

# Tincture Journal

Issue Six: Winter 2014



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# Editorial

by *Daniel Young*

Welcome to Issue Six of *Tincture Journal*, our Winter 2014 edition. A surge in submissions in the past quarter has been very encouraging; it was tough to select the work contained in this e-book. As always we have a mix of writing from all over Australia and the world, and it's interesting to note some of our return contributors—Sam van Zweden, Nathanael O'Reilly, Rhys Timson, Andrew Hutchinson, Anna Ryan-Punch, Frank Scozzari, S. G. Lerner—and exciting to welcome them back. New writers, don't be discouraged—we are always looking for new voices; there's a great mix of these in this issue.

Of course there is our perennial contributor, Meg Henry, who has appeared in every issue of the journal with “Inferior Bedrooms”, her short column that draws on the work of contemporary novelists to bring the misadventures of her love life to the page. This edition of the column is inspired by Kathy Charles' *Hollywood Ending* (2009, Text Publishing).

Our interview series continues in this issue. It's worth noting that all interviews are available on the Tincture website: <http://tincture-journal.com/category/interviews/>. The series began with Stuart Barnes interviewing David Lumsden in Issue Five and continued when I interviewed Angela Meyer, whose intriguing and satisfying book of flash fiction, *Captives*, was recently published by Inkerman & Blunt. *Captives* contains “Apocalypse” and “Glitch”, two flash fiction pieces that appeared in Issue One of *Tincture Journal*. In this issue, Stuart Barnes interviews Nathanael O'Reilly, whose first full-length poetry collection, *Distance*, will be published in June by Picaro Press, and Stu Hatton, whose second full-length collection, *Glitching*, will be published in mid-2014 by (outer) publishing. Both poets have two poems in this issue and you can find Stuart's interview with Stu on our website.

We hope you enjoy our sixth issue! Please don't hesitate to get in touch via social media or email with any feedback you may have.

# Inferior Bedrooms

*Regular Column by Meg Henry*

By then I'm seeing him maybe twice a week. It's early winter and when he suggests I pack an overnight bag, I hesitate, watching his eyes flick over the screen of his iPhone. I shouldn't be so suspicious, but when I ask where we're going, he says, "It's a secret."

We drive south, then west for a hundred and fifty K's and arrive after lunch to a bed and breakfast surrounded by low-hanging branches and wet ferns. The gravel driveway announces us and the proprietor comes to the window, calling down for us to take off our shoes before coming in. But we're not wearing any.

For the last forty minutes I've been lost. We pulled off the highway to buy wine for the road, then took all the backstreets. My head is spinning from the booze and altitude, but we go up politely, and he puts his arm around me while the transaction is made in cash.

"You're staying in the Woodland Room," she tells me directly. "Perhaps you'd like to freshen up?"

I shower in the shared bathroom, catching snippets of their conversation. There's another couple in residence. Breakfast is at eight.

"She was nice," he says when I join him in our wood-panelled room framed with colour pencil drawings of Australian marsupials. I dress in front of the open windows waiting for a sarcastic aside, but it doesn't come.

We take our wine up to the lookout as the sun is going down. The wet grass clings to my feet and I stare at Mount Warning, wondering about his intentions. Suppressing images of every horror movie I've ever seen, I try to relax.

The other couple come up over the ridge in matching parkers and ugly boots.

"We're on our honeymoon," she says, showing me the ring.

"It's a shame the mountain is closed," her husband says, and I realise with relief that I may have been expected to climb it.

"Joke's on us," I say.

"Celebrating something?" she asks, gesturing to the wine and the view.

I realise it's too soon for this kind of thing and hope he's not getting the wrong idea.

But he laughs and says, "Oh, we're not even dating."

She recoils as if he's thrown acid, and I grab him as they retreat, kissing him hard on the mouth as the sun slips behind the mountain, thankful for the perfect Hollywood Ending.

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

# The Horror of the Body

*by Sam van Zweden*

In jars, in boxes, in over-lit cabinets, on tables  
the human body gapes at me.

This museum is horror.

My body is horror.

A moulage masquerade—

mermaids are manufactured—all horse-hair and wax,

as if what the body does to itself

is not shocking enough.

We have to pretend.

A woman gives her daughter a brilliant explanation of what an umbilical cord is,  
and I miss my mum.

Body parts are shattered, separated, strewn across a room

I can't imagine the function of all these bits—

I can't place them in my own body.

A woman's tumour has grown its own hair.

What is the purpose of that?

My horror body.

This room full of horror bodies

separated and given up.

All the million ways

our bodies will betray us.

*Sam van Zweden is a Melbourne-based freelance writer. She blogs at [Little Girl With a Big Pen](#), writes reviews and personal essays, and is also the online editor for [Writers Bloc](#). This year Sam is doing honours at RMIT, writing about food and memory.*

# Waiting

*by Tiggy Johnson*

1

Kenny Walters stands behind the shower curtain and focuses on his breathing, having darted from the lounge room after hearing a sound like a key in the front door. He counts elephants in his head and recalls counting them when he was a kid: twenty for hide and seek; fifty after being tripped in the school hall; one hundred after Mum said don't speak to your father like that and as many as he could concentrate on after seeing Dad king-hit Mum through the kitchen window when no-one knew he was outside.

Now, he counts three hundred then listens. He remembers Jimmy Barnes pleading with him as a child to lay down his guns and surrender, and the creaking of a moving weight on furniture, perhaps the bed. He doesn't hear anything to suggest someone's about to barge into the ensuite, so he steps out of the tub, slowly, like he's been creeping around for eleven and a half years.

The bathroom door is open and he slides behind it, beside the wall and looks through the crack. He imagines a couple, pictures the woman first, perceives them having sex, and hears their groans for the first time. The woman's breaths are soft, slow, like Mum's when she'd been asleep before Dad got home. The man's are quick, hard, like he's come home from a pub-fight he didn't get to finish.

Kenny thinks of his parents, closes his eyes, tilts his head back and clenches his entire mouth. Remembers burying his head in his pillow, eyes pressed together, counting elephants, one hundred, three hundred, six hundred, whenever he'd hear them doing it. Now, he doesn't press his eyes together tightly to suppress tears; last time he did that was years ago, before he realised the tears had stopped coming.

He shakes the image of his parents and looks through the crack. The couple materialise and he decides to enjoy the show. Glimpses the woman's legs, spread across the sheet, and imagines he's the man, pressing hard against her, his hands clutching her chunky thighs, squeezing, pushing. He inhales purposefully through his nose, feels the air fill his nostrils, spread to the back of his skull and down his spine. He loosens his belt, drops his gaze and slips his hand inside his jeans, against his skin. He lets the back of his fingers lightly kiss his cock as if it's accidental. As if it's her hand, limp by her side. He sees the man pull back and jerk cum over her cunt. He's about to twist his wrist and take a good grip when the woman's head turns.

He steps back towards the bath. She reminds him of Mum. It's not her hair, although that isn't

too different, nor her features, which are probably similar too. It's her eyes. The shine of a new bruise still deciding on a shade, and the trickle of blood oozing from her forehead onto the sheet.

He gasps and pulls his hand from his jeans to cover his mouth. He's using both, as if he needs to push the noise back inside, and he slides along the floor, steps into the bath, hides behind the curtain again.

## 2

Kenny Walters was in the lounge room ten minutes ago. He'd jemmied the back door after no one answered his fourth knock, and looked through the kitchen first. Under the sink, through drawers, behind the rubbish bin, on top of the fridge. In the past twelve months, he'd found seven spare keys taped to plumbing, enough spare change beside teaspoons to get a few packs of smokes, and three wads of notes hidden in biscuit tins.

All he found was a warm can of Johnnie Walker Red, which he sculled. He moved to the lounge to check out the entertainment situation. Stereo, Playstation, whatever he could find. The room was sparsely decorated, just one brown couch and a TV, and he wondered if maybe a man lived here alone, if maybe the man was too poor to have anything worth pinching. He knew he wouldn't get much for the TV, maybe fifty bucks, but he figured he'd gone to all the effort. He leaned behind it to unplug the cord, thinking he'd put it near the back door before searching the bedroom and bathroom for jewellery he doubted he'd find. That was when he thought he heard the key, and only realised on the way to the ensuite that he'd heard a car's engine moments before.

## 3

Kenny Walters got caught taking ten bucks from Mum's purse when he was twelve. He would have asked her for it and maybe she'd have given it to him, but she was asleep and he hadn't wanted to wake her. He didn't know Dad was home until he heard the words you ungrateful little bastard and the sound of his belt unbuckling. Kenny knew he wasn't one of the quickest kids around, but Dad's whisky breath meant Kenny could outrun him whether over five metres or five hundred.

Kenny used some of the money at the games arcade even though that wasn't what he took it for. He hoped shooting aliens would help him catch his breath and let him forget about what might happen later. After an hour, he wandered the main street, twice, then headed towards the train

station.

He bought a ticket and boarded the next train to the city, imagining he was one of those snooty private school kids with their fancy shoes on the seats, although he'd have traded with anyone there. Even the blue-haired granny with the walking frame. He ran his hand through his hair roughly, trying to make his short spikes look untidy as if he'd spent hours getting them just right.

He crossed Flinders and Swanston and got on the first tram that stopped. It took him to South Melbourne beach, where he sat in the sand until he was colder than he ever remembered being, then made his way home, staring at the night lights and stopping a while to watch the bums outside St Paul's.

Dad would have had enough time to fall asleep, but even so, Kenny took a leak on the lemon tree beside the shed then crept through the back door to his room and went straight to bed.

He woke to the burning of the local paper slapping his cheek, jumped out of bed and inadvertently head-butted Dad below the ribs. He regretted it even before his head made contact, but not because he'd be in the shit with Dad. His memory of the last time Dad took one in the guts meant he had enough time to squeeze his eyes shut, duck his head and turn around. He didn't have enough time to pull away before he felt the warmth of Dad's insides empty down the back of his t-shirt and into the top of his jeans.

#### 4

Kenny Walters steps out of the bathtub and leans over the toilet to chuck. He lifts his head, tilts it, listens for the couple. Their grunts are even and he lets his shoulders fall, notices vomit dribbling down the outside of the toilet, a puddle already forming on the floor.

He considers turning the tap on, gently, to splash his face but instead leans towards the towel hanging beside the shower. It's damp, like it's been used recently, and Kenny wipes his mouth, cheeks, hands, then moves back to the crevice behind the door.

The woman is face down, the man supporting her pelvis above the mattress. He rides her like he's king of the rodeo and Kenny imagines he may as well be using a whip. The man is still dressed, his pants undone and slipping down a little. The woman's panties are hooked over an ankle, her dress pushed up over her back. Her skin is as white as hospital linen, except the bit of her bottom where the man's body slaps against her. Kenny sees her face, one cheek mashing into the rising blood pool with each thrust, her eyes closed, one forced by the violet swell. He wonders if she's awake or pretending to sleep, waiting for the man to finish. Still, like a bunny in headlights,

waiting for it to end. Why the fuck won't she just say no.

Stupid bitch. She could just say no.

Stupid bitch deserves what she gets if she's not going to stand up for herself. Not going to tell him to stop. Kenny walks a tense circle beside the bath, his fists tight by his sides. He doesn't make much noise, avoids looking at the mirror, the walls, focuses on small steps. Deserves what she gets if she's not going to say no, if she's not going to push him away.

Kenny punches the air beside his hip and grits his teeth. She deserves the whole fucking lot if she's not going to leave. Simply stand up and leave. What would it take? A little push, a few words? To say I'm not going to put up with your crap anymore. Why can't she just go? Pack her stuff, take Kenny and get the hell away?

## 5

Kenny Walters and Mum almost got away once. Dad disappeared for long enough that Mum's skin turned pink and she spoke sentences of more than four words. But it turned out he'd been in hospital after getting caught up in someone else's punch-up. When he got home, he seemed pissed with Mum for not having dropped in to hold his hand and tell him it'd be okay. Complained she didn't sneak his hip flask or a packet of smokes in while the nurses weren't looking.

Mum wore her hair forward for the next ten days. Kenny took a night job at the servo after saying he was eighteen, and saved up for a bond.

By the time Mum got away, Kenny had been in his flat for three weeks. Cops said Dad'd probably fallen, drunk, on the concrete footpath, or been caught up in some brawl.

## 6

Kenny Walters stops walking circles and looks through the crack. The woman is alone on the bed, her bottom, shiny, red, pushed into the air. The man's pants are buttoned, his shirt tucked and he moves around the room collecting her things. Shoes, a button from her dress, handbag, purse, panties. He pushes them into a green shopping bag.

Kenny holds his breath for a heartbeat when he sees the purse. He wonders if any money fell out, but his view is too narrow to see the floor where it was. He scans what he can see of the room, looks for signs of other money, other valuables. The man leaves the room. Kenny counts elephants as he waits, listens for the click of the front door open, the rustling of keys, quiet and

then the man's footsteps coming back. Thirty-seven.

He kneels on the bed, scoops his arms beneath the woman, lifts her to sit. Her head flops like she's newborn and Kenny tilts his head to look at her again. There's something about her that reminds him of Mum, something more than the bruise, but he isn't sure what. Perhaps it's her dress, like the one Mum always wore for Dad's birthday.

The man lifts her and tosses her over his shoulder and disappears again.

Kenny counts to three hundred before coming out of the ensuite.

## 7

Kenny Walters goes to where the woman's purse had been. There's nothing left. He sits on the edge of the bed and checks the bedside drawers. He finds a box from a jeweller's and smiles, opens it. The earrings are like a pair he bought for Mum last year. They look like diamonds, but they're not. He clasps the box for a moment then puts it in his pocket and checks again.

When he's finished looking through the drawers he turns and spots a video recorder on a bookshelf across the room. It's an older style one, at least five years old. He knows he won't get much for it, but twenty bucks is twenty bucks. He picks it up and as he lets it rest against his palm, he remembers video footage of Mum, Dad and him when he'd just learned to walk. His hands in the air as he took three, eight, twenty-four steps to Mum's embrace.

He wonders what might be on this tape and pictures the couple having sex. He presses a finger down on the rewind button, smiles, closes his eyes. Counts. Eighty-five.

It's a different woman on the screen, face down, looking away from the camera. Looking asleep. Date-stamped for last week. Her hair's tied back the way Mum wore hers in the photo she gave him. The one that was taken after he was born. Where she's happy, holding him wrapped in a blue blanket with yellow ducks.

He thinks of the photo, closes his eyes, counts to ten, feels his breath travel down his spine, opens his eyes. The man is on the screen, approaching the woman. He lifts her dress, supports her pelvis, pulls her pink panties over her plump thighs, past her knees, leaves them on one ankle. Before he moves closer, he turns to the lens, grins, winks. Kenny almost drops the camera, jumps back. The man looks familiar too and he wonders why he hadn't noticed sooner. Why he hadn't noticed when he was watching from the ensuite. Maybe if he'd caught his image in the mirror. The man reminds him of Dad in a different picture Kenny's seen. A family photo taken the day Kenny

started school. The one he tore up to set Mum free.

