

TINCTURE JOURNAL



Issue Seventeen

Autumn 2017

Tincture Journal, Issue Seventeen, Autumn 2017

ISBN 978-0-9943503-6-7

ISSN 2201-7593

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Editorial

by *Daniel Young*

With the long hot Australian summer still burning fiercely here in Brisbane, it's hard to think of this as the Autumn issue, but here we are. A few months ago, while reading submissions, I tweeted: "the skin as map / body as landscape metaphor feels very overdone". Images came to mind of black-and-white cinema advertisements tracing a body's contours in close-up, making them look like geographical formations in order to sell moisturiser (or something); or slightly more obscure references like lyrics from the song 'Cardiac Atlas' by June of 44: "he finds his way with a map of arteries / he makes camp just above your heart". So yes, it felt overdone to me, but I was quickly forced to qualify this with another tweet: "but I'm reading a piece by someone who's doing it well, so who cares?"

Who cares, indeed. I was tweeting about the opening of Charlotte Adderley's non-fictional 'Ethanol, Eschar', which executes what could be a tired metaphor so beautifully that the first few paragraphs left me breathless. This is not cliché, it's great writing. Beyond that, it's the harrowing story of a burn victim and the advanced treatments offered by the Queensland Skin Bank.

Meanwhile, avoiding cliché in editorials is a tough ask in itself, which is why I often keep these as short as possible or outsource the job altogether, such as in last issue where Kirby Fenwick's editorial discussed [literary journals as a space of dissent](#), a topic raised by Patrick Allington in his research and at last year's Small Press Network Independent Publishing Conference. Would it be clichéd to think of each literary journal as a unique geographical formation in Australia's—and the world's—literary landscape? Each fulfilling its own function, each shaped in a particular way by the stresses of the weather around us: costs, funding concerns, history, readership, audience demographics, distribution models, and the varying energies and competing commitments of the staff. Clearly, landscapes are on my mind. The underlying constant, what we all share, is a love of literature, of providing space for new work, particularly work that may struggle to find a home elsewhere. I certainly hope that's what we're doing.

My recent preoccupation with landscape metaphors was further reinforced when I read Gerald Murnane's somewhat-linked story collection, *Landscape with Landscape*, republished by Giramondo in 2016. In 'Landscape with Freckled Woman', he writes:

The young man believed he might draw a map of a city beyond the reach of normal perception and only faintly recalling the city where he had lived his early life. The suburbs and

districts in the new city would be sized and spaced according to the intensity of the poetic feeling he had once felt in this or that part of another Melbourne. Thus, a huge glowing core of what he called vivid imagery—with its centre where Fitzroy might have been—would spread outwards and drive to the farthest margins the shrivelled remains of places where a young man had once tried and failed to feel what was expected of him.

We don't publish themed issues of *Tincture Journal*—or we haven't to date—so I won't proclaim that landscapes are a theme you'll find running through all of the pieces within. But maybe now, since you've read this far, you will. It might be unavoidable. Perhaps the huge glowing core of vivid imagery won't materialise in any other way.

This issue starts with the first in a series of postfiction pieces by Johannes Klabbers that we'll publish in 2017 under the title 'Moederland'—a series concerned with Johannes's return to his motherland after thirty-six years living in Australia, a shift of landscape that brings with it questions of belonging. We're also beginning a new series by Alexandra O'Sullivan, 'Political Reflections' starting with 'The Day Trump Won', which examines the intersection between the personal and the political, and how macro events can impact our lives in myriad ways.

And, of course, there's the very best fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry that we've been able to find. Please, enjoy the view.

PS: in case you're wondering about the significance of the duck on the cover, there isn't one. They just make me smile.

Some Days

by Rebecca Jessen

it's like the sun never sets here. endless horizons scarred pink. home is a big screen TV and a three-tier cat scratcher. Mum is always on high terror alert. March mornings are for scraping ice off the windscreen. I don't miss the morning cold. or the way the wind always blows in my hair. people feed the birds here. day old white bread strewn across public lawns and private parks. do you ever notice the way Mum never stops at roundabouts. or the way your little sister dances. like she's an extra in a music video. when she grabs your hand to dance suddenly she's eighteen and hitting the clubs with her girls. do you notice the way it makes you feel. like the daggy older sister who wears her hair too short and worries too much. do you notice the stale acidic scent of cat and cigarettes. that is distinctly Mum's place. the way you can miss people even when you're with them. the way that visiting home can take you back a decade. you see not how this place has changed but how you have changed. do you ever notice the way Mum's place is like a time capsule. yet to be sealed. never buried.

Rebecca Jessen lives in Brisbane. She is the award-winning author of Gap (UQP, 2014). In 2015 she won the QLD Premier's Young Writers and Publishers Award. Her writing has been published in Overland, Meanjin, Going Down Swinging, The Lifted Brow, Tincture Journal, and many more. Rebecca blogs at becjessen.wordpress.com.

Moederland

Part One: I'm Not From Around Here

A postfiction series by Johannes Klabbers

I

Belonging can be fleeting. I feel it for the first time briefly, six months after moving back to Europe, in the baker's on Christmas Eve queueing for a *tulband* cake—as especially requested by Moeder who never asks for anything, almost always refuses everything, and only ever gives you what you mostly don't want.

I'll bring a *stol* too, I tell Moeder on the phone.

—Oh no, I already have two.

Yes but this one is from the best baker in town. Yours are from the LIDL, two for the price of one? And no extra charge for the E202.

—What's E202?

It stops mould growing.

—Oh I should get some for the bathroom!

That deserves an audible giggle. I dutifully oblige.

Maybe you should keep your *stol* from the LIDL there!

I can tell she's smiling from her voice.

—Anyway, how do you know that baker doesn't put it in his *stol*?

They don't need to. It doesn't get a chance to grow mould. People buy it the day after it's baked and then they eat it all!

It takes a good hour to get to the front of the queue but no one really minds. The atmosphere is *gemutlich*. People who come into the shop and accidentally or on purpose try to jump the queue are gently reproached with a joke and elaborate hand gestures. The old bulldog who lives around the corner waddles in and subjects customers' shoes to random sniff tests. But

when an *appelbol* is dropped to the floor my suggestion that it would make a suitable treat for the dog is not taken up. The thing is, no one can tell that I'm not from around here by the way I speak. As long as interactions are limited to a conversation about the weather or an order for Christmas cakes, no one would know. I could pass any shibboleth test. But I am unable to find words to voice the immense depth of my sadness.

The thing is, I have been here before. I was a child here.

II

The bare trees are outlined in white this morning. As day breaks I think it's an illusion at first, a trick of the famous Dutch light, but no, there it is. A heavy frost overnight has turned the humid air into ice and coated the trees in white, creating a chocolate-box landscape outside my window.

What is it to belong? I lived more than half of my life in Australia but it wasn't until the last few years that I felt I belonged there. And now I live in Europe. It is winter. It's not so much the cold—thanks to global warming it doesn't get that cold anymore—but the greyness that contributes to this feeling of otherworldliness. Belonging is not about longing. I don't long for 'Australia'. From my current vantage point I am sad to say Australia seems somewhat pointless. But I long for blue (cobalt, emerald, turquoise) skies and the smell that a leaf from a lemon-scented gumtree releases when you crush it with your fingers as you walk in the early morning before it gets too hot. That's not nostalgia, it's a simple fact.

What have I come here to find? I have no idea, but one thing I've discovered is that I don't belong, even though this is where I lived for the first fourteen years of my so-called life. Just there is the bridge over the canal where I told Irene de Groen that I loved her. The shop where I bought her an ice cream is gone, but over here is where I watched her eat it.

The thing is, the ones who have been here all along can withhold the belonging.

III

Random walks reveal half-remembered spaces, streets, buildings, and sometimes I hear the voice of my grandmother, clear as day, say a street name: *Predikherenstraat*. As I turn left and right here and then right and left there, connections become apparent between the streets and buildings that I never knew existed.

Half the city was torn down in the late sixties/early seventies and replaced with buildings that now too are being demolished.

What does it mean ‘to belong’?

Soon after I turned fourteen, my parents decided to move from what was then widely thought of by the English as ‘The Continent’ to England. They asked me if I wanted to go and I agreed, but asking someone without any real agency to agree to something when they don’t have another viable option is not very meaningful.

Australians don’t tend to think of distances between European countries as significant, and geographically they aren’t, but culturally and politically all those years ago—and so it seems again now—they were as far from each other as Australia and England; perhaps even farther because of the language differences.

Also, the little country where I was from had only recently been invaded and occupied by the fascists that had come to power in the east. More than a hundred thousand of its people were told by men with guns to leave their houses and put on trains bound for extermination camps. Only a few thousand came back.

I spent a lot of time in my childhood years in the company of an old *Mischlinge*—a half Jew—who would have been dead too had her race been recorded in the usually meticulously maintained population register, or if she’d gone to register as Jews and half Jews were required to do under the Nazi laws introduced soon after the invasion, or if she’d worn a star as she was supposed to do. But my grandmother wasn’t someone who did what she was told. So there. It runs in the family. That’s why I am here.

The old people never tired of talking about what happened during the war but they didn’t speak about what didn’t happen or what could have happened to them. And no one told me about what *did* happen to over a hundred thousand others who lived around here, spoke the same language, looked the same as us.

IV

I’m not from around here either. I’m from over there.

What does it mean to be *of* a place, to be *from* somewhere? Where are you *from*? people would ask me, mispronouncing my name. I never knew what to say. I changed my name to suit them, to make it easier for them to say. You can be different in so many ways, in what you wear or how you walk, or by what you say and what you don’t say and in Australia too, I was an outsider, with my strange name and unconventional ways of being a person. I lived there longer than anywhere else but am I *from* Australia?

On my frequent visits to the *Moederland* I felt awkward, like an intruder. People didn't understand where I'd come from, or why I went there.

In Australia, do people live in houses? My aunt wants to know.

—No Auntie, they live in huts.

I doubt if she'd ever left Holland.

Until a few years ago I didn't have an Australian passport. I had a permanent residence visa because I was married to an Australian. The marriage didn't last but I would lose the visa only if I lived outside of Australia for any length of time. I never intended to go back to Europe but. (They don't put 'but' at the end of sentences here, neither in Dutch nor in the odd form of English most people speak.) When the law changed to make it possible for Dutch subjects to hold dual nationalities, I became an Australian citizen. I'd hung on to my Dutch passport because the idea of having to apply for a visa to go to the country where I was born and raised and where my mother still lived was not something I could contemplate, but not because I felt like I belonged there.

And now I am here: a foreigner in my own country.

The thing is, belonging can be withheld, and it can be withdrawn. Someone can just decide one day that you don't belong here and if there are enough of them and they have guns and they're pointing them at you then it's true and it's as true on this side of the world as it is on the other.

When they came back—the ones that did—they found other people living in their houses, sitting on their chairs, eating at their tables. They told them to go away.

Johannes Klabbers is thinking through what it could mean to write postfiction. This is the first of four postfiction pieces to be published in Tincture in 2017. See also postfiction.space.

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

Political Reflections

Part One: The Day Trump Won

Non-fiction by Alexandra O'Sullivan

The day Donald Trump won the election, I stepped off the train at Flinders Street and began—according to Google Maps—a twelve-minute walk along Swanston St towards Embiggen Books. I could have caught a train to Central, and had a four-minute walk, but I was more familiar with Flinders Street, and I was feeling particularly in need of that familiarity. Those lovely old steps with the view of Fed Square and Young and Jackson, the air and the sound of the tram bells, all accessible within moments of stepping off the train. It's not like the claustrophobic design of Central, getting off the train underground and negotiating the escalators that climb endlessly up and down the different levels, until you finally manage to spiral your way out onto the street.

I was also glad of the time to soothe myself with the pleasure of city walking, a rare treat for me, and mentally prepare for the literary event I was going to. I wasn't performing, but socialising is a performance for me. The streets were busy. Distracted by a group of buskers, I walked into the back of a man, then repeated "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," until he eventually turned to forgive me. I was feeling shaken. It was a day that had shaken me. Not just me. It had shaken my feminism.

It had been kicking along just fine. I'd been writing nifty little articles about gender socialisation, motherhood and rape culture, and standing on a sturdy foundation of beliefs. I thought the world understood me, and vice versa. But that was just the microcosm of social media holding up its mirror. Trump's victory had smashed me right through it to the other side, and there I was, cut and bleeding, with this new ground shaking underneath my feet.

It was a relief to step through the door of the book store and back into my world. The world of writers and literature nerds. This crowd was my crowd. But as a writer steeped in self-doubt, I have only to change the order of the words to change the meaning. Was this crowd my crowd?

I scanned the room and spotted someone I knew, but although she waved back, she made no welcoming gesture for me to join her, so I didn't. Instead I skirted around the edges, pausing by the snack table to feign casual nibbling, before finding an empty chair and claiming it. There was a woman hovering above the chair beside me, and when she caught my eye I made a welcoming gesture and said, "feel free to sit," as if I owned all the chairs in the room. She sat and we started talking. She told me she'd cried when she heard the election results. I nodded in

agreement, but I haven't cried for years. It feels too much like giving in. She was classically beautiful and studying a doctorate, and I wondered how my bachelor's degree and cheap haircut was holding up beside her.

I'd had my hair cut just a few days before. The hairdresser was a brisk middle-aged woman who didn't listen to my request for a short bob. She cautiously snipped at the edges, leaving it far too long, whereas I wanted the freedom of a brutal cut. *Just lop it off!* I wanted to shout. Instead I'd murmured timidly, "maybe a little shorter, maybe a little shorter," until I felt I couldn't ask any more from her. Somehow it had ended up uneven and I agreed that I must have been sitting with my legs crossed—I hadn't. "See what it does!" her scissors flashed in the mirror as she snipped at the longer side.

§

The publisher running the event gets up to talk about an upcoming book that I have written a piece for. I want to tell the woman beside me that I'm in it, but there's no way of doing that with any level of dignity. Instead I listen to the publisher talking about motherhood—the topic of the book. She's telling a harrowing story of giving birth to a dangerously premature baby. I'm pulled into the world of neonatal wards and tiny babies struggling to gain the weight they need to join us out here. Tears press against the back of my eyeballs.

When she finishes, I stagger towards her like someone drowning. She smiles at me quizzically.

"You look familiar?"

"We met at Scribble Creative, and I wrote the thing for your thing."

She doesn't comment on the thing I wrote for her thing. *She hates it she hates it she hates it.* I gesture towards the stage.

"That was—"

I knock my fist against my chest. I am all feelings and no words tonight. She smiles and nods at me, understanding. We talk for a bit, then suddenly a light breaks over her face.

"Hang on! You're Alex O'Sullivan, you wrote a piece for the book! I loved it!"

§

Later, I'm leaning against a table of books and sipping from a glass of wine, listening to the open mic section that I'm too scared to put my name down for. The performers are angry tonight.

They're reading political poems from their iPhones. They're striking at the zeitgeist.

I want to talk to everyone in the room. These beautiful people who can articulate so clearly and angrily the mess of the world right now. For me, it's less clear, and cautiously angry. After the readings, I end up talking to a guy who is working on a PhD about how nature can be art. He mentions Nabokov, and I feel immensely proud that I can chime in knowledgeably about his work with butterflies (thank you *QI*).

I get invited by a friend to the after-event dinner. I'm chuffed. They want me to join them. Do they want me to join them?

"Can I join you?" I ask as I trail out after a different publisher and a celebrated feminist poet I've been wanting to meet for a long time.

"Yes."

The publisher avoids my eye and I feel like I'm in high school all over again. My idea of what defines the cool kids may have changed, but even at thirty-one years of age, my desire to be with them has not.

At the restaurant, I step on the feminist poet.

I had just finished telling her how much I'd been wanting to meet her. She had listened sweetly. She's child size, and I had been babbling and trying to illustrate how much I looked up to her, as I towered over her. Then she had turned to enter the dining area and I stood on her heel, pulling off her shoe.

Fucking hell, I'm Trump.

I should probably leave now, before I do any more damage.

§

Later, I walk towards Flinders Street to start the long journey back to Frankston. I will use this time to start making sense of Trump's victory, to turn the arguments over and over in my mind, until they refuse to turn anymore, and then I will turn them over some more. I know it's not as simple as choosing to be on one side or the other. If it was, it would be a no-brainer. You have to find a way to smash through your own mirror, even if you get hurt doing so, and access the other side. Or else how do you create change?

My editor had wanted me to write something about the election, but I know this thing will not be her thing. This indecisive rambling. Alone again, and walking, the questions that had been

crouching in the back of my mind could finally come out of hiding. Had we done this to ourselves? Had we spent too much time gazing at our own reflections and shouting at everyone who didn't see what we could see? Had that created this terrible imbalance?

Had I been sitting with my legs crossed this whole time without realising?

Good intentions are never enough.

I'm always trying to do the 'right thing'. I was buying eggs at the supermarket the other day, and there was a woman hovering over the display in front of me. She was reaching her hand out to get a carton, then changing her mind, pulling her hand back. "It's hard, isn't it," I said to her in sympathy, "trying to find the most ethical one. How do you know?" She gave me a blank stare, and I realised that maybe she was pausing for a whole different reason. Maybe she was concerned with the quality of the eggs, or the price. I leant past her to grab a carton of free range, murmuring "sorry, sorry."

§

The morning after election day, I pull the doona over my head, and lie like that for a long time, reluctant to venture out and turn on the TV. I don't feel ready to face the world, the big world this time, not just the one I think, I hope, I maybe fit into.

I get up eventually, and poke around the kitchen making myself breakfast. I slide an egg off my spoon into the boiling water, then press my phone and ask Siri to set the timer for three minutes. "Setting timer three minutes," she tells me in her cool, impersonal voice. Then she adds, "don't overcook that egg." For some reason that last part, her awareness of what I'm doing, and her calm advice, makes me want to cry.

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

The Need for Poetry

by Mindy Gill

with Jeet Thayil

is old, very old, though not venerable. Imagine
a picture of an old man, his shirt open,
his big belly full of pork and rice wine,
asleep on the road, scars all over him, his hands
for a pillow, imagine the untended whiskers
on his face, his staff thrown some distance away,
not yet stolen, his dirty feet, now imagine
the moon above the man, the chaos it bestows
on the ocean, which could pluck it like a pear
from the sky in one cold metallic wave,
and in that wave imagine the fish discovering
the myth of the other world, a world not preserved
by salt for air, without the elegance of jellyfish,
and here is where they realise how our sky
begins with black while theirs begins with light,
now imagine our sky sliced from a bigger sky,
a universal sky, tiger-striped with planets
and space stations, now imagine the scientists
on those space stations using equations to find us
another, gentler star to call home, and what
are homes but places to keep things we love
that we destroy and leave? Now imagine
the man who drew the picture, who waits
for the old brawler to awake so he can tell
another one, a quick story to start the day.

Mindy Gill is a Brisbane writer whose work has appeared in Australian Poetry Journal, Voiceworks, Hecate and elsewhere. She writes for Peril Magazine.

Water Lily

by Douglas W. Milliken

Elaine has been balding in such an enduring, inexorable way that her pink scalp glistens beneath her fine puff of hair: a skinned grapefruit in a spun-sugar cloud. Elaine has eyeglasses whose prescription needs updating. Elaine has shin splints from working forever on a cement factory floor, and Elaine has a shotgun. A double-barreled ten-gauge with an ivory handle like a pistol. Annette would have called it a riot gun. Elaine keeps the gun in her lap.

Elaine has an alligator in her seasonal pond.

Elaine has cause to be armed.

Pond though might be too misleading a word. More than anything, it's a puddle. Long and shallow. A fetid red pool. Hard-packed terracotta is what Elaine has built her home upon. Slick when wet and slow to dry. Drainage, consequently, is a joke.

Nor is *seasonal* quite correct either. There's only a wet season here and a dry season. Elaine, in all her years, has yet to witness a dry season. Every day, four or five times a day, the constant and galvanised lead sheet of sky collapses into pummelling rain. Fat, warm drops the same temperature as skin. Whapping the tin roof. Gathering in the hollows.

