feel like a drug,” he acknowledges. “It can be like an addiction.”

“So it’s not my fault, then,” she says. “It’s just chemicals in my brain.”

A susurrous wind makes the trees shiver, makes her dress billow against her legs. She slows her pace, lingers by the window of a lingerie shop. This walking around has made her tired. A thin layer of sweat coats her skin, even in this cold; she looks like she’s made from wet clay. In the window pane, her ghost is imposed over wisps of scarlet.

“Do you think you’re looking for validation?” the Professor says in her head. “Do you need to be attractive to be lovable?”

“I didn’t have a bad childhood,” she says.

She closes her eyes and sees his avuncular smile. When she opens them she feels that funny kind of time-lapse in her brain, synapses failing. These silky slips of burgundy inside the shop window, this gloomy street—for a second she’s seen this scene before.

§

She does have a date tonight, with a web developer who’s been doing some contract work at her office. Luke, his name is. She tipsily charmed him over Friday night drinks last week and now he’s suggested they hang out at his place, drink some wine, listen to music. Obviously she knows what that means—she’s not an *idiot*—but she’s fine with it, why the hell not. He’s not the long-haired, starving artist sort she usually likes, but he’s cute, this guy. He has shiny white teeth and big, muscly arms. He reminds her of a bear.

“It’s not about whether the music was *good* or not,” she’s saying as he pours her a third glass of white. By now, her wine-warmed blood is feeling vital in her veins. Her eyes are marbles and she’s gesturing with her hands a lot. “It’s about what it *represents*. Like the feeling that it captured. Like, I wasn’t even part of it at the time but I still know exactly what it felt like then, and ten years later when I was old enough to feel it too, that album still fit it perfectly.”

She’s being obnoxious, saying pretentious things, hearing the words before they’ve formed properly in her head. She keeps expecting him to say something to belittle her, but he just smiles in a way that she’s starting to find quite devastating. A cute guy with a real job who isn’t a drug addict—it’s exotic to her. She shifts a little closer to him on the couch, just slightly.

“You smell nice,” she says, suddenly. “All cedary.”

“Cedary—is *that* what it is?” he says. What a very strange girl, he must be thinking. “I don’t even know what cedar smells like.”

She shrugs, takes a sip of wine.

“Well,” she says. “I used to work in a perfume shop. It was actually kind of interesting, for a while.”

“Did you like it more than what you’re doing now?” he asks.

“I don’t really know what I like,” she says. She twirls the stem of the wineglass in her fingers, eyes fixed on the gleaming rim. “I guess I always used to kind of think I’d be an *artist*.”

“Well, you are,” he says. “You’re a designer.”

“Not really,” she says, making a face. “Designing catalogues isn’t really *designing*. You just push buttons and do what you’re told. A monkey could do it.”

“A monkey who was trained to use design software, maybe,” he says.

“Exactly,” she says, and they both smile. Her body is relaxed into the couch, and she lolls her head to the side to rest against his shoulder. He strokes a strand of her short, messy hair.

“Well, I always wanted to be a footballer,” he tells her. “But it turns out I’m better at web development.”

And they both smile, and she feels a surge of strange happiness. In this moment, she thinks, she could be a different kind of girl. She’s not that woebegone, skinny waif slumped on her therapist’s couch—she’s lissome and strong, and she’s kissing a guy who’s actually nice to her. His hand is in her hair and she can feel his heartbeat through his shirt and she thinks, yes, this is someone I could be.

§

Afterwards, his body is tired and entwined with hers. She feels small, encircled in his big bear-arms. The heady rush of the wine is fading, and she feels like she could be lulled to sleep. She lets her cheek rest against his chest and runs her fingertips along his warm skin. And then he rolls away from her, saying, “You be the big spoon, OK?” She dutifully curls around him, and now she’s looking at his muscular back and something bleak unfurls inside her. His breathing slows; he is falling asleep already. And she closes her eyes and she burrows into a familiar kind of misery, a hollow that welcomes her like an old friend.

§

She wakes from a fitful sleep to a surge of terror. The bleating red lines of the clock say 4 am. What day? Naked, she twists to look over at Luke, who’s sleeping heavily next to her. It feels like there’s a sparrow beating its wings inside her chest. The Professor, she thinks. She climbs out of the bed as quietly as she can and rummages through the dark to find her clothes, her boots. She needs to see the Professor.

Outside, the streets are cold and silent. She can’t remember the last time she was out at this time of night. The heels of her shoes clomp loudly all around her, slow and steady as she walks along. It must take almost an hour to walk to his house from here, but she’s got time. She walks and walks down the night-drenched streets.

Around the corner from Paul’s house, she sits down on a bench beneath a tree. It will be morning soon, she thinks, she can wait until then. The sky is still deeply black, but she doesn’t feel that cold, not really. She’ll wait here.

§

Then it’s light. She can’t remember seeing the sun come up, but it’s light now. There are people walking past in suits, clutching briefcases and takeaway coffees so it must be a decent hour. She stands up, wraps her coat tighter around her body and starts to walk.

It takes him a while to answer to the door. He opens it with a curious look on his face that becomes confusion when he sees her, all bedraggled and pale. Then he is furrowed, school principal-like.

“Faith,” he says. She shifts her feet, looking down at the concrete steps.

“Can I come in?” she says quietly.

He watches her, this lost sea urchin with messy hair, and he softens his face. He doesn’t say anything, but he opens the door wider for her, and she slips past him like a cat into the room.

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# Colour Wheel

by Sue Stevenson

The French writer Guy de Maupassant hated the Eiffel Tower so much that he regularly ate meals in its restaurant so that he didn't have to look at it. I very much admire his creative method for dealing with what to him was an eyesore. I wonder what he would have thought of Federation Square? Now that I have been basically living here for the past month, I must say it's grown on me more. And the river is so close, too. Now the weather is hotter, some of us have taken to sleeping on the banks of the Yarra, but Fed Square is our gravitation point, our kitchen, our toilet. We roam from one to the other.

Some things take time to grow on you. I wonder if Mr de Maupassant would have grown to love the Eiffel Tower? It seems strange now to hear that someone thought the Eiffel Tower ugly, but maybe that's just because the image of it has become so stuck and solidified and universally accepted as beautiful that lots of people who think it's horrid don't say so for fear of being thought to lack taste. But when it was built, Guy certainly wasn't the only one who hated it.

It is his particular way of dealing with an abhorrence that inspired me and kept me focused before the Shutdown. I reframed my soul-corroding corporate job, everybody's tedious consumer existences, into a hero's journey where the end result would be change from within. It sounds wanky but it worked better for me than eating any of the other bullshit stories the media fed me day after day. To make meaningful the meaninglessness of partitioned office life into a quest where the people entered right into the guts of the beast and ate it from the inside was what kept me sane while they sprayed stuff overhead every day to block the sun, in a cheap attempt to reverse the changing climate. Actually, no, that's not quite the flavour of the description I'm after. While Maupassant may have been able to enter into the Eiffel Tower and *eat* from the inside, entering into the matrix and eating *it* from the inside sounds like a cancer or a parasite, and I do not care to take on the behaviour of the oppressors. I was going to say the *old* oppressors, but really, I don't know if they are still here or not. Perhaps they are like fleas or parasites, and can never be entirely eradicated without killing off the host. Maybe we need shit like that so we know what the light is. I don't know if they have self-combusted. I don't know anything anymore. I know a lot now.

What I was hoping was happening to us was that we were heading towards a case of Bluebeard's wife: if the characters in fairytales all represent different parts of a person's psyche, then that story represents entering into the guts of the predator in order to disarm him, taking his power and recasting it into something else. Like alchemy. Transmuting the parasitical into something that fits us better. Turning the parasites into probiotics.

That was what it felt like we were all moving towards, slowly. Until the Shutdown. And then, everything just stopped. And then after that the Colours came. And now we're all disorientated twice over, because the Shutdown and the Colours are kind of opposite on the colour wheel. The Shutdown was like some kind of dark olive green. The Colours are like violet. I think the Colours have thrown me even more than the Shutdown. I had a feeling about the Shutdown coming. Whoever could have predicted the Colours?

Guy de Maupassant's name in International Phonetic Alphabet-speak looks like this: [gi d(e) mo.pa.'sã]. Phonetically, it would look something along the lines of: Gee Dee Mow Par Soh. The G of his first name is not a soft G, though, like *giraffe* or *geraniums* (neither of which I have seen since the Shutdown). It's a hard G, like in *gruff*, or *gouache*. I have seen much gruffness since the Shutdown. And gouache—well, I've seen a fair bit of that, too. I still have

a good stash. As far as I can see, I seem to be the only one in the city who is raiding the arts supply store a few streets over for gouache. If only they stocked premixed violet.

Since the Colours, I've had this continuous craving to paint with violet, which I am still finding awfully hard to mix myself from scratch. I am kicking myself for all of those times that I could have practised mixing colours myself but instead opted for the quick trip to the store for premixed tubes of Brilliant Violet.

The Colours that spilled out of Joe yesterday were mainly violet. They were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, surpassing the last lot of awesome colours that spilled out of someone else a few hours before that. It's like being stoned without smoking anything. Everyone, even ugly-hearted people, is looking beautiful, and it's doing my head in. (It has to be said, though, that there is obviously some rhyme and reason to the Colours, though I haven't yet learned how to read them past the basics. They are another language entirely and it's going to take some time. For instance, the snarly bastard who hangs on Flinders Lane and who strikes me as a Former Bastard-From-Shattered Ego-and-Rich-Parasitical-Privilege rather than Bastard-From-Mental-Illness—he has some shitty colours going on. Colours that look muddy, as though someone inexperienced in colour theory has mixed too many together and come up with Poo Brown. But even he has Cerulean Blue sparks, Deep Yellow and turquoise sparking beneath all the murk.