*Tiggy Johnson's words have appeared widely, including in Cordite, Island, Quadrant, Overland Audio II, Going Down Swinging, and in Black Inc's Best Australian Poems 2012. Her short story collection Svetlana or otherwise was published in 2008, her poetry collections First taste in 2010 and That zero year, co-written with Andrew Phillips, in 2012. She is currently writing her family history in poetry. Tiggy Johnson's poem "Searching for Mary" appeared in Issue Three of Tincture Journal.*

# The Interesting People of Mount Kilimanjaro

by *Stephen Koster*

The smell is instantly revolting—enough, in fact, to make me gag. The milk inside looks green and is divided into two parts: green curds and green oil. The curds side is filled with some kind of cheese sweat, and the oil side glistens like a gasoline spill.

Outside, my neighbour's sprinkler has fallen on its side and is spraying his house. The sound of its mechanical arm whacking against the wall echoes inside my head.

*This is dumb, I think.*

*No. It's only dumb because other people would think it's dumb. There's nothing inherently stupid or smart about it.*

*Then, again, that's because it's pretty dumb.*

*Ah, screw it.*

There's a tribe near the base of Kilimanjaro who perform ritual circumcisions upon their young men when they come of age. The boy in question can't move or yell out. Any reaction during the ceremony is considered unmanly. You have to forget your foreskin ever existed.

Now that's chaos.

Two opposing beliefs at a crossroads. Trying to circumcise a grown boy who loves his foreskin, and a system that believes in the goodness of things stripped of their foreskin.

I'm not boring. There are lots of things to prove that. For example, when coming home from work every day, there are different routes I take. Sometimes these routes lead past places I'm not too comfortable walking past, like privately-owned convenience stores.

*I could go to a museum, I think.*

*That sounds boring.*

*Nothing's inherently boring or interesting, it's all in how you—*

*Said that already. Got to stop saying inherently.*

Setting the milk on the counter, it's only a few moments before the excuses come. This could

affect my health. This is not a rational exercise. It won't be *fun*.

There are obvious reasons to put the milk down the drain. The smell, the taste, the fridge space. Expired milk isn't good for anyone. In the natural state of humanity, someone encounters something foul-smelling and throws it away. Thus, by knowing this milk is past its prime and not disposing of it, I am rejecting nature.

I find a clothes pin and plug my nose with it.

*Bungee-jumping. I could go bungee-jumping. That would be fun.*

The pin smells like wood shavings and nothing else. An absent sort of smell. A smell vacuum.

The milk sloshes as I bring the edge of the bucket to my lips. The metal ridge is warm.

They all called me boring last week. Isabella and the rest. In a family restaurant. In public. It wasn't like I overheard them say it in a private conversation. It was right to my face.

They were there, underneath the fake taxidermy moose head on the wall, going through the menu, and I was talking about investment strategies.

Dave was wearing a striped shirt that no one called boring.

No one called Linda boring, and she only ordered a salad.

Isabella wasn't boring either, but no one made fun of the fact that she always orders at least two diet pops every time we go out. She should be the obvious choice.

*Yeah, so I'll drink it. So what? I'm fine. I feel great.*

At first there's no taste. My taste buds are in denial. There's nothing wrong with this milk, the taste buds believe. They taste the greasy yellow sludge, but the signals don't reach my brain.

My tongue feels the milk before it tastes it. A hard, curdling mass. Going south, through pipes and tubes. Buried deep in my stomach. Weighing everything down.

*It'd be funny if they found me on the floor or outside in the neighbour's sprinkler, or with my head in the sink, like I'm bobbing for apples.*

After one swallow I start to reel, immediately regretful. Lurching towards the sink I shove a quivering finger into my throat and gag. Nothing comes out. I feel the milky mass inside me, gurgling and slipping around, and going everywhere but back up.

My throat tightens as nothing follows nothing. A little saliva, but that's it.

Choking, I wretch and fall to the floor. The veins in my forehead bulge out like little blue highways. The ceiling spins.

*That's fast, I think, as the ceiling goes one direction and I the other. Can we go the other way? Let's go the other way.*

I find my cellphone and, crawling, scroll through the contacts to find a name while holding a hand to my forehead, which is burning up. At least I think so. It's hard to tell. It might just be the heat. Lying motionless feels good. I could stay like this.

*Floors look weird. We never look at floors this close.*

The call goes through, reaching an uncertain voice on the other end.

"Hello?" it says.

"Hey, Isabella, it's me," I say. "Could I borrow your ironing board collection?"

*She'll say no and then I'll probably die.*

Now the vomit comes. The spray goes on and on and won't stop. Though I try to shut my mouth, this only causes the flow of breakfast, lunch, and milky curds to go through my nose, forcing the clothes pin to fall into the expanding pool of human oatmeal beneath me. There are at least three smells instantly detectable, all of them cheese related.

"What?" Isabella asks. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I manage to get out before the next wave comes exploding out of me. I see teenagers with black skin and shaved heads, jumping, landing on the tips of their toes, all of them with blood-stained loincloths. They are jumping under a mountain shrouded with clouds, on top of my stomach.

*Can you guys stop? I dig the enthusiasm, but it's killing me.*

"What did you say?" Isabella asks. "Are you wearing a mask or something—I can barely hear you."

A primal choking sound comes from my throat as a shot of vomit sends my phone skittering under the fridge, burying Isabella's voice under a three-hundred pound appliance and a pool of stomach sludge. At this point her words are unrecognisable. Anglo-Saxon mumblings.

*No more. Please.*

This would be even worse with a circumcision involved. I try to think about not-mountains, not-cloudy peaks, not-circumcisions. Kilimanjaro. This wouldn't have happened if I'd gone for the hot sauce challenge. I wonder if those village elders had this problem. The unwillingness to commit.

I *had* to be watching National Geographic.

I *had* to realise I'd never be as manly as a grown adult who willingly lets his foreskin be shorn off.

The phone continues to wonder what's going on. I don't know. I start to forget where I am. I'm not in Africa, that's for sure. The thirteen-year-old tribesman dancing on my head tells me so.

*Ease up, man. You're heavy.*

I know the milk won't kill me. In the morning I'll be stronger.

It's a Nietzsche thing. There is no milk.

I fall to my knees in front of the fridge and reach under, making rainbow arcs with my arms. My hand touches something palm-sized and rectangular.

I pull out the phone.

"Isabella. Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Remember what you said about me being boring?"

"You're not seriously hung up on that?" she asks. "I only meant—"

"Have you ever been to Mount Kilimanjaro, Isabella?"

"No, I haven't."

"Would you think someone who went through an adult circumcision was boring?"

"Jesus," Isabella says. "You didn't—"

"No," I say, wiping froth from my mouth. "Only metaphorically. In reality, I drank a lot of expired milk."

Or at least that's what I try to say. My mouth is somewhat occupied.

I vomit again, all over my clothes. Like jumping into a swimming pool full of pig's entrails. The phone slips from my hand again. Through my own fluids and mucus, I notice the call has ended. Picturing Isabella's face, all I can see is its outline and a frown. I grab the phone and before redialling her number, I dial nine-one-one.

*Okay, guys. You can start dancing again. Just keep it down when the paramedics get here. I know you're happy to be circumcised and all, but let's keep it in check. Some of us aren't there yet.*

Some curds drip down the spout of the empty milk bucket, like I've forgotten them. I scoop one up along the edge of my finger and drop it into my mouth.

I have, as they say, become a man. Under my jeans, my foreskin is nodding furiously, clapping its folds of skin together in prayer.

*See, I think.*

*This was much easier than going to Africa.*

The call goes through and I give the friendly man on the other end my address before I pass out. Though time becomes a bit fuzzy, I notice that sometime later Isabella very courteously helps carry me to the ambulance, which I think is a bit of a dramatic gesture, and frankly the kind of thing a boring person would do around a more exciting person, and as the paramedics passed me over to the kids of Kilimanjaro, I mentioned this. They carried me bleeding to the mountain through a long river of frothy green milk, telling me the whole time I am no longer boring.

“Victory at last,” I say to the ambulance driver.

From an upside-down position, the ambulance driver's face looks sullen and a little bit stoned, like he's ignoring me. Like I'm a fool. Like my finally becoming a man is inconveniencing him.

Well, he hasn't seen the mountains yet.

*Stephen Koster is an abominable snowman. He spends his days eating Sherpas and developing an advanced system of hand communication. His greatest fear is the little fuzzy things that get stuck between your toes when you wear socks. You can follow his work on Facebook: <http://facebook.com/stephenkosterwriter>.*

# Christian Girls

*by Nathanael O'Reilly*

Christian girls with breasts  
mostly exposed, silver crosses  
dangling in the depths of cleavage,  
sit quietly in the front row,  
hands crossed modestly in laps,  
eyes raised respectfully towards  
the speaker, lips almost sealed  
in a half-smile. As they eagerly  
lean forward to hear the Word  
their crosses gently swing out  
into open space—then back to rest  
in the valley of the shadow  
as bodies become upright.

# I Was Not Like the Other Kids

*by Nathanael O'Reilly*

I was not like the other kids at school.  
I did not play rugby, soccer and cricket  
on Saturdays. I did not play basketball  
on Friday nights. I did not celebrate  
birthdays, Easter or Christmas. I kept  
the Jewish Holy Days and did not eat  
ham, pork, bacon, prawns or lobster.  
I did not have a girlfriend or go  
to the blue light disco. I prayed  
and read the Bible before school.  
I tried to obey the Ten Commandments.  
I was not normal and I was not popular.

I was not like the other kids at school.  
I had friends all over the country.  
Annual religious festivals, Saturday night  
dances, Sunday sporting tournaments  
and summer camps gave me a social  
network spanning the continent.  
Friendships were nurtured and sustained  
by letter-writing and long-distance calls.  
Whenever I travelled interstate I always  
had a church member's floor to sleep on.  
I was a member of the One True Church  
and I was going to live for eternity.

*Note: Line twelve is adapted from Lyle Lovett's "Truck Song".*

# Interview with Nathanael O'Reilly

by *Stuart Barnes and Nathanael O'Reilly*

1. *For how long have you been writing poetry, and what or who inspired you to begin?*

I think I must have been about thirteen when I wrote my first poem, which was about a girl at school I had a crush on, and contained a terrible metaphor about my heart being kicked like an empty can down the street. That was twenty-seven years ago. I got serious about poetry while studying literature in year twelve. I had a fantastic teacher, Rob Robson (affectionately known as Robbo), who made poetry come alive for me. I will never forget his explication of John Donne's "To His Mistress Going To Bed", complete with hand gestures. Robbo showed me that poetry could be profound, complex, direct, irreverent, funny, even sexy—but more importantly with regard to your question, he inspired me to get serious about writing poetry. He also introduced me to Plath, Rich, Lowell, Heaney, Murray, Hughes, Keats, Yeats, and Eliot, which was an excellent start to my education as a reader of poetry.

2. *When and where was your first poem published, and what was it about?*

Some friends and I put together a zine in high school and I had a few poems in it, and I had some poems published under a pseudonym in the university newspaper when I was at Ballarat in the early 1990s, but I honestly don't remember the poems or exactly what they were about (they were probably love poems). I would go to the library and read journals like *Island* and *Meanjin*, and fantasised about my work being published in them, but I was so afraid of rejection that I did not actually submit any poems. I got married in 1999, started my MA in 2001, and then began my PhD in 2004—between being happily married and studying literature intensively, I had little time for poetry. I actually didn't send any poems out for publication until 2005, when I was thirty-two, and later that year a poem of mine called "Beyond" appeared in *The Oklahoma Review*. It was about being young and full of dreams and desires, but lacking the ability to attain the objects of desire.

3. *How and where do your poems take shape?*

My poems usually begin with an image, an event, or a phrase. The image or event might be something I experienced or witnessed, and at some point a nagging desire develops to put that experience or event into words. At other times, I will come up with a phrase and feel the need to

write it down. Usually, the first words I put down are the only ones I know for sure that I will write, but once I start writing, other words, phrases, and lines usually soon follow. When I'm in the right mental space, I can start with a single line and end up writing an entire first draft in a single sitting. When the inspiration runs out, I will put the draft away and then come back to it later to revise. The actual composition takes place in a variety of places—usually at my writing desk in my house or in my office at work—but I have written poems on planes, in cars, on boats, in airports, on trains, in pubs and cafes, while watching my daughter's dance classes, while walking down the street, and while my students are taking exams. When I have an idea I do my best to write it down immediately, no matter where I am. I used to drive 80 minutes each way to work, and I composed my poem "Symptoms of Homesickness" in my head while driving to work one day. I remember rushing from my car to my office to type up the first draft before I forgot it all.

*4. In an interview with Sydney Time Out in June 2008, Dorothy Porter revealed "Music has been the key for me since I was a teenager ... I wanted to tap into that dark potency of rock'n'roll, and I still write to music every day."*

*What music influences your poetry? Can/do you write to music?*

That's a great quote from Porter. When I was in my teens and early twenties, I wrote to music—in fact, I did pretty much everything to music, including writing, reading, and studying. However, as I got older I found that I needed silence and solitude to be able to really concentrate and create, so I no longer write to music, and haven't done so for more than a decade. Part of the reason for the change is that I found lines, phrases, and ideas from the lyrics slipping too easily into my poetry, which hampered my efforts to be original. I would also find the rhythms of the music inflecting my poems. I wrote one poem (which shall forever remain unpublished) that almost perfectly fits the melody and rhythm of The Smiths' "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side". As far as musical influences go, I have always loved music with serious, beautiful lyrics—basically poetry set to music. There are too many artists to name, but a few of them are Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, Tori Amos, U2, The Cure, REM, Paul Kelly and Nick Cave.

*5. The two poems—"Christian Girls", "I Was Not Like the Other Kids"—that appear in this issue of Tincture are from 'Cult', a manuscript you're currently working on. For this manuscript you received an Emerging Writers Grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts.*

*Tell me about these poems and the manuscript. What advice would you offer an emerging writer applying for this grant?*

I don't want to say much about the poems because I believe that poetry should speak for itself, and I wouldn't want to preclude a variety of readings of the poems. However, as you mentioned, they are both from *Cult*, which is a collection of poems about the experience of growing up in Australia in a fundamentalist Christian cult. I was born into a religious community that had very strict rules regarding personal behaviour, but also about interacting with people outside of the church. I did not know that I was actually a member of a cult until after I left the church in my early twenties, but I was always aware that the church was far from the mainstream and that many of our beliefs and practices would have been considered bizarre by my peers at school and their parents. So, I lived a kind of double life. On the surface, I seemed like an average Australian kid growing up in the 70s and 80s—playing sport, riding my bike everywhere, skateboarding, surfing, going to concerts, hanging out with mates, swimming in the river. However, I kept my beliefs and participation in church activities from everyone except my two best mates, and always felt like an outsider at school and university. The poems in the collection attempt to convey the experience of being both a member of a conservative religious community and a seemingly average Australian child, teenager, and young adult. Having been outside of the cult for many years, I am writing about it from a distance now and can see how it would have appeared to others. The cult had its fair share of problems, so I am interested in issues such as hypocrisy, appearance versus reality, faith, doubt, knowledge, trust, betrayal, loyalty, and community.