Yet this time, the puddle is a pond and the pond is seasonal because this has never happened before. The house Elaine built on her land's highest point is a saltbox on a cement slab with red clapboards and a green metal roof with a screened-in porch overlooking the acre of marl caldera out back. A few twisted locust trees lean their shade above her house. The sloping acre is dented and weed-patched and where the frogs like to enact their dramas when not in the marshes, screaming for sex. Elaine likes to watch the frogs from inside her screened-in porch. She uses Annette's binoculars. It's called retirement for a reason. There are worse ways to kill a day.

But this year something happened and the rains grew meaner, the clay less forgiving, and over the course of days the sloping acre filled like a washbasin with murky water, the puddles swelling to link together, annexation after annexation finally forming a broad, shallow pond.

The rain died down and for a few days the frogs swam as if it were a novelty, as if they were not hatched in the stuff, skirling oily wakes behind the knobby pimples of their heads. Then

the alligator appeared, basking malevolent and patient in the soup, and the frogs all at once were gone.

Annette would not have stood for this. A lot of the weeds choking Elaine's acre wilted and disappeared beneath the cloying ochre tide. Others, though, grew taller, flourishing in the mire. New awful insects appeared, too. They contained far less joy to watch than the frogs had.

One morning from her porch, Elaine—still glassing for a pimpled head, still hoping the creature would grow bored and retreat—noticed a single lily pad floating in the murk. Just a spotted green disc, wavering oblong amid the red.

Lowering Annette's binoculars, she wondered, *How did you get there?*

For the first week after the pond came and stayed, Elaine stood guard from the blind of her porch, squinting through fogged lenses while her aching shins screamed. The alligator rolled and drifted and rolled. In no hurry. Seeming sometimes almost inert.

Peering through the screen one squid-ink night, Elaine wondered if maybe this was okay. Maybe a change was good. Or was this even a change? Countless puddles had become a pond. Countless frogs had become a dinosaur. This was consolidation. This was progress. She told herself: *You can live with progress.*

Heard but unseen, a splash responded in the dark. Like a tree falling in water. At the core of the wet slap was a thud.

And later still, amid the shriek of midnight insects: a low bellow felt more than heard, shaking the springs of her bed, her windows, the water in her nightstand glass.

In the morning, Elaine resumed her vigil. Her shotgun joined the watch.

Scatter was a factor to consider. Which, framed differently, meant range. But slipping wasn't anything she felt particularly inclined toward, either. Her square frame was built for carrying, for lifting. She could mule a load up a mountain. She could pylon a weight aloft. Elaine knew this about herself and knew this, too: a figure skater she'd never be. Slipping wasn't anything she inclined toward.

So:

Alongside the house leaned odd cuts of plywood and pressure-treated planks left over from

a shed she and Annette had once built. One by one, Elaine gathered the plywood and two-by scraps and fixed them in the clay in a line down the slope, setting a path from her porch to the pond.

Elaine saved the largest piece of plywood for last. She laid it square at the water's edge.

Above the pond's ferric meniscus, the creature's eyes followed her progress ascending and descending the slope. Faint ripples flickered where its nostrils breathed.

On top of the plywood, Elaine placed her favourite blaze-orange lawn chair. She also brought a radio.

The lily pad lolled with the unstill surface.

The creature flared its nostrils and sank.

Elaine sat in her lawn chair where the water lapped the plywood, and laid her shotgun across her lap.

She listened to baseball while she waited.

She listened to the oldies.

Some mornings, Elaine brought with her a thermos of Sprite to her plywood by the water. Sometimes she'd bring a cooler of snacks. A bag of chips with its mouth rolled open. Pimento-cheese sandwiches cut in quarters. Anything she could eat with one hand without looking.

A heron might land then desperately fly away.

The water lily bloomed whitely in the scum.

She began thinking of her waterside plywood as her Observation Deck.

The alligator's back and snout and eyes looked like burling scales along a jack pine's ragged trunk. Thorny like the limbs of locusts. Floating so still, pushed wherever a breeze might guide: it really did look like a log. Huge. Inanimate. Sound. Then the creature would swish its great ridged tail, foam the brackish water with sloppy white breakers, and all doubt would be dissolved. It looked like nothing but what it was. What it was was a threat.

When it rained, it rained on Elaine. As ever, it rained four or five times a day. It didn't bother

her. She'd been rained on before.

Sometimes there were flies and sometimes there weren't. That didn't bother her either.

Elaine's rule was defense. This was her home. No one else's. When the striking time arrived, she'd strike to kill. But only after the intruder struck first. She could wait as long as she needed to wait. Annette would say just bag it and tag it, but Annette wasn't here. It wasn't her call. Elaine could afford to be patient. She would not strike first. In her mind, she certainly would strike last.

When her supplies ran low, Elaine stopped bringing a cooler to her observation deck. Hunger, she thought, would be her whetstone. She stopped bringing a thermos of Sprite. She would not walk into town to buy food. She would not abandon her post.

And she could not understand why the creature was here. Sloshing lazily in the foul stew. Alien eyes shining black. There were no fish here. No turtles and no nutria. A tepid, foodless pool. So why here? Its craggy back sluiced over in water. Lurching, then holding still. What was it waiting for? Why was it here?

What else, Elaine wondered, is out here but me?

And later:

Why are you waiting for me?

Listening to the radio, it sometimes seemed to Elaine that the creature was listening too. Articulating its middle so slightly to the music. Slapping its tail when another team scored a run.

Palms sweating against the ivory inlay, evermore ready, Elaine squinted at the water and wondered, *Are you mocking me?*

Annette would not have stood for this. One dusk when her vigil was ended, Elaine carried her gun into the house to discover an opossum in her kitchen trash. She found another playing dead in her sink. When she prodded it with the cool muzzle of her ten-gauge, it hissed at her, rodent teeth bared. Then it slunk beneath a cupboard.

Taking up her night watch in the screened-in porch, she had to wonder how long had the rat liars been living in her house.

Only later, lying reluctantly in bed, could she finally rephrase the question:

How long hadn't they?

One morning Elaine found her blaze-orange chair tipped over in the clay, red claw prints stamped on the deck. A long smear of mud marked where her chair had been knocked away. As if the creature had lain in her spot. Her radio was nowhere to be seen.

In her sleep, Elaine had heard nothing.

Yet another morning she discovered a bullfrog the size of a candlepin bowling ball waiting on the observation deck. She accepted this as a good sign. The bullfrog maintained its place alongside her throughout the day, its throat inflating and deflating with a marching drum's pace, the occasional wooden *pong*, though by the next morning's dawn, it too was gone.

The danger of being always so close to the water was terrifying, but it was also manageable. She could see (albeit blurrily). She was prepared (albeit hungrily).

Nights, though, were different. Elaine was inside and far from the pond. Maybe she'd hear the creature emerge from the water if it came for her in the dark. But maybe she wouldn't. And either way, she would not see it coming. She would not know where to look. And though she could watch and listen all day every day, always—always—she would need to sleep. So who would watch and listen then? That question alone was enough to keep her awake. But not forever. Not ever long enough.

The opossums had given up playing dead whenever she entered her kitchen. The opossums no longer hissed. To the blind rats, she was part of the backdrop now. Annette would not have stood for this, either.

But Annette isn't here, Elaine repeated herself. *Only the creature is here.*

And standing one night with her nose to the screen and the dark outside pressing back, she thought for the thousandth time and even said aloud:

“You want me. But you will not have me.”

In the dark there came no splash of water. No thump of claw on clay.

It was only the next morning, descending to her final vigil as the lone water lily bobbed like a buoy in the pond, that she realised: the creature believed this very same thing.

The red water rippled with movements unseen.

The galvanised sky cracked open with rain.

The tin roof popped.

The filthy meniscus popped.

Seeing and seen, the vigils resumed, each lending purpose as the other lent back.

Douglas W. Milliken is the author of the novel To Sleep as Animals and several chapbooks, most recently the pocket-sized editions Cream River and One Thousand Owls Behind Your Chest. His stories have been honoured by the Maine Literary Awards, the Pushcart Prize, and Glimmer Train, and have been published in Slice, the Collagist, and the Believer, among others. 'Water Lily' was written as part of a fellowship with the Hewnoaks Artists Colony. His story 'Arena' was published in Issue Seven of Tincture Journal and is [available online. www.douglaswmilliken.com](http://www.douglaswmilliken.com)

Ethanol, Eschar

Non-fiction by Charlotte Adderley

When she dreams, her skin is a map.

An atlas of undulations and ravines, of crevices and pools. Vast flat lands give way to bumpy roads winding and scaling towards steep pinnacles. Unpredictable elevation changes are charted from her toes to her head.

When her skin is a map, it depicts a great, big world with many countries. An amalgamation of cultures drifting together forming one great picture. Rough and smooth areas are joined by skin-coloured seas.

It shows different-coloured terrain; red, pink, salmon, white, stitched together as one. It represents a world that has changed over time to become what it is today.

In reality, her skin is burnt. The protective layer for her flesh, and her largest sensory organ, is scarred and scorched from intense heat. It is bumpy and thick with collagen-packed scar tissue.

If her understanding of chemical science was as comprehensive as her imagination, she would have understood the properties of ethanol. A colourless, volatile, and flammable liquid, its molecules are made up of ethyl and hydroxyl groups. When in contact with a heat source, ethanol combusts.

The night she comes to understand the extent of this, she is sitting with friends on a deck in Brisbane. It is a cold and wintery June evening. Conversations keep them warm as well as a large spread of cheese, crackers, dips, and cake. A barbecue sizzles in the background and the smell of smoke lingers in the cold air.

She is at ease with people she is fond of; she breezes into the evening with a sense of calmness and contentment. It seems like any other night in her life.

“Want to roast marshmallows?” a friend asks and drops two bags of squishy, sugary clouds onto the table. Nostalgia is a funny thing; small comforts can conjure such happiness like childhood sentimentality.

A fire is lit from the base of a small table-top burner with a bottle of liquid ethanol. The flame is almost invisible to the eye.

In an instant, the flame explodes into a burning orange ball right in front of her. One minute, the sound of chatter and laughter from people at the party. The next, the unmistakable ‘voomph’ of gas. Her skin is set alight. There is screaming. Then, sleep.

When she wakes up in hospital five weeks later, she sees that orange ball over and over again. It doesn’t leave her mind as she lies in bed, burnt and broken, skin dripping over her bones.

Burns are classified as: first-degree (superficial) affecting the epidermis, or outer layer of skin cells; second-degree (partial thickness) affecting the epidermis, and part of the dermis, or inner layer of skin cells; and third-degree (full thickness) destroying the epidermis and dermis layers, and affecting the tissue underneath.

She doesn’t need to be told that she has suffered the worst kind of burns. She comes to bitterly respect ethanol and its high level of volatility; a clear, almost invisible chemical that can cause such visible destruction.

In a blank hospital room, she loses all sense of time. There is only night and day; dark and light. She cannot see in front of her; not the clock on the wall, not the shelves of medical equipment near the windows, and not her own feet in front of her at the foot on the bed.

She cannot see her bound body, bandaged from head to toe, blood seeping through the gauze on her legs. Her eyes are heavy, glued down. Her remaining senses must become acute.

Dedicated nurses work all through the night; they wake her up regularly for check-ups. A blood pressure cuff around the right arm, Chlorsig antiseptic lotion applied to the upper lids and along the water line of the eyes, a thermometer under the tongue, and medication pushed through the peripherally-inserted central catheter (PICC) line.

She picks up these terms as the nurses repeat them; her hearing compensates well for her lack of sight.

The doctors surround her bed each day; they ask her how she is feeling and she gives a feeble nod each time. She feels them staring, not coldly, but in admiration either for her, their surgical work, or both.

They say, “You’re doing well, okay.” She doesn’t know how she is doing or whether she is even doing anything. She is existing; that seems to be enough for now.

The nurses tell her that the doctors and surgeons who specialise in burns are remarkable. It is a difficult and demanding specialisation that requires meticulous work.

Later in her recovery, she will learn that burns surgeons are considered “The athletes of the medical world”, and that they operate for hours under extreme conditions of up to 39 degrees Celsius to maintain the optimal environment for patients.

Her parents tell her that these doctors and surgeons are their heroes. The nurses say they have done an amazing job of skin grafting. She has never delved into the world of medical phenomena, and when she is forced to become a part of it, she finds herself in awe.

Skin grafting is an intricate surgical process whereby healthy skin is transplanted to areas where damaged skin has been excised. The transplanted tissue is called a ‘skin graft’. This process is used on extensive wounds, primarily caused by burns.

In *Techniques in Orthopaedics*, Jillian Fortier MD and Charles Castiglione MD describe the classifications of skin grafting in detail:

“Split thickness skin grafts include the epidermis and varying proportions of the underlying dermis. Full thickness skin grafts comprise of the epidermis and the entire thickness of the dermis, including structures such as sweat glands, sebaceous glands, hair follicles, and capillaries.”

If her skin is not a map, then it is the skin of Frankenstein’s monster, stapled and stitched together, piece by piece, to form a new creation. Both split thickness and full thickness skin grafts cover her almost all over. “My face, my neck, my chest, my arms, my hands and my torso,” she recites to the people who are brave enough to ask.

When she becomes brave enough, she traces her fingers over her left arm; it is rough and soft at the same time. It doesn’t feel like an arm. It definitely doesn’t feel like her arm, or as her arm should feel. Or, at least, as her arm used to feel.

She cannot detect her fingers running the length from her elbow to her wrist. It takes a while to convince her skin that it is being touched. She is told to keep trying as this process of desensitisation helps the mind adjust to the lack of feeling in the damaged tissue.

Third degree (full thickness) burns involve nerve damage since the epidermis and dermis layers of the skin are destroyed. She is told the feeling in these areas may never come back.

The crux of her elbow is spared and the edge of her damaged skin borders it. If her skin is a map, her ‘normal’ skin is an island in an ocean of burns; untouched patches of land with skin grafts surrounding them.

Nurses dress her open wounds in sticky, yellow occlusive gauze called Xeroform. Bandages

are methodically wound and wound around her limbs each day.

Her left ear is black; she knows this because the nurses tell her as they carefully sponge it and dress it with more Xeroform.

If her sense of impending death was as perceptive as her imagination, she would already know that the skin on her ear was now eschar. Dead tissue forming a dark scab that would eventually rot and fall away: eschar.

It has met its end like the rest of her skin; charred black and dead, in need of debridement. It will heal, they think, but she has come to accept loss as an inevitable matter in the life of a burns patient.

Every couple of days her bandages are unwound and gauze, thick with congealed blood, is peeled from her wounds. She is lowered into an industrial-sized bath.

Her most acute pain is numbed with oxycodone hydrochloride, a narcotic analgesic that makes her head fuzzy. The water is hot and bubbly with antibacterial soaps.

She breathes in and out, relaxing into the enveloping warmth. The nurses chat to her as they sponge down her wounds, “What kind of music are you into?” But she is in her own tropical lagoon.

She is floating in a pool of dreamy blue; gentle waves lapping at her skin. She is weightless, drifting effortlessly here and there. Her skin is rejuvenating, regenerating in the pure water.

Her raw wounds are soothed and healed. A fresh, salty scent fills her lungs as she levitates on the water’s surface. There is nothing around her; she is solitary, quiet, and revived.

With every wave that washes over her, the scarring on her body fades a little more until every bump and crevice has disappeared. Her eyes close as she floats along in her reverie, the warm water carrying her.

“Are you okay?” a nurse interrupts. She opens her eyes and nods; she is okay, given the state of things. The bath water looks dirty and tinged red. Her eyesight is blurry but improving.

Back in her hospital room, the nurses lay out utensils, bandages, gauze, and scissors, along with sheets for her to lie on. She is transferred onto the bed and they begin their work.

Her legs are always treated first. They are the colour of beetroot in the areas where skin has been harvested for her skin grafts. They are ‘donor sites’, she is told.

A donor site is the area from which unburned layers of skin are taken to create a skin graft. Once harvested, the area is left to heal.

Her legs are raw and inflamed; they feel naked and vulnerable. The lines depicting where the skin has been cut away are perfectly straight, meticulously shaped.

One day, a nurse notices her looking curiously at her right calf. “You have an infection in your leg,” she says. Apparently, it is quite common to get a hospital-acquired infection, but this information doesn’t put her at ease.

An elongated scab extends the length of her lower leg; it is black and ruby red, jutting out from her worn-away muscle. The most gruesome eschar she has seen yet. The nurses cover it in Kenacomb ointment, an anti-bacterial cream, and bandage it up out of sight.

In early July, she looks in the mirror for the first time. If her skin is a map, her eyes are two pools of light in a desolate wasteland. Her features are gone, covered by sheets of new skin. She traces her forefinger along the suture line of the grafts; they look different to anything she knows about skin grafting.

Stretching from her brow bones, down and over her cheek bones and bridging over her nose, is a sort of pale mask. They call it Integra.

The surgeons explain, in layman’s terms, that Integra is a scaffold that replaces the epidermis of the skin when it is damaged, and regenerates dermal skin cells. It is a synthetic material made from bovine and shark particles which acts as a template underneath a skin graft. On top of this, a normal skin graft from a donor site is set.

She imagines Integra as the roots of a tree, anchoring down, its xylem and phloem cells growing through beneath the bark. Her own white blood cells and fibroblasts, found in the dermis, have regenerated and grown just the same.

Her grafts look smooth and flush to her bone structure, not thickly scarred like the rest of her skin. The outer edges join up to the rest of her facial skin which gives way to her shaved head. She is bewildered at the possibilities that exist in burns care.

She reads a newspaper article dedicated to the burns medical team at her hospital and the difficult work they do. The article mentions skin donation. She wonders whether or not grafts from other people’s skin work in the same way as her own.

The article reads: “Queensland Skin Bank, established five years ago, one of only two in Australia, [is credited] for improving survival rates of burns patients through reduced infection

risk.” Apparently, “The donated skin acts like a ‘biologic dressing’—or a big natural Band Aid—protecting patients from germs infiltrating their wounds until their own skin can grow back underneath.”

Later in her recovery, she meets a man involved in a boat fire with ninety per cent burns to his body. He tells her, “My arms and legs were burnt through to the fat. My feet were the worst—I still have limited feeling in them.”

He explains that most of his body is covered in cadaver skin: “Fifty packets of skin were used. I only have two donor sites on my shoulder and the back of my neck.”

She asks him what it feels like to have somebody else’s skin all over. He replies, “When you spend forty-two years with the same looking skin and then you wake up and everything is changed, it gets too much. I still have a lot of trouble looking at myself.”

However, he adds, “The doctors and nurses were great though, they love their job. I’m lucky my accident was in Queensland and I had these guys looking after me.”

She imagines that he must feel like Frankenstein’s monster; experiencing a dichotomy of inability to come to terms with the way he has been created, and a feeling of gratitude towards his maker.

In August, she is recovering; her skin healing, toughening, and becoming a part of her makeup. If her skin is a map, the divided countries are becoming one, thriving together in a big, cultured community.

Her grafts are melding into her ‘normal’ skin until she has trouble defining the borders that once separated them.

She stretches her limbs out daily, building her muscles back up from months of disuse, striving to be strong again. A physiotherapist visits her every day to stretch her skin in all directions, pulling it into shape so that she can move properly. They intend to get her to ‘full range’ of movement.

Scar contractures are inevitable in deep burn injuries; *The Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery* says that, “Contraction is an active biological process by which an area of skin loss in an open wound is decreased due to concentric reduction in the size of the wound.”

At times, she feels trapped in a web of skin, the tightness pulling her, restricting her. She manipulates it to allow herself to escape its hold.

She pulls her skin and presses hard until it blanches, turning white under the pressure of her

thumb. As she lets go, it feels softer, moulded to fit the contours of her muscles.

Innovations in skin grafting continue to develop long after she leaves hospital. Laser treatment becomes an outstanding option to reduce scarring, and alternative dermal scaffolds like MatriDerm are introduced.

Alternative and additional treatments progressively improve the appearance of scarring, break down collagen in hardened areas, and leave burns patients with soft, elastic grafts.