It does my fucking head in.

Where was I? Oh yeah, Guy de Maupassant. In his most famous story the villagers of Rouen peer through their shutters at an invading German army, people who are post-traumatically stressed, terrified and unable to control the evil that has come upon them. I used to feel almost jealous of these people for their terror. At least they had a visual cataclysm on which to hang their hats of trauma on. We had the nameless and faceless and unvoiced and mostly unrecognised invisible simulacra, the twenty-first century version that did not march in the streets of the West, but instead sold us half-ripe chemical-rich food because it increased profit margins, and oppressed us via greed and fearmongering and consumer sentiment. Of course, they oppressed others in other places by raping their land and instigating their wars, and sometimes outright killing their people. And so then I got to experience that familiar Western jolt of guilt when I compared my developed world nameless and faceless evil with their outright one. But then of course that guilt was appeased when the terrain levelled out, and the drones set in and so then for them too it was now nameless and faceless destroying, and then the drones started coming for us too.

The odour of invasion remains the same, though the world and two centuries separate Melbourne from Rouen. It swept through the houses and the inns, the parks and the kitchens and into the food of Rouen via people with big boots marching in the street where yesterday you spoke with your neighbours. But what happens when there is no need for big boots to march in because they can just watch you from the sky? And then what do you do after that when suddenly it all shuts down—the internet, the stock exchange, the planes overhead? This is how it has been for a month now. The Shutdown. A week of panic, murder and mayhem on Flinders Street, and then a couple of recalibration and relearning, and then the Colours.

Paradoxically, the Shutdown was when a feeling of freedom began. If indeed we are now free. But it felt like death, the way it must feel to a baby being expelled from the womb. We have been suddenly expelled from the invisible enclosure that has kept us from each other and ourselves, working to pay the bills, pay the interest back to the top of the pyramid. The craziest thing of course is that so many of us hadn't even known we were captured and that we were naive. And so many of us now don't know that we are free, if in fact we are. But I guess in the end that's what constitutes a slave. Someone who will stay in their cage even when the door is unlocked. You don't want to know you're a slave

because then you'll have to do something about it. Not wanting to know is like living inside a giant pigpen while the bullies roam outside, eating free range organic.

I am ambivalent now the internet has started up again. Or some sort of a version of it, anyway. That conversation about how the internet actually works was hilarious. I think it was actually the first time I really *saw* Joe, as he and Prabhu and Carmel all added their bits in to try to explain what meshnets were, and solar panels and generators and stuff, and how it was that we could now “get online” after a fashion. Except it wasn't like before, because now there are just pockets of other people online. But still, they are in France and Turkey and London, and so I guess that's the internet, right? There's just no one logging onto Amazon. And then other people were asking questions about things they didn't understand, though they'd used the bloody thing all day every day from the time they lay in bed in the morning, and who were able to walk around all day among real live people and not talk to anyone in front of them. You could see how twitchy people were, wanting to look stuff up on their smart phones, but of course they couldn't because we are conserving the electricity we have started generating in order to power the meshnet thing. There was something about that conversation between a technology-reliant bunch of wildly disparate people putting together all the pieces that made me laugh until I thought I was going to go maybe a bit hysterical.

I've been doing that a little lately.

So I can't help it, worrying about this new meshnet thing. I have gotten used again to only talking to people who are in front of me and now yesterday I tried to talk to Jasmine but she was using the connection, talking to one of the groups in France about what is going on there (much the same as here), and she had that distracted “Hmm?” that made me realise that she wasn't listening to me because she was too busy online and I thought, “Oh, fuck, not this crap starting up again” because even though we're all scared to shit we've actually begun to all learn to depend on each other to make whatever this is we're possibly stuck with work, and now everyone's going to go AWOL again.

I never did like technology all that much. I guess I'm one of the lucky ones now. In that respect I feel a little like the homeless people. They're the ones that people are turning to now for help on how to cope with “being out”—which is 100 times ironic, considering they're mostly homeless because of mental illness and drug problems. I'm not sure what they're going to do when all the chemists run out of their drug supplies.

This meshnet starting up has made me panic a little, because the silence of the lull made me able to think, even though I was worrying about what was going on in the places where the invisible pullers of the puppet strings dwelt. What if the beginning of the net is the slow decline towards degeneration again, this rejoining and rebirth? See, I have switched sides now. I used to be such an activist, boring everybody on Facebook with posts about our manipulation and the injustice of the system. Feeling despair at the number of people who didn't want to know what was going on around them. Now, all of a sudden, after a two week lull in string-pulling, I suddenly feel like I don't want to know what's going on out there. I want to bury my head in the sand. I have become, suddenly, a technophobe, where before I was just technologically resistant. I don't want to know what is going on because I am scared that the machine is still chugging away somewhere, and this freaky respite will turn out to be only be a respite.

Some say there is a great wheel of life that starts off beautifully. The golden age lasts for millennia and then people become complacent and slowly the wheel turns over centuries and centuries into degeneration, only to die and then be reborn again into another golden age. Like in Daniel's dream, where humanity is a person with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay and iron. Getting less valuable and more dense as you go on. As the world descends, it sinks into itself like vegetables into compost, only to be reborn from rich



soil into a new era that starts again with the golden head, where the first become last and the last become first.

Is that where we are at now? I don't know. But I must say, I think the Colours will make it so much easier to see who is who. Now, your flag is sort of flown all around you like a cape. Which is proving good in some instances and horribly exposing in others. The ones who I like to call the psychopaths, who probably worked in stock exchanges and nodded vigorously at the system that allowed them to screw other people for their own benefit—I like to think I can spot them, slinking around the edges of the streets. They have a surprising uniformity about them now, that regulation brown muddiness. But like I said, even they still have the Colours. And so my hope clashes with my contempt.

In comparison, Joe's colours are swimming together like a kaleidoscope I had when I was a kid, dancing in and out of each other in patterns that speed up and slow down according to his mood. I can see them even as he swims in the brown murk of the Yarra, shooting out and skimming along the water. They make me feel incautious, and I don't know if I like that feeling very much at all. They make me want to jump in and swim right over to him and merge our colours into Birrarung.

It's funny how quickly you get used to things. When the Colours first came it was as if a switch had been flicked, but dimly, so that they were just suddenly there, so faintly around people at first that it was like everyone had their own little mini fog around them, like Silky's hair in my childhood love, *The Faraway Tree*. I thought my eyes were beginning to lose their ability to function, maybe some sort of vitamin A deficiency.

There had been so many weird things going on by then, so much discombobulation, that it was only later that we knew that everyone else was aware of the fog but nobody said anything until the day after they first appeared, when the fog slowly cleared and the Colours started. I was busy making giant pots of dhal, and Joe said a soft "Oh," beside me, and sat down slowly on the chair that was in the open doorway of the kitchen, looking out on the coloured cobblestones of the Square.

I looked up at him, and there were these fine particles of blue and green swirling around and through the top of his head. Joe was staring at me, and then he looked out at Remadie, who was sitting on a table outside in the sun and who had colours of her own. Back and forth he looked at us, like a game of tennis. I looked down at my own chest, my legs, this swirl of orange colour that was pooling around my feet.

How do you describe the first experience of seeing your own colours? Seeing what has felt both beautiful and ugly on the inside, now suddenly borne outwards for others to see? I had dreamt of this before, lying on my bed, mourning for Ricky English, thinking that if he could just see how I was inside that he would love me. I would have relished the coming of the Colours when I was twelve. Now, their coming was the most intimate, scary and comforting moment of my life all rolled into one, and I do not remember ever before being among hundreds of people all day and yet nobody being able to speak verbally for hours on end out of pure awe, adjusting to the fact that suddenly we were as exposed as newborns.

I felt like a kid again in an adult universe where I didn't understand what it was that I was speaking so loudly, speaking that which had previously been hidden, needing to work out what this new language meant.

When I looked at Remadie, I felt so confused that I had to look away to avoid crying. The purple and grey floated and pulsed around her head and explained in one long, inarticulate crowded moment what was going on with her better than the chasm of incomprehension that had been our miscommunication style before. And I knew I'd been wrong about her, judged her harshly, would never have been able to see her ... purpleness, whatever it was, before. And so we played this triumvirate of tennis, Remadie staring at me, then staring at Joe, then Joe staring at me, and at Remadie, and

me staring at them both like some old comedy sketch until the combination of seeing them so raw like that made me turn away in inexplicable tears until I could compose myself to try to rescue the dhal from burning itself into an inedible mess.

That staring will haunt me. It was like my first experience of what romance is like. I'm talking about non-sexual romance (although to add to the confusion there is *something* going on with Joe and me. I just don't know what it is). But this was like global romance. See, I don't even have any words to bloody well describe it. I think of what the word romance used to connote—awful bloated violin music, the poor old violin taken hostage by Hollywood and TV commercials and made crass, a signifier for simpletons. Now with the Colours doing all the talking all that stuff seems even more crass, like children trying to speak of mysteries they have no conception of. The Colours have done magic. They have come in and cut all of my cynicism off at the knees so that suddenly I can't talk because there's no space for the words. And it's beautiful. But then I realise my own colours are speaking for me, and it terrifies me so that I want to run away. Even though nothing bad has happened. But ever since the Colours there's been a few delicious times where Joe has acted in ways that make me realise that he understands what I'm feeling without me even needing to say anything. And the feeling that rises up is so beautiful that it makes me want to go throw myself into that murk of the Yarra and swim to the bottom and hide.

Like, the other day I was feeling that familiar isolated aloneness, that cut-off chasm. Not the good sort of aloneness, but the other sort that makes you want to say fuck it to everything and go and impale yourself on a bong to forget, the way that I often did. I was feeling like that, and then I caught Remadie's eyes accidentally across the table and I felt like I knew from seeing her colours that she had seen how I was feeling.