I was really stunned and thrilled to be awarded the Emerging Writers grant. It was a huge boost to my confidence as a writer. My friend Jason Skipper, who wrote *Hustle*, a fantastic novel, suggested 'Cult' as the title for the project and told me that I needed an intriguing title and angle. I did some research and read advice from previous recipients, including the suggestion that my proposal should answer the following questions: Why this project? Why now? Why me? I made sure that my proposal answered those questions clearly and emphatically. Anyone applying for a grant should follow all of the guidelines carefully, take as much care with all parts of the application as one would with one's creative writing, and try to emphasise the unique aspects of the project.

*6. How has your poetry been influenced by others'? By reviewing others'? By teaching literature at Texas Christian University?*

I did not pursue an MFA and have never taken a creative writing class, so I am what some would call "self-taught". Thus, I have not had an influential writing teacher, but have learnt everything I know from reading and practice. I've been reading poetry widely and seriously for over twenty years, and I consider other poets my teachers. Reading other poets has taught me almost everything I know about poetry. I studied poetry formally as an undergraduate and while working on my graduate degrees, so I also read a lot of poetry criticism and theory, as well as studying poetry from the perspective of a critic. The formal study of poetry as literature allowed me to

acquire the technical knowledge of poetry necessary to teach poetry in my classes and write reviews and longer criticism. I can deconstruct a poem and teach others those skills, and though those skills are different from the skills necessary to compose poetry, I know they are also helpful creatively. When I write poetry I often think about how the poem might be interpreted, broken down, and received by readers. I expect that thoughtful readers will pay attention to form, structure, line breaks, metaphors, similes, enjambment, diction, punctuation, imagery, symbolism, allusions, etc. It was while studying poets such as Dickinson, Whitman, Herbert, and Ryōkan for my graduate degrees that I came back to writing poetry.

In terms of direct influence from other poets, I try hard to avoid consciously imitating other poets, but don't hesitate to acknowledge that poets such as Keats, Hardy, Yeats, Kavanagh, and Heaney have been big influences on my poetics with regard to subject matter, diction, structure, and tone. Heaney's use of verbs, for example, inspired me to take great care with verbs in my own work. The Irish poets' use of place names is probably an obvious influence for anyone familiar with my poetry. Reading Li-Young Lee inspired me to write about expatriation and diaspora. The work of Alex Lemon and Dan Disney has inspired me to experiment with form and structure.

I don't think that reviewing poetry by other writers has influenced my own work in any obvious ways, but it certainly gives me an appreciation for others' craft and reminds me to keep potential readers and reviewers in mind when composing, revising, and editing.

Teaching at TCU gives me the opportunity to read and re-read a great deal of Irish, British, and Australian poetry, and to discuss the works in detail with lots of really smart, dedicated students. It's a real pleasure to engage closely with poetry in collaboration with my students. I am sure that the constant reading, re-reading and close engagement with poetry that I do as part of my teaching helps me to improve and refine my own poetics.

7. *Tell me about your experience with Picaro Press, which published Symptoms of Homesickness and Suburban Exile: American Poems, your two poetry chapbooks.*

I've had a great experience with Picaro Press and their publisher, Rob Riel. I am a big fan of their chapbooks and their publishing philosophy (which readers can learn about here: <http://www.australianpoetry.org/2013/10/09/picaro-the-persistent-poetry-press/>), so I was delighted when Picaro decided to publish *Symptoms of Homesickness*. Picaro produces beautiful chapbooks at a really affordable price, \$5, which is less than one pays for a beer or a coffee in many parts of Australia now. It was really important to me that the chapbook be cheap and easy to acquire, since I wanted to make my work available to as many people as possible. Readers can buy Picaro Press chapbooks from their website (<http://www.picaropress.com/>) or directly from the poets. Many poets sell their chapbooks at readings, but since I live in Texas it's pretty hard for me to give

readings in Australia. I've sold chapbooks at readings in Australia, London, Toronto, and Texas, but I sold most of the copies through Facebook and Twitter. I had such a positive experience with Picaro publishing my first chapbook that I wanted to work with them again for my second chapbook, *Suburban Exile: American Poems*, and I am absolutely delighted that Picaro is publishing *Distance*, my first full-length collection. It's an honour to have the same publisher as many of the contemporary Australian poets I admire.

8. *What are your thoughts on print vs digital poetry publication?*

Print books have been a big part of my life for thirty-five years now, and I'm one of those people who loves the feel and presence of printed books and will pay good money for a first edition, a signed copy, or a particularly beautiful book. However, I also read e-books and can see the many advantages of digital publication. While I certainly get a kick out of holding a printed issue of a journal or anthology that contains my poetry, I am a big fan of digital journals such as *Tincture*. As a reader, I love the accessibility and portability of digital publications, which I can read on my Kindle, my smartphone, or my laptop. As a poet, I love that anyone anywhere in the world who has internet access can read the online journals in which I have published, and that those readers with internet access and just a small amount of disposable income can purchase digital publications that operate on a subscription or payment per issue model. I would much rather have my work published in a digital publication with a potentially huge audience rather than in a print journal that is only available to readers who can afford the subscription or have access to a library that subscribes to the journal. Certain print journals have developed a prestigious reputation over time and produce a beautiful artefact, but their readership is restricted by economic factors. I am much more interested in having my work made available to a wide audience than being published in a prestigious journal with a small print run.

9. *What poets are you reading, what's your favourite poem at the moment?*

As part of my teaching, I read a lot of canonical poets from Britain, Ireland, and Australia, but I also try to read as much contemporary poetry as I can. In the last year or so I have been reading poetry collections by Michelle Cahill, Heather Taylor Johnson, Jonathan Bennett, Paul Kane, John Kinsella, David McCooney, Lachlan Brown, David Adès, Dan Disney, Maxine Clarke, David Malouf, Kit Kelen, E. A. Gleeson, Stuart Cooke, and Michael Farrell. It's hard to pick a current favourite poem, but of the many fine poems in *The Best Australian Poems 2013*, edited by Lisa Gorton, David Musgrave's "Coastline" really blew me away—I read it over and over again. Matt Hetherington's "Middle-Aged Poet to Middle-Aged Poet" in *fourW twenty-four* had me laughing out loud and forcing my partner to read it, which is definitely a mark of a successful poem.

Thanks for the great questions, Stuart. It was a pleasure answering them.

*Thank you, Nat.*

*Nathanael O'Reilly was born in Warrnambool and raised in Ballarat, Brisbane, & Shepparton. He now resides in Texas. He is the author of Distance (2014) and two chapbooks, Suburban Exile: American Poems (2011) and Symptoms of Homesickness (2010), all published by Picaro Press. He is the recipient of an Emerging Writers Grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. Over one hundred of his poems have been published in journals & anthologies around the world, including Antipodes, Australian Love Poems, Cordite, LiNQ, Blackmail Press, Harvest, Transnational Literature, Mascara, Windmills, Postcolonial Text, Prosopisia, Red River Review, Snorkel, Tincture and Social Alternatives.*

# The Cicada Clock

*by Adam Byatt*

The eucalyptus and red gums exploded with thrumming, the air vibrating with the voice of a thousand cicada pupae; the aural accompaniment to the heat haze wafting up from melting bitumen.

Thomas turned off the road between two houses onto an almost hidden path and disappeared into a pocket of bushland dissecting the suburbs. As he followed the dog-legged track beside the creek the houses disappeared behind a thickening screen of eucalypts, a curtain forming a protective hollow for exploration and tranquillity. His thongs slapped a staccato rhythm against well-worn feet toughened by walking barefoot everywhere except across patches of bindies.

Against the commotion of cicadas, a girl's voice sang, "We built this city on rock and roll."

She came into view around the bend, her back to him, bopping on the spot, eyes closed. She held a bright yellow Walkman and the headphones covered her ears like miniature Princess Leia cinnamon scroll hair buns.

"Katie," he said.

The singing continued. He jumped forward a step and tapped her on the shoulder. She started and turned, ripping the headphones off her ears, the song lost to the cicadas' drone.

"Wondered if you were gonna turn up," she said.

He pointed to the Walkman. "When did you get that?"

"For my birthday." Katie turned and walked ahead, the headphones now a necklace.

They walked in single file, Thomas keeping in step behind Katie. He picked at low hanging leaves, tearing them into pieces before scattering the fragments. The thought of their last year of primary school temporarily interrupted the summer holidays.

"Who do you reckon you'll get next year?" asked Thomas to Katie's back.

"I want Mr Murdoch for Year 6. You?"

"Same. Or Mrs Watson. Don't mind."

"Don't have to worry for six weeks 'til school goes back."

Katie stopped at the storm water marker, a large concrete cylinder jutting out of the ground above the creek, the front exposed by floodwaters chewing at the soil. She sat on the circular cover, the yellow paint worn back to the base metal in several places, and drew her knees to her chest. Nature's breath moved the tops of the trees up on the ridgeline, though it was unfelt in the gully and the air stood still in the heat, a clammy hand wringing sweat from every pore.

Thomas slipped down to the creek.

"Going to be a bumper year for cicadas," he said with his back to Katie.

"What?" Their words were washed away by the water's quiet gurgle, swallowed and lost against the counterpoint of the cicada's cacophony.

Thomas reached for a long stick, wary of the time they'd seen a red-bellied black snake cross their path before disappearing into the undergrowth.

In the shadow of an overhanging tree Katie watched tiny skinks scurrying and skittering through the leaf litter to find a place to sun themselves. She picked the broad waxy leaves and collected thin twigs. Selecting two leaves of similar shape and size she began to fashion the hull of a boat, interlacing the leaves with the twigs like a needle and thread. A second twig crossed from port to starboard to give it shape. Putting it aside she crafted another followed by a third: a dry docked flotilla moored beside her.

The snap and crackle of dry undergrowth signalled Thomas's return. He threw down his snake stick, his other hand held slightly in front and loosely closed. Katie swung her legs over the edge of the stormwater marker, tucking her hands under her knees.

He climbed up from the creek and stood beside the marker, a little below her eye line. Beads of sweat formed a watery moustache on his upper lip. He wiped it clean with his free hand.

"I have a present for you." He unfolded his fingers and picked an object from his palm. Reaching over he placed the empty cicada shell he'd carried up from the creek on Katie's t-shirt, its hooked limbs sticking into the fluoro green fabric. Katie looked down at the empty shell astride her burgeoning right breast.

"Have you read *Where Did I Come From?*" Katie asked.

"Dad gave it to me after that night at school."

"Have you seen a breast before? Like a real one?"

"I've only seen Mum's."

“Doesn’t count.”

Thomas looked at the cicada shell and the small raised profile beneath Katie’s t-shirt.

Katie removed the cicada shell from her shirt and placed it beside her. She reached down to the hem of her t-shirt and lifted it over her chest, slipping her arms out of the sleeves. It formed a scarf. Her new breasts poked out, the areola beginning to rise like a loaf of bread.

“Touch them,” she said.

With his finger Thomas traced around the shape of her breast and over the nipple, a drop of left over dough mixture like he had seen when his mother made cupcakes.

“It’s very soft.”

“Mum says I’m a late starter. I’ll be the only girl in Year 6 who doesn’t need to wear a bra,” she said, slipping her arms back into her t-shirt. “I wear a singlet so I feel like everyone else.”

She pulled her t-shirt down and placed the cicada shell back above her breast.

“Do you have any hair down there?” she asked.

“Some. You?”

She nodded.

Thomas stepped up from his position below the stormwater marker, pushed his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts and underpants and lowered them half way down his thighs. A handful of hairs sprouted above his flaccid penis. Katie reached out and held it.

“Feels like an uncooked sausage,” she said, letting go.

She stood and hesitated before pulling down her shorts.

“You’re lighter down there than on your head,” he said.

“Yours is about the same.”

The thrum of the cicadas intensified as they covered their nakedness. Katie bent down and picked up two leaf boats, placing one in Thomas’s hand.

“Come on,” she said and cocked her head towards the gurgling creek.

The little boats rode the quickening current, squeezed between mossy rocks and out into a

deeper pool where the water stilled, circling in the eddy. Katie's boat was whisked away, quickly lost to sight while Thomas's continued meandering in circles.

"Time to go," said Thomas as the thrum ebbed. "Forgot to tell Mum where I was going."

Katie checked the shell was still attached to her shirt. Thomas picked up a spare leaf boat and followed Katie out of the bush to the chorus of cicadas.

## §

After the third consecutive 40-degree day he took a bet he couldn't cross the four lanes of the main road. Barefoot. A small contingent of hardy souls came out to see the spectacle but took refuge under whatever shade was handy. Even the cicadas thought it was too brutally hot to make much of a fuss.

Thomas stood barefoot on the edge of the gutter feeling the heat rebound off the bitumen into his soles. As he shifted his weight the dry grass crackled beneath his feet. Checking both ways for traffic he tensed, digging his toes into the grass before launching onto the black expanse.

He sprinted. The first few steps felt good, his feet barely touching the surface. The heat dispersed momentarily as his foot raised mid-stride, cooled with the passing air. By the time he reached the double white lines in the middle the heat had accumulated in the soles of his feet, exacerbated by the friction of running. The safety of the opposite gutter seemed unattainable. A few strides from sanctuary, he made a desperate leap for the grass. His toes clipped the gutter, scraping the skin, sending him sprawling.

"Water," he yelled.

A kid who lived opposite ran for the garden hose coiled like a snake in the sun and turned it on. There was a brief second of relief before the scalding water enflamed his aching feet. He yelled.

"Let it run cold," said Katie, pushing the stream away.

The cicadas intensified into white noise as Thomas watched the stream of water gush tantalisingly close to his aching feet.

"My feet are melting!"

The arc of water returned and drenched his feet, ran down his calves and down to his groin while the ground drank, unable to slake its thirst.

“Who’s gonna get my thongs from the other side?” he asked as the crowd dispersed.

Katie dropped them at his feet. “One step ahead of you.”

For the next two days the painful pressure of walking kept him indoors. The coolness of the kitchen linoleum was a respite but he preferred the bathroom tiles. With his back to the bath he moved his feet from tile to tile refreshing his aching soles. Katie sat cross-legged on the lid of the toilet and watched between sips of orange cordial and bites of watermelon.

§

Thomas counted the remaining seconds of summer by the incessant clacking of a thousand Green Grocers, Yellow Mondays and Black Princes while Katie went with her family to Queensland for the last two weeks of the holidays. He sat beneath the eucalypts or the liquid ambers and let time slip over him; he imagined each click of sound to be a grain of sand rattling against the hourglass.

“I’ll send you a postcard,” she said and Thomas stared at the picture perfect image of Noosa when it arrived, before turning it over. The stamp was skewed in the top right hand corner. Katie’s neatly formed cursive script filled the blank space.

*Having a great time.*

*Sunburn is now peeling and I saw a sea turtle when snorkelling.*

*See you at school.*

*Katie*

He pinned it to the corkboard over his desk, just above the pen tray where he kept his prized shells. First he put it picture side out, but he turned it over five minutes later to see Katie’s handwriting.

Picking up the plastic ice cream container of cicada shells, he went out the back, slipped into his thongs and headed towards the creek. Overhead, the click of a cicada turned into a shriek. A magpie landed on a branch, its prize plucked from the air and smashed it against the bough. The carcass of a Green Grocer dropped to the ground.