Burns treatments are proliferating, thriving in their possibilities. She knows that her doctors and surgeons are at the helm of these innovations. The newspaper article quotes one of her surgeons saying, “It’s the patients who keep me going and have done for three decades.” She feels connected to them, thriving with them.

Shortly after leaving the care of her nurses, she reads a research paper reporting that, “The mortality and morbidity from burns have diminished tremendously over the last six to seven decades. However, these do not truly reflect whether the victim could go back to society as a useful person or not and lead a normal life, because of the inevitable post-burn scars, contractures and other deformities which collectively have aesthetic and functional considerations.”

She contemplates this mortality and morbidity a lot, and whether or not she will lead a ‘normal life’. She contemplates ethanol and eschar, burns and baths; contractures and cadavers; all of the elements that have shaped her. She contemplates skin and how it can be regenerated, changed, stretched to create a culture in which it can grow.

But, when she dreams, her skin is always a map.

It is etched with tracks and channels and the veins of cities. It unfolds into a detailed and beautiful picture, labelled with places where others have left their marks.

It encompasses alterations, changes in direction, alternative routes, all mapped out for the world to see. It is a beautifully complex depiction of charted land.

It shows tears, and worn-out edges, rips and faded spaces. It reflects a remarkable journey through changing terrain. It details the new and the old; the touched and untouched.

Her skin is a map, destroyed by fire, and redefined by brave explorers.

Charlotte Adderley is a creative non-fiction writer and burn survivor. She holds Communication and Arts degrees from the University of Queensland, and has journalistic work published in lifestyle magazines such as The West End Magazine and Indulge Magazine. She volunteers with burns patients and carers around Brisbane assisting in their recovery and rehabilitation.

WWJD?

by Nathanael O'Reilly

At the Cisco Travel Plaza Jesus
Camp kids wearing blue t-shirts
with FUMCW2016
emblazoned on the front
and *GO!* on the back swamp
restrooms, block drink fridge
doors, crowd candy aisles,
form queues snaking away
from the cash registers,
wait to pay with armfuls
of drinks, candy and chips.

A blonde, blue-eyed Jesus
Camp girl lacking the patience
of a saint arrives at the congregation
of disciples waiting to pay,
declares: *OH MY GOD!*
YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME.
TELL ME THIS ISN'T THE LINE?!

Nathanael O'Reilly was born in Warrnambool & raised in Ballarat, Brisbane and Shepparton; he currently resides in Texas. He is the author of the full-length collection Distance and the chapbooks Cult, Suburban Exile and Symptoms of Homesickness. His second full-length collection, Preparations for Departure, is forthcoming from UWAP Poetry. O'Reilly is the recipient of an Emerging Writers Grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. His poems have appeared in journals & anthologies around the world, including Antipodes, Australian Love Poems, Blackmail Press, Cordite, fourW, LiNQ, Mascara Literary Review, Postcolonial Text, Prosopisia, Red River Review, Snorkel, Social Alternatives, Tincture Journal, Transnational Literature, Verity La, Writ Poetry Review and Windmills.

Compass

by *SJ Finn*

I met Silas in a bar called The Trickster. He was the Joker. I was the Queen of Hearts. He ordered schnapps and showed me how to drop the dram of liquor (glass and all) into my beer. The oily substance swam between the bubbles like a ribbon lifted and buoyed in a breeze. Peppermint stippled my tongue.

The barmen played tricks, shuffling and sorting cards. I laughed, enjoying everything. When we stepped down from our bar stools, Silas told me he thought I'd be taller. I could tell he was pleased, really pleased. I didn't say anything, just smiled a deep, happy smile.

I swallowed my first tab of acid with Silas. He showed me the dot of paper with a tiny picture of a dragon on it. He was holding it out on his fingertip. I could see it but what fascinated me were the grooves of his skin slewing sideways like a topographical map showing mountainous terrain. I looked under his cowboy hat into his shining eyes and guided his finger to my mouth. We walked through the snow, our feet disappearing into its pavlova plume. Flakes fell weightlessly from the sky and, with our faces up, the floating snow anointed our foreheads. All around us the world played a silent aria. We twirled between silver birches, our arms outstretched, our eyes seeing diamonds.

In his house—a small sharply-gabled timber place painted in deep warm colours—we looked out his small windows through crystals and coloured glass. We took off our clothes and kissed one another's nooks and crannies. At the end of the afternoon we submitted to temptation and he told me he felt like he'd been to Australia. I giggled and rolled off his tummy, but I'd fallen in love with him then and sometime later I wondered what people did when they wanted to be with someone who lived on the opposite side of the world. I wrote to my parents about other things—there *were* other things—and luxuriated in the misconception I had plenty of time.

§

I met Silas's friends. They were, he told me, the three most important people in his life. Different, but close as close, they were like a liquorish all-sort. The most striking one, or I should say the one that struck *me* the most, was Harley. He was a jocose, rowdy man, a little ursine to the eye with red sideburns and a half-grown beard. He was an outdoor educator; a schoolteacher that looked like a troublemaker. He owned a huge ramshackle house and the whole of the upper floor was his bedroom. At first I was timid in his company; he seemed so brazen to a good-girl. Even kindnesses did not soften me until he leaned towards me one night and said, "If you ever

need anything, help, anything, be sure you come and ask.”

Gratitude rose in me. “Thanks,” I said. “Really, thanks.”

Now when I think about Harley he probably would have been the man for me, but back then he was too much man for my sensibilities. I was a girl, a young girl with a view about what a boyfriend looked like. With his clean-cut athletic body, his square-chinned handsomeness, Silas fitted. He was the classic, innocuous good-looking young man.

Downstairs in Harley’s house was another of Silas’s friends, a Dutch woman named Hilda who was the only one to become what resembled a friend, to me. She had a quick manner, decisive, and a perpetually red face plus blond hair that shone metallically in certain lights. We’d sit in her kitchen drinking scalding tea and dreaming up ways to make money: grow a crop, write a bestseller, rob a bank—conjecture we’d always debunk by the end of several emptied pots. She was a stranger in the country too, a stranger waiting on news to tell her if she could stay.

The final person of the foursome was Bettina. She’d been away in Mexico when I met Silas, importing goods for her business. Silas introduced us at a parade; in fact, at the exact moment the brass band clanged and blew its way past us. His words submerged into the clashing, never to resurface again. It was a magician’s trick, one I should have seen as a sign—the ultimate introduction-disappearance. Still, as if to fix the day indelibly in my mind, I must have given Bettina my camera because I have pictures of Silas and myself on the street—odd shots of me looking one way and him the other. He wasn’t happy, a thousand explosive atoms of negativity coming out of him. When Bettina went off to buy waffles for all of us, I asked him if anything was wrong.

“No,” he said, his eyes kicking sideways.

My chin crimped as I employed fortitude. Bettina, a Spanish girl with the smoothest milk-chocolate skin and the prettiest almond-shaped eyes, came towards us with the waffles. Silas was all smiles and warm replies as, kicking his good looks back, he took his waffle from her. We stood, sharing a portion of maple syrup. His mood had passed perhaps, but even as the thought formed, he slid his eyes—more private than a nod—across at mine. They were mean, delivering a strychnine threat.

Now that I’m older, more indomitable, I wish I’d done something that day, something to circumvent the situation. Even though my heart was thrashing about, I should have said something, taken some action. Instead what I did was descend into a state of impotent complicity. Everything tightened. Oxygen thinned. I did what most do in a position of powerlessness: I thought it was me and tried to be good, to do everything just so. It was like

being underwater, suffocating despite being thousands of feet above the sea, a drowning on dry land. And when the opportunity to get away was offered I behaved like a moribund imbecile and didn't take it up.

“What are you doing later?” The question, asked easily before, was loaded.

“Nothing, got an early morning tomorrow. Have to unpack the truck, pick up scaffolding.”

“Can I come over?”

There was a pause and I thought he wasn't going to say anything. I really thought he might have ended it there. But at the last minute he nodded, cranked open his well-defined lips. “If you want.”

I left him and Bettina on the main road and went a block south to the motel where I worked and lived. In the open courtyard at the back of the place I stared at the steam rising from the Jacuzzi. When it snowed, which it wasn't, the heat from the water drifted up to melt the snow, expunge it into nothingness before it landed. When people sat in it, when it was snowing, snow gathered on their heads.

I stood staring into the water. Silas had cut out my heart out and run off with it, leaving me to take care of myself with no ability to move because without a heart the blood ceases to flow, the muscles don't respond, the brain is robbed of its thinking power. Only the automatic nervous system operates. My lungs kept breathing.

When I realised my knees were throbbing I took myself to bed. Waking late, the thought of Silas and Bettina cuddled up together unleashing a toxic heaviness into my system, I lay, my eyes fixed open in the small staff quarters I shared with five others. I knew I wouldn't go back to sleep, so I got up, walked over there, let myself in with the key he kept stashed between two garden rocks on the stoop. Silas was alone and I slid in beside him, lay awake with a pounding heart trying to be as thin and unintrusive as possible.

§

Silas told me he loved me. We were in a bar called The Side Door. A woman played harsh cords on her guitar and sung cruel disgruntled lyrics, her voice carping up and her arm striking the strings in an off-beat clash. I nearly missed it but my head swung around from the performer and our eyes locked. Mine, in that moment, were impartial. But after, soon after, I couldn't help but smile and we kissed, a long smooth salty kiss under the lavish call of the guitarist and the fat lights of the small bar.

“Will you stay?” he asked, his dark eyes dipping into my body, stirring my blood. “Here in the States. I’ve realised I want you to.”

I didn’t answer because the question was folding in me like meringue on a lemon tart. For the rest of the night I stayed wrapped in my comfort. The morning appeared and news rattled in my mail. My mother was effusive. I’d been accepted into university. A reason to return home, or a hurdle to run around? Jumping had never been my forte, not a strong suit in the family—determination, now that was another matter. I’d write to Mum and Dad, explain things to them. That I’d met someone. That I was staying. That I knew the necessary steps I had to take to obtain a further visa. I did this, wrote my excuses and descriptions home. My letter showed an emotionality that was underpinned by strength. It wasn’t crafted, just my natural flow. Naivety does that, lends itself to certainty, mixes to create conviction as dense as cured concrete.

§

The day we planned to go to the immigration office, the snow was wet and drove in hard like sleet. The sky was grey and thunderous. Huge groins of ruffled cloud rolled in. I stood on the pavement waiting for Silas’s frowning Ford 100 to rocket towards me. Under layers of clothing I found my wristwatch. He was fifteen minutes late.

When forty-five minutes had passed I walked in a hot daze towards his cottage. I knew he wasn’t there before I knocked, but I stood looking up at his window anyway. I walked to Harley’s and Hilda’s, telling myself he might be there. But really I went because of the storm in the sky and in me. I didn’t want to be stranded in the barracks of my motel-employee bunkhouse. Hilda wasn’t home, but Harley could hear my knock and opened his upstairs window.

“There’s a few of us playing truant,” he called. “Come up.”

Upstairs I found four or five people smoking joints and lounging on the furniture. He found me a spot next to him. We watched a movie—an old cowboy flick in which men hop confidently on horses and one woman is a damsel swinging between distress and truculence. Hilda came home and I squeezed myself out of Harley’s room to find her downstairs. She smiled her big smile and we drank herbal tea. I remember the way she said herbal in her Dutch accent without an h. The dirty rain came in through the open windows. That’s the way she lived. Not cosy.

“Silas is immature,” she said. “Even though you’re younger, you’re more grown-up. You need to think about that before you stay here for him.”

My heart was not so much cut out that night as broken, inside me still, but snapped in half, all splintery like a piece of busted timber. I walked home. On the way I rang my parents from a

phone booth and woke them from a deep sleep. I was crying when I hung up, half from homesickness, half from failure.

On the footpath beside the phone, I looked across the view of the Rocky Mountains. The sky was calmer and boasted a deep robust hue. It was still. The storm had not so much moved on as receded to a higher place. I watched it, tears balancing in my eyes, looking, searching, but I couldn't find one star showing through the layers of cloud. There was nothing other than distant ruffled darkness.

SJ Finn is a poet and fiction writer. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, and her latest novel is Down to the River. She can be found at www.sjfinn.com.

Plum, Flower

by Eileen Chong

Four panels: rosewood,
carved. You'd wanted hinges
put on, for a screen.

*From right to left, I said,
spring, summer, autumn,
winter. Birds and blossom.*

Latticework, where dust
lands and breeds. Orchids
and their bent necks. Lotus

mud-spears. Here,
the miniature suns
of chrysanthemums.

And where I desired
the ripe sweetness of plums:
only snow, branch and flower.

Eileen Chong is a Sydney poet. Her books are Burning Rice (2012), Peony (2014) and Painting Red Orchids (2016), all from Pitt Street Poetry. She has been shortlisted for the Anne Elder Award 2012, the Prime Minister's Literary Award 2013, and most recently, the Victorian Premier's Literary Award 2017. Another Language (2017) is forthcoming with George Braziller in New York. www.eileenchong.com.au

Shoes That Go Krtz-Krtz

Autobiographical fiction by Tamara Lazaroff

In his broken-down gumboots and with his pants rolled up to his knees, my grandfather, *Dedo* Trajan, is sitting in the chicken coop again.

With my two eyes, I can see him from the kitchen window. With my two hands I'm twirling my two silky ponytails while, behind me, my mum is chopping the celery for the celery soup. She's making it from the Margaret Fulton cookbook. Even though my *Baba* came past before and rolled her eyes and said, "What? Soup from a celery? I've never heard of it before. Is this the kind of food the Australians eat? Are they rabbits? Are we?"

But I don't care. I'm proud of my mum for trying new things, for trying new recipes. And everyone will have to eat it, too—my *Dedo*, *Baba*, Uncle Johnny, his new, fancy wife, Auntie Sveta, the baby growing in her belly, and me. But not my dad. Last year, we had to run away from him after he went to work one morning. So he eats his dinner somewhere else.

"But, Mum. Why does *Dedo* sit in the chicken coop with the chickens?"

I really want to know. It's all he ever does since he got us the new, big house so we could all live together, one family.

"One family!" he said. But now he doesn't want to even come in. At night, my grandmother has to shout at him from the back door and tell him he can't sleep out there.

"Why, Mum? Why does he do it?"

"Well, darling, I don't know," my mum says—in English—busy with her measuring cups and spoons. "But I've got an idea. Why don't you go and ask him yourself? Go on. Go."

So I do.

I go out the back door.

I go past the Hills Hoist.

I pass the little sticks-and-old-bedsheet screen that hides the hole that my *Dedo* and my Uncle Johnny had to dig yesterday afternoon. That's where we have to pull down our pants and go to the toilet and then cover whatever we do with a shovelful of dirt. But only until Monday morning when the man comes to fix the blocked-up pipe.

And then I'm outside the chicken coop.

At the gate, I stand frozen. It feels like a magic line, a force field that I can't cross without my *Dedo* giving permission first.

So I ask, "*Dedo*, is it okay? Can I come in?"

And *Dedo* nods his head without looking at me. But I can't take my eyes off him as he lets the smoke from his cigarette come out slowly from his lower lip. It's a sheet of mist that moves up over his face like it's an old, craggy mountain in some far away, mysterious place. In the end, there's one last wisp. I gasp as I watch it disappear and then, like magic, I'm free. I can move again.

I lift the latch.

I go inside and shut the gate behind me.

I make my way to where my grandfather sits, by the fence, on an upside down, empty feta bucket. Conveniently, beside him, there's a second vacant, upside down, empty feta bucket. On it, I take my place. I take my seat. And then we're both sitting on upside down, empty feta buckets—inside the chicken coop. We don't say anything for a bit.

Meanwhile, the chickens do their thing.

They don't bug us and we don't bug them.

They scratch, they cluck, they peck.

And *Dedo* keeps smoking and nodding his head over and over again, like he's coming to an understanding of a problem that he's been wrestling with for too many years. That, or he's judging, weighing and reckoning the possible reasons I might be visiting. I never have before.

Finally, he speaks.

In a proud voice, he asks, "So. What is it that you want? What did you come for?" He lifts his chin.

"Nothing," I gulp, I lie.

I try to shrug my shoulders, casual-like.

But he doesn't believe me. His eyes narrow to slits.

“Ha!” he says. “Everyone wants something. Tell me. Do you want a cigarette? Is that it?”

And then, before I can answer yes or no, he shakes the soft pack at me so that a few poke out like slim, straight, white fingers.

“But, *Dedo*,” I reason. “I’m just a kid.”

Well, that just makes him laugh. Ha! Like that.

“I’ll tell you something you’d like to know,” he says. “When I was your age I was already smoking twenty a day.”

“Well, okay. Maybe I’ll have one later,” I say—to make him happy. Then I add, hopefully. “But you can give me your lighter to play with, if you want?”

So he gives it to me, no question, no argument.

And I take it in my greedy hands.

Usually, in the house, my *Baba* won’t let me touch it. I can’t even look at it without her jumping to her feet and grabbing it away and saying, “Eh, girl. That’s not for you.”

Well, why not?

Now, I’ve got it.

I make the lighter do its tricks. I turn the lighter upside down so that the lady with the red hair’s red dress disappears. I take a good look at her bosoms and bare skin and everything. Then, when I want, when I feel like it, I turn the lighter again, the right way up, and the red-haired lady’s dress pours back onto her. Like that, up and down, down and up, I make her take her clothes off and put them back on, again and again, non-stop. I never get sick of it.

But then my grandfather interrupts.

He clears his throat importantly. He wants to know, “So, come on. Now, tell me. Did anyone fall down the hole yet?”

He means the hole in the backyard.

And I say, glancing up and down, trying to divide equally my attention between the lady on the lighter and him, “No. Not that I know of.”

“Oh, but they will, they will,” he predicts, throwing his head back, laughing like a villain

from a midday movie, showing his gold tooth. Then, specifically, he's interested to know, "What about your Auntie Sveta?"

"What about her?" I ask.

"Has she been to the hole to lighten her load?"

"Yeah," I say, off-hand, half-listening. "This morning at eight o'clock."

"And how did she like it? How did it go for her?"

He holds his chin, waiting for my answer.

"I don't know. I don't think she did." I try to give him the information he needs. "She came back with an upset look on her face and said that we were going backwards to where we came from."

"Ah-ha. Did she now?" *Dedo* says knowingly.

And then he starts to laugh again.

"Ha-ha-ha, ho-ho-ho."

And, if I really think about it, maybe I know why, too.

Sometimes at night, when my Auntie Sveta is upstairs with my uncle in bed, my *Dedo* and my *Baba* sit in the kitchen and talk about her. They say that she thinks she's better than us because she's never gotten her hands dirty in the earth. And because she went to college before she came here to Australia for a holiday and met my uncle and made him fall in love with her.

Anyway, *Baba* says that Auntie Sveta can think what she likes but we're all made the same. A hole for a mouth and a hole for what comes out. No one's better than anyone else.

"Yeah," *Dedo* says as a chicken walks past, stops and drops a blob of sticky white. "I can tell you a lot more about holes if you want. If you have the time."

"Sure," I say, "I've got time," still looking at the naked lady lighter.

I've put myself in a kind of trance.

My *Dedo* has to compete for my attention. He does his best.

He says, "Oh-ho, you won't believe it when I tell you. Something you can't imagine happened to me back in the old country when I was a kid. Even I can't believe it, when I think

of it now.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, still distracted.

So my *Dedo* leans in closer.

“I was about your age.”

“Yeah?”

He leans in even closer.

And then he adds, “I’ve never told anyone before.”

And that’s when I take my eyes off the red-headed lady. I put her down.

I give my *Dedo* my full concentration now.

“What? What happened?” I beg.

“I’ll tell you but you can’t tell anyone else.”

I nod hungrily. “No, no. I promise. I won’t. Ever.”

“Well,” chin high, with full confidence in me, he begins. “Let me first say—you know we didn’t have toilets in the village that flush. Only holes. And not just for the weekend. Not just until Monday morning when the plumber can come, but every day. For always.”

“Yeah,” I say. “You told me before. What about them?”