This is *Remadie*, who I've clashed with from day one. Geez. Again, that beautiful ache. I wanted to run and hide and run and hug her so much that I thought I would twist up into a knot and all my colours would fall out on the ground.

I came across Joe yesterday as I was off for a morning swim in the river and to water the seedlings. I came round the corner and upon him looking at himself in the mirror. He was looking down at his arms where green and silver wove themselves round and round and swirled around his torso and head. He was moving his eyes backwards and forwards between looking down at the colour swirls around his hands and arms and then looking up at himself in the mirror. The colours changed slightly every time he looked down. They slowed, as if responding to his gaze, opening themselves up. Then he looked up into the mirror and they moved a little faster again, but in a languid sort of a flow like a bunch of rollerskaters around a rink. It was more of an intimate moment than if I had walked in on him jerking off.

Then he saw me watching him. And the colours, the green and silver weave like a beautiful tree, began to pulse. And then they began to change, to fade out from one thing so beautiful I didn't want to see it end into another thing so beautiful I didn't want to ever see that end either. Pulses of tiny red circles began flowing out from his chest, shooting out towards me. Then threads of gold and yellow, interspersed with the tiniest flickering little circles of violet, like tiny little stars that had little round middles shooting tiny little beams out from their circumferences.

Joe looked at me so shy, with the sun coming in the open doorway and puddling on the floor, shooting colours spilling from his chest. We smiled, and I turned for the river.

*Sue Stevenson would like to live in a cave, in Costa Rica and in basic financial comfort, not necessarily in that order. Her non-fiction piece "Blinded Me With Science" appeared in Issue One of Tincture Journal.*

# The Hermit Convention

*by David Harris*

From Mt Athos they trickle in.  
The slopes of Sinai shed a few.  
Himalayan caves disgorge the hairy ones  
sometimes mistaken for yeti.  
The high desert of New Mexico  
exudes two delegates, and one  
sneaks in from Manhattan, the Lower East Side.  
They drift around the lobby  
of an Iowa Holiday Inn  
avoiding eye contact  
but reading the convention agenda.  
A workshop: New Trends  
in Meditation. A panel:  
Getting Started in Solitude  
(the first ten years are the hardest).  
At the awards banquet, even the head table  
seats only one. The keynote speaker says,  
“Aum. Aum. Aum.”  
At checkout, awkward handshakes,  
explosions of volubility: “Good seeing you.”  
“Next time.” They nod at one another.  
And they file out, one by one,  
silent and smiling.

# Poets Anonymous

by *David Harris*

“My name is Bill, and I’m a poet.”  
With manly will he doesn’t add a word  
to round his final iamb. The others  
nod their recognition and chant “Hi, Bill.”  
All dressed in business suits: no jeans, berets,  
or sandals in this group, who must avoid  
that poet look, lest to temptation—no,  
no fancy diction, either. Just plain speech,  
no meter to distract them from business,  
from the harsh reality of keeping jobs  
and making good and looking at a tree  
and seeing only bark and leaves. Bill says  
he’s weaned himself, no more rime royal,  
only plain free verse. We all applaud.

*Until 2003, David M. Harris had never lived more than fifty miles from New York City. Since then he has moved to Tennessee, married, acquired a daughter and a classic MG, and gotten serious about poetry. All these projects seem to be working out pretty well. His work has appeared in Pirene’s Fountain (and in the Best of Pirene’s Fountain anthology), Gargoyle, The Labletter, The Pedestal, and other places. His first collection of poetry, The Review Mirror, was published by Unsolicited Press in September, 2013. On Sunday mornings, at 11 am Central time, he talks about poetry on WRFN-LP in Pasquo, TN ([www.radiofreenashville.org](http://www.radiofreenashville.org)).*

# The Intersection

by Gordon Kuhn

He was alone, seated in a cocoon of steel and glass at a traffic light waiting for the swaying overhead trio to favour his direction. It seemed to him that it had been red far too long. But it always seemed that way at this particular intersection. Today would be no different from all those in the past. Today would be no different from the ones to follow.

It was his choice to be at that intersection, no one else's. There were faster routes home, but he chose this because it was the slowest as the dusk deepened and aged streetlights flickered on in a vain attempt to hold back the gloom. He wanted to be alone in the silence of his car. He wanted to remember. Most importantly, he wanted to give her a chance to materialise beside him on the seat, the seven-year-old that haunted him; and she was late in her arrival.

This was her intersection. She had others, but this was the primary place she would meet him. This was where his mind drifted the most and the guilt for his past actions surfaced the easiest. It was an addiction, a love-hate relationship that he was incapable of freeing himself from; at least, he told himself that. However, he knew he was secretly enjoying punishing himself over the events of years before.

A sudden dash of snowflakes, thick ones, coated his windshield and interrupted his self-imposed despair. He turned on the Cadillac's wipers and with a quick swish the wet dusting was cleared from his view. The wipers dipped down out of sight and then re-emerged for a second swipe.

A loud *screeeeech* rose from where the rubber was being forced across the now dry glass. The man pressed his lips together as he reached out and turned the wipers off when they were halfway through their cycle, causing them to come to an abrupt halt before reversing, leaving a line of collected snow behind to slowly melt on the glass.

*Thumpf!* The wipers seated themselves out of sight below the windshield.

But more flakes swirled in the winter air, spiralling down from the grey soup high above to land and collect where the earlier batch had been cleaned from. And so, with a heavy sigh, he flipped the knob and turned the wipers back on at their lowest speed, not wishing to hear the discomfoting sound of dry, worn wipers being dragged over cold, dry glass, but knowing it was inevitable, just like her appearance was inescapable. He slumped in his seat ever so slightly, quietly resigned to events not in his control.

*Screeee!* The wipers swung out from their hiding place. He gritted his teeth and watched as they crossed the windshield, reversed and swept back to their starting position—*thumpf*.

He noted that his car was being joined by others who were positioning themselves alongside and behind his CTS where it sat on the poorly maintained side street waiting for the red to turn green. Clouds of white smoke drifted up from their tail pipes as drops of moisture leaked from the pipe ends and fell to the pot-holed pavement. The same was taking place across the street, but the cross traffic was not slowing, which meant they still had the green light.

*Screeee*—*thumpf*.

To distract himself, he turned the radio on to a favourite station that played only music from the 80s. Perhaps she wasn't coming, he thought. His hands on the steering wheel, one finger tapped out the beat of the music.

“Why do you do that?” a small voice rose from his right.

He went stiff. He did not look. He knew there was no one there, and yet the child’s voice was clear and distinct beside him.

“You did that just to be annoying. You do that at red lights when we can’t go. You don’t want to talk so I have to sit and be still and listen to a bunch of *that*.” The voice moaned its young owner’s displeasure.

The man’s heart jumped and a lump formed in his throat.

“Yes,” he said, “I am annoying. We both know that.”

“Well, my mother said that...”

“Your mother isn’t here, and neither are you.” He took in a deep breath and slowly sighed.

“Then why are you talking to me?” He felt the dismissive nod from the child next to him, his chest caving in response.

After a moment of silence between them, he felt her body shift on the seat. “Are these heated?” she asked, fingers poking at the leather beneath her, pressing down trying to find evidence of an electrical wire.

“They are.” He tapped the top of the steering wheel with his forefinger and looked at the swaying traffic lights above. *Turn, damn you.*

“I could use them on,” she said. “I’m cold.”

“That’s because you aren’t here.”

“Oh, bull crap.”

He looked over to where the voice came from. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why,” the little girl voice rose again with a slight whine. “Why should I?” Sarcastic, a slight huff tossed in for good measure. “You know as well as I do how it works.”

“Because I said...” He stopped mid-sentence, knowing he just stepped off a cliff and tensed for the fall.

“So? So? Because you said so?” she snarled. He needn’t look over, he could sense the cold scowl creeping up on her young face as indignation began to surface. “Because you said so?”

“Yes.”

“You have no right to say that to me,” she snapped.

He could see her now out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t want to turn and look. He knew she was there with her mouth partially open, staring at him. It was a favourite from her arsenal of artfully expressive looks of irritation, meant to cut thin stripes in his already bleeding guilt-flogged flesh of conscience.

A moment passed and then she asked, “Do you have the heater on in these seats?”

“No.”

“I thought so. I’m cold. Could you please...?”

“It’s winter, kiddo, it’s always cold. You were always cold. You were a Florida girl.” He smiled, then reached over and punched the button that turned on the heater in the seat beneath her and looked to the left at the car sitting next to him. The driver was watching him closely. In response, the man held up his cell phone and mouthed the words, “I’m on the phone”.

The other driver nodded then looked away.

“Idiot,” the man muttered, looking back toward the traffic crossing the intersection. “Must think I’m some nut sitting here talking to myself.”

“Still having anti-social problems I see,” she said with a haughty rise to her voice.

He came about to see her face to face. “No.” He looked directly at her. “I’m a combat vet. I suffer from PTSD and I feel uncomfortable when somebody is staring at me. OK?”

“Uh huh. You said that before if I recall. Somewhere in the back of my head I think I can hear the same words, the same—” She had a finger to her cheek and was looking up at the ceiling of the car her face twisted as if struggling to remember.

“Cut the crap.”

“Oh.” Her lips tightened and pressed into a white slash. “It’s quite all right for you to say *crap* but I can’t.” She crossed her arms and looked out the passenger-side-window.

“You know, for just being seven you are pretty smart but I don’t expect you to understand. You were too young back...”

“How would you know if I had been able to understand?”

“Because I...”

“Oh, because you thought I wouldn’t be able to. Yeah, you knew me so well, didn’t you?”

He stared at her. What else could he do? She had him and he knew it. After a long moment he wet his lips with his tongue and then began once more, slowly, “If you would give me a moment I think I can explain, but you are too angry with me and you’ll never listen, so why are you here now?”