The wings, miniature cellophane stained glass windows, reflected the late afternoon sun. He remembered watching a pupa emerge from the shell, its wings wet, requiring the heat and warmth of the sun to give them strength. The remainder of the afternoon was spent squatting back on his heels under the eucalyptus in the backyard and watching the tiny black ants scour the carcass, moving inside and out, under and over.

The students swarmed around one another on the first day of Year Six, creating their own cacophony: talking over each other about movies they watched, places they went, who stacked it on their bike or skateboard, the worst sunburn and the space shuttle explosion.

Katie appeared in front of Thomas, her hair in a multitude of plaits beaded at each end. He stared at the remnants of sunburn peeling from her nose, the fresh pink skin pushing through the darker outer layers. She squeezed his hand and he felt something cool inside. In his hand was an empty pipi shell, the translucent pinks and greys beginning to fade.

“I couldn’t beat your watermelon seed spitting distance,” he said. “I tried every day you were away.”

She smiled.

Summer paused with the first chime of the school bell. Lines were arranged, desks assigned and blisters formed on heels while new shoes were broken in. In Mr Murdoch’s class, Thomas sat in the row behind Katie, three lines of desks back from the board.

The excitement of the new year faded with the waning of summer as blisters healed, exercise books became dog-eared, and the cicadas began fell silent, settling in to winter hibernation.

## §

On the cusp of a new summer Thomas wore his best jeans and new shirt, purchased by his mother especially for the Year 6 dance, rounded off with his favourite pair of worn out sneakers. A begrudgingly accepted compromise.

“You’ve put gel in your hair,” Katie said.

She tugged at the hem of a black cardigan worn over a green dress that danced around her knees when she moved.

“You look pretty in green,” said Thomas.

“Green is my favourite colour.”

“I know.”

“Please find your partners for the Pride of Erin,” announced Mr Murdoch behind the Mobydisc desk after muting a squeal of feedback.

Two circles formed: boys on the inside, girls on the outer. Thomas and Katie held hands in the correct position. Against the clamminess of his, Katie’s were cool and soft. He glanced at her

breasts removed from their winter shell, fuller and rounder than when he had touched them.

They danced their steps in time to the music as practiced and Katie's dress flared out as she spun to move onto the next boy. Thomas watched the green dress progress around the circle.

The song ended with a polite smattering of applause. The formalities over, pop songs bounced out of the speakers and girls walked like Egyptians as the boys congregated, then boys danced on the ceiling while the girls huddled in the corners.

Thomas never lost sight of the green dress.

## §

Summer started before the school term ended. The first slap of thongs on bare feet beneath the eucalyptus and red gums punctuated the buzz of cicadas in the trees above. Another dry docked flotilla beached on the metal stormwater marker; Achilles' beaked ships drawn up on the shores of Ilium. Beside it, lined up like an alien invasion fleet of starships, was row upon row of empty cicada shells.

Thomas and Katie stood side by side, their toes edged into the water, careful not to slip on the moss, a boat held by each.

"Look," said Katie, lifting up her t-shirt over her chest with her spare hand. "First real bra."

"I still wear Batman undies," said Thomas.

Katie stepped upstream, crouched and set her boat sailing. As it reached the end of the channel, Thomas stooped down, scooped it from the water and passed it back.

"What's your uniform like for high school?" he asked.

She crouched down again, ready to set her boat afloat.

"Gross. At Mount St Benedict's Girls' School I have to wear a white hat each day. And a blazer."

"Mum bought my new uniform for Turrumurra High next year. I have to wear a tie."

"What's it like?" she asked.

The boat sailed.

"The jumper's a bluey-green colour. Mum calls it teal blue."

The boat was scooped and returned.

“Anyone else going you know of? Anyone from Mrs Watson’s class?” he asked.

“No. Just me.”

The boat sailed.

It rushed past Thomas’s feet, caught the current, and sailed on. Thomas squatted down and launched his boat, forever to play catch-up.

§

Katie grabbed Thomas’s hand. “Graduation’s over. Come with me.”

“Where?” asked Thomas.

“Outside.”

“Why?”

“I have a present for you.”

They slipped though the milling parents and children, shined shoes and neat hair, threadbare uniforms holding out to the last moment. Thomas looked over his shoulder to the stage and the banner above the podium: “Congratulations Year 6. We’ll Miss You” and caught snippets of parents’ conversations discussing successes or disappointments.

He let go of Katie’s hand and paused in the stuffiness of the school hall, letting the din of voices and scraping chairs reverberate. Through the open doors at the rear of the hall he caught the faint click of the last cicadas of the evening as night fell. A hand slipped into his and pulled him away.

The cicadas’ buzz intensified as the hall’s murmurs receded.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

Katie led the way past darkened classrooms and stopped at the last in the row.

“It’s our room,” said Thomas. Moths battered into the fluorescent light above the door. The light left on in the storeroom illuminated the forest of chair legs placed on desks. Thomas looked to where he sat, where Katie sat, from a different angle.

Katie unzipped the pocket of her uniform and handed across a large matchbox. “I found this on the first day of summer and kept it for you.”

Thomas cupped the matchbox in his left hand and pushed the tray with his right forefinger. Inside was a perfect cicada shell. She reached over and carefully removed it, placing it on his shirt just above his chest.

“Bye, Tommy,” she said.

Leaning in, hands on his shoulders, she kissed him tenderly on the cheek. He felt the wetness of her lips and tackiness of lip-gloss, smelling faintly of strawberries. He felt the gentle pressure of her breast and heard the snap of the shell breaking.

And the cicadas fell silent.

*Adam Byatt is an English teacher and occasional drummer with an interest in literary pursuits, rhythmic permutations, theological amplifications and comedic outbursts. He sifts through the ennui of life and catalogues them as potential story ideas, which collect as a pad of sticky notes on the fridge door. He occasionally finds loose change while searching for the perfect pen. You can find him on Twitter [@revhappiness](#).*

# Splash

*by Les Wicks*

This cicada season,  
don't blink.

Yawning lawns think they're hay, all  
my daylight savings have been stolen  
by a fraudulent river.

Libraries close, vacate in vacation as  
small balls bounce on TV. My bicycle trammels  
the surquedry of fowl our whispers  
are ships scrambling onto rhythms of wind.

We sail towards failure  
where songs are condign.  
There's the belly laugh  
as certainty slips on that time-honoured banana.  
Comic is the last grace, the science of otiosity high  
distinction at the edge of our extinction.  
Why do I keep stuffing up?  
The last speciality, an incontinence of deed  
that's in our seed, the DNA.

Do Not Attribute  
music is in the skipped beats  
what's-his-name drops his fame  
the volume shrinks  
the less we think.

*Over thirty-five years Les Wicks has performed at festivals, schools, prison etc., and has been published in over 250 different magazines, anthologies and newspapers across eighteen countries in ten languages. He conducts workshops and runs Meuse Press which focuses on poetry outreach projects like poetry on buses and poetry published on the surface of a river. His eleventh book of poetry is Sea of Heartbeak (Unexpected Resilience) (Puncher & Wattmann, 2013).*

# Carnival

*by Beau Boudreaux*

Funk, heavy bass  
the Meters through speakers

hard back books on the shelf  
a pile in progress, pages turned

down, there's a Celtic mist  
and a harbinger, silver dollar

for these better days,  
love letters to Heather

carnival rolls below  
float procession, sack full of gold doubloons

pings the pavement, the flambeaux dip—  
flame warns the kids

while I'm holding the coiled braid of Rapunzel  
George Porter sings through floor length curtains.

*Beau Boudreaux teaches English in Continuing Studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. His first book collection of poetry, RUNNING RED, RUNNING REDDER, was published in the spring of 2012 by Cherry Grove Collections. He has published poetry in journals including Antioch Review and Cream City Review, also in anthologies along with The Southern Poetry Anthology.*

# Rain of Ashes

by *Rhys Timson*

It could not be seen, but it was there. Somewhere in the stratosphere, tiny particles of rock—thrust from the earth by an Icelandic volcano days before—had formed an invisible barrier against travel from one continent to the next. The Atlantic Ocean was itself again: vast, unknowable, untraversable. The Western European skies were clear of machines for the first time in a century.

The cloud had also turned the Newark Economy Airport Hotel into something like a prison, only—as Pete was sick of hearing Spencer say—with worse facilities.

“We won’t be here much longer,” Pete said, perched on the narrow windowsill, stroking several days’ worth of stubble and pulling his jeans up over his gut.

“So why couldn’t we have booked the Hilton?” Spencer, recumbent on the bed nearest the door, glowered at him from the shadows of his deep-set eyes.

“I can’t afford the Hilton,” Pete said. “I’ve spent all my money.”

“Or the Holiday Inn? Or the Econolodge?”

“I can’t afford it.” Pete looked out of the window. Across the New Jersey Turnpike, he could see the chain-link fence of Newark Airport and the tarmac moonscape stretching out towards the terminal. Every few minutes, a plane would taxi up to the runway and accelerate into flight, its chassis shuddering, its wing flaps extending, its landing gear tucking itself away as it gained the sky—but always turning and heading south, or north, or west. Newark was the end of the world, as far as travelling east went. That was another thing Spencer had said several times: Newark was the end of the world.

“I’m getting no sleep in these beds. Who are they made for exactly? They’re like, what, five and a half foot long and two foot across? I’m six foot four.”

“I know.”

“It’s all right for you and Gareth. You just drop right off. I’m a light sleeper.”

“I can’t afford anything else, OK? Go and stay in the Hilton if you want. It’s just cheaper if we share. It isn’t that bad.”

“And you snore. Both you of you snore like bison. Like a herd of bison. Like a herd of

wounded bison. On heat.”

“I get the picture.”

Spencer’s feet arced back and forth the way cats move their tails to show their displeasure. His arms were crossed and his lower lip jutted out from under his large, pale face. Suddenly, the chorus of Lenny Kravitz’s cover of *American Woman* kicked into the room.

“That’s Gareth’s phone,” he said.

“Yeah.” Spencer picked it up from the bedside table and peered at the screen. “What was wrong with Led Zeppelin’s version anyway?”

“Is it the airline?”

“No,” Spencer looked up, a lupine sneer splayed across his face. “It’s the wife.”

“Should we answer it?”

“Can’t she just leave him alone?” Spencer said. “I get it, they’re married, she just found out she’s pregnant. But this is probably our last ever boys’ holiday and she’s ruined it by calling him up every five minutes. Now she’s made the past couple of days even worse with this whole baby rubbish and Gareth’s talked about nothing else. It’s all baby this, baby that, oh Kate thought of a *lovely* name, oh Kate found some *perfect* baby clothes in M&S, oh she found a crib made out of Fairtrade recycled balsa wood. So what? It’s so boring, all this baby bollocks. I’m sick of hearing about it. I can’t imagine anything less interesting in life than raising a mewling, squealing infant. So, why don’t I tell her that?”

Pete lunged forward and tried to snatch the phone away, but Spencer was too quick. He’d already answered.

“*Hello* Kate,” Spencer said, rolling his eyes.

Pete exhaled and looked away, at another plane lifting off into the grey-gauze sky. There never was any telling Spencer what to do—he’d given up trying. He was too tired. Spencer would say what he would say. All Pete could think about was how good it would be to get home, how relaxing to be alone for a while. They’d travelled all the way from Vegas to the east coast in a month and barely spent a single hour apart. The cracks were not just beginning to show, the whole edifice was coming down on their heads.

“No, it’s Spencer—Gareth’s friend Spencer,” he heard his travelling companion say, and he wondered, as he watched the cruciform shape of a Boeing disappear behind a blanket of cloud, at

the way Spencer's tone changed, from the brash confidence of a moment earlier to a kind of stage whisper, an ominous hush.

He turned back to his friend. Spencer was nodding, eyes at the floor, his spare hand against the side of his face.

"I'm very sorry," Spencer said. "Of course, yes. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. If there's anything..."

Spencer took the phone away from his ear and held it out in front of him at arm's reach, looking as if he had forgotten what it was for.

"Something wrong?" Pete said.

Spencer was paler than usual, almost translucent. He drew a lungful of air. "Fuck," he said, his eyelids sliding down and his shoulders dropping.

"*What?*"

"That was Kate's mum."

"And?"

"She wanted to talk to Gareth."

"Uh-huh."

"Kate's dead."

They stood motionless—a tableau of shock—wondering what to do next. Pete had known Kate for four years, almost as long as Gareth had. They'd talked about moving to the same area of London so their kids, when they had them, could grow up together.

"What about the baby?" Pete said.

"*What* baby?" Spencer snapped. "There is no baby, Pete. It's two months old."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. They don't know. Some kind of haemorrhage. I don't know."

Pete focused on dust motes swirling in the low afternoon light, hearing only the sudden pounding of his heart.

“I don’t know what to say,” Spencer whispered.

“What can we say?”

Pete thought back to the last time he’d seen Kate, standing in the doorway of the house she shared with Gareth. He remembered her dark hair blowing over her face and her right hand on her stomach—perhaps suspecting even then the new life growing within her—as Gareth clicked his seat belt home and waved back just before Pete drove them both away, to Heathrow. He remembered Gareth turning his head all the way around as they moved off, trying to catch one last glimpse of his wife, complaining he had woken up late and had been so rushed he had not had a chance to say goodbye properly.

“Why did this have to happen?” Spencer said, pulling Pete back to the present. Spencer ran his hand over his slicked-back hair, then pushed his knuckles against his lips and raised Gareth’s phone again.

“What are you doing?” Pete said.

“I’m turning his phone off,” Spencer said, taking his hand away from his mouth and holding it in the air like a conductor about to signal the end of a performance.

“Why?”

“We’re not letting him get any more calls.”

“What do you mean?” Pete took a step toward Spencer, his hands out to pull Gareth’s phone away from him, but as he did so the door to the room swung open and their missing companion stepped in, his sunburned face redder than usual and his gelled-up quiff looping over on itself. He was carrying a bottle of champagne. By the time Pete had turned back to Spencer, his friend had pocketed the phone.

“You have no idea how hard it is to get an actual bottle of champagne around here,” Gareth said, walking over to the window. He jabbed his finger at the glass, towards the cars speeding along the turnpike. “See that thing—here’s a lesson for you, never try and cross one of those on foot. Only an idiot would do something like that.”

He turned back to his friends. “Are you guys OK? You look terrified. What’s up?”

He looked down at the champagne and, without waiting for a reply, added: “You know what I need? Ice. And that’s one thing this hotel does have. Unlike champagne, which I had to go to the sodding Hilton for and bribe the concierge because they don’t have an off-licence, or something.

Anyway, back in a sec.”

He threw the champagne down on the bed nearest the window and walked out again, whistling as the door slammed behind him.

“Shit.” Pete sat on the end of the middle bed, reaching behind himself for it and lowering his body down like an old man would. “How do we tell him?”

Spencer looked up at the grey, popcorn tile ceiling and whispered: “We don’t tell him.”

“How can we *not* tell him?”

“We just don’t. We lose the phone.”

“We can’t just *not* tell him. He’s bought a bottle of champagne to celebrate his future fatherhood.”