“Well, one night—” his eyes look into mine, then widen and flare. They whirl like kaleidoscopes and pull me and keep me there. “That night, that night—it was deep and dark. There was no moon, there were no stars shining in the sky—when, all of a sudden, my guts woke me up with a kick.” He stops to let that sink in. “Diarrhoea,” he explains with a serious, matter-of-fact expression. “I must’ve had some bad goat’s milk to drink.”

“Yuck,” I say. “Goat’s milk tastes like hooves and hair.”

“Alright. What if it does?” my *Dedo* pulls me back into line. “I needed to go, bad. My stomach was a knotted, twisted cramp. So, I got up. I rushed out the door. But that night, like I already told you, it was the deepest, the darkest. It was black. There was no moon, there were no stars to guide my way. I stumbled around out there trying to find our hole. It was where it always was, of course. But I misjudged. I missed. I slipped and fell in. I fell down into all of my

family's shit and piss and who knows what else. Oh, and I fell in deep. It was awful. The smell! I retched in disgust. And then I shat my pants. What did it matter? I called and called, but no one heard me. No one came. I was so alone. I had never felt so alone in all of my life."

"Really? Never?"

"Well, no," my *Dedo* says. "I'm just saying that for effect. To tell you the truth, I've always felt that way. That's how life is. You have to get used to it. You come alone, you leave that way. In the meantime, no one holds your hand. You make your way the best you can. You fall in a hole, you have to get out. Well, believe me, I called and called. Still, nobody came. I was stuck. In that hole. Can you imagine? I tried to climb out of the slippery side but every time I tried, the earth—mud and more—broke away. I started to cry. And in a quivering voice, I asked for help. 'Please, please,' I begged. I don't know to what or to who. You know that I don't believe in the church and their priests and what they say. They're all crooks.

"But then, then, out of nowhere, I heard a voice. It was just a whisper at first. I thought it was the wind. But the whisper grew louder. It was a woman. Or an angel. Or both. In the hole with me. She had to be. She was close. Then I felt a touch on my shoulder. Then a hand, two hands, that put mine in hers and then around her waist, her hourglass hips. Up and down, up and down, she moved my hands and sang such sweet but nasty things, like I'd never heard, into my ear.

"And that's how time passed until first light. I must've fallen asleep or passed out because I opened my eyes. And the first thought I had, my only wish and hope was that I would finally get to see the face of the woman who had stirred me so. But to my surprise, in my hands I found that I was not holding a woman but a chicken—caked in brown."

My grandfather stops and sighs and sighs, wistful, sad.

"To this day, I still don't know what happened down there in the hole. I don't know if it was the work of a witch. Or a desperate dream. Whatever it was, I don't care. It felt real. And it was beautiful. And I got through. I came out alive. That's what matters most."

And then I say—suddenly remembering why I have come, what I want to know—"Is that why you stay here? With the chickens? Because you think one of them is going to turn into a beautiful woman and sing sweet but nasty songs in your ear?"

"No," he says, laughing away my idea. "I'm too old for all that now. Anyway, your grandmother wouldn't like it. She'd whack the back of my knees with the feather duster and it would sting. No. I'm telling you this story because I want you to know the important things that have happened in my life. So that you don't think that you come from nothing and no one. So

that you don't think that you are alone. Even if you are. We all are, like I said. Besides, a story —" he shrugs "—it's also to pass the time."

And then he picks up the lady lighter from my lap and flicks it so that a fire flashes onto the tip of a new cigarette. He sucks in and then lets the smoke slide slowly out from his lower lip. It's like a sheet of mist that moves mysteriously up over the old, craggy mountain that is his face. There's one last wisp. I watch it disappear. And then there's a call from the back door.

It's my *Baba* shouting, "Come on. Come inside for dinner. We're having grass soup."

But my *Dedo* shouts back, "We're busy talking, woman. Can't you see?"

My *Baba* just shakes her finger and then her fist.

"Listen to me. You can't sleep out there," she shouts, louder than ever, and then she lets the door slam.

Soon enough, it's quiet again, for a bit.

My *Dedo* can finish smoking his cigarette in peace.

And the chickens can keep on pecking and scratching, happily.

The sun, too, can begin to set.

Then, it's time—my grandfather says it is—for the birds to go to bed.

"*Mrsh!*" he tells them.

Some of them do go by themselves into their nests. Others he has to shoo. They flap their wings. They think they can fly. They want to.

"Come on. Try, try. Tomorrow's another day," my grandfather laughs.

And then they're in, all of them. There're a few *bach-bachs* but quickly the chickens settle into their chicken dreams. And then my *Dedo*, with a sigh, sits back down on his upside down, empty feta bucket next to me.

"Yep," he says it again. "Tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow." He raises one eyebrow at me. And then he looks far into the distance at a point that isn't there, that hasn't arrived yet. "Tomorrow—I've given it a lot of thought, too," he tells me and the future, like it has ears to hear him. "One day, you'll finish school—not like me, only to fourth grade. You'll go to college or university or wherever it is that young people in this country go. Then you'll get a job in an

office. Oh-ho, and you'll look good too. Do you know how?"

"No."

"Do you want me to tell you?"

I nod my head. "Sure."

"You'll wear a nice-fitting suit." A warm, happy smile spreads across his face as he speaks. "A jacket and a skirt to the knees to show off your figure and your legs. Tight like this at the waist." He pinches in his own to show me. He sucks together his lips like a fish. "Like this."

"Oh," I say, catching on fast. "Like the lady on the lighter. Like the lady you met down the hole?"

"Well, in a way. But did I say? You should know, you'll be carrying a briefcase with important papers inside of it. Don't ask me what they say. You'll be going to an important meeting to say important things. I can't imagine what. It's beyond me, I'm an ignorant man. But, oh, you'll look so fine. You'll wear silk stockings with a black seam down the back. And you'll wear high, high heels—*shtikli*—that have fine, fine points. And when those points strike the ground as you walk down the office building halls, they'll go *krtz-krtz, krtz-krtz.*"

"*Krtz-krtz?*" I giggle and make a face like the kid that I am.

"Yeah," my *Dedo* says solemnly, uncrossing and recrossing his legs the other way. His legs in their rolled-up pants, his feet in their broken-down gumboots that would go *sloosh-sloosh* in the mud and the rain, if they went anywhere.

"Of course! What do you think? *Krtz-krtz*. That's the sound your shoes will make. *Krtz-krtz*. So that everyone hears you're coming. *Krtz-krtz*. So everyone knows you've arrived, so everybody knows you're here."

Tamara Lazaroff is a Brisbane-based emerging writer of fiction and non-fiction, and a sometimes-poet. She is currently working on her first collection of short stories and a novella based on her roots tour travel and study through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Her work has been published, or is forthcoming in various journals in Australia, New Zealand and the U.K, including Meanjin, Southerly, Verity La, Headland and The Wrong Quarterly.

Beach Road

by Thom Sullivan

months of a wintering brightness : rooms
that remember them : a squaring off

of blistered paint : a window in to a light
that's tidal : washing out over folds

of paper that crumple : lathering up
over sand : months of an airstream

whiteness : dour gulls : the nightly haul
of kelp : a thought that inks itself in

to the margins of a faint notation :
a notebook open with morning

exposed across it : the aspect capricious :
changing : calcium : cumulus : foam :

Thom Sullivan grew up on a farm in Wistow/Bugle Ranges in the Adelaide Hills. He had a short collection of poems, 'Airborne', published in New Poets 14 (Wakefield Press) in 2009. Since then he's edited or co-edited seven published books of poetry. His poems have appeared in The Best Australian Poems (2014, 2015), Australian Love Poems, and as part of Australian Book Review's 'States of Poetry' anthology. He was a featured writer at Adelaide Writers' Week in 2016.

Great Expectations

by Denis Fitzpatrick

It really never is wise buying illicit drugs on credit. It is even less wise to do so when the company one works for is still a week behind with their wage payments to their hard working staff, and the prospects of soon receiving that back pay are slim under any light. Adrian Sommers had thus always avoided buying his pot on credit, having heard many stories of smokers who were bashed over being a day or two late with a five or ten dollar repayment. There was then no way Adrian was now going to get his weekly fifty dollar deal on tick, even if he could convince his man to offer it, especially since being late to repay the debt could well mean a shattered kneecap or two.

But Adrian's desire to avoid the risk of serious hurt was, however, gradually giving way to his growing cravings for some of the fine smoke. And anyway, if he was kneecapped for late payment, at least he would have the ganja to ease the pain. Doubtlessly, though, his dealer would not give him a fifty on tick. Maybe a twenty, but it was a fifty that he needed, three grams, to get through the week and to have something to look forward to each day at lunchtime during his telemarketing job, and after he had knocked off for the day, like now. Maybe his dealer, Jerry, would accept a cheque? Well, why not? It was certainly worth a try. He would sweeten the deal by making the cheque out for sixty dollars. Inspired, and faintly desperate, he rang Jerry.

“Hiya, Adrian. Want me to pop over with the usual?”

“You bet. But can I pay with a cheque? My wallet seems to have gone up in smoke too.”

“Gz, don't know, Adrian. I've always dealt strictly in cash.”

“I know, Jerry, but this is a rare exception. I'll make the cheque out for sixty bucks for the inconvenience.”

Jerry crunched the possibilities, quickly offering, “Make it out for seventy and I'll be there in five minutes. Give or take.”

“Okay, cool. I'll write it out now.”

“See ya soon, Adrian.”

“See you soon, Jerry.”

Jerry was over in ten minutes and must have banked the cheque on the following day, a Friday, for when it came to Tuesday morning, and Adrian's usual checking of his emails and bank account, the cheque had cleared. He was now also, and unexpectedly, three dollars and seventeen cents overdrawn. He was relieved that he still had two functioning kneecaps.

“Cool,” he sighed. “Thanks, God. I owe you one. A big one.”

Come the following Thursday though, payday from Fischer's Marketing Services, Adrian received an email instead, briefly asking him if he would consent to another postponed payment of wage. Adrian really had no choice but to agree, for not to would mean that Fischer's would then be unable to meet its legal wage requirements and must instantly cease trading. Luckily Fischer's was a small firm so probably all of the few staff had agreed to the request, their only real hope of getting paid. He likewise replied in the affirmative, and all through that day's shift wondered how he was going to get that week's groceries. Plus his cat needed kibble, Adrian not having any for the past two days. He had fed her milk instead, which she seemed not to object to in any degree. But he couldn't live on milk.

The answer exploded clearly in his mind when he sat down to the TV after the day's work: just buy two weeks' worth with a cheque. Seeing as how quite a few of the local Redferne Quinnsverth supermarket staff knew him as a regular customer, and had exchanged names with him, often happily chatting with him, he felt sure he could get the supermarket to accept a cheque, just this once. May as well see how much the kind bank was willing to let him get further into its indebtedness.

“Cool,” he said to himself, relieved that he wasn't on the cusp of serious starvation. “Might also be able to get a longneck or two.” He flicked across the TV's channels, caught the end of a David Attenborough documentary, and then headed out to try his luck. He had nothing to lose.

§

Adrian was not in any way surprised when his groceries cheque cleared on the following Tuesday. He was now over one hundred and fifty dollars overdrawn on his bank account. He was tempted to ring them up and ask by how much he could overdraw, but then the whole thing was probably an error, an oversight, best taken advantage of while it lasted. Indeed, he had better make hay while the sun shone. So he rang Jerry again, after he got home from work, asking for a quarter of an ounce of pot, seven grams, to be paid with a cheque.

“Gz,” lamented Jerry, “don't think I can do.”

“My last cheque was good, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, but Adrian, this is becoming a habit. One that affects me.”

“I’ll tell you what, Jerry, I’ll make the cheque out for one-ten, instead of the usual ninety. The last one cleared no problem so the extra money is easy dough for you. And I swear this’ll be the last time. It’s just that work hasn’t been paying their wages, but promising to. Help me out, Jerry, this one last time.”

Jerry again quickly crunched the possibilities.

“Okay, Adrian. But this is the last time. And make the cheque out for one-twenty”

“Cool. Thanks, Jerry.”

“See ya in five or ten.”

There was a reason for Adrian’s buying so much extra pot, namely that if Fisher’s didn’t pay in full what they owed him by the second following Thursday he most definitely would quit and find another job. Blessedly, Aus’s economy had been steadily growing over the past fifteen years and the unemployment rate had been around the full employment level for even longer than that. Getting another job within a week should be so simple, and he’d once more be a made man with plenty of smoko and not a worry to belittle his calm. So, if he did end up leaving Fischer’s he’d need the extra ganja to tide him through until clover once more ran free under his feet. And if worse came to worst he could always borrow the money to repay Jerry from his older sister. He didn’t really talk with his sister but she had always looked out for him in the past, and would do so now if he honestly told her of his predicament. There really should be no problem at all with quickly solving his financial distress.

Adrian was not actually surprised when three business days later he received an email from his bank telling him that his cheque for \$120 had been dishonoured. A \$20 dishonour fee had also been applied to his account and if said account did not return to a credit balance within five business days the bank would commence legal action without further notice. According to plan he rang Julia, his sister, but her phone just rang out. He kept trying over the next two hours but it just kept ringing out. Was she ignoring him? Was her phone ringing forlornly at Julia’s place, accidentally forgotten for the day? He had not the slightest clue.

He had known that this free money really couldn’t last, but he now knew he had stupidly persisted in spending it nonetheless. Well, since Fisher’s probably wouldn’t pay either this or next Thursday, Adrian decided it was time to see some of the great Aus. Right now, before he found an extra hole in his head. Of course, Adrian was unsure if Jerry owned a gun, but a sharp knife succinctly applied to one of his carotids would be just as effective. Jerry may even prefer that repayment method, there being no *bang* and no consequent ruckus.

Foregoing the rest of his morning coffee, he packed a bag with a few clothes and headed off to explore the great land of Aus, a land whose majesty must only be paralleled in another Universe. His cat, too, would have to move on, but without him. He decided to visit Queensland first, catching any suburban train as far north as possible and then trusting to the luck of his thumbs. He jauntily headed off to the station, setting off on what could only be a great adventure.

§

His adventure soon soured. He lost the rest of his quarter ounce somewhere along the highway north and it took him a week to reach the Queensland border. He didn't have time to pine for his pot though, as he was intent on just surviving each day, stealing whatever food and water was closest, even begging a few dollars for a feed from the rare lifts he got. When he did eventually reach the Queensland border, weary and sore, he swore that he would never leave. He would remain here throughout his life, working hard, and avoiding all drugs. It really was time that Adrian grew up.

Accordingly, he slept for two whole days, awaking refreshed, invigorated, but very hungry. He had no energy left to reach Brisbane, despite his enthusiasm, and decided to try a different tack. He would simply approach any house that looked down to earth, and beg of the owner for a good feed of something. He would even tell the truth if he had to, that he was running from a drug dealer who probably had unpleasant designs on his welfare, and to find a better life without drugs.

Adrian was partially successful in his goal. No one single home fed him to satiety, but after several houses offered him small, nourishing meals, and a ten dollar note from the last lady he begged from, he was now ready for Brisbane, the sunny capital of a welcoming, sunny state. He entered Brisbane just after noon that same day, opting to sleep in a park that night, to approach some charities tomorrow for help to start a new, better life.

§

Adrian's luck must have now been on the upswing again for, on his way to a nearby Salvation Army office, he spotted a sign in a butcher's, advertising a shop assistant's position. Adrian was sure that the advertisement was posted there exclusively for his perusal, and he did not look the gift horse in the mouth. The butcher's took him on without a resume, the manager seeing a potential employee who honestly proclaimed his dilemma, and who would probably return a lot to the shop if she, the manager, also went out of her way to help him. She even advanced some of his wage to make adjusting to his new life a tad easier.

And that certainly proved to be the case. He soon found a room in a boarding house without

too much bother and turned up to work each day half an hour early, knocking off also a half hour later than quitting time, most days. His manager, Sherie, was quickly coming to rely on this young man's puppyish enthusiasm. And she believed him when he said that he hadn't had any marijuana for weeks and weeks, that he didn't miss it at all. They both agreed he had landed on his feet to great effect.

§

Jerry tracked Adrian down two weeks after he had moved into his boarding house in West End. He was all business with Adrian, even telling him that he had been traced through his Medicare card, thanks to one of Jerry's ex-girlfriends who worked in Medicare Aus. An officious pharmacist had informed Medicare of Adrian's change of address and new mobile number when he, Adrian, had filled a prescription for some cream for the blisters on his heels. Another reason to stay in Brisbane forever and give up all hiking. Obliging, without any wariness, Adrian had updated his address and phone number. Jerry did not sound disgruntled on the phone but clearly told Adrian that his absconding had had ripple effects upon him. If he didn't get his one-twenty in a maximum of two days Adrian's sister would bear the brunt of his malfeasance.

Adrian too was calm on the phone, telling his old drug dealer that he was in a good spot now in bright, warm Queensland, was finally living like a responsible adult and that Jerry's money would be deposited as soon as the bank opened in the morning. In fact, he would put one-fifty in Jerry's account, considering that, really, he should have already paid the outstanding debt by this time. They ended the conversation amicably and Adrian was the first in the queue for the opening of the bank on the next morning, letting work know in advance that he'd be late to arrive for his shift.

And now that Adrian had his life firmly in hand, he decided on one last fling, and then back to the solid foundations he had built for himself here. Accordingly, he went to his local pub after the day's work and upon discreetly enquiring was given a number he could ring to get a twenty dollar deal delivered to his home. Once again at home, and after buying a small hash pipe, he excitedly rang the number, memories of the many good times he'd had with the smoko almost overwhelming him. The phone picked up after two rings. As Adrian had been told he just gave his address and was told they'd be there in twenty minutes. They'd honk their horn four times when they arrived. Adrian was even more excited when he put his mobile away.

The new dealer was fifteen minutes late but Adrian had been very patient throughout the wait. The guy gave him a big deal for the extra wait, assuring him that it was the 'dynamite gear'. Which it most certainly was. After the first hash pipe of the stuff he was by far the most stoned he had ever been. It was even better than he remembered. And with the more sizeable deal he was sure that he could make such potent smoko last for at least a week.

This gear even seemed to keep coming on and on, and pretty soon he felt like he deserved a party. And deservedly he went to buy himself a six pack of Guinness cans, marvelling at all around him on his trek to the bottleshop.

The first can went down like a lover intent on only making him happy, and he had two more cans before he felt the need for another pipe. That last pipe, though, was lights out for him and, after putting the three remaining cans into the bar fridge he went to bed, drifting into slumber, feeling toasty, warm, and comforted all over.

It's no surprise then, considering how absolutely stoned Adrian became, that he awoke the next day seriously late for work. He left home almost immediately upon awaking, stuffing the twenty into the coin pocket of the jeans he'd slept in. He'd have a joint at lunch, to fully acclimatise to a new day.

How it was that his manager was able to recognise the smell of pot Adrian was never able to find out. She probably just had a lucky guess, assumed the pungent stink wafting from Adrian's lunchtime smoke in the loading dock must be marijuana. Sherie had very little of the rebel in her, only ever talking about the shenanigans of her daughter attending kindergarten. She unhesitatingly sacked him. Adrian finished the joint, once more aghast that pot was threatening his independence.

Well, be that the case, fleeing from it once more should solve the problem. So, when he got home, he flushed the ganja down the toilet and carefully packed his travel bag. He was going to Western Aus this time and, finding he only had about enough for the airfare and groceries for a week, he decided to withdraw it all and trust the bank would again honour a small overdraw on his account for said airfare. The cash would be spent in supermarkets in WA, who were probably not as willing to accept a cheque as the local supermarket had. He couldn't spend his ready cash immediately either, needing it to set himself up as best he could in WA. He once more jauntily left his home, feeling himself on a wonderful adventure.

Denis Fitzpatrick has been writing for over thirty years and has been labelled "Sydney's hippest writer" and "the hippest of off-beat writers" by the publishing house, Independence Jones (now, sadly, no longer in business). He is in full remission with paranoid schizophrenia, and over the past several years has written almost exclusively about mental illness, from the point of view of those so affected. He is published monthly at [The Short Stories Club](#), a blog run to promote new and emerging writers, and has several books available online. He is also having a collection of his stories published in 2018 by Waldorf Publishing, again, mostly stories viewing mental illness positively, if a little bizarrely. He was also published in Issue Fourteen of Tincture Journal. You can find him on Twitter [@viearus](#).