That caught her off guard. It was a new manoeuvre that he had never before attempted. In every other encounter he would always just apologise without any attempt at an explanation. “You won’t listen to me so we really don’t have anything to say to one another.” He turned away and focused on the road ahead waiting for the light to change.

“Why did you leave?” Her voice was soft and had a slight tremble in it. It was the sound that someone makes just before a good, long cry.

He bit his lip and looked down at his hands resting lightly on the steering wheel. “Why?” she asked again.

“I...”

“You left without saying goodbye.” The tremble grew.

She didn’t see the tear that traced a line on his cheek, and he quickly wiped it away.

“I know,” he said softly. “It was wrong of me. I know I hurt you. But I didn’t know what to do.”

“You could’ve said goodbye. Simple, to the point, goodbye.” She curled her lips

“I—I couldn’t,” he stammered.

“But why? Why would you do that? You just left. You came over to the house that last night, had dinner, and then left. I don’t understand.” She spit the words out and the rush came. He wanted to turn and hold her. He wanted to let her pour her tears out, to feel her anguish empty along with the anger. She had every right to feel cheated, dumped, hurled from a relationship that she trusted in only to find it held no value. “My God,” he whispered. “I—I’m so sorry. I—never meant to hurt you. God, if I could step back in time I’d—”

“But you can’t!” She was clawing her way up out of a torrent of pure emotion, her face red and wet with tears. “But you can’t!”

“No,” he looked out the side window at the car next to him. The other driver was watching him again, but abruptly averted his eyes when their gaze connected. “Your mother and I we—” His throat closed up. “We—we just had problems and it had nothing to do with you. You are—were, my Termite. You were my strong little girl and—and I loved you.”

“I hated that you called me that,” she sobbed. “I never understood why you would call me that.”

“Because you were so strong!” he replied quickly, suddenly leaning forward. His eyes, round and wide, darted back and forth while he searched for the right thing to say. “I know you didn’t like my nickname for you,” his words rushed, “but it was meant with a deep respect for the person I knew you would become, who you turned out to be. I could see that in you!”

“If you knew I didn’t like it then you shouldn’t have said it. If you knew it hurt me then you shouldn’t have done it.”

“I simply meant that I knew you were strong and would do great things. I never meant it to hurt you. I never meant to do anything that would hurt you in any manner.”

At seven only, her anger had been raised. She met him head-to-head with fists raised. At thirteen and beyond—well—he never knew her then, but he was certain that was a sensitive age; being called the name of an insect at a younger age by someone she loved had fastened itself to her ego and she would never forget or forgive.

It was simply the mistake of an adult that could not be undone—like the separation and the walk away. It was done, over, like pieces of paper torn up and left lying on the floor to await the touch of a broom, to be swept up and out with the trash.

*Screeee—thumpf.*



“Dammit, light, change,” he mentally ordered, his eyes upturned to the swaying fixture suspended over the intersection, and then back at the traffic crossing in front of him. “I meant that I knew you were strong and would do great things. I never meant it to hurt you. I never meant to do anything that would hurt you in any—” He paused, the words catching in his throat.

“But you did. You did,” the voice said, “and now—”

“And now?” he asked quietly, staring down towards the floor of the car.

A moment passed in silence, and then another. He wanted to break the spell. He wanted to look into her eyes. He wanted to say to her how wrong he had been.

“I’m married,” she said quietly, the words delivered dryly.

The colour left his face. “I—I heard,” his reply came in a whisper.

“You could have walked me down the aisle—but you didn’t.” She paused. A small sob. “You weren’t there. You left my life and never came back. No cards on my birthday. No phone calls. Nothing.”

His fists tightened on the steering wheel. His knuckles turned white from the pressure.

“I have two children, a little boy and a little girl,” she added. “Like my mother when you knew us.”

He started to turn to look at her, but the blast of a car’s horn caused him to jump.

He looked at the intersection where a stream of traffic had been rushing through and realised the traffic light had changed. The car sitting next to him had pulled forward and was making a left turn.

The horn from behind came again, but this time it wasn’t just a slight beep. It was *beeeeeeeeeeep!* The man looked in his mirror and saw the driver behind waving a fist at him. He sensed the mist beside him was slipping away. If he could have held onto it just for a moment he would have turned and—

“It’s green, Daddy,” the little girl voice said from beside him as the mist disappeared. “You can go now.”

*Gordon Kuhn is a published poet, essayist, and novelist. A disabled Vietnam Veteran, he started writing while in the Marines to relieve the stress. He holds a Masters Degree and taught at the University of South Florida for ten years before retiring. He is currently working on three major projects, including one about a serial murderer that terrorised the community he lives in.*

# A Set of Neatly Folded Pyjamas

by Merran Jones

*Sod it. What's the point? Maybe I should just leave her. Go back up to Leicester. Start over.*

Nigel cuddled his whisky, his thoughts percolating. The engineering department at AndersElite wouldn't miss him. He'd already retired from any real productivity.

The ice in his glass jostled for space, as trapped and meagre as he. *I hate the miserable bitch!*

Gary, the barman, glanced up, as if he knew Nigel's thoughts; a road they'd travelled many nights before. With each lift of the whisky glass, Nigel seeped further into his remorse. By closing, he'd be lost within his hands, inertia oozing through his body.

*Time for home?* Gary would suggest.

*Mmph.* Nigel would lift his head, chuck Gary a floppy-lipped grin (or was it grimace?), then slouch out the door.

Nigel finished his drink. The whisky fanned over his tongue and settled in his stomach like warm coals. The mirror behind the bar reflected his cemetery face, his elbow-chin. He ran a hand through his hair. His fingers grazed the bald patch he'd sported for a whole year before his wife, Martha, had shared the news. Nowadays, he combed the remaining wisps over—a barcode on his head.

*You look ridiculous!* Martha would scorn. She put a lot of effort into mocking him; her mountainous frame looming, her chins trembling. Nigel hated those chins. She grew another for every significant anniversary. He feared they'd eventually rise up and smother him in the night.

Nigel lifted his glass and motioned to Gary for another.

“All right?” Gary asked.

“Yes.” Nigel's textbook reply. He never shared his thoughts. That wasn't the English way. When it came to personal affairs, maintaining a stiff upper lip—the best of British stoicism—was imperative. And so, Nigel internalised his pain with alcohol, night after night, in the presence of his pseudo-family, until the glass trays were stacked and the lights turned off.

Nigel glanced around. The White Oak was one of the few pubs that remained true to its original ambience. Burrowing into the landscape like a resilient tick, it refused to surrender its low beams, rickety tables, and questionable OH&S standards. Unlike the revamped architecture dotting the country, there was nothing deliberate in its weathered style. But it was more home to Nigel than 12 Tackley Place, Oxford.

“Excuse me!”

The Marks & Spencer blouse of a woman sitting beside Nigel snapped her fingers. She wore a look of distaste and a crimson lipstick—an attempt at roguish. It'd seeped into her lip lines.

“This is unacceptable!” She held up a fourteen-year-old bottle of Numanthia.

The best friend was in menopausal lilac. All sour and pancake-faced, she sat squarely next to the first woman—a united front of theatrical outrage. Obviously the Weight Watchers meeting had been cancelled, a £40 drink on the cards instead.

“There is *stuff* in the bottom this bottle. It’s disgusting! What kind of standards do you keep?”

“Firstly ma’am, the wine isn’t actually made here.” Gary said. “It’s ordered and delivered in bulk. In this case from Spain. Secondly, that sediment is the mark of a good wine. It’s the yeast and tannins that accumulate during the ageing process. That’s supposed to happen when it sits for long time.”

“There’s no need to be impertinent!” lilac snapped. Too much tempranillo hung in her voice, the result of a 14% wine on an empty stomach, save for a bit of gassy chat.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but when you pay that much for a bottle, it’s not going to be your average cask of fruity lexia.”

Runny lipstick glared. “But it’s disgusting! I’ll bet I’ve got it in my teeth now.”

“Me too! I can’t go back out looking like this.”

Nigel smiled into his glass.

“Well it wasn’t to our satisfaction. So we demand a refund young man. Remember the customer is always right!” Lipstick rapped her knuckles on the bar.

Sonia, the pub’s newest employee, hovered next to Gary, waiting for his response. She seemed too virtuous for such a place. Nigel tried a sympathetic smile, then gave her a wink. A mistake. One had to be very stable to wink at someone and not scare them. Sonia moved down to the far end of the bar. Fair enough.

Nigel threw his watch in front of his eyes. *Time for home I guess.*

He eased off the stool and shrugged into his coat. His knees buckled. This was standard. The alcohol slid into his legs by a certain time of night.

He sloped down the street, past a bus stop of white-collar employees. They stood in a damp queue, ties loose, weary from their day of ass-kissing. Nigel remembered his early engineering life, sharing the same clean-shaven eagerness. But after years in a dead-end cubicle, batting away emails like dogged flies, he found little difference between experience and cynicism.

The streetlights sheened silver onto the ground, spotlighting scraps of litter. Nigel decided to walk the long way home. He was in no rush. Martha wouldn’t care. With any luck, she’d be in bed by the time he got back, leaving him to eat his cold casserole in peace.

He passed bruise-coloured trees. A brisk wind hooked its fingers under his collar. Nigel pulled his jacket tighter and thought of their last argument. The previous night, he’d arrived home to find her bleating on about some new Egyptian cotton sheets. He’d automatically nodded, pouring two fingers of Glenfiddich. Dinner had been the standard rehearsed script. He’d thanked her and started to clear the table. Then the arguing had ensued—something about the way he rinsed the Denby before stacking the dishwasher. Apparently there was a technique. He’d missed the classes. The bickering soon focused on his unsatisfactory salary, his penchant for alcohol, and his previous misdeeds. At which point he’d

bailed, parachute in hand.