“I don’t think he paid much for it. Did you see the label? That wasn’t a vintage year.”

“Are you mad? We have to tell him. Don’t you care? Give me the phone”

“I’m not saying we don’t tell him.” Spencer joined his hands behind his back and paced over to the window. “I’m saying we don’t tell him *now*. We’ve no idea when the flight is going to be back on. We could be stuck here for another day from what the airline said. What good is it going to do him to know about this when he’s three and a half thousand miles away? We’ll tell him when we land at Heathrow.”

“No, we can’t do this,” Pete said. “We have to tell him. You took the call—you tell him.”

“*Bullshit*,” said Spencer. “You want to tell him so much, you do it.”

“He has a right to know.”

“I’m trying to protect him.”

“You’re protecting yourself.”

“If it was you, would you want to know?”

The door opened again, but slower this time. Gareth had turned the handle with his elbow and he was balancing several plastic tubs full of ice in his arms. “I’m not quite sure how we’re going to pack this around the champagne guys. Probably should’ve thought of that. Anyway, I have ice, and it’s bloody freezing. No, don’t both rush to help me at once.”

Pete hurried over and took three of the six containers out of Gareth's arms. They placed the ice down on the table next to the television.

"Well," Gareth said, rubbing his hands together. "Let's get this party started," he turned to his friends, both of whom had their hands in their pockets and neither of whom were meeting his gaze. "Problem?"

Pete looked at Spencer. He saw his friend's large Adam's apple bobbing up and down and his lips parting slightly. *Say it, he thought, tell him,* but Spencer kept his head down, his blue eyes locked on the balding carpet. Pete turned to Gareth, took a deep breath, and shook his head. He couldn't do it. The words wouldn't come.

"We just want to get home, that's all," he said.

"I have good news on that," Gareth said, picking up the champagne and working off the metal cage covering the cork. "Richard Branson's done a test flight or something, zany billionaire that he is, and all's good. Looks like flights might start going out again tomorrow, or so the TV said."

He began to work the cork out of the top of the bottle, worrying it to the left and then to the right, his facial features pulling together in concentration. When he had the cork at just the point before its motion was no longer under his control, he added: "So, here's to me being a father, and us getting the fuck out of here." The cork popped, bursting upward like a bullet, and batted one of the ceiling tiles temporarily out of place before falling back to the ground. Meanwhile, a column of champagne splashed onto the middle bed in one short, frothy spurt. "Shit," he said. "We haven't got any glasses."

## §

It was only when the airline called later that evening to tell them they were booked on a flight out in the morning that Gareth noticed the disappearance of his phone. They ransacked the room, turning over the beds, going through every bag they had, even retracing Gareth's route across the turnpike in a desperate bid to find an item that, Pete and Spencer knew, had never been lost. Pete marvelled at Spencer's equanimity—his ability to act dumb, to play along, all the while knowing the device in question was sitting in his inside coat pocket. They had given up at midnight and arrived at the airport at five. They queued for over an hour at check-in and another hour at security before they reached the gate. There, their shoe laces retied and belts refastened, they slumped into the row of black vacuum-moulded plastic chairs in front of the wall of windows looking out onto the tarmac.

Before the panic over his mobile, Gareth had drunk almost all the champagne himself and taken care of all the miniatures in the mini-bar too, glugging the tiny Jack Daniel's in one go and

following it up with the vodka and the gin. Pete had only finished his drink out of politeness, not being in the mood, yet he hadn't slept for more than a few minutes and now he had a headache and felt on the edge of vomiting. Spencer was unconscious at the end of the row, his head lolled to the right and a small puddle of drool forming on his shoulder. Gareth was to Pete's left, tapping his feet on the floor and jerking his head around. Pete wanted to say something, but it was already too late.

"I don't know about you. But I cannot *wait* to get home," Gareth said. "I mean, I love you guys—of course I do—but right now, after a month of being on the road with you, I'm sick of the sight of you."

"Yeah," Pete said. "Me too."

"I mean seriously," Gareth pulled his head back towards his friend, his brown eyes wide and a manic grin on his face. "We've been friends for, what, a decade? That's long enough. Quit while we're ahead, I say."

Pete swallowed hard, a burning sensation clawing its way up his throat. He could not join in the joviality. "Whatever you say."

"I mean, I've seen enough of both of you to last me a lifetime, and him," he pointed at Spencer, who was emitting a quiet whistling sound from his nose. "Christ, I never want to hear from him again."

Pete turned to look at their other companion. He could not understand how he could sleep, given what they knew. "Agreed."

"I'm a family man now, I've got responsibilities. I can't go loafing around with you layabouts any more. It's about time you both got your lives in order. Like me."

"I promise I'll try and do better," Pete said.

"Damn right you will. You know what you should have done, you should have married Emma. You could have had a kid by now, maybe two. What were you thinking leaving her for that little intern? I told you she wouldn't stick around but oh no, you didn't listen."

"Enough," Pete said, turning to his friend. Gareth had had an entirely new energy about him since his wife had told him she was pregnant—as if a new person had been growing inside him too.

"And that prick," he pointed at Spencer. "Someone needs to tell him to propose to Jane already. What the hell is he waiting for? Shall I tell him?" Gareth reached over and jabbed at Spencer with his index finger, poking him in the arm, the shoulder, then the stomach. Spencer

came to slowly, batting his friend away with his hand, until he realised Gareth wasn't going to desist.

“What? I was sleeping.”

“*Marry Jane.*”

“Alright. Just let me sleep. I've got a lot to catch up on seeing as how you two kept me awake for most of the past month.”

“Yeah, just put a ring on it, OK? As soon as you get home.” Gareth turned back to Pete. “Crazy. I never thought I'd be the one putting your lives in order.”

“Yeah,” Pete stood up. Dark circles of sweat were spreading at the armpits of his linen shirt.

“But I can't believe I lost my phone. What if Kate's calling me? I need to tell her I'm on my way. Why can't I remember my sodding landline number?”

“You'll be home in a few hours,” Pete said. He was looking at his reflection in the polished floor and could just about make out the shadowy outline of his head in the tiles, the barest semblance of his features.

“What if something happens on the flight?” Gareth said. “What if the plane goes down? This could be my last chance to speak to her.”

“It'll be OK.”

“More chance of dying straining on the shitter, is that what you're saying? Maybe so, but I worry. I've got to be there for her. I don't want to let her down. I can't take risks any more.”

Pete turned to look at Spencer, envious of his apparently easy slumber, angry at his friend's intransigence and even angrier at his own cowardice. “Don't worry,” he said. “We're here for you.”

“You?” Gareth laughed. “I've just spent all of the past month with you. My wife is two months pregnant. I know we planned this trip for years but, really, I've got a family now. There'll be no more of this kind of thing.”

He pushed himself to his feet, rocking the row of plastic seating as he did so.

“Can I borrow your phone? I really should text Kate. Let her know my flight number at least.”

Outside, another jet connected with the ground, its body shaking and its wheels grinding on the

tarmac as the pilot applied the brakes. Inside the terminal, Pete felt himself plummeting, his insides dropping onto the floor. It was one thing not to tell his friend the truth, it was another to lie. He could not give Gareth his phone and let him compose a love message to his dead wife, have it be picked up by his dead wife's mother, have his whole family frantically calling that phone and the one Spencer had switched off and stashed in his hand luggage to tell him his wife and child had died the day before.

“Come on man, I'm not going to *call* her. It won't cost you anything.”

Pete pulled his phone out of his pocket and placed it in Gareth's outstretched palm, his hand shaking as his fingers released their grip.

“Don't look so happy about it,” Gareth said, and he began scrolling through the list of names in Pete's address book.

A moment later, he cursed under his breath and gave the phone back. “Why don't you have Kate's number?”

Pete shrugged, but he could not disguise his relief. He had to turn away, pretend he was looking up a nearby screen for information about the flight.

“Gate's been announced,” he said. “We should go.”

## §

The flight to Heathrow would take seven hours, plenty of time to think about what he had and hadn't done—seven hours to go some way towards putting it right. After take-off, Pete switched on his TV screen and began watching the tiny white plane icon moving, like the hour hand on a clock, across the map of the Atlantic Ocean. He was in the middle seat, with Gareth to his left and a vacant space to his right. Spencer had managed to finagle the exit row.

“You're not watching a film?” Gareth said. “I'm about to start on *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skulls*. They say it's shit, but...”

“You like shit films.”

“Exactly. I like shit films. I'm not ashamed of it. I think the *The Godfather Part III* is the best of the lot, I think *Jaws: The Revenge* was the pinnacle of the series. That's me, I have shit taste in films, but...” he leaned across the arm rest towards Pete's face, “I also have a beautiful, pregnant wife. So, actually, your continued mockery of my taste in film is meaningless now. And you know what? My kid's going to grow up with shit taste in film too, it's hereditary I hear. And I'm the one passing on my genes, not you, not Spencer with his Herzog this and Bergman that. Tragic, but

true.

“You’re rambling.”

Gareth nodded, his smile so wide Pete could see his eye teeth. Seven hours of this, Pete thought, how do I endure seven hours of this? The man in front of him had reclined his seat as soon as the plane was airborne, and there was little room for Pete’s legs to fit into the space. The white noise background hum of the aircraft, usually something that lulled him to sleep, seemed an unbearable monotone, a static pounding on his ears that would not give up.

“Do you mind if I shift to the aisle seat?” Pete said.

“No, of course not. I don’t want to talk to you anyway. I’ve literally *nothing* left to say to you. Go on,” Gareth shooed him away and Pete half-stood and slid over, grinding his knees against the seat in front as he squeezed through the tiny space.

As soon as he sat down, he heard a murmur to his left. Looking round, he saw a woman handing a young baby to the man sitting in the seat across the aisle from Gareth. The kid was tiny, in a pink fluffy romper suit and with wispy blonde hair pushing out above its head at crazy angles. Pete looked at Gareth, and he could see his friend’s eyes fixed on the little thing. Then he saw him lean over and tap the man on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, I hope you don’t mind me asking, how old is your little one?”

Pete couldn’t hear the response above the engine noise, but he could see the man smiling, and the child smiling, and Gareth smiling back, their radiant glows backlit by the rising sun as the plane banked to the right.

“She’s beautiful,” Gareth said. “Your first?”

The man nodded. He must have been about Gareth’s age. “I’m going to be a father too,” Gareth added. “It’s the most amazing feeling.”

Pete had to look away, the recycled air all of a sudden toxic to his lungs. He had the sensation of almost crying, but no matter how much he blinked, no moisture slickened his dry eyeballs. He turned back around and saw Gareth crouching in the aisle, pulling funny faces at the child, his big red face set in a look of unrestrained joy.

It was too much. He stood up and marched down the other aisle to the exit row, to Spencer reclining in comfort, his long legs stretched out as far as they would go, a black velvet sleep mask over his face. Pete pulled the mask up and Spencer jolted into life as if he’d been struck by lightning.

“What the hell are you doing?” Spencer said.

Pete crouched down beside him. “We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“About what horrible people we are. About what idiots we are. I can’t believe what you’ve made me do.”

“Made you do? I didn’t make you do anything.”

“Our best friend is back there, virtually crying, thinking about how happy he’s going to be when he gets home to his pregnant wife, and we know she’s dead. And we’re not telling him.”

“I say again, what good would it have done?”

“It’s all right for you sitting here, all relaxed. You don’t have to sit next to him, you don’t have to listen to him planning what school his child’s going to, or how great it will be to buy the kid all those toys he wanted when he was small.”

“You know I always ask for the exit row. I can’t fit in regular seats. Do you know what happens to people who get deep vein thrombosis?”

“I don’t care.”

“You can die, or you can lose your legs. Do you want me to lose my legs?”

“I want you to tell Gareth the truth.”

“I will... as soon as we get to Heathrow.”

“*Now.*”

“At the start of a trans-Atlantic flight? Are you mad?”

“This whole thing’s mad. We’re mad.”

Spencer closed his eyes. “OK. You remember when my dad died?”

Pete shook his head, failing to see the relevance.

“I was in Auckland. A whole day’s flight away. My mum told me the news over a crackly telephone line where every fifth word went missing. I was coming home in two days’ time

anyway. I just thought, why couldn't she wait? He'd still be dead in two days, he'd be no deader. What good did it do to me to know when I was so far away? I had the most hellish twenty-four hours of my life, just getting home, breaking down every ten minutes, at the check-in desk, on the flight to Singapore, as I changed flights, on the next flight. Being trapped on a plane for so long with that kind of knowledge. I wanted to spare him that."

Pete stood up. The blood had pooled in his calves and his knees screamed in protest. "No. It's not right. It's not our choice to make. I have to tell him. I have to do it now."

Without another word from Spencer, Pete turned round and headed back down the aisle, clarity of purpose lifting tiredness from him like a veil. The plane noise dropped to silence, the dryness of his mouth and eyes was no longer important. He passed row after row of strangers until he reached the rear of the plane and there, back in his seat, was Gareth, one of his oldest friends, one of his best friends, wiping his eyes and staring at a photograph of his beautiful—dead—wife in a blue polka-dot dress.

Gareth looked up. "Sorry man, getting a bit emotional. Apologies for being such a dick."

Pete took a deep breath as he stood over his friend, gripping the seat in front of his so hard its occupant turned around to look at him with a knitted brow.

"Something the matter?" Gareth asked.

Pete exhaled and closed his mouth. Out of the window, he could see the plane's wing cutting through a wispy cumulonimbus. He imagined the dust and ash from the Icelandic volcano floating around within it, the tiny pieces of rock thrust up from the centre of the planet that had hung over the earth for the past few weeks like a patina of relics, and he thought about it all falling to the ground, about the ashes that would rain on everyone's heads. He wondered if anyone would even notice when it all came down.

He lowered himself back into his seat. Then he buckled himself in, lengthening the belt a little in acceptance of his spreading middle, and told Gareth there was nothing wrong, deciding that, for just a little while longer, he would let his friend be happy. For just a few more hours, until the plane touched down in England, until they connected once again with the earth, he would shield Gareth from death, he would let him be a father, he would let him have a wife.

*Rhys Timson has previously had stories published in 3:AM Magazine, Every Day Fiction, Literary Brushstrokes, and the first issue of Tincture Journal. He is slowly building some kind of a website at [www.rhystimson.com](http://www.rhystimson.com) as he hears it's the thing to do.*

# It's a Marilyn Free-For-All

by *John Grey*

No one will leave you alone.  
Not even in death.  
Everyone wants a thread of your platinum hair,  
a chunk of your breast,  
a flake of skin from your tight waist.  
They can't get enough of your invention.  
They're constantly digging in the graveyard.  
Big blades, many fans—  
your coffin doesn't stand a chance.

Everyone who knew you is dead.  
They're not the ones  
breaking down your rosewood door.  
It's some kid from a small town in Wisconsin.  
It's a gay guy from New York City  
aching for more icons.  
It's a young woman in Los Angeles  
whose own look doesn't rate a glance.  
Or a student with a camera.  
Or a writer with six magazine pages to fill.  
You're more popular on eBay than Jesus Christ.  
No wonder that wind won't stop  
blowing up your skirt.