Avid Reader

by Rosanna Licari

At the book launch
you tell me I look good
then say you didn't mean it,
and later you say you did.
You walk up to the author,
he tells you he's in Capalaba.
You ask him if he's growing anything.
He tells you he smokes kiff every day.
He says it's safer than alcohol.
He never brings wine now
when he sees his girlfriends.
You say we'll visit. You two will
talk poetry and get stoned.
You tell me I'll drive you there.
I tell him you're making this up.
You tell me you've written
a manuscript, it's about your women.
You've named them all.
You tell me I have beautiful hands.
You tell me you'd pay for it,
the coffee, if we were lovers.
You tell me I am hard.

Rosanna Licari is an Australian writer. Her work has appeared in various journals and anthologies. In 2015, she won the inaugural Philip Bacon Ekphrasis Poetry Prize for her poem 'The Wait'. She is the editor and publisher of StylusLit.

Running Away from the Circus

Non-fiction by Philip Keenan

There's nowt so queer as folk

—Anonymous

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

—Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (trans. Constance Garnett)

When I was growing up I was briefly friends with a boy whose family was different from mine. Firstly they had a tennis court, and I suppose that means they had a swimming pool too—these tend to go together. They did in the houses of the North Shore's successful middle class, anyway. And I recall being driven home in a shabby yet somehow stately Volvo, all the way to my house in another part of Sydney where the leaves weren't so leafy and the few tennis courts were made of concrete and owned by the local council. The father of this boy may have been an architect, if certain stereotypes about Volvos have any validity. From memory the man had unwieldy greying curly hair and a cardigan covered his shapeless body, and the two parents spoke to their children as if they were rehearsing intelligent-sounding things they had been working on to impress company with at a later date. The father could have been a psychiatrist, now that I think about it. As we drove, the father attempted to catch his children out with questions while the mother focused on achieving high scores from unseen judges. Did the architect or psychiatrist ask probing questions of me, sitting in the dark, in the back of his station wagon? I have forgotten, but it wouldn't matter if he did. What does matter is that this family had a pet name for their mum. They called her Moo. It was based on some kind of cute incident when the little sister couldn't say 'mum' properly and thereafter the whole family adopted her attempt as a substitute.

It was one of those linguistic things, an in-joke, hilarious and uniting to those who share it, repellent to those who don't. I remember feeling that it wasn't as endearing as intended. I wondered what was wrong with these people. In what other ways were they different from my family? The incident which spawned the name took place on a long-haul aeroplane flight, and our holidays just weren't like that. As a general principle, the effort of imagination required to identify with the internal dynamics of this family proved beyond me.

Since arriving at my new school, among the long sock and short pants–wearing heirs of the satisfied plutocracy, friends had come my way with unexpected ease. This was put down to my selection by certain parents as a suitable playmate for their boy, when it was clear that my marks were better than average, as if osmosis or some other force might allow academic results to be shared by association, in the same manner as guilt. Or that was my mother’s guess, her theory, which she put to me after she and Dad and I had attended a number of birthday parties at these houses, with these people, while I was still in the first flush of friendly intimacy with the sons in question. Upon reflection, it was something she didn’t have to tell me, but we were close and this was the sort of thing we would talk about.

The boy in question shall not be named, although I recall him as vividly as when we were eleven years old. We drifted apart in the years after this and early in high school he left for a different private school, one with a more appealing drama department. He is an actor now, or so I’ve heard.

But the boy and the family are not important. The in-joke is the point of this little excursion into my history. It wasn’t that there were no references and stories and shibboleths in my family—we positively groaned with them and my sister and I were probably already becoming bored with the constant references to our time in England, where I was born, and where we lived for a handful of years.

They were our in-jokes, I suppose, and they would have been as alien to another boy or girl as were the things the Volvo family talked about to me. Even now my parents talk of “when we were in England”, as if they weren’t referring to a four year period which ended almost forty years ago. It is as if those experiences, and their stories, are the only things they find truly interesting in their entire lives, and they may well be right. Although I like to think that my life after toddlerhood should warrant something more than a footnote in the story of the family which lived in England for a little while.

The point is that people do things differently.

And this was emphasised in a new way on a recent weekend morning as my wife and I lay in bed, in our flannelette pyjamas, unwilling to face the cold, and chatting about our plans for the day. We discussed tea and coffee and maybe even something to eat—such are the mundane indulgences which punctuate our marriage.

Laetitia, which is not her real name, brought up the list game. This is a game where you have to name the group of celebrities for whom you ought to be given a ‘free pass’, which

means that should you be presented with an amorous encounter with one of those people, and you let nature take its course, such conduct will be blameless. When others play this game together it is a delightful thing to hear.

The conundrum for Laetitia was that one of the members of her little fantasy celebrity sex gang recently died. Again, there is no reason to name him, but there can be no other like this man and having expounded at some length for my benefit about the dilemma she found herself in, Laetitia decided not to fill his place on her three-person list. It made me think of when professional sporting clubs retire the number worn by a former great player when that person enters their Hall of Fame. However I didn't say this. I didn't contribute anything.

If this sounds anti-social that is because it is—anti-social and grumpy.

Inevitably I was asked for a list of my own and the rules were explained for me, as if their complexity could be causing the blockage in the free flow of amusing repartee between us. But I couldn't. It isn't my game. It's something other people do, and it's not for me.

I prevaricated and thought of ways to change the subject and then we almost had an argument. The difference of opinion was over a small yet revealing comment. I said, "If I say anybody, you're just going to tease me and I'll never hear the end of it." I was thinking of when Myer Wolfsheim won't attend Jay Gatsby's funeral and he writes to Nick Carraway: "I cannot come down now as I am tied up in some very important business and cannot get mixed up in this thing now," but it opened me up to a very serious charge—that I'm not fun.

No one likes to have such an accusation levelled at them. But there are situations when I seem to suck up all the fun in the atmosphere, like some sort of cosmic enjoyment vacuum. And it's not something I can really help. This doesn't mean I have no sense of humour. I have a rich and anarchic one, but am perhaps reticent to share it, and therein lies the problem.

All of this recalls being asked which footy team you supported and not wanting to say because all your school friends supported other teams and you could only get it wrong. Something similar happened at a later age with bands. "What sort of music do you like?" genuinely vexed me for some time until I grew up enough to make peace with the truth: *no one you like, in fact I know nothing about popular culture now.*

When this mood dominates it's as if I can't allow myself to join in with the other girls and boys. What others expect is clear—there is no mystery—but the effort to do one's duty is simply too hard. In our early teenage years some of us found ourselves at school dances and knew none of the girls from the other school and we froze. Of course we had some notion of what to do—just be yourself—but the pressure was too great and a legitimate alternative to taking the risk of

looking foolish in front of strange women was not asking anyone to dance and not attempting to talk to anyone. Our flawed reasoning said that this approach would preserve some measure of dignity. But to preserve dignity by hiding is to preserve no dignity at all. And so some of us took a kind of middle path, between the wallflowers and the lotharios, which was, late in the evening, to ask a quiet, low-profile girl to dance, and to embarrass ourselves on the dance floor in front of her, and then to sit with her and prove that our small talk skills were as poorly developed as we feared they might be without the subject of footy to fall back on.

Perhaps I'm not fun. It could be that I've forgotten how to enjoy myself: that something I had as a child, a sense of boundless enjoyment and living totally in the moment, has quietly died over the years. Maybe my fun is different from other people's fun. Fun is letting go, but an insistent voice reminds me of the dance floor—there are infinite ways to look like an idiot.

Laetitia could have guessed this, and she probably already had.

There was another game, an earlier one. A game she used to play with a friend of hers where you challenge the other person to name their price to perform some act which would normally be considered outside the bounds of good taste or the law. They used to laugh together and crumple with their laughter as they thought and answered. It never worked with me though, for the same reason as the other game. The conversation went something like this:

“How much would you need to do it?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. Everyone has their price.”

“No. Nothing.”

“Really? Not for any money?”

“No. Because I'm not going to do a poo in a supermarket. Not for any money.”

§

My first encounter with *The Wind in the Willows* led to falling in love with Badger, living in his burrow underground, in the Wild Wood, surrounded by weasels and stoats, bad guys too scared to bother him. His home seemed so cosy and his grumpiness was an asset—these things had strong appeal for me.

Perhaps it is instructive that Badger was a loner, for I have always distrusted happy families. The concept seemed somehow disingenuous, forced even, as if people were trying too hard to

prove something to the rest of us. There was love and security supporting me, but certain personalities will always be quicker to frown than to smile, and I wonder if our apparent happiness was only convincing because it was a performance.

One person who might have had a view about this is my mum, but her conversation of gossip and confidences has morphed into the sort of talk you might expect from a Lewis Carroll character, which is what happens to all of us, with advancing years.

People are different and families help to shape those differences. The way a family functions must remain unknown to outsiders. In some there are too many raised voices and conviviality too seldom restrained, in others late night phone calls come from locked hospital wards and constables and paramedics minister to the crises of a sibling ill-equipped to cope with adult life.

The hoarders I grew up with and their loving house in which I was raised contributed to the character of a very serious little boy who became a very serious little man. I share their pathological nostalgia. Their mania for neglect and melancholy lurks within me too, waiting like a sleeper cell to be activated at a later time.

Some of us have entered that phase of life where decisions must be taken with care and cannot be lightly reversed. Blaming others for unintended consequences is not an option, and it never has been. One judgement I did make was this: my list has one name on it. I chose Monica Bellucci. It seemed a low risk choice—and she's beautiful.

Philip Keenan is a writer from Sydney with an interest in the strangeness of familiar things. Philip's work has previously appeared in Issues Seven and Thirteen of Tincture Journal.

Spider

by Ailsa Dunlop

Holly held her left hand in front of her face, crooked her fingers, and tried to imagine a spider. It wasn't working out so far. Her hand made a functional body, but she only had five fingers and nothing she could use as a head. If she raised her middle finger—not in a rude way, just higher than the rest of her hand—then that could be the head, except it was more like a very long neck, with the tip of her finger as the head. She had never seen a spider like that. And now it only had four legs.

She lowered her middle finger and hooked her right hand around the back of her left, sliding the first three fingers of her right hand through the thumb and first two of her left, tucking the spare thumb and pinkie in between her hands. Now the spider had eight legs and a fatter body. It could even crawl a bit, in a stunted sort of way, if she moved her hands apart and together again very quickly. But it still had no head.

“Desperate times,” Holly muttered. She would have to use her own head. “There’s just nothing for it!” she said out loud, then immediately regretted it. She waited a few moments, watching the door to see if anyone would come in or call, “What?”

Nothing. Either nobody had heard, or they were ignoring her.

She drew the body of the spider up under her chin, twisting her arms and neck so that the squishy bit under her chin rested on the boniest part of her right wrist. Now she *was* the spider. She flicked her new spider eyes from side to side a couple of times, leaned over and scuttled a little across the bed with her finger-legs. Then she was bored again. As soon as it had begun, the thrill and intrigue of spider life had dissipated. “It’s not much fun being a spider,” she whispered, “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

She untangled her hands, clasped them behind her back, and sat with her legs apart, eyes focused on the dusty collection of figurines on the dresser in front of her, feet wagging in her peripheral vision. She felt pain in her neck. She let her muscles go and her head swing down. Now her eyes focused on her own crotch, her denim skirt scrunched up at her hips.

Her eyes scanned the whole area, from the shiny fuchsia seam and bow of her underwear to where she could just make out the shape of her vulva through the gusset. She had learned the word ‘vulva’ earlier that year from a book on puberty she’d found in the senior section of the library. She had found the book very interesting and not at all funny, but later when she’d told

Lena about it, they hadn't been able to stop laughing. After that, whenever they saw a Volvo on the street, they pointed and said "vulva", and giggled until they had tears in their eyes.

Holly moved her undies to the side. He was funny-looking, but not ha-ha funny. He always looked like he was frowning. She knew it was strange to think of her genitalia as a he, but it had never struck her as feminine. He must have been bored—he didn't do anything yet, except wee. He didn't have hair, he didn't have periods, he didn't have sex, he didn't have babies.

Back before Holly and Lena had broken friends, they had talked about sex a lot. Once, during a sleepover at Lena's house, they even pretended to do it. Lena had been the boy. She had lain on top of Holly, and they moved up and down together very fast, making grunting noises like on TV. The couples on TV kissed while they were doing it, but Holly and Lena hadn't wanted to do that, so they just pressed their cheeks together and pretended to kiss instead. They had done a very realistic job. Their noises escalated in pitch and volume together until they were as loud as they could be without being heard, then they collapsed on the bed, panting and feigning doe-eyed exhaustion.

"I love you, darling," Lena had said.

"I love you too," Holly replied, "But darling! You realise I'm probably pregnant now."

Lena sat up and fixed her eyes on Holly. "Pregnant? You mean I'm to be a father? Darling, I can't think of anything more wonderful!" And the two had embraced.

Together, they'd made wobbly time-lapse hand gestures and announced, "Nine months later..." And Holly, padded with pillows, sat up in bed puffing and groaning, while Lena held her hand and chanted, "Push! Push!"

"You did this to me, you bastard!" Holly screamed, a little too loudly, and Lena had broken character and told her to shush. But soon, Holly had delivered a ragged and naked porcelain doll to her own arms.

"It's a girl! Well done, darling. She's just perfect."

"Her name is Jocelyn, and she's going to be a beauty and a genius, I can already tell."

Holly and Lena had stopped being friends when Lena broke her promise to Holly that they would become private investigators. They had planned to start a business to solve mysteries and fight injustice in their school. They even had a name and a slogan: "Holena, P.I: In crime-fighting, we are one." In retrospect, it occurred to Holly that this didn't make them sound particularly good, as she realised that if she had a crime that needed solving, she would rather

have two people on the case than one. Nonetheless, they had agreed to go into business at the start of that term.

Late in the school holidays, Holly had phoned Lena to go over their plans, and had been informed that Lena didn't want to do it anymore, and that just because people said they were going to do something, it didn't mean they were actually going to do it. Holly had screamed down the phone that Lena was a fucking fat asshole, before hammering the phone on the receiver seven times. Later that evening, Lena's mother phoned Holly's mother. Holly had been in her bedroom, and hadn't been able to hear the conversation, but afterwards she had heard her parents talking in the kitchen.

"...about the kind of attitudes our child is being exposed to at home, a nine-year-old using language like that...either an idiot or a fucking hypocrite...where her daughter gets her vocabulary from?"

Holly knew why her mother had said that. Once, Lena had accidentally walked in on Holly's father in the toilet, and told Holly, "Your dad's got a big dick". This had made Holly strangely proud; she felt reassured that her genes were good, that if she had been a boy she would have had a big one too, and that she came from strong sperm and would grow up healthy and live a long time. Her mother had overheard Lena though, and stormed into the room, pulled Lena's face up close to hers, and told her to show some respect for people's privacy. Then she called Lena's father to come and pick her up. Lena cried and apologised as she left. Both their fathers had looked very embarrassed.

Now Lena was best friends with Eva, who used to call them losers and retards and mental patients. Eva still called Holly those things. Lena didn't join in, but she didn't try to defend her, either. Holly hung out with Min-seo and Soo-jin. They were nice; they always saved a seat for her, and they spoke English to each other when she was around so that she wouldn't feel left out. They hadn't been over to her house, and she hadn't been to either of theirs. Her mother had suggested it a couple of times, but Holly was afraid they would run out of things to talk about.

Holly stretched out on her stomach on the bed. The sunset was starting to come through her closed blinds. Her parents and Claire had told her to open the blinds more often, instead of shutting herself in. But the window only opened onto the back of the garage anyway, so it wasn't like it made any difference. And she had never felt comfortable with them open.

"If only that *bastard* hadn't got custody of my darling Jocelyn in the divorce," she said. "A little girl ought to be with her mother, and she's growing up so fast!"

She rolled her eyes up into her head until her skull hurt and her eyeballs felt about to crack.

She wondered if you could die from rolling your eyes. Could she kill herself right now, without moving from this position? What if she pushed really hard, like when she was having Jocelyn, but so hard this time that her heart fell out? It would sit there beating between her legs, still attached to her body by a thick, blue vein. She would have to get scissors to cut it like an umbilical cord before she could die.

She could go the other way and clench up instead, until her body shook and she could feel pressure from the inside of her head out. She did it now. She could hear her own blood pumping and her teeth grinding. She bet if she did this long enough, her head would explode. Would she keep going this time? How far could she push it?

She let it go. She let her muscles go completely limp, and felt the tension evaporate. She rolled off the bed, went to her desk, and took out the exercise book that contained the manifesto Claire had helped her write. Claire had said her mind had muscles, just like her body, and that just like learning to do the splits by going down a little further every day, she could train her mind to do what she wanted it to by practising. She read through what she had written again:

When I find myself getting lost in a fantasy, I will aim to focus on a task. I will look at what is going on around me, and I will find something that needs to be done. Maybe something is dirty and needs to be cleaned. Maybe I have homework to catch up on. Maybe the dog needs to go for a walk. I will pick something to do, and I will concentrate my energy on doing the task well, until it is done. Afterwards, I will reward myself with something I like doing, like reading my favourite book or watching my favourite show. Each time I feel like I want to escape into a fantasy world, I will repeat this process, even if it is hard. Each time I do it, it will be easier than the last, until one day, I won't even need those fantasies anymore.

Holly liked Claire, but she found it very hard to concentrate in their appointments. The walls were so white and bare, and the building was so quiet, that her head would start filling in colour and noise for her. The space around Claire's head would turn to neon-coloured pixels, and the pauses between her words would be filled with a shrill buzzing. Holly would feel as if the body in the chair was a robot impostor, while the real Holly was just outside the window controlling it, and she would become terrified that Claire knew it wasn't really her.

Once, she had been trying to listen to Claire speak when she'd suddenly thought, "You're a grown woman. You probably have a big, hairy bush." She hadn't expected to think this. She had never pictured Claire nude before, or thought about her like that at all, but out of nowhere it had entered her head. She hadn't been able to take in a word Claire said after that, because she'd been concentrating so hard on not thinking about her big, hairy bush.

She lay back on the bed, and resumed the spider position. How old would she be before she

stopped wanting to do things like this? Did it work like that, or would she just have to stop doing it, even though she really wanted to? Would she be an old woman, still thinking about spider heads, and fake babies, and death by eye-rolling, and psychologists' big, hairy bushes, and have to go around just pretending that she was thinking about the news?

Her fingertip spider-feet shuffled over the covers, then stopped to gaze up at the terrifying face of Mount Leg. It was truly a momentous day—the first spider ever to reach the summit, she'd be in the Guinness Book of Records for sure.

“For the sake of spiders everywhere, my life is but a small sacrifice,” she said. “The first step is always the hardest.” She began to climb.

Ailsa Dunlop is a writer and stand-up comic based in Melbourne.

From 'Autobiochemistry'

by Tricia Dearborn

[55] Caesium

A commercial grade caesium clock
is the size of a suitcase. It works

by a kind of ticking you can't hear:
the jump of caesium 133's

55th electron—footloose
above the cloistered 54—

to a higher orbit. Beyond
precise, this atomic sundial.

Accurate to within a second
in 1.4 million years.

Sometimes after what seems aeons
a decision is made

in an instant unmeasurable
even by the caesium clock.

A woman kisses you.
You make the leap.

[74] Tungsten

sudden dusk
in the house again
my hand at the light switch

it's always one of those

old black bakelite switches
that click so distinctly

click! the filament
fails to blaze, an ominous
absence of incandescence

I run from switch to switch
each click! floods a room
with nightmare dark

Note: '[55] Caesium' and '[74] Tungsten' are taken from an extended poem sequence that explores autobiographical content via the lens of the chemical elements.

Tricia Dearborn's poetry has been widely published in literary journals and is represented in numerous anthologies, including Contemporary Australian Poetry, Australian Poetry since 1788 and The Best Australian Poems (2010, 2012). She is on the editorial board of Plumwood Mountain, an online journal of ecopoetry and eco-poetics, and was poetry editor for the February 2016 issue. She has been awarded several grants by the Australia Council, and a 2017 Residential Fellowship at Varuna, the Writers' House, to work on her manuscript in progress. Her most recent collection of poetry is The Ringing World, published by Puncher & Wattmann.