*I'm off to the pub.*

*Of course you are*, she'd hissed at his drizzly back.

Their fights started as thinly-veiled insults; a cat needling its claws into soft flesh. The needling would turn to scratching as the argument gathered speed, and would finally erupt in a snarling mess. Then Nigel would bolt for the pub and Martha would busy herself with housework, as if the smoothing and tidying could neaten the furrows in their life. But no amount of vacuuming could extract the years of resentment ground into the carpet.

Nigel couldn't remember when Martha's nagging didn't furnish his life. They were pushing thirty years. The lines that defined her face—around her eyes and either side of her mouth—were like parentheses, adding subtext to every remark:

*Did you take the rubbish out? (Or did you leave it for me to do, you shiftless bastard?)*

*Have you paid the electricity bill? (Or is it still sitting on the table along with my divorce papers?)*

Often she'd throw comments so bent they'd return to her with a positive spin:

*Did you sort the tax forms? Oh, no wait, I did that yesterday, then filed them neatly in the drawer.*

With every conversation, she sought to trip him up. Little wonder he doused his wounds with rum.

He remembered returning home once with a watery armful of lilies. They spoke for the sentiment that always caught in his teeth. He dripped off his jacket and went to step inside.

*Don't you dare!* Martha barked, her voice like winter. She glared with arctic eyes as he removed his shoes, ignoring the soggy flowers.

Nigel continued to walk. His limbs tightened as the whisky drained away. He headed down Woodstock, then took a right at Squitchey Lane onto Banbury Road. He remained in no rush. By now Martha would have fixed the curlers in her hair and plastered her face in Nivea. Nigel passed houses with a silent, dejected dignity. They radiated a weary sigh over an economy of Starbucks and mobile phone stores.

Nigel sighed again. *Where have all the good years gone?*

Back when they'd first met, Martha had been a vivacious young thing. She'd blithely taken his hand and given her parents the finger as they'd danced into the sunset.

Then came the line of miscarriages. *The cursed years*, Martha called them. She changed, understandably. Her humour grew inflexible, her poise forced. The trauma gathered under her eyes. She and Nigel finally gave up, the pain too great for either to continue. By that stage Martha was burned and couldn't stop picking at the scars.

They bought a dog: a meagre substitute. But rather than bring them joy, Colin caught their gloom. He'd lie motionless, a pile of bloodhound melting into the shag, glancing up at them with dripping eyes.

They began to realise their marriage had stalled. While their friends went through the sequence of nuptials, house, dog, children, they remained on the step before the children—disabled in the twenty-something stage. Love may have

been blind, but marriage was an eye-opener, and after the honeymoon wore off, they realised how stuck they were.

Martha piled on weight. The mighty scaffold of her frame grew doughy, a butternut pumpkin atop which peeked the cushiony pool of her face. She didn't run, so diabetes soon caught up with her. Stinging from her failure to perform the most base of womanly tasks, she tucked herself away into a world of gardening, Mills and Boon, and some changeable weather.

Nigel thinned proportional to Martha's growth, becoming a clothes-pole in a faded suit. He wore a sad expression, his face collapsed at either side. The ruckles on his brow burrowed deeper each year. Behind him trailed an air of hopelessness.

Before they realised, they were firmly in the grip of middle age, their lives as dry as toast, both living a marriage neither recognised.

That was when Nigel turned to Nancy, Martha's younger sister. Brighter, thinner, and more bearable in every way, she laughed at his chalky jokes. She had an infectious energy, similar to Martha's in the beginning, and talked with her hands, shaping big words in the air.

*Oh, look at the sunset honey! Isn't it gorgeous? Let's go for a walk in the park.*

Nigel drank in her spirit like nectar. She sent him cards at work, written in a flowery script and embroidered with kisses. They met on Wednesday evenings, while Martha was at bridge. As Martha played a winning trick, Nigel and Nancy stood in the Holiday Inn off the A44, staring at the rows of keys; each gaining entry to a cocoon of infidelity.

Nigel would return home smelling of someone else. He'd wipe his feet on the mat, wearing thin his excuse:

*I was working late on the Crossnet project. The deadline's been pushed forward.*

*Sorry, dear. I've been down at the Oak with the boys. The rugby was on.*

*Mmm*, Martha would reply, starchy-faced. She'd stand a foot taller than Nigel, arms folded, breasts squishing together.

*OK then. I'll come to bed in a bit.* Nigel would leave the room, suspicion on his back, heart rattling in his chest.

*Let me take you out for the day*, he said one weekend, after a fresh surge of guilt. *We could go see those cruziana lilies in the Botanic glasshouse, then have dinner at the White Horse. Sound good?*

*No, thank you.*

*Martha, I hate to see you like this.*

*Then close your eyes.* She left the room.

Despite patches of remorse that visited like a storm, Nigel continued to see Nancy. When she caught up with Martha every second Friday, Nigel prayed she'd keep mum about the affair.

But like old floor tiles, Nancy began to crack.

*This can't go on, she hissed down the phone. Especially now that—*

*I have to go. Martha's home.*

*You have to decide, Nigel!* Nancy yelled as the line went dead.

It didn't go on. Nine months later, the affair came to a screaming halt as all three met in the maternity wing of John Radcliffe Hospital. Martha, visiting her sister, and the bastard child she'd been so evasive about; Nigel attending to his lover, and his firstborn son.

*Nigel? What are you doing here?* Martha, carrying freesias and a suspicious look, eyed her husband.

Nigel's throat twisted into a knot. His mouth opened and shut like shears. He glanced into the ice chips, hoping to find an answer.

*So it turns out I can have children!* he blurted.

A year later, they still barely spoke. Martha left for a few months and Nigel learned the fridge didn't replenish itself. Neither did the toilet paper. But they both found the other's absence took a greater toll than their presence. Each evening, Nigel would open the front door and drop into an abyss, his chore of a wife still gone. They needed each other in their own tragic ways. So Martha returned to 12 Tackley Place, but a permanent chill settled in the house, lugging its cold into every room.

Nigel bought Martha anything she wished, desperate to right the wrong.

*Whatever you want, dear,* he said, hanging like a coat-hanger around the edge of her life.

*Yes, the Himalayan pillow arrangement was fine.*

*Yes, reupholstering the lounge for the fourth time would be fine.*

*Yes, a goldfish pond out the back seemed fine.*

*Yes, a conservatory to catch the August sun should be fine.*

With each mounting request, his voice grew less sure, but better a third loan than a petulant wife.

His son Gerald visited every second weekend. Sullen and long-limbed, he barely spoke to any of them—partly for being called “Gerald”, and partly for being spawned from a humdrum affair and a cheap bottle of merlot.

Fat silences filled those weekends as Nigel attempted to bond with his son.

*How about we head to the park? Kick the football around?*—the word “football” was awkward in Nigel's mouth.

*Nope.* Gerald said, hammering on his gameboy. Hunched on the sofa, knees each side of his chest, he resembled a large crane fly.

Martha would enter with a tray of ham sandwiches. She'd glance down at Gerald, unveiling her plentiful chins, and

scoff. *Like father like son!* At which point Nigel would return to the uterine safety of his study and computer.

The years limped along, but it was clear life wasn't working. Every little thing upset Martha. Misery ate away like emphysema.

*I'm this close to leaving you again!* Her voice a sharp needle, her thumb and finger close together; not a wide apart space, within which he could crawl back.

*How about counselling?* one friend suggested as their marriage careened downhill.

Martha looked at Nigel with a weary mix of distance and divorce. *Well, it can't make things worse.*

So they went to a woman called "Promise". Draped in hippy layers, Promise had a head shaped like an inverted tear, emphasised by her pixie haircut and saucer ears.

*Let's begin shall we?* she said, her many bangles jangling.

"Promise", Nigel said. *Is there a service guarantee attached to that name?*

*Pardon me?*

*Shut up, Nigel,* Martha seethed.

*Picture the marriage you want. The perfect marriage. How you think things should be,* Promise's voice took on the ethereal quality known to most masseuses.

Nigel imagined himself in front of his computer, a bottle of gin beside him. No nagging wife. No steamed broccoli. No Staffordshire plates on every wall.

They tried, but a stack of pointless sessions and £1,600 later, their marriage still struggled along, only with lighter pockets.

The Nancy/Gerald issue continued. Martha was quick to remind Nigel as she dredged up the past, week after week.

*How can I forget? I'm reminded every time I see my sister; every time Gerald is here; every year that we didn't have children!* The pain blistered from her mouth.

Nigel shook out his thoughts as he walked past the river. A thin sunrise oiled its surface. Dawn struggled to push the night back. Oxford was at the bare end of winter. Nigel flicked a cigarette into the water. It gathered among a lace of litter. He passed nodding pigeons pecking at kebabs. Nigel tilted his head to the muddy clouds. He'd walked out the night, the alcohol, and his ruminating thoughts.

He returned to 12 Tackley Place and forced his key into the lock. Upstairs, his side of the bed was still made, pyjamas neatly folded. On her side, Martha was a mountain of snoring sheets. Querulous by day and indifferent by night, she lay facing the wall. She always faced the wall.

Nigel sighed for a third time. She may have been a miserable bitch. But given all she'd been through, could he really blame her?

*Merran Jones is an Australian physiotherapist who has been writing since 2013. She spent last year writing the first draft of a book which is still sitting on her kitchen table. Since the start of this year, she's concentrated on short stories. Her work has appeared in: Alfie Dog Fiction, Writers' Forum, Seizure Online, Darker Times Collection Volume Two, and One Page Literary Magazine.*



# Cubans

by *Philip Keenan*

Even the smallest waves seem to produce a deep roar at night, as if they come from the very bottom of the sea. And they keep coming. You don't notice it during the day. Daytime noise is different and it mingles with the other noises made by cars going past and kids shouting to each other and surf carnivals on the weekend. During the day it's a visual thing. We stand in the kitchen and look out the big window and watch talented locals and the occasional interloper catching breaks and riding them in to shore. Families collect shells or build sandcastles or wade together to where the icy water reaches young armpits. They sound like clichés, but they happen all the time, things like that. We look out at the cool horizon and count the oil tankers which never seem to move and yet they appear as dots and drift in closer and line up outside the human playground, before slowly moving on, to be replaced by more tankers the next day.