That's the problem with being a goddess.  
Life as a corpse is never peace enough.  
You've been disinterred so many times,  
people mistake the dead you for the real you.  
Your public can only celebrate the body.  
It's dust by this.  
I'd give anything to have it in an urn.

*John Grey is an Australian poet, resident in the US. Recently published in The Lyric, Vallum, and the science fiction anthology The Kennedy Curse, with work upcoming in Bryant Literary Magazine, Natural Bridge, Southern California Review, and the Pedestal.*

# The Man Who Killed James Dean

by Sam Ferree

Harvey and the tan man checked in to the motel at the same time. The man was in his late fifties, balding, rail-thin, and his skin was charred dark brown. Harvey held the door for him. The man walked at a courteous distance behind Harvey up to the front desk.

The morning light gave the reception area a glassy, mirage quality. The tile floor reflected like a mirror so that Harvey was nearly blind. He walked slowly up to the desk, adapting to being on his feet instead of careening seventy miles an hour down the road. Nerves eased, knots unwound. He was still hung-over and shaky, and he hoped that the Listerine was powerful enough to mask his un-showered beer and sweat body. There were a few chairs, a TV. A middle-aged couple sat in the chairs smoking, hunched over a map and debating where to eat.

“Are you all right?” the receptionist asked Harvey. She looked a little younger than him, in her late teens, he guessed, sunburnt and tall. There was a radio sitting next to her on which sat a copy of *Nevermind*. “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was ending.

“I’ve been driving all night,” Harvey admitted. “Thought I could make it to San Francisco today, but I can’t do it.”

“Yeah, you look it,” the receptionist said. “Need a room?”

“Yes.”

She asked questions and he answered mechanically. He was from Michigan. He needed a room. Non-smoking. He wanted a wake-up call at 6 pm.

“Planning on driving through the night?” the receptionist asked. She looked at him sceptically.

“I drive better at night,” he said. He preferred to drive after dark, actually, since he could barely see anything in the brutal sunlight. Anyway, it was more fun imagining being alone on the road where every city and town he passed was a discovery in the middle of nothing as opposed to nowhere.

The receptionist shrugged. The key was a dull beat-up silver. For a moment everything was blinding sun and grunge guitar and Harvey stood dazzled and sick until the receptionist said, helpfully, “You can go.”

At the door Harvey heard the receptionist say, “I know you.” He turned and saw she was

speaking to the man.

“No,” said the man. “I get that a lot.”

Harvey stood for a moment just outside. The air was hot and dry. The desert looked like it stretched into infinity. Harvey had never been this far west and he knew that if he had driven through the night he probably would have fallen asleep at the wheel. He’d thought about it more than once, nodding off to the blaring radio. Waking up upside down, far from the road in the heat and sunlight and desert earth; it probably would not have killed him. There was nothing to run into. It didn’t seem like a good reason to delay his trip, even though he was in no hurry to end a four day journey that had turned into three weeks. Eventually, he decided alleviating his exhaustion was a good enough reason to stop.

The room was three doors down from the office. Time, patience and persistence got the door open. The room was warmer than the office, but not by much. Harvey turned the air-conditioning down, took a sip of tequila from a bottle he had in his backpack, stripped, and crawled in between sheets stiff as plastic tarp.

Seven hours later he woke up shivering on top of the covers. The disorientation lasted a moment and gave way to nausea, then hunger. He pulled on his clothes and looked around the room. A bed, a desk, two chairs, a TV, dark green carpet. Every motel room looked the same to him and so reminded him of the first hotel room he’d seen when he was as kid. His parents took him to the Smokey Mountains on a camping trip during which he nearly drowned twice and almost froze to death when he sleepwalked through the autumn night. “I thought you were going to die all the time,” his mother told him when he last went to visit her. “You played with things you weren’t supposed to. You put things in your mouth. You were always into everything.”

Harvey’s parents often told him he was going to die when he was growing up. At first he thought that death was something that was only going to happen to him in particular. Then he learned it was universal.

It was still an hour before the wake-up call, but he wasn’t tired. He decided to go to the desk and tell them he was awake. The door wasn’t locked but nothing was gone. He never remembered to lock the door. Sometimes he’d sleepwalk for blocks. This didn’t bother him. He hated waking up and sometimes the only good thing about the process was that he’d wake up and not know where he was. He decided it was an adventurous way to start the day.

The sunlight had not changed in intensity, just direction. Harvey felt like a roast. It seemed peculiar that anyone would feel compelled to stop here, let alone live here. Maybe they were just too tired to go on, Harvey thought. The only logical explanation.

The same receptionist sat behind the desk. She was slouched over, still listening to *Nevermind*. Somehow he'd walked in at the exact same moment in "Smells Like Teen Spirit." If the middle-aged couple and the tan man had still been there he would have sworn that his sleeping hadn't happened and the clock was wrong. But the receptionist looked up. She looked at her watch and then at him.

"You're an hour early," she said.

"Yeah," Harvey said.

"Do you still need coffee?"

"I always need coffee."

She smiled. She wore dusty khakis and a blood-red tank top that made her sunburn look milder. She wore thick, black, Buddy Holly glasses. She was pretty, Harvey thought, in a musician sort of way. He'd known too many musicians.

"I'm making some coffee in the back. One of the other guys who works here is a snob and so it's actually pretty good. If you want, it's free," she said. "My replacement gets here in five minutes."

"Sure."

Her replacement was a middle-aged woman who nodded to her and then took her seat unceremoniously. The first receptionist took her CD. The replacement switched it with *The White Album*. As soon as this ritual was complete, she took out a yellowed paperback of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and ignored them.

The receptionist retreated into a backroom. He waited for what seemed an unusually long time. It might have been the music; the Beatles clanging through "Back in the USSR" felt depressing and he thought he could hear an echo. By the time the receptionist returned carrying two nondescript, heavy ceramic mugs, he was doing his best to hide his shivering.

"Let's go outside," the receptionist said.

The sun was uncomfortable as they walked, but Harvey wondered how much the burns would hurt later. "Come on," said the receptionist, nodding. "There's a little bench and canopy thing over there. Sorry, did you want cream or sugar?"

"No," Harvey said and sipped the light brew. It was acidic, fruity, like cranberries almost. He hated coffee without sugar or milk, but the receptionist was drinking it black.

They walked around the length of the motel. It was much smaller than Harvey had thought. A few doors down from his the cinderblock wall terminated in a straight shot to where the ground became the horizon. The motel sat at the edge of town. To their left were a few more buildings that thickened into a city and the right was asphalt, sand, and dirt.

A few feet behind the building stood four concrete and wood benches beneath a sheet metal roof. They sat down. They both were already sweating and Harvey watched the beads gathering at her collar bone and sternum. She looked out across the desert. There was no wind. Just heat and silence. Harvey wondered if the receptionist had forgotten he was there.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“We’re from Texas. All over Texas,” the receptionist said. She looked at him and shrugged. “My dad’s a minister and doesn’t have a congregation so they keep sending him wherever they need a pastor. He’s getting pissed that no one wants him to stay.”

“I haven’t been to church in years,” Harvey said.

“What brings you out this way, anyway, Michigan?”

“My name’s Harvey,” Harvey said. “I’m just meandering my way through to San Fran. Yesterday I was at the Grand Canyon. It’s big. I’ve seen so many pictures of it and heard so many people talk about it, but nothing prepares you for how big it is. At the edge, you feel like you don’t exist.”

“It’s big,” she agreed. “I hiked down with my mom and dad once. Every time you think you’ve reached the bottom, there’s another ledge. My dad turned that into a metaphor, too. That’s what God is like, that tremendous, behemoth feeling around you, he said. It creeps me out.”

They sipped their coffee. It was growing cooler, which felt odd in the stark desert heat. The cranberry sting grew more acute and Harvey wasn’t sure he could finish it.

He had hiked down the Canyon too. It was exactly how she had described it, an entire day spent descending, one sheer drop after the next until suddenly, disappointingly, he’d found the bottom. There were campers down there. He pitched his tent next to a Swede who said she was going up the Bright Angel pass. It was longer, she said. The Swede was in her late twenties and doing a cross-country journey across the States, visiting distant relatives, jumping from one national park to the next.

“You’re hiking alone?” she had asked. She had bright red hair. “It’s dangerous to do that. Unless you’re a ranger.”

“Aren’t you alone?” Harvey said.

She waved vaguely. “I’m traveling with a group. They’re staying at the Phantom Ranch, but I wanted to camp.”

“It’s not so bad, hiking alone. It feels like a Western.”

“You’re an American man,” she said in a thick imitation of an American accent. She wore a Mickey Mouse tank top. “Do you burn?”

Without waiting for his reply she brought out a glass pipe and a bag of marijuana from an inner pocket of her backpack. There were other campers nearby, but far enough away that they could pretend to ignore Harvey and the Swede. No one looked. She passed the pipe to Harvey and relaxation rinsed through his body. It was cloudy and so there were no stars, which they agreed was disappointing.

“No, seriously,” said the Swede. “You shouldn’t walk alone. Didn’t you hear about the two guys last week?”

“What about the two guys?” Harvey asked.

“They were wandering around in some park in New Mexico,” she said. “They got lost and ended up dying of dehydration a couple miles from the interstate.”

“So, it doesn’t help to be with someone, does it?” Harvey said. “Sounds like a very intrepid way to die.”

“How American,” she said.

“Better than dying in some hospital,” Harvey said. “That’s what most people do these days.”

“You’re trying not to be most people, aren’t you?” said the Swede.

They didn’t talk much longer. She invited him into her tent. As they crawled in together, he thought about how deep he was beneath the ledge in a canyon carved out by a river and that he was living a movie. The next morning he went out of his way to call “Hello” to all the surrounding campers packing up their gear. He knew they had been loud because he hadn’t heard anyone talk throughout the night. The other campers resolutely would not look at him.

“What’s in San Francisco?” asked the receptionist now beside him in another desert.

“A cousin,” he said. “She’s an artist. She said I could crash with her for a while if I ever

needed to and I decided to take her up on the offer.”

“Why do you need to?”

Harvey shrugged. The setting sunlight reached beneath the roof and searing heat crept up his leg as he tried to formulate an answer. He was not good with this question.

“I got bored,” Harvey said. “I lived in Michigan for a year, Baltimore before that, Maine before that, Toronto, Boulder, Seattle. Most of the family is in Northern California. My family moved a lot when I was a kid so I guess I got the habit.”

“What was Michigan?” the receptionist asked. “I don’t know anything about Michigan except that there’s a lot of water there.”

“There is,” he said. “There’s a parking lot in Michigan where I worked. I loved that job and got paid too much for a graveyard shift. But I couldn’t stay. I was just a year into a degree. My parents even threatened to disown me. I think they’re joking, but we haven’t talked lately.”

“We’re both travellers,” said the receptionist. Her lips stretched into a grin as if this were terribly funny.

“Yeah,” he said. The cranberry taste lingered. “It’s weird. Being on the road. I’ve been driving for three weeks, but I feel like I haven’t been doing anything but driving for years. You forget, you know, that you’re going somewhere, that there’s even somewhere to go, that there’s somewhere you are coming from.”

She nodded. “I hate it. Being surrounded by nothing. Following my dad’s goddamn flock.”

“Why don’t you go your own way?” he asked.

“I do,” she said, emphatically. “Frequently. But my dad’s like a fucking bounty hunter. He always finds me and then guilt trips me into coming back. I hate that I love them. But, in a few weeks, I’m going to college and then I’ll have a reason to get away.”

Harvey asked reflexively, “What are you going to study?”

“I don’t know. Music? I’m in a band. They tell me we’re terrible.”

She ran her fingers around the edge of her cup, dipped one tip in and withdrew. She looked for a moment at the liquid on her finger. “Hot,” she muttered.

He thought about what she said about the Grand Canyon. Creepy. Not the word he would have used. He said, “So, when did you lose your faith?”

“When did I say that?” she asked and looked at him. Mild alarm. The expression softened and she shrugged. “I never had it. No. I guess it was... I just realised that God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, all that shit couldn’t be as good as I thought it was.”

“Isn’t God supposed to be perfect?”

“Exactly. Well, I mean, sort of. I have a pretty powerful imagination. When I was little, like five, I would freak myself out by trying to think about infinity. I tried to think about how old time was and how big the universe is. It made me really depressed because I realised how little I was. That’s the kind of person I am. I’ve always thought about infinity. But I got older and started thinking...” she frowned. She sipped her coffee and continued. “What is God like? Infinity, but good, thinking all the things that my dad always said God was. And sometime, I guess in middle school, I realised that nothing could be that big, that good. It just wasn’t possible. I really liked the idea of God and I still do. I just don’t think He’s out there.

“What about you, Harvey?” she asked, almost on top of her last thought. Like she’d already forgotten it. “When did you lose your faith?”

Harvey shrugged. “I didn’t. I just never needed God.”

“That’s such a guy thing to say,” she said and grinned.

“What do you mean, ‘That’s such a guy thing to say?’”

“All macho and stoic. You’re trying to seduce me, aren’t you?” she said. She looked at him over her glasses, smiling. “Let’s get our terms right.”

He smiled. “I’ve got to go to California tonight.”

She shook her head and smirked. “You know what they say about pastors’ daughters, right?”

This was a trap. He spoke carefully, “No. What do they say?”

“No idea.” She swatted her hand through the air. “But you wouldn’t believe some of the shit people say when I ask them that question.”

She looked at her watch. “I’ve got a concert in four hours. I have to go home and eat and pray. Acting, you know. You’re staying to see the concert.”

“You said you were terrible.”

She sighed. “No, I said *they* say it’s terrible. You know, *them*. They say everything’s terrible.”

Harvey chuckled. A four day journey that became three weeks could drag on a little longer. “Where’s the concert?”

“In room 14.” She smirked.

“Seriously?”

“There are, like, four people in the motel right now. Why the hell not?”

“Why not,” he agreed.

The receptionist grinned. “Easy friend.”

“I’m the easy friend?” he said, feeling mildly offended.

“Apparently we both are,” she said. She stood and threw the remaining coffee onto the parched soil. Without saying another word or looking back, she walked away.

By that time, he was fully bathed in the dusk light. The heat seized him. The sunburn began to throb with pain as twilight cooled the air. He looked out across the burnt, desert landscape. Here, it was easy to forget that somewhere, two thousand miles away, there were so many trees, forests, hills, and deep, cold, merciless water.

He didn’t like his waiting options. Either freeze in the room or feel his skin char in the sun. He walked around the building to the lee side in search of shade and found an empty concrete pool. It looked as if it had been dry for ages, but there was no debris or trash at the bottom. A handful of reclining chairs sat around the perimeter of the pool. There was no one there besides the tan man from the reception desk, lounging beneath the awning, reading a book and smoking a cigarette.

Ignoring the man, Harvey walked up and stood at the edge of the deep end. It did not seem a great height. Harvey could swim, but he still hated deep ends. It was a phobia. He had nearly drowned so often as a child that he was surprised he could stand to be around bodies of water at all. But the pool was dry. The drop could kill him more easily than the water if it had been full.

“You’re cursed,” his father told him once. “I’ve pulled you out of lakes, rivers, pools, anything deep enough to die in. One day, I thought, this kid will drown in the bath tub.” That’s why his parents forced him to attend swimming lessons. They were afraid, no, certain that he’d drown.