Our Mate, Cummo

by Dominic Carew

“Don’t get me started on Cummo,” I told Phil, the day after Cummo got arrested again. “That guy’s on another level now.”

“This is the second time in a month!”

“I don’t reckon you should get me started, Phil.”

The pair of us were in Rob’s Pub, waiting for Brick and Neil Hammond to come out of the court house across the road where Cummo was being arraigned. It was hot as hell outside; we were drinking iced water. Phil couldn’t put it down.

“Did you hear what he did beforehand?” he asked, his eyes wide and his right knee bouncing. “How he stole all that booze from the golf club, then drove a golf buggy onto the main road with all the booze, and bottles were falling out and smashing on the road? And a bus went over a bit of glass and blew its tyre?”

“Phil, please.”

“That bus, it jack-knifed sideways and three old ladies fell over inside and hurt their hips. Did you hear?”

“I heard about that, Phil. Yes. But Phil.”

“The bus driver got out and chased him, didn’t he? Right along the road. And Cummo, that crazy bastard, he was too drunk to notice, so he kept driving the buggy down the middle of the street with all the booze and bottles and they kept falling off the back of the cart.”

“I know that Phil.”

“And then, did you hear, he ran into a pole, and banged up his nose, and the cops came?” He stopped for a moment, took a sip of water. “It was two in the afternoon!”

I knew all about that too. I’d heard the whole story from Neil and also from Cummo, who’d called me earlier that morning from his cell. But I didn’t feel the need to pore over it like a kid with a girlie mag. On the other hand, Phil was keen to get through every detail. It was his way of trying to understand our mate, I guess.

“Those coppers. They saw him in the banged-up cart, but they didn’t cuff him.”

“Don’t get me started on the cops either, Phil.”

“They were too busy talking to the driver, I heard. Taking notes from the driver and the people on the bus. They should’ve cuffed him straight away, though. It was a constable. A young inspector and a constable with no experience.”

“I s’pose they didn’t know what they had on their hands,” I said. “I mean, they didn’t know what kinda bloke Cummo could be.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, tearing up a beer coaster then putting the pieces on the table by his glass. “Why couldn’t he have sat in the buggy and waited for them to take him in? Surely he knew they were cops. Their lights would’ve been flashing.”

“I don’t have a clue either, Phil.”

But that wasn’t entirely true. I don’t mean to say I knew how Cummo’s mind worked, like, I’d never understood the depths of Pete Cummins and I’d never wanted to. But I knew enough about the guy to figure he was capable of doing what he did yesterday. After crashing the buggy into the pole.

“If you ask me, those cops are the ones that shoulda been arrested. Oi Rob,” Phil said, looking over to the bar, “can you bring us a lemon squash? Those cops,” he said, turning back to me, “were negligent in their duties.”

“Lemon squash for you too, Al?” Rob yelled.

I nodded.

“Those coppers,” Phil went on. “They shoulda cuffed him straight away.”

I nodded again. Not at anything in particular this time. I was trying not to think about things. About how Cummo had gotten out of the buggy and taken his clothes off, for example. Right in front of the bus, with the passengers looking out their windows at him. And how, completely naked but for his shoes, he’d walked over to the cop car, gotten in and driven off. I just wanted it all to wash over me for once. So I nodded my head. I nodded my head to the sound of an unheard tune. Maybe it was peace I was after. A few moments of it at least. Because the truth was, I wasn’t so sure Brick and Neil were going to have the best news when they came in to Rob’s in ten minutes time. Part of me was of course hoping that they would. That Cummo had been let off again, maybe with a warning from the magistrate and a fine big enough to shape him up. But another part was kind of wishing against it. I think it was the fact that I was wishing

against it that was making me feel like I needed peace.

“Can I ask you something, Al? I mean, something about Cummo?”

“I’m no authority on the man, Phil.”

“But you went to school with him. From year three. You knew him when he was a kid.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But even so. I don’t hold myself out to know the man any better than you or Neil, say.”

“Hmm,” he went, going quiet for a minute, eyeing those bits of coaster as if they were the disparate parts of a complex problem. I could see the thinking in his eyes, the trying-to-figure-things-out look he’d had since we came into the pub. The fan overhead thwacked the air.

I reached for my glass of lemon squash, which Rob had brought over while we were talking. It was already lukewarm from the heat blasting in from the open doors that led onto the street. From where I sat, I could see through the doorway, across to the Local Court. A single-storey brick building that could’ve been a kindergarten or a library. Above it, the blue sky. The lemon squash relieved my throat. Its tangy sweetness nice and simple, a welcome contrast to the issue we had before us.

Phil wanted an explanation. But I couldn’t give it. Not to him. And not to anyone else. People think if you saw someone grow up, you had their number. But what could I say? Serious. Okay, so Pete Cummins was an out-of-control but somehow fully functioning bloke who worked at H&R Block five days a week, had a lot of mates and a decent golf game (buggy fiasco notwithstanding). Some guys reckoned his only problem was the drink. That all the arrests, fines, overnight lock-ups came down to him being too pissed too often. They were right to some extent, I suppose. Earlier that month he’d gotten done for running naked through Woolworths. Pissed as a sailor. Before that, he blew point one in his VX Wagon, then opened the door and chucked on the copper’s shoes. He’d gotten into fights at footy games and gotten kicked out, he’d yelled to waiters in restaurants that the Cum Man was coming to get them if they didn’t bring him more booze stat, and gotten kicked out of said restaurants. Every time, all sheets to the wind. The kind of behaviour usually seen in teenagers, or footy players on Mad Monday. You didn’t know if it was egoism or narcissism or plain stupidity. It was innocent enough, though highly inconsiderate.

What more could I say? That he was a loose kid and I wasn’t surprised he’d turned out this way? That he hit his head when he was ten or that his parents were alcoholics and that’s where he’d gotten it from? ’Cos none of this was true. Or if it was, I didn’t know about it. Who was Pete Cummins? It was a bloody good question, but sorry fellas, don’t look at me for the answer.

In all honesty, I was fed up thinking about it. Every week, something new. Some fresh disaster, the rounds of phone calls that went with it. The gossip. All us blokes, worse than a sewing circle.

The air was even hotter now; nearly one o'clock. My armpits wet and my neck itching.

“You know what I reckon,” I said to Phil, turning on my stool to look him in the eye. “I reckon the best thing that could happen to Cummo,” I paused, took counsel with myself one last time, “is they lock him up for a while.”

Phil had a look on his face like I couldn't possibly mean that.

“Honest, Phil. They lock him up, he'll figure he's wasting his time and come out a better bloke.”

“But they'll mince his arsehole in prison. Good lookin' dude like Cummo.”

I thought about that for a moment.

“There are worse things in life.”

“Bullshit,” he said.

“There are, mate. Worse thing would be keeping on down the path he's on. Ending up on the drugs one night, too drunk to know the needle in his arm won't be the last. For example.”

“You're being melodramatic.”

“Maybe I am. But then again, maybe you know what I'm saying's right.”

“No way.”

“Well shit, Phil,” I said, pissed at both of us for being so hung up. “Didn't I tell you not to get me started?”

He'd opened his mouth, he was thinking hard and I guessed he had something important to say, when two figures appeared in the corner of my vision, running down the steps of the court house and onto the road towards the pub. They were wearing suits without ties, their hair blown messy in the hot wind. It was Brick and Neil. We watched them hurry across the road. They were pale, their eyes wide open, as though they'd just witnessed an armed robbery.

“What is it?” I said, as they came through the door. “You both look freaked.”

Brick went to speak, but Neil beat him to it.

“No good,” he said, catching his breath as he went. “The court... the prosecutor. They fucked him.”

“He’s goin’ in,” Brick said.

“What for?” I said.

“All three,” said Neil. “No bail. Cummo hears him say it, then curls over the table and starts cryin’. Brick and me never heard cryin’ like it.”

“It was the hardest part,” said Brick, “of the whole hour. Cummo cryin’ like a little boy.”

I looked over to the court again. Red-bricked, its windows so full of sunlight it hurt to stare. I pictured him in there, sobbing still, with a blanket over his head, being led out back to the van. It was waiting to haul him away. I didn’t know what I felt at that moment. The peace I’d been after hadn’t come. But at the same time there was space in me again. I breathed in and out slowly, bringing my eyes back to the table, with the empty glasses and the pulped-up coaster. I stared down for a long time, and stared. Phil’s gaze—I could feel it—hammering at me. I’d look at him in a minute. I would. I’d look at him. Just as soon as I’d thought of what to say.

Dominic Carew is a lawyer and writer from Sydney. His short stories have appeared in TEXT Journal, Verity La, Scum Mag and Going Down Swinging Online. He won the 2016 Sydney Writers’ Room Short Story Award and has been commended/shortlisted in numerous other short story competitions.

“I can be tight and nervy as the top string on a violin”

by Mark Roberts

I know how she feels
the tightness that starts
in the stomach and connects
to a point at the back of the head.

Each night I wake at 2 am
as the string begins to tune
a slow tightening towards E.

I wait for the bow
a long slow stroke
as the final adjustment is made.

I wonder how tonight’s performance
will end.

Note: “I can be tight and nervy as the top string on a violin” is from Sylvia Plath’s ‘Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams’

Mark Roberts is a Sydney based writer, critic and publisher. He is the founding editor of Rochford Street Review (rochfordstreetreview.com) and has run the small literary press Rochford Street Press (rochfordstreetpress.wordpress.com) since the early 1980s. His latest poetry collection, Concrete Flamingos, was published by Island Press in 2016.

Venus

by *Grace Jarvis*

There is a very beautiful girl sitting opposite me on the train. I am openly staring at her and she looks uncomfortable. I don't mind. Locks of purple hair fall unrestrained onto her forehead as her eyes restlessly sprint around the carriage, looking for something to land on besides my beady gaze. I am almost pleased when she chooses the chipped remnants of black polish encrusting her jagged nails. Her lipstick is bleeding. There is a thick layer of grime coating her cuticles and her nervous fiddling continues to distress an already significant hole in her tacky fishnet stockings. I picture my mother scolding me for wearing laddered tights under my godforsaken school kilt and I picture this girl's mother: dead somewhere, a gutter. My attention, much to her chagrin, returns to the girl after the train's sudden stop nudges my briefcase against the scuffed toe of her dilapidated Doc Marten. I scowl at the girl and she tucks her violet hair behind her punctured ear and seeks refuge behind a battered copy of *The Bell Jar*.

I wonder if she knows she is a cliché.

I wonder if she has a boyfriend.

I wonder if she looks this terrified when she fucks.

I get off the train.

It's a short walk to the office, but the scorching Brisbane sun prevents the usual gaiety I provide to the outing. The stickiness of my blouse removes some of the dignity. My heels clatter over a storm drain and I make a show of bending over and placing a twenty into the hat of a woman asleep under a battered Driza-Bone.

Gracious.

Generous behaviour, too, for the workmen across the road from my vulnerable behind. Grinning, I saunter onwards down the street to the tune of whistling.

Air-conditioning; a blissful respite, spoilt only by Serena chewing her nails loudly behind the shiny reception desk. Each bite sends a clattering echo around the obscenely acoustic lobby and I'm tempted to walk over and rip her traumatised hands out of her mouth.

Clack!

I walk quickly towards her, imagining the pleasure seizing her thick, blonde ponytail would provide me.

Clack!

My god, the woman has guillotines for teeth.

Clack!

Pause. She looks up at me and smiles. Her lips, previously host to a lurid scarlet, which is now painted in rings around her fingers and smeared over her crooked teeth, create a gaping wound in her otherwise pleasing face.

“Serena.”

Her smile flickers at my address and she raises her eyebrows to indicate the recognition of her name.

Oh, she’s a retriever, it all makes sense.

“Can you send a memo up to Carlisle and tell him we’re meeting with new candidates for the position at 9?”

“Of course!”

Her mauled digits skitter across the greasy keyboard below her. She is clearly relieved at the task. I imagine her ravaging a chew toy with her Revlon-stained incisors and fight the urge to tell her what a GOOD GIRL she is, for fear of her flaxen braid whipping into overdrive with excitement. I walk towards the lifts, my heels taking to the marble floor with a much more harmonious echo. I press the button.

“And Serena?” I call back over my shoulder.

“Mm?” she says, mouth already full of her wretched extremities.

“If you must have something in your mouth like that all the time, might I recommend cock?”

I smirk. The lift doors open and she turns an interesting shade of puce.

“It’s just that it might get you promoted.”

Ding!

The sixteenth floor is about as busy as one can expect for a work environment full of rich white men pretending to do a very important job that even they do not understand. I wander past a room seemingly wallpapered with obscure graphs and catch a moment of exceptional comedy as I notice an overweight man, standing with his suit jacket over his chair, looking at pages of numbers and just scratching his head.

I cough from the doorway.

His glazed expression snaps back to engaged and I chuckle at the growing dark patches in the underarms of his expensive shirt. I am so engrossed in the silent movie that I appear to have been gifted free tickets for, that I do not notice Jeremiah come up behind me until his clumsy, grotesque hands have a grip on my butt. I whip around and am confronted by his leering grin and twinkly, piggy eyes. I can smell the pie he had for breakfast on his breath and his repulsive yellow teeth stand like headstones in his cavernous mouth.

I am afraid he might swallow me.

He is still touching me.

I taste bile.

“How’s my angel?” he grunts.

‘My angel’ is the apparent nickname of the day, ruining the twenty-eight-day streak of ‘Honey Bun’ (he loves Rodgers & Hammerstein, he is a cultured man) and joining the prestigious ranks of ‘sweetie pie’, ‘sugar lump’ and just plain ‘sexy’.

For the traditionalists.

“Better now that you’re here,” I purr, uncomfortably aware of the lack of exits.

Jeremiah, ego soothed, releases me from his grasp and begins to waffle on about a darling story involving the death of a ringtail possum on his way to the office and the immense satisfaction it caused him frosting his bumper with fur and blood.

There is a fleck of pastry clinging to his bulbous upper lip.

This man controls my salary.

He is still talking about the dead possum.

There is altogether too much arousal in his tone. I imagine him on his hands and knees, licking ex-possum off his BMW. I imagine his wife watching the bouncing fleck of pastry, which

I assume is a permanent addition, knowing she has shackled herself to such a heinous man. I imagine the wife is holding a carving knife. It makes me feel better. I imagine Jeremiah staying late at the office and jerking off to the proudly-framed picture of his sixteen-year-old daughter permanently suspended in a moment of volleyball triumph.

I excuse myself.

Carlisle is waiting for me in my office. He looks somewhat sympathetic. I must look shell-shocked. He points past a dehydrated pot plant to the sparsely decorated waiting room and indicates a crowd of nervous strangers clutching folders. We exchange a look of dread.

“Now?” he questions, reluctantly.

“Let them eat cake, I guess.”

A string of applicants breaches my office; stumbling over simple human tasks and blinking deafly at very basic instructions. Carlisle and I snicker between appointments.

“This could be a drinking game,” he smirks, after the sixth university graduate has forgotten their own name.

“Yeah,” I said. A bird flies into the spotless window.

“Drink every time someone’s life comes crashing down around them.”

My favourite is a pretty brunette girl, who comes in after a string of men, all with seemingly the exact same name. She is wearing a tight black dress and odd green velvet boots and she looks on the verge of a nervous breakdown. There is a terror behind her eyes that intrigues me almost enough to ask about her personal life, but I automate the string of scripted questions and ignore the responses just as I had for all the previous candidates.

It’s only fair.

We give her the assigned topic and ask her to give a short presentation. She stands and wiggles to straighten out her dress. I smirk as Carlisle ogles her without discretion. She’s his type. He likes a Calamity Jane.

She’s a disaster; midway through her hasty performance her entire being becomes distracted by the purple bra strap that begins slipping off her shoulder. She pushes it up under her dress. It slips down again. She pushes it back. It slips down. Her lip starts to tremble. The terror behind her eyes swings up a level, like the bushfire warning signs on the highway. I watch this woman’s bushfire risk swing from high to catastrophic in such a violent manner that I’m sure it will knock

her over. She pushes her bra strap back under her dress. I lean forward, fascinated. I am sure that I am about to watch what happens when a human brain implodes. She finishes the presentation. I am tempted to award her a medal, were I not sure she would collapse hysterically over the finish line and expect me to reconstruct her.

We call in another Michael.

In a break between interviews, I sidle into the ladies' room and I'm confronted by the catastrophic brunette hunched over the furthest sink from the door.

The floor is wet.

I kind of hope she's pissed herself, until I realise the puddle accumulating on the tiles is being supplied by the overflowing sink she is tending to. She has wrenched her tight black dress down around her waist, rid herself of the tragedy bra (I see it, hanging haphazardly from the adjacent tap) and is hunched topless over the sink. Her tits—very nice tits—are flopped out and hanging into the porcelain lake and she is crying hysterically. Her brunette hair is damp and sticking to her bare face. I take a step back. I am consumed by the glorious image.

An oil painting.

Venus de Milo.

She belongs in a museum. I forget my bulbous bladder and I stand rapt.

“What was your name again, sweetheart?” I ask, in the hushed tone appropriate around exquisite art.

The Mona Lisa has no eyebrows.

“Isabelle,” she sobs, not looking up from her aquatic breasts. Her green velvet boots are soaking wet.

There's a ladder in her stockings.

Back in my office I put the name 'Isabelle' in purple letters at the top of my list.

By the time I leave, Serena has dragged her mangled nails home.

On the way back to the train station I look for the lady under the Dryza-Bone, but she is gone and the train carriage is empty.

I imagine the beautiful girl in the fishnets.

I imagine her reading Sylvia Plath to her cat. I imagine her buying gin in the bar near her house. I imagine her throwing herself off a bridge.

I imagine her mother; dead somewhere, a gutter.

Grace Jarvis is a second year university student in the throes of an arts degree based existential crisis. She was the recipient of the Queensland Theatre Company's Young Playwright's Award in 2015 and feels she needs to mention it constantly as it's the most impressive thing she's ever done. You can find her on Twitter [@grace4jarvis](https://twitter.com/grace4jarvis).

Last Post

by Aidan Coleman

It goes on
like the joke about daleks and stairs.

Light wriggling off
a star

no longer there.

The shit
we talk through open

summer,
as kindly

shapes
the proper.

Fetch me butchers
paper.

A better answer.

Aidan Coleman has written two collections of poetry which have been shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Kenneth Slessor Prize, the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature and the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. Besides poetry, he writes reviews, speeches, and Shakespeare textbooks.

Fighting for Breath

by Paul Threlfall

George was stuck in traffic again, and it was fucking raining. He swore and slammed the horn pointlessly, then settled his bulk deeper into the sweaty bucket seat. The fat drops pounded his windshield, nearly obliterating the car in front. Tail-lights expanded like red eyes watching him from across the ring. Between them dangled his lucky yellow boxing glove. George punched the glove and swore at someone's mother. He hated this season. It didn't make no sense, he knew it—rain meant more fares, less people taking a three-block walk. But the humidity got to him, right into his chest, rattling around in there. He reached for the glove box for the third time that hour, fumbled out the asthma spray with meaty fingers. Wheezily inhaled. He was getting light-headed from the spray, but his lungs still felt like they were collapsing.

When he looked up the red eyes were gone, and some asshole was tooting him from behind.

“And the same to you,” he muttered as he accelerated hard through the green, then braked just as hard as he caught up to the traffic in front. Red eyes. Raindrops. Rattling lungs. George drifted off again, back where he always went. The third round. He was being hammered. His opponent was everywhere, socking him from left and right. Whatever he did he couldn't land a blow, one of his trademark sledgehammers. The little fighter just danced away, danced back to sting again. George was still angry, but he was getting tired. He lurched forward...

The big man shook his head, dragging himself back to the present. The 14th Street subway wasn't far now, he'd pull over there, maybe step out for a moment, grab some gum. Take a breather until he'd worked his way up the queue. It was going to be a long night, sitting in this traffic. He hoped he didn't get a talkative one. He'd switch on the radio, scowl at them in the rear-view. Between his bulk and the boxing glove it usually did the trick.