At night the birds are silent and when the fishermen's torches go out and they go home all that is left is the sound of the rhythmic pounding. When we first bought the house, I found it hard to sleep at night. It's louder than you think it will be, and it's inexorable. Nancy didn't have this problem, which was good for her. She settled right in straight away. It helped her to sleep, she said. She said it was soothing and she told me not to think about it and just lie there and relax. I tried. But it's hard to try not to do something. Not thinking about the sea, just beyond the patio where Nancy and I have a cup of coffee and do the crossword together, was beyond me. It wasn't fear exactly, but there are powerful forces at work and it's so close and it's beyond your control.

I wasn't thinking about huge waves crashing into the holiday house and dragging us down into the raging water. Well, not exactly. But the beach was on my mind. I wondered what was happening out there.

Eventually I did get used to it, as I knew I would. The sounds of rolling and receding water at night became as peaceful as looking out and marvelling at the shades of blue or noticing the approach of changing weather, far out beyond the shipping.

Under a waning white moon one night last year Toby said something similar about the noise. It was just us—Nancy had gone to bed—and we were sitting on the patio in the smoking chairs, looking out at where the horizon had been some hours earlier. In the morning, these chairs are the coffee chairs, and they become the cocktail chairs in the afternoon, and at night they are the smoking chairs when I go outside for a cigar and a whiskey. Which makes me sound like an alcoholic, but I'm really not. A glass of single malt goes very well indeed with a cigar, that's all. And that makes me sound like I'm a smoker, but I'm not really one of those either. It's an after dinner treat which I enjoy while the Australian coastline is spread out before me—or, my part of it is. Anyway, this isn't supposed to be about me.

"There's a kind of echo, almost," he said.

"It's nature, mate. The awesome power of nature." I wasn't being entirely serious, in fact I was doing a nature documentary voice, but he nodded thoughtfully.

After cutting the heads off a couple of cigars I handed one to Toby and lit it for him while he held it in his mouth. He asked about cigar etiquette and I told him that you can do whatever you like when you're smoking a Cuban. He coughed a bit and smiled.

We spoke about when we were teenagers and one of the cool kids would pass you a cigarette, if you were lucky. You showed you were also cool, that you were an adult among kids, by inhaling properly and not simply blowing the smoke straight back out again.

“Now you don’t have to inhale,” I said. “These are cigars and you’re an adult. I wonder what happened to those cool kids anyway.”

The next day I didn’t see a lot of Toby. He praised Nancy’s special bacon and eggs, quite rightly, at breakfast and then put on his hat and disappeared into our vast, leafy backyard with the weekend newspaper under one arm. The backyard is actually not all that big but it backs onto a national park, so we call the whole thing ours. He found a clearing with some shade and read for a few hours.

In the smoking chairs, we smoked again and chatted. It was good to see Toby relaxed. He had a snooze in the afternoon and he was in the mood to talk.

“You’re my mate,” I said.

A stranger might have thought this made Toby angry. It was an obvious thing to say, he said rather forcefully. He gets like this sometimes: strident and argumentative, yet cheeky. The point I was trying to make was that we never see anyone else from school any more, but we’re still mates and that’s really quite a rare and even beautiful thing. I cherish it.

Toby agreed that it was important, but said there was no need to keep going on about it.

We sipped our whiskey and he told me his news. Not that he called it news. Work was hard and the pay wasn’t what they told him it would be and he felt trapped. The house was small and although she would never say anything, he knew Claudia was frustrated. She had been quiet recently.

I showed him the photos from our trip to France on my iPad. The wineries and the food—funny how food becomes more important as you get older—pretty little villages in Normandy, a few shots of Provence, sadly ruined by too many tourists now, the lights of Paris at night, The Eiffel Tower, Champs-Élysées, Arc de Triomphe, cathedrals, restaurants. Clichés again, but tourism is cliché as well, isn’t it? As I talked him through the photos, aware that holiday photos are only truly interesting to the person showing them, he made good comments and asked good questions.

He said he’d never been to France and thought he never would. He couldn’t afford to. He had to read about these things as he couldn’t afford to actually do them.

“You’ve missed out, mate,” I said. “You’d really love it. The chance to immerse yourself in the culture. Anyway, you’ll go to France one day.”

He looked away from me, out into the night, quiet and thoughtful and not at all happy.

“Look mate,” I said, “get that going again.” And I pointed at the ashtray where his cigar had rested for some minutes. Smoke was still reluctantly emerging from the lit end. “It’s a Cuban. Anything’s possible when you’re smoking a Cuban cigar.”

“Yeah, maybe I could retire early and not have to do anything ever again. Like someone I know.”

It was more of that truculence, but I didn’t take the bait. I just pointed at the ash tray.

The end of his cigar flashed redly as he inhaled, and a small cloud of smoke covered his face.

“Do you feel better?” I said.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

§

A big white house crouched in a bowl of greenery at the end of Boronia Avenue. The street was lined with thick, bushy Banksia trees which formed a haven for lorikeets and provided privacy for the row of houses. It was a little community of people who didn't bother each other. The street was wide and the houses were positioned with plenty of room between them and the overall effect was of a spread out and slower pace of domestic life. The big white house, number 14, was where Toby and Claudia went to live in the winter and they felt so free without the crowding of neighbours, and felt so relaxed with four bedrooms and a double garage, that before long they got a dog and talked about having a baby.

Over the next few months you could say I gave Toby some advice. Introductions were made with a few mates of mine and we talked about wise investing and planning for the future. All Toby needed was strategic thinking and confidence to be a player in the housing market. He needed to be convinced of his potential—that was all.

Downstairs at number 14 was a home theatre room which had a large and comfortable reclining lounge. The television was enormous—it was like a movie screen at the end of the room. In Toby's mind, this room was perfect. It was what he'd always wanted and he loved coming home to his new house at the end of Boronia Avenue, in the little valley at the bottom of the street.

The house was so vast that they often found themselves in different rooms, doing different things. Often Claudia would be somewhere else when Toby was watching TV on the big screen. They thought of this as maturely enjoying their own interests and being comfortable about spending time alone. Claudia read a lot.

The perfect bubble they lived in was disrupted first by Babs the dog. Babs used to “sing” when there was music playing and a female voice was singing. That's how she got her name: after Barbara Streisand. She was eccentric, but she was also charming and a very cute dog. All their guests agreed that her serious little face, when she howled her accompaniment to the music on the stereo, was pretty funny.

Babs used to shiver when she was in the home theatre room. This concerned Toby, who loved the idea of sitting in his armchair and watching the footy on TV with his dog and a drink in his hand. When Babs shivered he would pat her vigorously and try to cheer her up, but that never worked, and he would allow the relieved animal to go and lie somewhere else, somewhere safer, in another room.

And then Claudia decided the theatre room was cold. She said it felt eerie in there, a cold that got right into your bones. It wasn't like normal cold at all. Babs was a sensitive dog, Claudia said, and you should pay attention to the sensitivity of animals. She didn't want to go into the theatre room either: it was creepy and she said she wouldn't be going in there again.

Soon Toby stopped using the best room in the house as well. He preferred the company of his family to spending time with appliances, although the remote controlled blinds he had installed were fun to play with. It was a cold room but he liked cold as a rule and it never felt weird to him in there. Not that kind of weird anyway.

In a dream one night a TV reporter knocked on the front door and pushed past Toby and her camera crew followed her through the house and she threw open the door to the home theatre room. Inside there were blood stains and spatters and bloody drag marks all over the carpet. There were marks on the walls too. When he saw this forensic evidence Toby knew terrible things had happened to the previous family who had lived in the house. Of course nothing had really happened—it was just a dream—but it made him more aware of the way the house breathed and moved, the quirks of the building’s personality. You could even say he became a bit too aware of these things.

Experts were called in to examine the symptoms that concerned Toby most. A plumber came to look at the noisy pipes, and when the pipes were fixed and became silent the dog stopped shivering, thus solving that mystery. But the home still had mysteries. They weren’t violent or supernatural, but mundane mysteries can lead to a trail of problems, as Toby was to find out. Rising damp, unsafe wiring, termites, and chemicals in the groundwater are not the kind of things you want to hear about your home. And they all cost money to fix.

Number 14 became worse than a nightmare as a result.

§

And we were back on my patio at night with the waves lapping and smoke curling and we chatted again, Toby and I.

He said he didn’t want my advice any more. Never again, he said. His voice was hoarse.

“It’s all gone. I lost my wife. My dog. I loved that dog.”

“I know. You can get another dog.”

He didn’t seem in the mood to laugh, so I tried to reassure him.

“These are setbacks, mate,” I said. “In Chinese the word for crisis is—”

“I suppose you visited China recently, did you? Got a feel for the culture?”

I let that go. Toby was clearly upset. He said he was sick of being told what to do by other people. He said he wished he still lived in the old house, “that shitbox”, with the woman who used to love him.

“I was never really sure about Claudia, to be honest,” I said. “She never seemed quite friendly enough. She seemed bossy.”

“She didn’t like you either.” Now Toby was angry. “She called you a ‘pompous dickhead’ once.”

I pointed up at the bedroom window, where Nancy was sleeping, and indicated to keep the noise down a bit.

Very quietly he said: “I wish I never smoked your cigars or drank your single malt.”

“Why are you here now then?” I said, feeling oddly bold.