“Do you miss the lakes?”

It was the tan man. Harvey turned to see that he’d put aside his book. He was smoking and

watching Harvey.

“What?” Harvey asked.

“Michigan. You’ve got a lot of water there. Pools are the most water you’ll see until you get to the ocean.”

“How did you know I’m from Michigan?”

“I checked in right after you, Harvey.”

Harvey wished he had paid more attention when the man checked in. That this stranger had overheard his personal information wasn’t in itself bad, it was that he hadn’t forgotten it. Memory like that wasn’t trustworthy. Villains knew things like that. Like that Clarice had daddy issues.

“I’m sorry,” Harvey said. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Don. Donald Turnupseed.”

The name sounded familiar. “Do I know you?”

“No,” the man said.

The physical distance between them was ridiculous. They were practically shouting at each other across the still-hot concrete and empty patio furniture. The man’s voice was soft. Dead hot air didn’t carry it at all. Harvey didn’t want to be the one to close the distance, though.

“I thought you were leaving soon?” the man said.

Harvey bit his lip. The man’s knowledge was unnerving mostly in that none of it was really a secret. “I’m staying a little longer.”

“I see. Felt like a swim?”

“No. I hate pools.”

“So do I.”

“Then why are you here?”

The man, Don, gestured at the building. “It’s shady here and I wanted to read. It was a long bus ride.”

“Bus?”

“Bus.”

“From where?”

“New York. The only place it’s okay not to drive.”

Harvey was only able to make out the last word of the exchange by the way the tan man’s lips moved. *Drive*, he thought. He had crossed the distance from one end of the pool to the other so that he stood a few feet away from the man and closer to the exit in the chain link fence. Even so close, Don’s voice was a quiet rasp.

“I think I’d die if I weren’t able to drive,” Harvey said.

“So did I,” the man let his cigarette fall. He crushed it and lit another. “I thought, and still think, about all the things that could kill me, but don’t. The bus could’ve broken down in the middle of the desert and I could’ve dehydrated. I could get cancer. It seems weird, doesn’t it? All the things that could kill, but don’t? They always kill somebody else.”

“I guess so,” Harvey said and looked at the pool. “I’ve nearly died a lot.”

The old man shrugged. The red light was fading fast now, sliding into purple. The day’s heat fell to a tolerable warmth. The man said, “James Dean died just up the road from here. Just a few miles up 46.”

“I had no idea,” Harvey said and turned to face the vague direction the man had indicated. On the other side of the cinderblock and wood motel there was an interstate that sprawled across the desert. Somewhere out there was the place and Harvey would probably drive by tomorrow night.

“Did you ever see any of his films?” asked the man.

“I saw *Rebel Without a Cause* a few years ago.”

“What about his other movies?”

“I thought he only had *Rebel*. I loved that one, though.”

“Everyone does. Everybody wants to be that noble punk who’s smart enough not to drive off the cliff and good enough to help the town freak. Everyone is either him or wants to be.”

Harvey shrugged. He watched it with his older sister when she passed through town on her way to Montreal for an interview. They never really spoke. Every so often one would make a familial gesture, like suggesting that they should watch a movie together and spend an evening

talking. The incidents were good, but never led to a greater mutual understanding. His sister hated the movie for its sexism, but he had loved the way James Dean hunched over his cigarette, mulling.

The tan man watched him and then flicked his cigarette into the pool. He was quiet for so long that Harvey started to say, “Goodbye” so that he could leave when the man said, “I’m in town for my daughter. She moved here... five years ago to teach special ed to... troubled, I think. Troubled students. She loved it here. The weather and the people, she said, she loved it all. Once she said that the odd thing about this place was that no one seemed to be from here. They were all recent immigrants or followed jobs or just ended up here.” He lit another cigarette. “She said that’s why she loved it. She felt at home with so many people from somewhere else. That was good for her because we were always travelling when she was little.”

Out of the corner of his eye Harvey saw street lamps flicker on. He glanced at his watch and wondered if he shouldn’t wander around to the other side of the building. At this rate, the creepy old man was liable to talk all night.

“She died coming home from a conference. A semi ran her tiny car right over. I’m here for her funeral.”

The man stopped talking. Harvey wondered how long the silence could last and felt a gradual desperation rise up his stomach to his tongue. Something to say. He said, “I’m sorry.”

The temperature began to drop. It was by no means cold, but Harvey shivered anyway. The man said, “She was pronounced dead at the hospital, but they told me she died immediately. No pain. It always seemed strange to me, a doctor having to say when someone’s dead. They can’t cover a body until a doctor has said it’s okay. It’s a symbolic gesture, covering a body.”

Harvey considered excusing himself, but decided he couldn’t just walk away. Why was he listening to this? Harvey asked, “When is the funeral?”

“Tomorrow morning.” The man looked at his cigarette. He seemed confused, as if he’d pulled off a piece of his own face. “No one asked me to speak. If you asked me who organised the ceremony I couldn’t tell you. Who organises funerals? Not the parents. They told me my daughter’s mother had to be sedated when they told her. I wish they had done that to me. Her mother and I haven’t spoken in years, but neither of us knows who organised the funeral.”

The man finished his cigarette. He dug in his pocket for the pack. When he found it he offered one to Harvey who accepted. They smoked together, Harvey trying to mask his nausea.

“I’ve never been to a funeral,” he said.

“That’s okay,” said the man. They smoked their cigarettes. Finally the man said, “When you’re young you shouldn’t have to think about things like funerals. You’re excused. It’s okay if you don’t care. Someday you’ll get it, but for now just don’t worry about it. That’s what I tried to do when I was young. You should just live and worry later.

“That’s what I always thought. But, you know, the guy who killed her was just a kid too. Her age. Twenty-three. Have you ever wondered about that? The way it seems like all these babies die. Babies killing babies. When you’re twenty-three, you’re just a baby. Things that happen then aren’t supposed to leave scars, just some warning memories...”

The man looked at his cigarette and then at the ground and then said nothing more. Harvey walked away gratefully. Neither said goodbye.

It was still hours until the concert. Harvey didn’t want to go back to his room, but didn’t want go anywhere else either. He turned off the air-conditioner and opened the door to let the hot desert air in until the room was a tolerable temperature. It was neither warm nor cool. Harvey felt like there was nothing surrounding him, that his skin was part of the air and he stretched out to fill the room.

With nothing else to do, Harvey poured himself tequila, leaned back in bed, and thought about the conversation he had just had. It was okay that he’d never been to a funeral, the old man had said.

People called him morbid. You’re cold, people had told him. No, he thought, you might as well just accept the fact you’re going to die and do what you can while you can. He wasn’t afraid of death. Drowning, yes, but not death. Death was just something that happened and so why bother getting emotional about it?

Harvey thought about the tan man and how it seemed that every word he said was an unfathomable effort. Like he was talking beneath the ocean. Harvey wondered about the driver who killed his daughter. Was he going to California? Did he ever think that he’d cause a funeral?

He must have fallen asleep because he awoke when someone pounded on the door. He lunged and then hobbled to the middle of the room. He called, “It’s open!”

The receptionist stuck her head in, “Did you fall asleep?”

“Yes.”

“It’s eight hours ‘til dawn. Hurry.”

They walked together around the building to room 14. There were five others in the room. Three sat in the corner nearest the mini-fridge, passing a joint. They glanced at him momentarily before going back to their animated conversation. A young woman sat on the bed in front of an electric keyboard and a young man stood next to her with a saxophone. The receptionist sat down in a chair with a cello.

When she saw Harvey's expression, the receptionist said, "You try convincing a Baptist minister to buy you a fucking electric guitar."

She introduced everyone in the room and Harvey promptly forgot each name. One of the circle nearest the fridge asked, "Beer?" and reached into the fridge, producing a Budweiser. As soon as the can was out of his hand, he went back to the discussion. All three of the young men were dressed in torn jeans and ugly button-up shirts. All looked meticulously unkempt. Harvey could smell their soapy deodorant, sharp, like how a commercial forest should smell.

"—Rick said that they were going to be gone two weeks last Thursday down to Mexico City. They're not there. I asked Mason and he said that the other neighbours, the weird Italian guy, he's visiting family back home. There's no one else for miles."

The band began to play. Harvey settled down on the carpeted floor by the door and listened. They played for two hours, one song after the next, without speaking at all. Sometimes one or the other would sing, but for the most part they focused on their instruments. Nirvana, the Pixies, the U-Men, Neil Young. Covers entirely. Some songs he didn't recognise, but they all sounded vaguely familiar. The cello, keyboard and saxophone sounded, to Harvey, even more dissonant than the original music.

Then they played "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and the three in the corner, who were engrossed in their conversation throughout the whole long session, turned around and started to sing along. Harvey listened. He had heard the song enough, but could not remember the lyrics. It never seemed worth the effort. Even with three singers so close, he still couldn't make out the slurred words.

After that, without a cue from any of the musicians, the music stopped. Not even a beat passed and one of the three sitting in the corner stood up, saying, "Alright, it's decided. We're doing it."

The pianist and saxophonist nodded. The saxophonist looked at the receptionist who shrugged and then shook her head. Instruments set aside, the pianist and saxophonist followed the other three outside and a few moments later Harvey heard a car engine start and a vehicle move away.

“What was that?” Harvey asked and stood.

“Oh they’re going to this house that’s going to be demolished tomorrow. Harvesting the wiring and pipes for scrap. That’s the only way Fred makes money, it seems like. He sells stuff that he finds and he’s very good at it. An artist.” She stood and stretched. “Want to walk?”

The air was much cooler than it had been hours earlier. There was still no wind. Harvey looked up to see if there were stars but there was just enough light pollution from the town to blind him. The receptionist took him by the hand and pulled him around the building. He could feel her calluses.

Every window they passed was dark. The receptionist had been right. There was no one else in the motel. Or everyone was just asleep, but Harvey saw no difference and didn’t think it mattered. He wondered which room the tan man was in.

The receptionist led him to the empty pool. They sat down on sandpaper hard concrete with their feet dangling over in the shallow end.

“It’s been dry for years,” the receptionist said, apologetically. “I’m Juliet, by the way.”

“What, and I’m Romeo?” Harvey said.

“No,” she said. “You’re Harvey. My name, it’s Juliet. And if you make another joke about it I’ll hurt you. Everyone jokes about it.”

“Sorry, Juliet.”

“I like my name,” she said. “Hey, look.”

She hopped into the pool and they walked down into the deep end. At the very bottom, scratched into the rough plaster and concrete bottom, someone had written “Hell.”

“Someone was very creative,” she said.

“I hate pools,” Harvey said. “I’ve nearly drowned too many times.”

“Well, you’re in no danger here,” the receptionist said. She sat down. “You know, I’m terrified of living forever. Maybe that’s why religion doesn’t appeal to me. Eternal life seems cruel.”

“Cruel?”

Juliet shrugged. “What’s the point in doing anything if you have a second chance? And, think

about it, who really wants to live forever? Can you imagine that? You can't. No one can. I've been alive two decades and that feels like forever for me and it is, but imagine four billion years or a trillion. I remember that I loved my comfort blanket when I was really little and it was the world to me, but then I grew up and now it's in a box somewhere. What awful loyalty. In time, all relationships are like that. After a couple of centuries, love must seem like a tiny blip on this long drive. Can you imagine living forever? Would you want to?"

"I've never thought about it seriously," Harvey admitted. He leaned back against the wall of the pool.

"Because you've nearly died so often?"

"Yes."

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable, then turned away. He reached out and pulled her toward him. They kissed. She still tasted like the acidity of the coffee. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

Harvey could not see anything over the edge of the pool except the sky and, for the first time that evening, a handful of stars. It was easy to imagine that his whole world had been reduced to that tiny enclosure, that there was no motel just above, no town, no road leading to the place where an icon had died. There was no home and no place he was going. Just the concrete and sky.

"I love travelling," Harvey said. He did not wait for her to reply. "I hate driving down the same road twice, recognising a place. It's depressing, you know, knowing that there's only so much road and that if you go long enough, there won't be anywhere else that you haven't been before. I could go on forever," he said.

They breathed. Harvey's legs went numb and the weight of Juliet's head was pushing his shoulder into the concrete. Time was at a standstill. He was certain that if he watched the sky for long enough he would gradually realise that the stars were not moving. He felt drunk.

Juliet said, finally, "I don't think we're talking to each other." She traced the lines of his palm with her calluses. "I'm so goddamn bored," she said.

They stood up. Juliet stretched, arching her back until she was looking at him upside down. She winked and righted herself. "Come on," she said. "I'm bored."

There was a silver metal ladder to one side. Harvey was closer. He took a step forward and stopped suddenly when he saw that someone had written on the blue painted concrete next to the ladder "Nursery." There was no time to think about it. Juliet tripped across his foot and stumbled

into the wall. Her skull made a dull thud.

“Fuck!” Juliet shouted. She half sunk half fell on the ground.

“Shit. Are you all right?” Harvey crouched next to her. The short distance and fall had been comically ludicrous and he was shocked when he saw blood trickling down from a cut just above her eyebrow.

“I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt. It’s okay. It’s just...” Juliet muttered and then held her hand out in front of her face. She saw the blood, said, “Oh,” and then slouched forward into Harvey. He just barely caught her.

Harvey stared at the blood that seemed to flowing too fast down her cheek and chin, dripping onto her tank top and blending in with the dye. Liquid heat dripped onto his hand. His extremities went cold and numb. Breathing became a conscious and difficult effort.

“Hey. Hey... Hey!” Harvey said and shook her gently. She did not respond. He looked up out of the pool shouting “Hey!” at the sky with a handful of stars and in his shivering panic realised that he was in a hole in the ground in the middle of a desert.

Inspiration finally struck. “Help!” he shouted, then again and again, but no one came.

There was a lot of blood. More every moment. He wondered how long it would take her to bleed to death and if he could carry her, but he remembered that you weren’t supposed to move people with head injuries. Suddenly he was sitting down across from her on the cold cement. It seemed absurd that he wasn’t the one dying.

Later, after he had seen more people pass out from shock and nerves, Harvey guessed the whole episode must have lasted moments. Juliet came to, saying “That was graceful. It’s not bad. It doesn’t hurt.” Juliet stood up over him. A moment of unsteadiness and she caught herself. Harvey felt as if he were pushing water out of his chest with each exhalation.

They walked to the reception desk where Juliet’s replacement was still working. In the light of the room, Harvey could see that there was far less blood than he had thought. The replacement looked up from her book, did a double-take, and stood up. She looked with concern at Juliet and aggression at Harvey.

“What happened?” the replacement demanded.

“I’m not very graceful,” Juliet said and walked immediately past the desk into the back room. The replacement glanced at Harvey, then followed.

Harvey was alone in the reception room. It was still cold, but comparable to outside. The blood on his hand was beginning to congeal. He held it up to the light and inspected the fingers, the palm, the life-lines in the red. He was about to go to the bathroom to wash himself off when Juliet came back holding a towel over her forehead and waving at him urgently.

“Go. She’s calling my family and they don’t live far away.”

“Are you all right?”