Nearly there. The crowd was spilling out of the subway ahead, a spreading puddle of umbrellas and black coats surrounding the stairs. But he was in luck, there was room behind the taxi stand. Cabs were peeling off so fast carrying commuters that if he joined the queue he'd have to stay in his car. So he decided to risk a ticket and park in the loading zone. Anyway, who would bother to check in this deluge?

The crowd was still growing as George levered himself out of the seat and made his way to the subway entrance, using his bulk to force open a passage. He was wheezing more now as the rain pounded his bare scalp and trickled down the neck of his jacket. Swearing to himself, he managed to force his way into the fluoro-lit underground.

The place looked green as a sea-cave to his weary eyes. Trickle of water running down the walls. Ugly, rusty stains. He hauled his belly up against the wall under the candy shop window.

“Gum,” he managed to grunt, holding out a crumpled bill without looking at it. The shopkeeper took the note, pushed out the change and a packet of Wrigley’s. As he pocketed the slim pack a fresh spasm hit and he slapped his pockets, looking for the inhaler.

He’d left it in the damn car. What a moron. His lungs rattled as he felt his airway contract. Like a straw, he thought. He was starting to panic, leaning against the green wall, forcing himself to breathe slowly, in, out, in. Stars in his sight like he’d been punched. Breathe. People kept pushing past him into the rain, oblivious. No room here. Slowly the red haze retreated. In. Out.

Now. He shoved himself away from the wall, dragged one foot up a step then the other. Breathing. Not far now, he thought. A few more steps. Someone squawked as he stepped on the back of their shoe, but he hardly heard them. Somehow he made it up the stairs, back through the crush of commuters. Collapsed into the car, reaching for the saviour drug.

He sat there a long time, just breathing. The rain fell until the world dissolved, and behind the waterfall he sunk back through time. The fighter was dancing around him again. Charles Spiers—a name George had never forgotten. His followers called him the Little Hornet. The ringside lights were blinding him as he tottered, trying to keep track of the twisting, weaving, stinging midget. If he could just land a blow. Spiers danced in again, punching his gloves then sneaking around to jab him in the jaw. The lights grew larger, white flames like suns through a growing red haze. George staggered. What was that sound?

Rap rap rap. He jerked upright and looked around.

“Hey, clear out! No standing!” yelled the cop through his side window. George fumbled with the key as the cop put his stick away and stood back, watching. The Crown Victoria rumbled to life. As the wipers cut in he could see that the crowd had thinned now. The dash clock showed that he’d been there an hour.

Damn. That would not help his case with the company. He edged forward into the rear of the stand. Only two ahead of him now, soon he’d have a fare. Not that he really wanted one. He’d rather be at home, watching TV and listening to the dehumidifier do its thing. His apartment wasn’t bad; he’d bought it long ago, when he’d been winning fights, working days too, the energy of youth. Real cosy, sitting up there looking out over the river to the Island. Much more peaceful than at street level. The neighbourhood was going downhill. Or maybe he was getting old.

This time he didn’t go back to the ring. Thinking about his apartment he realised how tired

he was of city life. He let his mind slip further back, back to when he was growing up in Minnesota. It had become like a dream to him, an ideal of peace and calm. Of course it was garbage, he'd hated his childhood, his violent father, their struggle with the land. And now he couldn't seem to picture it. All he saw was some glowing scene of cornfields, probably out of *The Wizard of Oz*. He'd never even been to Kansas. Disgusted, he wrenched his thoughts back to the job. Time to go to the top of the queue.

He didn't have long to wait. A skinny little Indian guy pushed his way through the thinning crowd and pulled open the rear door. Ironic, George thought. Sometimes it seemed he was the only old Latino driving anymore, everyone was fresh up from México. Or Indian, Afghani or some damn thing. A lot of them wouldn't give an old driver the time of day, too busy jabbering on their phones in Arabic. Well, a fare was a fare.

“Where to?”

“Queens,” the Indian replied in the accent of a local. Whaddayaknow. “St James Avenue in Elmhurst.”

“Uh-huh”. First piece of good news. He'd landed a good long trip. It would go some way toward making up for the last hour.

As he manoeuvred the cab into the traffic flow George glanced in the rear-view mirror. Rain was trickling down the little man's face, dripping from his nose, but he didn't wipe it away. He was staring at George in the mirror, eyes round and almost black. George scowled and put the radio on, returned his gaze to the cars ahead. Just his luck. The Indian looked troubled. Well, George wasn't his priest, or his shrink. He'd just have to deal with it on his own, the way *he* had always done.

The peak-hour traffic was clearing nicely and George settled into the rhythm of driving, relieved that the worst of the night seemed to be over. Once again he tried to picture the fields of long ago. He wondered what it would be like to just keep driving. Beyond the skyscrapers, through the apartments and the factories of the suburbs, until the last house gave way to fields, grass under an open sky.

He pushed away the Kansas cliché, tried to picture what it had been like, fifty years or more ago. When he couldn't take the beatings anymore and he lit out for the city, jumping trains, begging and stealing. Considering Chicago, deciding it was too close to home, his father might find him. Finally arriving in New York.

Lying about his age, taking any dirty, stinking, illegal job he could get, with petty gangsters or cash-in-hand small businesses. Finally discovering the hard way how good he was with his

fists, and that he could make money from it. Dreaming of making more money...

Back before that. When his dad was out, before Mom died, she must have loved him, must have baked cookies for him in a warm farm kitchen. They must have sat and eaten them on the porch which was walled in with mosquito wire, essential among those endless lakes and swamps. Probably the porch was freshly painted then, not peeling and starting to sag at the corner. Maybe his dad only drank a little, didn't hit him so often...

But he couldn't see it. He had no memory of such a time. When he tried he saw a kind of mangy city park—weeds overgrown, trash stuck to the cyclone wire, a billboard with some Coke cans and burger wrappers under it.

“*Cookies!*” he snorted under his breath.

They'd arrived. George pulled in to the kerb where the Indian directed him and told him the fare. But the little guy wasn't moving, just staring at him in the rear-view.

“George *Costa!*”

“Huh?”

“I know you! You're George Costa!”

The Indian was practically jumping out of his seat, dark eyes sparkling, white teeth glowing in a ridiculous grinning mouth. For a moment George stared at the face in his mirror, perplexed.

“Yeah. Yeah, I'm George Costa.”

“I knew it! I knew it was you. I'm a big fan of the old boxers. I've got all of your fights on DVD. In a set, *Giants and the Wannabes*. I can't believe I got to meet you.”

“No... pleasure's mine. Not too many recognise me these days.”

“I guess... If you don't mind... I always wondered, why didn't you try for a comeback? After the Spiers fight, I mean. You were great. I always thought you were the fighter that should have made it to the big time.”

“Spiers...”

He was there again. The Little Hornet weaving, jabbing. Light blazing in his eyes, roaring, roaring. Like the sea, he thought.

Blue. Why was he lying on blue? He came back. The roaring was his fans, disbelieving, the

Hornet's fans exultant. The ref was counting him out.

He didn't care. He just wanted to breathe. Why couldn't he breathe?

In the car the seat was tipped back. George stared up at the light. A face, shouting at him. Dark eyes. Rain.

"The field," George said. "Wanna go to the f—"

Paul Threlfall is a writer and librarian based in Melbourne, Australia. His fiction has been published in Tincture Journal and performed as part of 1,001 Nights Cast, and his poetry has appeared in Litmus Magazine. Paul has also won awards for three of his short stories, in the City of Boroondara, City of Greater Dandenong and University of Melbourne short story competitions.

Combination Soup

by Pam Brown

october already

*

on the last night
of september
server shudder
sends out
too many emails

it's always 11.52

when
I'm
prevaricating

*

flat screen hd tv
in a
red wheelbarrow
hard rubbish
going home

*

the nazi train
full of gold
in a railway tunnel
in Poland
we don't know where

*

fog delays
seeing double

cirriiform recedes
in a chemtrail wake
over Punchbowl
spraycan
 can spray
everyone's a welder

*

the food
section

 how to eat
 an
 ortolan

cover your head
with a cloth
shield your shame

 but know
your Bottega Veneta napkin
 deserves no stain

shoot
the nutribullet

*

the other
 food
 section

Trastevere

*from them there is
the top of the street
food of quality
now a legend
where lick
a moustache*

*

the train
full of gold
is in
Wałbrzych
we don't know
if it is
booby trapped

*

you're the salt
in my stew

*

an ash threat
volcano blows
in the east

in the summer
of my 67th year
I join
the carbon cycle
go wading
in radioactive plume

*

microbes

determine
every difference

including
intelligence?
or
the *appearance*
of intelligence

could somebody
sign me on
for some
of the artificial stuff

*

a Futurama concept—
'super speed'
win \$200
&
in one day
spend it
on
50 cups
of \$4
coffee
drink them
to achieve
super speed

it'll be great

*

sold to a wrecker
for a speck
careless in car city

sideways ear rocks
a vacuum
of phantasm

too-too icelandic music
bluetooth car kit a fad
devotional drumming
frosted electronica

though predominant
in the end
that Gotye song
was too simple

*

saving for a spoiler
& sheer line
panel design
shelf-stacking
cool rooms
to make the money

to make
ends meet

sick of night
freezing
in frayed gloves

*

you're the lace
in my shoe

*

ban cigarettes

& the entire jail
riots

*

glance
at the green digital numbers
on the little oblong panel
on the plastic clock radio
in the bookshelf

11.52 again
has the clock stopped?

*

write
a line for the trees
in Ashmore St

sunset racket
birdchirp
batshriek
big dark shade
farewell trees

*

don't you want
to laze around
on a warm
& airy paddock
put the top down
follow the curves

*

all of it is lies

tears well
inside the eyes

sound's white noise
round the house

*

a man
in orange day-glo
& a comical plastic helmet
bangs each light pole
with a hammer

bam bam bam bam

sounds more like

thwok thwok

notes its number
on a clipboard

looking for white ants
old technology
hammer pen clipboard

ausgrid logo

*

november now

*

on the first night
coo coo cooroo
falsetto blues singer

blinded by the hurt
coz I'm
blinded by the hurt

troubled refrain
slowly building
backing singers

it's intersubjective
I
join them
coo coo cooroo

blinded by the hurt
repeat

*

anti day
everyday
partly cloudy
in Wiley Park

Jan
'taught the Beats'
to a secular mix
at Wiley Park
Girls High School

after her job
on Tribune,
communist newspaper

here am I
in
the train
'this train

will stop
at
Wiley Park'

Jan
& her whiskeys
& crime novels

*

the way
cloud
banks

*

this sign—
do not visit
after heavy rain
risk of tree failure

glue gum
eucalypt haze
blue gumski
karrabin
bundjalung
red gum

*

I can't
help you

*

third floor—
is every woman
on the third floor

here
for a mammogram?

*

there
a little poem
tucked
at the end
of the lifestyle supplement

just a bit bigger
than
a horoscope chunk

to give it its due

*

I can't
help you

*

going going
koala
powerful owl
gang gang

coo coo cooroo

*

documentary—
the teabag tag
jiggler dangling
from
Noam Chomsky's

cup

endearing

*

troubled refrain

real life

tastes plastic

anyway

repeat

*

electric money

*

to think the

future

I've

always had

frugal expectations

thinking

what cannot

be thought

trickgensteinian

*

everyone's

been to Paris

or claims it

where influences

live

& teach

& children

lift giant leaves

& blow

fluff

*

start to loathe

the sun's

shrivelling

affordable viola

planted

for cheer

wilted

even the sun has cancer

(norma cole)

*

singed

no

signed

repurpose

funding

get

brand poetry t-shirts

rain taxi

book thug

I ate all your bees

*

noodle bowls

trestle table

white cloth

pristine, cool

embroidered edges

lidless jars

potent chillis

fresh bean shoots

mint

*

nothing

‘under the bed’

just dust

& a five cent piece

*

I don't give a

*

windows

rattling

blind cord bead

tap tap

a southerly

what's there to say

you went away
twice

you didn't die

*

money
language
time

electric money
safekeeping
beyond panic

an ethic
an epic

writing
to say

hooligan affection

takes up
all
the time

*

standing waters

watery metaphors
persist

putrefied slime
mites

mal aria

misaquaterrists!

forbidden swamp

filthy mire

nether regions

fountains of youth

marshes

ague

*

'thinking with'

undoes

things

&

the future

talked past

*

love affair

with weather

*

I have the time

to worry

every day

I check the temperature

in Taormina

on World Weather

*

'losing my religion'

cost \$2.19

I don't know

what

I expected to pay

'we drink to forget

the coming storm'

discounted

\$1.69

*

refining the skill of peeling

small oval stickers

off the mangoes

without damaging the skins

*

I'd like

to say something now

but outside

the planes

heading off

are so noisy

I'll wait

the eastern curlews

are leaving too

(for China—

counter-survival

land clearing)

*

slim hope—
our collapsed planet
might recover
 & I need a myth
 that says so

need to restore
 ‘normalcy’
the commentator said

*

it was awful
 in the taxi
 silence
 a tense silence
 contrived as rest

I became
 an idiot
small talking
 to myself

you didn't help

*

turned on
 The Velvet Doghouse
because nothing
sounded better
last time I listened

*

what did I do
to deserve this

(the women's question)

or what did

I ever do

optional

*

stale cigarette odour
swamps the hallway

it's the agoraphobe
next door

puffing away

the *agora* can be overwhelming
even if it's just
a supermarket

*

not 'being conceptual'

if tv's on
we always
watch the weather
at the end of the world news
we have a thing for it

a love affair with weather

is that boring for you
so boring
you needn't know

so boring as to be so bent

*

you are welcome
to stop reading
this poem now
whoever you are

thanks

*

becoming light
early in the morning

becoming patchy
in the middle of the day

*

sometimes
I dread the *agora* too
like, panel talking
performing poems
queueing for tickets
(general admission)

everyone expectant
keen
looking ahead of them
& upwards

I don't actually go anywhere
much

*

clear
showers easing
tomorrow, mostly sunny
sunlight on compromise

unfinished
table of contents

*

december's done

*

then the you tube
future
re runs

feature
the sunday after history

light blue velveteen
mixed up
something silver
amphetamining meaning

I'm living in a silent film

put it up

*

whimpering—
that's how it goes

anyone
out there

put up
with it

no crisis

*

a flash
in the pan

when you walked in
a stray kitten
fled
a corner of the yard

a stitch
in time

*

picks clink

subtitle
for a chain gang

songs not prison

an awful metaphoric

nina simone
sam cooke
the pretenders

*

lonely bowl
of tom yum goong

time
makes your life
fiction

like

steepening chicken
with spicy slaw

steamy yet
 impossibly
 untrue

*

refeeling
straighten up
& fly right

*

a public holiday
taking care
of correspondence

remaining silent

nothing
 up the gum tree
 two doors down

*

‘the antinomy of death’

antimony
 a metal
 an element

antinomy
 also
 an element

bipolar options

reject dying
rely on
immortality

but
certainly &
incomprehensibly (to me)
I will die

unprotected
by my sceptical commitment
to worldliness

now
inquisitive
about death

you know,
when-how-where

*

standing here
in City Road

with a bagful
of old paperbacks

culled

cereal boxes
their destiny

*

nothing hereafter?
I ask

my lonely bowl
of soup

Note: parts of this poem were originally published in Australian Book Review States of Poetry 2016 (New South Wales) under the titles 'November now' and 'Electric rain'

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You Are Cordially Invited

by Sean Gandert

I don't mean to brag, really I don't. But I think everyone has a right to talk about their children, especially when they're so successful. Why, I remember one parent-teacher conference when Mrs Velásquez, I think it was her, she came up to me and asked, "You're Héctor's mom, right?"

I said yes, and I asked her if there was any problem because she had that look on her face, like she wanted to say something but didn't know how to say it. I knew Héctor was a good boy at home, but who knows what little boys do when their parents are away.

"It's nothing bad, of course," she said. Maybe she could read the worry on my face. "It's just that Héctor's... such a bright young lad." She actually said 'lad', like he attended a boarding school, not Zia Elementary. "Héctor's such a bright young lad, but he's so quiet."

I laughed, not that it was particularly funny. Is that all? I asked her.

"Well... maybe if he took up some extracurriculars?"

I said I'd speak with him about it, and she told me he was already doing fourth grade math and reading at his grade level and all the usual pleasantries. I'm not bragging. It's a fact.

The next day, I asked him whether he had any interest in sports or music or anything like that. He said no, and I'm not the type of parent who's going to force their children into something, so I dropped the subject. Later, though, he asked about raising his allowance, which was cute because it was just so Héctor. His father and I always taught him to keep his eye on the prize, and so I told him that if he picked an extracurricular activity, I'd give him an extra dollar a week.

He only played soccer for one year, and I can't blame him because in all honesty he wasn't any good at it. I kept giving him the extra dollar, though. My husband, *ahora está con Dios*, used to say that it was more important his son learned the value of a dollar than anything fancy like music or sports anyhow. I'd say, let the loud, rowdy boys get bruised and muddy, my Héctor is safe and sound at home with me.

§

Woooo boy, Héctor and I go way back, way way back. Shit, we go back so far I don't even like know. I had an older sister the same age as his brother and the two of them were friends.

Classmates for a while, anyway, and I guess our moms got knocked up at the same time and it was just fucking easier to put us together when we were infants. Shit, I don't even know what the hell we did back then, but I remember his house and sword fighting in the backyard. We went to different high schools after he moved to the Westside, but kept hanging out. It's just not that big a city so we always knew some of the same guys—the 505's a small fucking world.

You know what, I'm pretty sure the first time I ever got shit-faced was with that pendejo. I don't think he was aware of my booze-virginity at the time. I was embarrassed about that so I told everyone stories about getting wasted, but really my sister wouldn't buy me a damn thing... and to be totally fucking honest with you I was a little bit afraid. What the hell did I know about drinking besides what I saw in shitty movies?

So right, it was before this party and we wanted to show up hammered because we didn't know if there'd be drinks when we arrived. Well Héctor wanted to show up hammered, I just didn't want to look like a complete fucking pussy, so we stopped at a park on the way over and downed a couple 40s. Got back into his car, this beaten-up Hyundai that was like one heavy breeze away from collapsing, and were headed back towards Julia's house when he pulled over so we could puke out the windows. It got onto all our clothes, and the car doors, and fucking everything. Héctor grabbed a hose from this one house and he just like sprayed us and the car down, which was a terrible fucking idea but at the time seemed like the only choice we had.

We still went to the party, and it was fucking hilarious because we were both trying to hit on every girl in the place, even though we were still half-soaked. I didn't realise we stunk like a garbage disposal until I woke up the next morning on Julia's couch.

§

I did think he was artistic. Fausto was good at sports, Héctor was good at drawing, that's how it was. I had two children so I knew the type of nonsense most of them drew, and what Héctor turned out was in a whole different league.

He was really into comics for a while. He liked Batman and Iron Man the best, so I bought him pencils and pens and he'd try his hand at them. He'd spend the afternoon working on a page or two, and when he finished he'd put them up on his toy chest with a price tag drawn next to them in chalk. I'd haggle with him over the price, because that was part of the game, and I was so proud of him I used to save everything he drew. His comics were maybe four pages at the longest, but he'd staple them together and it was really professional.

He liked to draw in private. He'd close his door and say I couldn't look until he was finished. I still checked on him, because that's your job as a mother, but I pretended not to see

anything, even though I did. I think he was self-conscious about placing his thin white drawing paper on top of old comic books and tracing over them for poses of his own hero, Mr Marvellous, who was kind of like Superman and Batman mixed together, with super strength and flying and all that but also the playboy alter ego. I don't know why he was so embarrassed, though, because his were just as good as the originals.

Eventually I came in while Héctor was drawing a comic without him noticing. I stood over him for a few minutes, admiring his steady hand as he pressed down over those Technicolor pages. When he noticed me it was too late to pretend I hadn't watched.