“Well, it would be wrong for them to go to waste. If they’re being offered.” He allowed himself the briefest of smiles.

“That’s the way, mate. Like I was saying, in Chinese the two symbols are danger and opportunity...”

We watched the sun rise together, which sounds a bit like the sort of thing that happens at the end of a film, but it did happen, and when we finally went to bed there was a new strategy for Toby and I was satisfied that I had done some of my best work.

*Philip Keenan is a writer from Sydney who is interested in the strangeness of familiar things. He blogs at Johan Turdenmeier's Miscellany ([turdenmeier.wordpress.com](http://turdenmeier.wordpress.com)) and you can find him on Twitter [@Turdenmeier](https://twitter.com/Turdenmeier).*

# The Trout

by *Robin Reich*

Students called him James-a, I sometimes called him Jimmy, but the name that suited him best was one given to him during his days at some English university or other: The Trout. I first met him the night I arrived in Masan. He limply shook my hand and then immediately proceeded to guide me around ChangDong, his favourite drinking area of the city. Well, guide isn't quite right. It was more like I followed him on his trouting adventures as he flowed around the concreted pedestrian streets of downtown Masan, past the elderly men vomiting at the outdoor *soju* tents, into every Western Bar that still allowed him entry, and onto the various barstools in front of outrageously dangerous bartenders who put on fire-eating, glass-juggling shows at the top and bottom of every hour.

Contrary to the judgements of so many Koreans around me, I found nothing exceptional in The Trout's physical appearance. But in Korean society, it seems height is considered the most redeemable feature in a person, along with age, although age is relative. The Trout was 197 cm tall. Everywhere we went together, young Koreans were openly in awe of him. Soon after I first met him, he obtained a Korean girlfriend based solely on the length of his body. It couldn't have been for any other reason. She spoke very little English and he spoke even less Korean. But magic happened and after being with her a few days, The Trout told me he was in love.

One morning The Trout left our shared flat to teach a class at our *hagwon*. I didn't have a class until the afternoon, so I stayed in our tiny kitchen-living area and smoked cigarettes. As soon as The Trout left the building, his girlfriend, who had stayed the last quarter of the previous night, fired up some J-Pop on the communal boom box and wordlessly sat close to me. She turned on her phone and accessed her messages. She freely wrote notes in her diary on particular days, which appeared to be spaced a large page apart, scribbling in Korean for about ten minutes. She was planning to be a busy girl. She knew I knew no Korean.

Alone together later that day, I suggested to The Trout that his girlfriend might be a prostitute. Along with her busy schedule, her working hours were the give-away. Although The Trout had never before considered himself in such a milieu, he instantly believed it true, that our shared assumption was fact, and he became genuinely upset, which genuinely surprised me. It turned out he was embarrassed, not because he was possibly dating a prostitute, but because I had figured it out before him. Without a trustworthy interpreter at our disposal, there was no feasible way to obtain the answer to the question of her occupation, so The Trout and I realised the question didn't exist.

The Trout continued to see his girl for the very late night and early morning sex. A few days later she left for a boat trip to China with friends or a flight to Japan for business, The Trout didn't know for sure which, though I suppose it could have been both. Or perhaps she just wanted to get away. The Trout didn't see her for the next two weeks, after which time he thought she had moved on from him. But after a few weeks more she was back on the scene. She caught up with The Trout in the Western Bar where they had first met and they easily rekindled their relationship over some highly charged Black Russians. She'd brought from China two *hanzi*-inscribed boxes of pills as presents for him. The Trout was told the pills were a drug of some sort, with effects similar to cocaine. Or so The Trout gathered.

After drinking *soju* for a few hours the next night, just the two of us, The Trout and I could no longer resist the allure of the boxes before us on our small kitchen table. The Trout said his girlfriend had advised him to take four pills to get high. We took four and then thought she probably meant for us to take eight, because we were twice the size of her.

After we had taken eight each, we figured the pills couldn't possibly be too harmful. After all, The Trout had interpreted that she had bought them from a vending machine. I asked him how the hell had he understood such a claim and he proceeded to re-enact their discussion. He spoke to her using the words, in English, 'buy', 'money', 'how much?', along with the props of a 10,000 won note in one hand and a box of her pills in the other, which he swapped from hand to hand as he slowly and loudly spoke the words. She replied, in actions only, by grabbing a couple of 500 won coins and feeding them into a vending machine that she had invisibly marked out with her hands. Or so The Trout assumed. I drunkenly accepted his assumption. Then we took lots of four more over the next twenty minutes until we had consumed twenty-four pills each in total. In hindsight, I wouldn't take the risk, in sober circumstances, of popping twenty-four vitamin C tablets, let alone one pill produced, in all likelihood, in an unregulated factory in an unknown part of China.

I passed out. I may have died if not for being awoken by knocking at the front door. Well, I thought it was knocking at the front door. I somehow raised myself from the floor to my feet to open the front door but there was no one on the other side. But the door knocking continued. I was looking up and down the empty stairwell of the building and still hearing knocking and I couldn't figure it out. I barely had control of my body, which seemed twice its usual mass. Movement of any body part was heavy lifting. I was a solid block of amazement while at the same time I couldn't have cared less. And the knocking sound would not stop. I closed the front door and listened for the knocking. I could still hear it. I opened the door again, again there was an empty stairwell, but the knocking continued, and my lack of comprehension did not abate. I gave up, closed the door, and turned around to see The Trout's girlfriend knocking at his room door some metres away. I could not localise sound. I passed the girlfriend as I went to the bathroom and told her to stop knocking, there was no way Jimmy was still alive, which of course she couldn't understand. I tried to piss but couldn't, so I made my way back to my room. Disregarded shouts of JAMES-A, JAMES-A! was all I knew as I collapsed into bed and unconsciousness again.

The Trout also survived. For the next five days we ran on autopilot, not eating, barely drinking, certainly not thinking. We battled through work by making the students play hangman on the whiteboard, in every class, repeatedly, day after day. It so happened that the owner of the *hagwon*, Mr Lee, the elder brother, was in town that week visiting from Seoul and wanted to have dinner with us one night. We informed the bearer of the news, the manager of the *hagwon*, Mr Lee, the younger brother, that we were both too ill to attend, that we both had terrible colds and needed rest. So Mr Lee, the elder brother, turned up the next day at our workplace after the last class had ended, medicine supplies in hand. The medicine was unlike any kind of medicine I had ever encountered. The Trout and I were each handed a small paper bag full of various-sized pills, each a different colour, of about eight in total. Mr Lee, the elder, told us to swallow them all together with water. We obediently did so and then marched with Mr Lee, the elder, into the street. We followed him for a few minutes. He walked so quickly The Trout and I had to run a little every so often to keep up. Finally, he led us through an opaque frosted-glass door that directly abutted the road. The door was covered in *hangeul* and it seemed indistinguishable from any other storefront that lined the long street we had partially walked along. I would never have known it to be a restaurant by looking at it from the outside, so I was surprised when wait staff warmly greeted us as we walked in. We sat at one of the eight vacant tables that filled the tiny eatery.

Mr Lee then told us his life story, of which I remember only parts. He went to Seoul National University. He was a high-ranking Navy officer. He was sent to America with the life savings of his entire family. He lived in New York and worked every single day for twelve years straight. I don't think he told us what work he did in the US. He came back to Korea and invested in a multitude of businesses with his old Navy and University buddies, including all types of *hagwon*. I had the distinct impression as he was talking, and it is an impression I still hold, that he was a spy of some sort, at some stage, in some place, but he never directly said he was, as far as I can recall.

That night I dreamt that North Korea invaded South Korea, via Masan. I saw them rowing into the harbour in Olympic-style eight-man boats, hundreds of them. I recognised them as North Korean military personnel by the precise orderly fashion in which they rowed, the perfect alignment of the boats, and by the distinctive peaked caps they wore. I applauded their surprising strategy. Who could have possibly foreseen they would invade South Korea from the South? The next day, during a break in classes, I told The Trout about my dream. He said I needed a break from Masan, and while I agreed with him, I told him I didn't have the money to get away. He told me not to worry about money, he said he'd shout me a trip to Gyeongju tomorrow, tomorrow being a Saturday. I enquired as to how he could possibly afford it considering he spent more money than I on any given day and our salaries were identical. He said he had loads of free money. Your parents give you money, I guessed. No, he told me, it wasn't that, then he went on about his high school friend Neville, who had found himself working as an investment banker or an accountant or some other finance related job, deeply ensconced in the money-for-the-sake-of-money profession. Apparently Neville furtively used The Trout's identity to illicitly gain profits from insider information he regularly obtained during the course of his employment. The Trout received a commission on the profits. Obviously The Trout had no concerns at all about the situation. I told The Trout he was stupid, that if he got caught he'd go to jail, and I couldn't believe how he could trust a person who engaged in such activities, trusted friend or not. What if Neville used his identity for other purposes, other frauds, I asked. Neville had probably borrowed money in the name of James Cook from scores of financial institutions, with no intention of ever paying the borrowed money back. The Trout was unperturbed by my outburst. He said he knew he was never going back to England, and so Neville could do in his name what he liked, as long as the free money flowed.

I allowed The Trout to buy my journey to Gyeongju, via Busan, and to pay for the entire two-day trip. The bus rides were horrid. There were no seats vacant after we had boarded, on either bus, so we had to stand, horribly hung-over, the entire way. We arrived at the dusty bus station in Gyeongju around midday and went straight to a convenience store to buy some bottled beer. The Trout opened a bottle, took a large swig, and asked me to follow him, he had something to show me. We meandered around the small downtown streets and just before we came to an intersection, The Trout told me to go on up ahead and turn left at the junction, he would follow. I did as he said and discovered, just as he had some months earlier, what he had wanted to show me. Around the corner was a huge grass-covered dome-shaped hill in a small deserted park. It instantly brought to mind the landscape in which the Teletubbies resided, somehow magically plonked down just around the corner from everyday city streets. I turned and saw The Trout laughing at the look on my face, the bewilderment I must have so openly displayed. Then we walked to the bottom of the hill, sat down, took off our shirts and began drinking. The Trout advised that we were sitting at the foot of an ancient burial mound from the Silla period. He said that we were now both aware of our little act of desecration.