He stopped selling me copies or working while I was home, removed all his drawings that had been hanging from his closet door and his dresser and every other flat surface in his room. I never said anything about it. I don't know, maybe I should have, but I still don't know what.

§

I think I gave you the wrong impression earlier, because our time growing up was not some crazy party. Shit, we barely went out, which was why I hadn't tried booze-a-hol until senior year. I was busy with clubs and he was into, you know, like eBay and shit like that. We hung out a lot, we just didn't 'go out'.

Héctor was not, despite what you may have heard, obsessed with comics, though he certainly had a fuck-ton of them. By the end of middle school, though, I don't know that he actually read any. He was into their value. He was a big-time collector, we both were I guess, but him even more so. We used to visit thrift stores and garage sales in the hope of finding rare shit, but mostly we bought online. He sold Magic cards, too, and rare video games. Sometimes we'd play Magic or whatever together, but since it was mostly just us, there wasn't much point. Selling cards, though, he was great at that shit. At the end of high school he sold almost all his stock to buy that crappy ass car, but I have no idea what happened to it after graduation.

§

Dude was my motherfucking wingman, and I don't say that lightly. Wingman, to me, is a goddamn honour. It's a special bond between friends that goes beyond... I don't know, anything else. Wingman means that day or night, if you need someone to head with you to a party, a poon-tang mission, they'll be there. We went out twenty times one month and got laid at more than fucking half of those, or at least I did. Héctor would play the asshole and I'd swoop in for the kill, that was our usual play. We didn't even need to discuss it, Héctor started negging 'em once we arrived and it was fucking on. Héctor didn't mind, either, he'd just pick up the drunk ones at the end of the night. Not a picky motherfucker, that's for sure, and I respect that about a guy. Ugly chicks need loving, too.

§

I met him through an ex. He was... not the type of ex you stay in touch with. He was more the type where you gather up everything they ever gave you, ever touched, ever even mentioned, then put it all in a trash can and set that on fire. You watch that fire burn until the cloud of black smoke makes you feel a teensy, tiny bit better.

Not that I actually did that, though I really wanted to. I mean, that sounds like waaay too much effort, but also if you did that in a dorm you'd probably get arrested, or at least expelled. My point was that he made me so angry sometimes, just so angry like you have no fucking idea. Even now it's getting my blood pressure up, I can just feel it, and my therapist said I'm not supposed to dwell on these things so I'll just... you know, let's change the subject.

Okay, Héctor. Héctor Héctor Héctor. Umm, I guess they used to play games together, that was mostly it. Like Madden and Halo and stuff like that. I don't know that they really liked each other, although I remember thinking so when I first met him. Peter was just... okay, I cannot let myself go on about him again... but I don't think they were actually very good friends. I didn't really like Héctor, either, because when I met him I was pissed at Pete, but when I finally came back to school he was one of the few people who didn't try to make me talk about it or ask too many questions, so I thought maybe he was ok. We hung out some after that, and I thought, "This guy doesn't judge", and I needed more friends like that.

§

Fuck yeah I stayed here for college, you think I'm a fucking millionaire? Chinga tu madre, I mean it's not like I couldn't have gone somewhere. Dad told me he'd pay for my housing if I went to UNM, and like that was that.

I guess Héctor just wanted to get out of here. We used to hang whenever he was back for breaks, but that was pretty much it. Neither of us are the kind of guy who calls or shit like that. We've run into each other a few times after graduating, but I don't know. I didn't end up inviting him to my wedding because it would've been... I mean it'd be nice to see the guy, but I don't even know if he would've come.

Okay I guess he probably would've, but it just would've been weird as fuck seeing him after all this time.

§

I was always happy he was so shy about girls, especially since Fausto was such a mujeriego, which I don't mean as a compliment. Maybe you're supposed to want your son to be a big stud, but Madre de Dios that sounds awful to me.

I'm sure he was interested in girls, had some crushes, probably kissed a few, he just didn't bring it home with him. We've always been close, we still are, but that's not the sort of thing we really talk about.

To be honest, we never even had 'The Talk'. You know... sex. It probably would've been easier if Martín hadn't passed away, and I'm not making excuses, it's just not natural between a mother and her son. It never seemed like the right time and then, I don't know, all of a sudden it was too late. I didn't mean for him to learn about everything from TV and the internet, and lord knows what Fausto or his friends at school were saying... but it just sort of happened.

§

There was this one time we were at some party in the fourth-storey dorms and we'd been out since, I don't know, eight or nine, and we were *fucked up*. There was music and dancing and we had a few more drinks, and then Héctor announces he needs to take a leak. He walks over to the bathroom, but it's locked. So he bangs on the door a few times but it stays shut, and people are yelling at him to chill out and I'm thinking maybe he'll head downstairs to piss in the bushes like everyone else. Instead, he heads over to the window, and without looking to see if anyone's there he whips it out and sprays a yellow stream onto the pavement below.

Five seconds later I hear someone screaming from the pavement, and Héctor looks down and he starts laughing and so do I and it's just fucking hilarious.

§

I knew of him before I met him. I was with the libs and he was, at the time, a Tory. A very outspoken one. I couldn't tell you what that even means except to say that Tories were conservative, though not as crazy conservative as the Party of the Right, who were just plain scary. Political Union meetings were always dull, but there were usually a couple speakers with charisma, and he was one of them, even though every word coming out of his mouth was complete and utter bullshit.

§

I was gone because of what the university called a 'mental health issue'. It was depression. I was depressed, I'm not anymore. I mean I guess I am, still, but I take medication for it now, and while the medication gives me headaches and made me put on an absolute *ton* of weight, I'm okay now. I go to therapy, too, though maybe not as regularly as I should. I don't mind the weight gain. I wish I hadn't gained it, of course, but that was a long time ago and it doesn't seem so important now. It's weird, when I look back at old pictures of me, I just know most of those guys I was with would never date me the way I look now, even though I definitely look better

than I did back then. I have fuller cheeks and my skin is healthier now, and I'm not as critical of everything, but I'm sure Pete would think I'm some fat-ass if he saw me, even though I'm not fat. I'm average for my height. You can check, I'm 5'11, so people think I'm fat when they hear my weight, but really I'm average.

And Pete, I broke up with him over the phone because he was cheating on me while I was 'on vacation'. He was still in college and I was at home and 'crazy', at least I'm sure that's how he rationalised it. He was such a fucking asshole that I... it's not important. Honestly, I don't really blame him. I really was kind of crazy then, especially that second year. I mean we were all crazy. Héctor, for instance, was fucking nuts, and maybe that's really why we became friends. The only difference was that he still got good grades, while I had to leave school for a year.

§

Shit, to be totally honest, we'd probably been drifting apart even before the end of college. I don't mind drugs, at least not in the abstract, but some people are assholes when they're high. He literally hit me one time. Like hit hit, not just a playful slapping sort of thing. I don't have any fucking idea what it was for, but I know he was on coke at the time. I forgave him, but I just didn't want to be around him much anymore.

Six months later he was dating this girl I knew, and she 'fell down a staircase'. Like that's a thing that actually fucking happens. I wanted to tell her, "There are a million other excuses, why the hell'd you use the one from TV?" I mean she was my friend, but puta was dumb as a fucking Trump supporter, especially since she stayed with him for another semester.

§

I don't know what you heard about Héctor and the upper-decker, but that was real. It was at Beta, those fucking 'tards. Hilarious, man, just fucking hilarious.

§

The meetings were miserably pretentious, in every conceivable way a waste of time. The idea that college students can make a difference in the world... it's just so naive. At the time, though, it seemed important, even if I had difficulty staying awake through an entire meeting, which, I should add, frequently topped three hours in length.

At the end of one of those oh-so-productive meetings, I fell soundly asleep. Héctor woke me up afterwards. He tapped me on the shoulder, said the meeting was over, and that I had beautiful eyes. I didn't know what else to say, so I thanked him.

He asked me out after the next meeting, and to this day I have no idea why I said yes.

§

Fuck no, I would never date Héctor. Could you imagine how awful that would be? Let's be blunt here, even with my medication I'm not the most stable person, and Héctor is... he's very focused, I guess you could say. That's part of why he was always a lot of fun to be around, especially back in college. Everyone knew a hundred people with big plans, recording an album or writing a novel or making a million on Wall Street. But they had zero follow-through. Héctor was one of the few who would say something and then you absolutely knew he'd go out there and do it.

God, he used to freak out just seeing what my room looked like. The idea of us being together is beyond ridiculous.

§

I won't tell you the Vegas story. The Vegas story is too fucked up. And I don't even like strippers, but... damn.

§

We went on a few dates, but neither of us had money so that didn't last long. Usually we just hung out. Sometimes we played Mario Kart or studied. We ate together at the dining hall a lot, usually with his group of friends, though sometimes mine. We also went to parties, though not a ton.

I bet you thought the politics thing would've caused problems, right? But it didn't. At least, not really. I was angry with him for a little while when he switched to the PoR—they're literally nazi-fascists, no lie—but I got over it. We didn't talk all that much so it wasn't too important, and since we had similar taste in books and movies and especially television, we bonded over that instead. We probably watched *Buffy* and *Angel* three times over. I know some of my friends thought it was all about sex, but if we'd been fucking for as many hours as I spent watching Whedon I'd've been getting laid more than a porn star.

§

That's a totally different question. Yeah we fucked. But it was just the once, and it didn't change anything, though I guess it was kind of weird. It was just one of those things you do in college. I had a lot of guy friends back then, I'm not sure why, or why I don't anymore. Anyways back then I had a lot of guy friends and I'd had a bad break-up—this wasn't with Pete, it was someone else—and were both pretty drunk. Really, it could've been anyone who stuck around at that party. It just happened to be Héctor.

I have no recollection whatsoever of the event itself. To be honest, I don't even remember how we got back to my room, 'cause I blacked out pretty early. The only reason I'm sure it happened was that everyone saw me leaving with him, and I woke up in a, like, state. There was a used... there were obvious signs, and I felt like crap, though at the time I was more concerned about my massive hangover than anything else. I opened the bathroom door and felt like I'd been punched in the face with that tangy rotten puke smell.

§

We knew each other's names and email addresses, and that was it. Neither of us lived in the city, unlike the other interns, so a month before it started we agreed to sublet an apartment together. We were being paid a subsistence wage, so living alone wasn't an option. I spoke with him over the phone once, and we agreed on basic parameters, i.e. ground rules for what would be acceptable living quarters, at which point he largely left the entire business of finding an apartment, making arrangements, etc. to me. I *did* think that was fairly rude, but I didn't speak up about this at the time because I preferred beginning our living situation on, as they say, the right foot. To his credit, he also didn't interfere or argue, or even whinge, as many who hand someone else the wheel are apt to do, about the choice, and he sent me his rent post-haste. I didn't hear from him again until he arrived.

§

We broke up because he slept with another girl after a party. It's as simple as that. Then the semester ended and he went to his internship and I went to mine. I was hoping that when we returned, I'd never see him again.

§

We never talked about it, even when it became public knowledge. It was mostly the same between us after that, so whatever. Not exactly the same, but it wasn't like a big deal or anything.

§

I don't wish to hyperbolise, but it was like a war in there, almost from day one. I'm uncertain how or why it began; I believe it was simply a matter of personalities. Interns were situated along one wall, with a sort of desk-shelf in front of it, and we placed our laptops wherever we happened to sit that first day. Héctor sat adjacent to me on one side and this other intern, who I won't name and to whom he took an immediate dislike, on the other. By the end of the day, they already had some sort of 'beef', as they say, though what it was precisely I was never certain.

Like any intelligent party bordering a warzone, I tried my best to stay out of it. There were

only seven interns, though, and by the end of the first week everyone was forced to choose sides. You were with either Héctor or this other individual, and despite spending ten hours a day less than a foot away from each other, after that first week I never heard a word pass between them.

They competed for credit at work, but also everything else, from stories told at lunch to who threw the best party. It was, needless to say, completely ridiculous, but at least it kept work interesting, which was valuable considering that otherwise the entire summer would have been sheer drudgery.

The peculiar thing was that, when the internship came to a close, I found that no one who actually worked at the firm had any idea that Héctor and this other fellow were rivals. In hindsight, that made sense, given that they barely knew any of our names, so why would they care if it was true Héctor stole this other intern's idea or not?

§

I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but once the semester began we got back together. I was young and I didn't really know what I was doing. Plus, I was worried about my senior essay and finding work after graduation, and he was so... comfortable. I knew it was a bad idea, even then, but I still forgave him, and we were okay, for a while. At graduation there were jokes about us being the first to marry, and I stayed with him when he went to business school.

Soon after we moved, I learned that he'd asked a classmate out. I was far angrier about this than a drunken one-night stand, and I wasn't the only one because apparently his whole cohort iced him out. I could see the pattern. So we broke up again, this time for good.

§

He was still in business school and I had an apartment downstairs from his. I'd seen him around, and I thought he was kind of cute, but he never said anything so I didn't either. He always seemed to be in a hurry, hunched over in a big overcoat and running up the stairs. I didn't think he had any idea who I was, and in a building like ours, filled with students and artists and not so many families, you don't really go out of your way to meet the neighbours.

I had a little gathering at the apartment, and I guess it was a bit louder than usual. We had music playing and a few wine bottles out, and it was only midnight when I heard knocking on my door. I opened it, and it took me a few seconds but I recognised him as the guy from upstairs. He asked me if we could turn down the music. I said okay, but once he left we gradually turned up the volume until by two it was back where it was before.

A few more knocks on the door and it's him again, and this time he's not so nice. He yells at us that he needed to study for his final, and says he won't leave until everyone who doesn't live in the building gets out.

The next day I filed a complaint with the super, but I don't think anything came of it. What I do know is that a week later, when I'd almost forgotten about the whole thing, there was a card and a bouquet of flowers waiting at my door in apology.

§

We didn't stay in touch, but we remained on good terms. In my experience, most friends are merely hypothetical once you're no longer living in the same area, which isn't the same thing as saying that we are 'no longer friends'.

Still, we have met up a handful of times since the internship. I moved to Los Angeles for business school, and on several occasions he has contacted me about lodgings. Héctor's well aware that he's a welcome guest at my house, "mi casa es su casa", as they say, but while we've met for meals, he's never actually stayed over. There was a female he was interested in living nearby, and I suppose she was fine with him dropping by for a quick, ahem, screw. I believe it was always this same female, with whom I was once introduced, and not random tête-à-têtes, but I can hardly be certain.

I suppose that at some point he got serious with someone else, or perhaps she did. In either case, after a year and a half of semi-regular appearances, he stopped visiting.

§

We've talked half a dozen times since then. Maybe less. I left the city and moved in with my parents, took some time off to figure out what I wanted to do. I'd been planning for us as a couple, so when I was suddenly alone I had no idea what I even wanted. I'd stay in bed all day, skipping meals and not answering the phone, because I didn't have a reason not to.

And then, suddenly I was over him. I went to graduate school, and I haven't really thought of him much since. No, I don't mind talking... all of that feels like it happened to a different person. It's like remembering an old TV show I haven't seen in years, even though I know it all really happened to me.

§

He was well-qualified for the position, but so were all of the candidates. We only interview the best. I try to base these decisions on which candidates have the most to offer us in the long term. After all, it's not as if the position we're hiring them for is all that difficult. Time-consuming,

certainly, and arduous. Sixteen-hour days are normal for their first couple years, everyone who walks through the door knows that, so I tend to choose the candidate who has that extra spark, that competitive edge that will drive them to excel. If I suspect a candidate would sell me down the river for their own advancement, that's the one I hire.

§

Every so often he forwards me an article, or vice-versa, plus he follows me on Twitter. About a year ago he returned to LA, I believe for work, and we met for dinner. That was the last time I saw him, and he failed to mention a fiancé.

§

At first Héctor didn't treat the job with any degree of seriousness. That's not surprising, investment modelling isn't the most glamorous work. You can spend your entire day staring at the computer without making measurable progress, so after their first few weeks some people goof off a lot, office pranks and such.

I sat Héctor down and told him that what he'd done with the fire extinguisher wasn't acceptable. He stared me in the eyes and said he understood, firmly shook my hand, and I never heard another complaint about his 'jokes' again. I'm sure he was furious at me, but I never saw that in the office, only determination. Dissension between management and employees is typically the most productive relationship.

§

He didn't sweep me off my feet, but he did take me on 'date' dates for the first time in my life. No other guy did that, they always wanted to hook up at a party. Héctor invited me to restaurants and shows. The first time he took me to an office party I worried I'd be underdressed, but he said he didn't care what I wore because I'd outshine everyone if I showed up in pyjamas. He's sweet like that, and while I know some of my friends didn't like him at first, and half-joked that I'd 'sold out' by being with him, everyone warmed up eventually. The idea that an artist can't love an investment banker is absurd.

§

I've never met Wendy. She didn't come along to the five-year reunion, and I'm not terribly surprised, as a lot of guys come solo—it's that sort of weekend. Don't get me wrong, it's not a big fucking orgy or anything, it's just fun to dance without wearing a leash, if you know what I mean. 'Look but don't touch' was the theme for the weekend. Or maybe it was touch but don't touch too much, am I right?

Me and Héctor did a lot of... substances. Not that we're into that sort of thing. I don't want to say anything that might negatively affect him in the future, so let's just say we did a lot of 'not cocaine' at the afterparty, and Héctor, that motherfucker, was out with me until past six. We'd barely talked in five years, but he was still my wingman, just like old times.

§

I wasn't overly worried about him meeting my parents, just... normal worried. Héctor has such a... he has a sardonic sense of humour, and sometimes it can be hard to get the joke. My parents are kind of old school Christians, and I worried they'd take comments about certain subjects the wrong way.

To my surprise, they got along fabulously. Héctor knew what to avoid, and instead they talked about fiscal policy and that sort of thing which, frankly, I couldn't care less about. After a little friendly disagreement, they really got along, and I couldn't have hoped for a better meeting. We go up to Vermont and visit them almost every month now.

§

Of course I'll be there. I'm staying with a mutual friend of Héctor's, actually, because hotels are so stupid expensive in New York.

I did meet the blushing bride once, I think, right when they first started dating. I don't think she liked me, but she was the one being a bitch, so that's on her. Not that I care what she thinks anyhow, I'm going for the trip and the open bar and because weddings are super fun. I could use a break from LA, too, with all the craziness going on with my ex, so the wedding's coming at a perfect time for me.

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We just drifted apart, like I said. I don't even know what he fucking does now. We're still Facebook friends, though. I think he lives in New York?

§

Is he like a son to me? No, I have a son. What a stupid question, he's an employee. I will be at the wedding, though, as I find that partaking in social events such as these pays dividends in company morale.

§

I met her when visiting Héctor in Brooklyn. He took me to the top of the Empire State Building, the Staten Island Ferry, Times Square, and Wendy tagged along. I thought she was very nice,

very pretty, and I was happy for Héctor. For dinner, he took me to the one New Mexican restaurant in town, and while it wasn't very good, I appreciated the gesture. It was a little odd that he only spoke English to the waiter, which made the whole ordering process difficult because the waiter's English was not the best, but I was just happy to see how good he looked. We talk on the phone every few months, we're still close like that, but it's different seeing someone in person, and due to his work he hasn't flown home in a few years. I can't wait for the wedding.

§

I work at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. What can I say, it's a fucking living. A good living, too, don't get me wrong. Not for everyone, but litigation pays the bills.

Nah, I'm married. Got a three-year-old son and a fourteen-month-old daughter. We'll all be there, and I can't fucking wait. Gonna have to see if Héctor can still drink like in the old days, or more importantly whether his ball'n'chain will let him.

§

No, I've never had any doubts because I know Héctor and who he is, so I know that he really, truly loves me the way I love him. I couldn't be more excited. While I know we got engaged pretty fast, it feels like I've been planning this wedding, with Héctor's help of course, forever now. I know it's ridiculous to speak about soul mates, but that's just how it feels with him.

Sean Gandert's first novel, Lost in Arcadia, will be published in May 2017 by 47 North. He has also contributed stories or essays to the South Dakota Review, Columbia Journalism Review, Solstice Magazine and elsewhere. He is a graduate of Bennington College's MFA program, and hails from Albuquerque, New Mexico.