After a few hours of drinking interspersed with poor imitations of Teletubbies, we went in search of accommodation. We found a cheap hostel and dumped our small packs. The Trout said he was going to the bar adjacent in case he were to find in it the man or woman who would speak highly of him during his funeral service eulogy, whenever and wherever that may be. Before he trouted away, he told me I should check out the area by bike, as he considered it the best way to experience the city referred to as a museum without walls. I said that was a good suggestion and left him to his needs. I found a place that hired bicycles and soon enough I was away from the modern part of the city and onto the gently ascending, uncrowded, narrow bitumen road that led to the tomb of General Kim Yusin. Nearby his tomb a statue of the General aboard a rearing horse caught my eye. I walked closer to it and noticed the General's eyes were serene, not combative at all, as he viewed to the west a luscious green valley, a thousand years from the city. Amidst that monument to fight, all was calm.

After a while I reluctantly got back on my bike and made the descent back into town. It was late summer, the full-



leaved trees by the roadside provided dappled shade as I coasted along. Then the shade disappeared, the city came into view, and I thought I'd better get back to The Trout, lest he trout his way to trouble without me. I found him, hammered, exactly where he said he would be, otherwise friendless. He was attempting to converse with the Korean barmaid. She obviously wasn't interested and she quickly gathered my drink order in order to be done talking to him. He cheerily greeted me as the crazy colonial boy. I told him Gyeongju was awesome. He said he was disappointed in Korea because it wasn't culturally any different to England. Life in Korea was no different to life in England. I asked if he was taking the piss, but of course he was right. He only ever hung out in bars and every bar is essentially the same, so I didn't bother with his nonsense any further. I wasn't about to be coaxed into an argument with a drunk. My reluctance to counter his stupid remarks produced in The Trout a faux rage, for he wasn't about to be denied a dramatic scene. He started to strategically yell curses such as Fuck Korea!, Fuck you all!, to the Korean patrons, strategic in that he knew in all likelihood they would not understand the mangled English he employed to cast his insults and he would amusingly get away with being a dickhead. He became too demonstrative as he continued swearing and he collapsed to the floor. He continued cursing in English as he flopped about until he took the well-meaning assistance of a few young Korean men, at which time he gently spoke and woefully mispronounced *kamsamnidas* as he was helped back into his seat. It was quite a scene, an act called diplomacy, and I couldn't help but applaud the hilarity.

*Robin Reich lives in Ulladulla, NSW and is studying to be a primary school teacher. He considers writing thusly: analogous to the task of an animator from the 1940s transferring hand-executed artwork from paper to animation cells, thousands and thousands and thousands of times, producing great depth. He believes his desire to publish writing is purely ego-driven. This is his first published work.*

# Between the Line

by Seabird Brooks

The baby has just drifted off when the phone rings, penetrating the deep quiet that descends at this hour. Laura follows it down the hallway and, as she often does when she's home alone, hesitates before picking up.

"Hello?"

"Laura?"

"Yes."

"Laura Lee?"

"Who is this?"

Silence.

"It's Kieran."

"Kieran! Wow, how are you?"

He doesn't respond. The line hums softly, a hollow sound, and briefly she imagines it stretching off into the night, stretching all the way down to St Kilda where Kieran sits alone, breathing just loud enough for her to hear.

"You're in Old Bar," he says finally.

"I am," she replies, trying to remember the last time they spoke. "I tried to call you before I left. I've tried to call you a few times since, but I can never get through. You changed your number or something."

He laughs softly. "I lost my phone, and your number with it. I'm always losing things. The battery on this one is almost dead."

"Well," she says, smiling, "how *are* things? I would've contacted you on Facebook, but of course, you're still too cool for that."

He laughs again. "Things are OK."

She pulls up a chair by the kitchen table and gazes at the darkness beyond the window. Behind her in the living room, the television flickers, ghostly and silent. "It's been two years," she says, still trying to summon a definitive last moment from their time in Melbourne together, a time comprised of late nights and live music and too much alcohol and too many drugs. Not to mention, on occasion, mornings spent waking up next to one another.

"It's been *more* than two years."

"Yes," he says. "And you've got a baby now."

She pauses, wondering if there's a hint of pain or resentment in his words. "A girl. Poppy."

“After Iggy Pop,” he says. “Good choice.”

She laughs. “Speaking of, how’s the band?”

“Well, the Stooges are starting to get on a bit, but Iggy looks as good as ever.”

“Stop it,” she says, still laughing. “You know what I mean. How’s Dane and Folksy and the rest of the guys?”

An odd clinking sound echoes down the line, and it takes her a moment to realise it’s ice rattling in a glass. When Kieran speaks again, after a long, awkward silence, all the humour in his voice is gone. “That’s a thing of the past. We broke up a while ago now.”

“But *you’re* still playing, right? Still writing songs?”

“I guess so,” he says. “You’re married now?”

“Not married,” she tells him, glancing at her watch and working out how long it’ll be before Joe gets home, wondering what his reaction would be if he walked in now. “He’s a good guy, Kieran. You’d like him.”

“Of course,” he says. “I don’t doubt it.”

“I wish you could’ve met him. But, I don’t know, it all happened so quickly, and you were on tour, and I couldn’t reach you to tell you I was leaving.”

“Is he there with you?”

“He’s at work.”

“Where does he work?”

“The bowling club.”

“Old Bar Bowlo,” he says softly.

Outside in the street, the headlights of a car sweep by, illuminating the stillness that settles here each evening. Laura runs her hand over the cover of a book on the table and thinks back to Kieran’s eighteenth, recalling vague images of a yard glass and disco lights and the club’s bright blue carpet.

“How long since you’ve been back here?”

“Jesus,” he says, “don’t ask me that. I can’t remember.” And then, after a long pause, he asks, “What’s it like there now?” But judging by the tone of his voice, what he’s really asking, or what she imagines he’s asking, is: What’s it like to be back there now, as an adult, in the streets we walked when we were kids? The bus stop? The beach? That place in the dunes where we lost our virginity, ten or twelve or even thirteen years ago? What could that possibly be like?

“It’s nice,” she tells him, her voice steady and composed. “Still the same, a few new shops here and there, but you know, quiet, peaceful, a little boring maybe. But we make do. I take Poppy for walks down the beach. Sometimes I pass by your old house.”

For thirty seconds, a minute even, she waits for his reply, her words slowly dissolving in the static. She realises he's not going to say anything.

"You should come back here, Kieran."

He lets out a strange noise, caught somewhere between a cough and a laugh, a sound that lacks definition but implies something deeper.

"Just for a visit, at least."

"Look," he sighs, "my phone is probably going to cut out soon."

"Where's your charger?"

"At a friend's place."

"A *girl*/friend's place?" she says, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not really." He pauses for a moment, and Laura hears the faint click of a lighter. "So look, it's been good—"

"Wait!" she says. "Come on, keep talking with me. Like old times."

"Like old times," he says, "but not really."

"Tell me about the band. What happened? Are you still giving guitar lessons?"

"Not anymore. I'm pouring beers a few nights a week at the Cannibal Club."

"At the *Cannibal Club*? Really? You guys used to pack that place out."

He exhales long and hard, and Laura can't help but picture him standing in a cloud of cigarette smoke, staring out at the city. "Yeah, like I said, like old times, but not really."

"It's not so bad," she tells him. "There's nothing wrong with a job like that."

"I'm twenty-nine next week," he says. "Did you know that?"

"Of course I did. I haven't forgotten your birthday. It's exactly one month before mine. I tried to call you for it last year, and I would've tried to call you this year too."

"Yeah, well, I'm fucked if I know the answers, Laura."

"What answers?"

"Your baby," he says, "Poppy. What's it like?"

Instinctively, she turns and looks down the hall, listening for Poppy's voice. "What's the baby like? Is that what you're asking?"

"For you? I mean, what's it like for you?" He stops, searching for something. "You must feel like you've really done

something. Something special.”

“I don’t know, Kieran, I don’t really think about it like that. It’s just something that happened, and I love her, sure, but... you don’t think about it, you just do it, you know?”

“What about him?” he asks.

“Joe?”

“Joe. What’s it like for Joe?”

Laura runs her fingers through her hair, trying to understand what he’s getting at, trying to reconcile the cool, intelligent person she’s known for so long with the voice on the other end of the line. “It’s the same thing, Kieran. I don’t know what to say. He loves her. We both do. You should visit us and see her for yourself.”

He laughs. “You know, I really thought we’d be young forever. I did. The way we lived our lives down here. But I guess that’s the proof. Poppy’s the proof.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“The band too,” he says. “Mum and Dad moving to Queensland. It’s all proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“Proof that there’s no secret. That’s the secret, isn’t it? You lose things and you don’t get them back.”

“I’d love to see you again,” she tells him. “I really would.” She wants to put her arms around him, calm him down. “Come visit us. We can walk the baby, have a drink or two. It’ll do you good.”

“That’s it but, isn’t it?” he says. “It all just becomes a thing of the past.”

“Promise me you’ll come see us.”

“You lose things,” he says again. “You lose things an—“

His battery dies there, just as the baby wakes crying, and Laura is talking to no one when she says, “But you find new things too.”

*Seabird Brooks is a fiction writer from the South Coast of New South Wales who is currently backpacking through South America. His stories have been published by Verity La, Seizure, and Readers’ Digest. He was awarded runner-up in the 2014 Josephine Ulrick Literature Prize.*

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