“Of course I am. It’s a cut. But you don’t ever want to piss off the reverend. I’ll change your room number and name on the registry before he gets here. Keep the lights off.”

“Will I...” Harvey began, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Probably not,” the receptionist said. She shrugged and smiled. “Bye, Harvey.”

Harvey woke up at the unusual hour of eight in the morning some time later. He felt peculiarly awake. He put on his clothes and walked outside into the morning light, the sun slapping his skin with sudden intensity.

“Hey,” a dusty voice said.

Harvey pivoted. The tan man stood a few feet away, hand still on the doorknob to the room next to his. Don looked embarrassed. He was wearing a black suit and tie. The tie was old fashioned, skinny and undone. His mouth worked, he looked back inside the room. With sudden inspiration, he held up a finger, disappeared back into the room and came back with a pack of cigarettes. He offered one to Harvey, who accepted reluctantly, and lit both.

After his first drag, Don seemed to find his bearing. He looked at the rising sun, nodded, and then looked back at Harvey. “How do I look?” he asked.

“You’re tie’s undone,” Harvey said. He felt dizzy from the smoke.

“Oh,” Don said. He looked at the two ends helplessly.

“Here,” Harvey said.

He reached out and began to tie Don’s tie for him. It occurred to him that he had never tied someone else’s tie before—that was the prom date’s job, he thought—but his hands went about the task with unexpected dexterity and certitude. The cigarette, balanced between his lips, blinded him to the task. His fingers tightened the knot. “There,” he said.

“Thanks,” Don said. He took a drag, inspected the knot and nodded. He looked back up at Harvey. “So, I guess you’re staying for a while?”

“I thought I’d leave today, actually.”

“That’s a shame. It’s a beautiful country. You can see the whole world standing in one place. Do yourself a favour sometime and stand out in the middle of the road with your eyes closed. When no cars are there, of course. And just feel everything stretch out around you. You can really feel how big this place is here.”

Don started to walk away. After a few steps he turned and held up the end of his tie. “Thanks. Hey, what should I say?”

Harvey asked, “You’re on your way to the church?”

Don nodded. “Yeah. The church.”

The sun felt like claws. Harvey had never been so aware of his clothes before and the skin below it. Don was waiting. Harvey tried to think of something to say and he felt that he had never tried at anything so hard in his life.

“Say she found the place she loved,” Harvey said.

Don nodded slowly. He threw the cigarette away. “Yeah. Thank you.” And walked away.

Years later, Harvey drove through the same town on his way to Salinas. He was listening to an NPR interview of the baby, now eighteen, who was the model on the cover of *Nevermind*. “Quite a few people in the world have seen my penis,” the young man, Spencer, said. Harvey felt old.

It was late afternoon and he still had miles to go. He didn’t drive through night anymore, and the sooner he got to Salinas the sooner he would see his kids. But he did make a detour. He circled around the area several times before he realised that the motel was not there anymore. The desert had taken back that chunk of land.

He thought about stopping. Getting out of the car. Feeling the sun burn his skin. Maybe stand where he thought the pool must have been, close his eyes and imagine that there were no mountains in the distance or buildings nearby. Imagine that he was standing in a hot infinity.

There were miles to go, yet. They were expecting him, waiting for him. Harvey remembered that he’d promised.

He drove home without stopping, paying attention to nothing but the road and the other

travellers.

*Sam Ferree lives in Minneapolis with a poet and two cats. Professionally, he writes grants and copy for an environmental non-profit. Unprofessionally, he scribbles. His work has previously appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Deimos eZine, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine and Sybil's Garage. To find out more about Sam, visit his website at [samferree.com](http://samferree.com) or follow him on Twitter, [@samferree](https://twitter.com/samferree).*

# Back to Front

*by Nathan Hondros*

did you work out that direction was  
a leitmotif in the poems I mailed?  
Always travelling, always arriving  
but where? you wrote. and when?

more light came in your house  
than I imagined. I thought of this.  
and what for? your plants that  
know you better than I did

neither coming nor going they sit  
inside out, resting in their urge to speak  
waiting in the opposite of motion  
four metres of shadow at one o'clock

stop. it's only my hand holding you back  
don't look at the road or remember  
when you arrive you won't know  
and you'll still be cold. and why?

oh, that's a question too old to answer  
so instead you catch the fireworks  
and light shows I know are thrilling you  
stupid and futile but the only way out

*Nathan Hondros is a poet with an interest in the surreal and abstract. He is an editor for Regime Books (<http://regimebooks.com.au>). His work has appeared in Westerly, The Australian, Masthead, and other magazines and journals, including The Drunken Boat. His poetry appears in the US anthology Milk and Honey Siren (2013, NostrovialPoetry). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has adapted his work into radio plays. A collection of his fiction, Man and Beast, was released in 2009 in collaboration with writer and theatre artist Damon Lockwood.*

# Memory

*by Andrew Hutchinson*

There was a man with a gun at the side of the road. This was when I was headed home, driving through a shopping strip with people and cars all around and there was a white van parked at the side of the road and I came past it and there he was, behind the back of the van, his arm reaching out, holding a black gun. He wasn't pointing it at me, he was looking over towards the opposite side of the road. The gun looked big, but I'd never seen a gun before so who knows. He was wearing an orange jumper and black tracksuit pants, black hair and olive skin and as soon as I saw the gun panic expanded through my body. My breath caught in my chest, my arms seized and my fingers clawed the steering wheel. I ducked down, got my head down below the window line, almost crashed into the gutter as I pushed the accelerator. I don't know who he was aiming at; I didn't see where he went after. I drove hard, squeezing through gaps in traffic and when I got home I ran inside and locked the front door and got to my room and lay down, took in deep breaths, tried to calm down. My body trembled all through the fading light.

Work was pretty understanding about the whole thing. I told my boss about the gunman and how I'd be going to the police station and I didn't know how long I'd be, but I'd come in right after. He was okay with it. The police asked why I didn't come in straight away and I said I couldn't. I'd just seen a gunman in the streets, I had to get away. They took my statement then another officer, not in uniform but in a suit, he talked to me some more and wrote notes.

“Did he kill anyone?” I asked him.

“You tell me.” The officer said as he continued writing on his notepad.

“No, I mean have there been any reports of any shootings in the area?”

The officer looked up to the roof but he was really looking inside of his head. “Hold on, I'll check.” And then he left the room. It was a white room, with a table in the middle and one of those recording units on the table, but nothing else. There were no windows. They didn't have one of those double-sided mirror walls.

The officer came back in.

“Nope, nothing,” the officer said, and he sat back down and went on with his notes.

“There were a lot of people around,” I told him. “I'm surprised no one else reported it.” The officer didn't respond, kept writing, the top of his head pointed in my direction.

I went to work after and went back to my desk and continued on as normal, like nothing had happened.

Afterwards, I drove home along my normal route, came back round towards the shopping strip, and I felt shaky, nervous. Then, as I came through, there was a white van parked alongside the road and when I came past it there he was. A man with dark hair and olive skin, holding a black handgun. The panic was worse this time, the kicks of my heart resonating through my bones and I accelerated, drove as fast as I could and turned down the next street with one of those blue POLICE signs, and I screeched the brakes as I pulled up outside the station, left the car door hanging open as I ran.

“Quick,” I yelled to the officer behind the counter. It was the same officer I saw when I came in this morning. “Quick, there’s a gunman down on High Street.” I was running out of breath mid-sentence, trying to get the words out too quickly. The officer leaned his head to the side and spoke into a walkie talkie pinned to the shoulder of his shirt then called out to the other officers in the back of the station.

“Where was he? What kind of gun did he have?” the officer asked. I told him the man was on High Street and that he had a black handgun, looked like a big one. There were voices crackling over the walkie talkie, squelching sounds between the words. Two other officers came out to the front and stood on either side of me. They had their hats on, ready to go.

“Where on High Street?”

“At the start, just where the shops start.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“I don’t know, I just drove away as fast as I could.”

“What did he look like?”

“He had an orange jumper and black pants, olive skin and black hair. He was standing right behind a white van like this,” and I showed them how the man was standing. “I didn’t see him till the last minute.” There were more voices over the walkie talkies. I could hear police sirens in the background, screaming through the static.

“Do you know who the gunman is?” an officer beside me asked.

“No, I don’t know him.”

“Have you seen him before?” the officer on the other side said.

“Yes.”

“You’ve seen him before?”

“Yes, I saw him yesterday.”

“Yesterday. Where did you see him?”

I felt a hot sensation filling through my skull.

“I saw him yesterday, in the same place.”

The officers next to me looked at each other.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I saw the gunman yesterday, in the same place, behind the white van. I came in and reported it this morning. I spoke to that man.” I pointed to the officer behind the desk. “It was the same man again,” I told him.

Again I sat in the white room, speaking to the officer in a suit. The officer looked disinterested and wrote notes while he was speaking.

“So you came in this morning and reported that you’d seen a gunman yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“And you saw the same gunman, in the same place, again today.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” The officer leaned back, looked up at the roof. “So what happened after you left here this morning?”

“I went to work.”

“So you just went to work—and what happened there?”

And I went to answer but then I realised I didn’t know. I couldn’t remember being at work at all. It was like I went to the police station and spoke to the officer who wrote notes and then I was driving home. Nothing in-between. I looked at the officer. He was watching me, his eyes shifting all round my face, my body.

“I don’t remember going to work.”

The officer smiled with closed lips, put his head down, wrote notes onto his pad.

“But I must’ve gone, I mean, I was coming home from work.”

The officer didn’t respond. I knew what he’d be writing down. I pushed my fingers up along my temple, then dropped my hand when I realised what I was doing.

§

Back home I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. It was an old house and there were patterns of leaves and stems trailing across the tops of the walls and gathering into complicated corner pieces, sculpted in plaster and painted over in white. I stared at the patterns and wondered what had happened. I thought over the police station, how I’d stopped at the first one I saw on the way home, which wasn’t the same one I stopped at in the morning. But the same man was working behind the counter. Again, panic surged, warmed through my arms and shoulders and I felt tired, worn out by the whole thing. I fell asleep thinking of the man in the orange jumper and the gun and police lights pulsing against the sunset.

§

In the morning I got up and got ready for work and headed outside to the car and then I stopped. My fingers were under the door handle and I thought over what had happened. Maybe I’d suffered some sort of psychological trauma from seeing the gunman, something de-railed inside my head. I decided I’d call in sick and wait out the day at home, then drive into High Street in the afternoon, show myself that there was no gunman, that there was nothing to be concerned about. Reset my brain, so to speak.

I parked the car behind the shopping strip and walked down the alleyway towards High Street, came past the old cinema and the café with the tables out on the footpath. Even though I hadn’t been to the street in a long time it felt very familiar. Alternative types with bright-coloured hair and spiked boots. A guy with dreadlocks smoking a cigarette at one of the tables. And up ahead, at the start of the shopping strip, I could see a white van parked alongside the road. And there he was. I could see his orange jumper from way back. I started moving faster to get to him, to see what he’d do next and the man walked towards the road. He had a gun in his hand. But as I got closer I realised it’s wasn’t a gun he was holding. It was a black tube of some sort. The man in the orange jumper put his arm up towards the road, maybe waving at someone on the other side, and then I saw a white car accelerating past. I saw myself behind the wheel. The car revved hard and I watched myself duck below the window line as the car jacked up onto the curb and rammed into the concrete wall of the cinema building. A cloud of shattered glass burst into the air and the back wheels lifted from the impact then bounced back onto the footpath and I ran over, pushed through the growing crowd. And I could see myself. The top half of my body was smashed up through the

windscreen. There was blood leaking out, dark red trails slithering across the white bonnet and dripping down the side of the metal. I couldn't see my face; people were all in the way and then someone started screaming over and over. There were sirens in the distance. I watched as the fire truck and the ambulance and the police arrived. As the officers dragged my body out of the wreckage and onto the footpath, I watched, and it was like a scene from a film, the camera moving slowly backwards, drifting further and further away. The ambulance officers were pushing at me, cutting the clothes off my body, feeling their fingers along my skin and one of them looked up and shook his head at someone else—I couldn't see who. The ambulance officers pushed a clear pipe down into my mouth and pumped in air and a feeling of sickness trickled through me. That warm saliva feeling, swirling up. I drifted further and further back without moving, watched the red and blue lights twirling against the sunset, the world dimming and the sounds fading till there was nothing more than those plastic bulbs, spinning and shrinking on the distance.

§

I woke up in my room, staring up at the leaves and stems. It felt like no time had passed between me being on High Street and me being back in bed and I was breathing hard, glad to be back but wondering how I got home. I tried to think over what could be happening. I couldn't be re-living the same day, because I wasn't actually living the day at all, just moments that went from one to the next with nothing in-between. I thought it must be brain damage. I must have crashed and now my mind was caught in this static state where I'm just re-living it over and over. Then I thought maybe I could change it.

I got up and into the car and drove in the opposite direction to how I would normally go to work. I passed the milk bar and the primary school and turned down onto Main Street, and when I came round the corner everything blurred. It was like when you load a website and it's taking too long to come up and you move the mouse and the colours and shapes on the screen drag, then you move back up and they drag again till it's just a mess of lines. The road in front of me looked like that, as if someone had dragged a still image and the world had just blurred into nothing. There was no movement, I wasn't going anywhere. I looked in the mirrors and there was nothing there either, just grey like the sky before rain. It felt like the car was hovering, still, and I took my hands off the wheel and turned them, palms facing me, looked at them. And when I looked up I was back in my room, staring at the ceiling, the leaves and stems trailing across.

§

I thought over the details of what had happened, the gunman, the police station. I wondered where my mind had got hung up. Maybe I injured my head and my short-term memories were the last things firing through my synapses. And because these were the last things images I'd put in, they were all I could see. Maybe that's why I couldn't go in a different direction. But it didn't explain

the police station. If these were memories, how did I go to the police station? Then I thought of the ambulance officer shaking his head. I thought about that for what felt like hours and then noticed my phone on the bedside table and I grabbed it, dialled in my parents' number, and held it to my ear. It rang twice before an unusual voice answered.

“Hello,” a woman said. I pulled the phone back from my head and looked at the screen. The number dialled wasn't my parents' number. It was something else. Then the voice started talking again.

“Hello,” I said “Yes, hello...” But the voice was already speaking.

“Yeah, I'll just get her for you,” the woman said, then the voice got quieter. “Sarah, it's for you.” she called out. And it clicked in my head who this was. I looked at the number again, it was the number of my first girlfriend, from back when I was sixteen. How could I have dialled that number? I'd not have been able to remember it if you'd asked me. But there it was. Then another voice started speaking. It was Sarah.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello, uh, I need help, can you...”

Sarah's voice continued, not responding to me. “Hi,” she laughed a little. “No I knew it was you. I was hoping you'd call.” And the voice stopped.

“Sarah, hello, I need...”

She started speaking again. “Yeah, I liked it, thank you. It made my day.” And I realised she wasn't really there. Sarah would be thirty years old by now, but her voice was the one I remembered. I'd not spoken to her since we were kids. This was a memory, a conversation we'd had back then. She kept talking, pausing to wait for where I would have been speaking and I hung up, tried to dial another number. It came up with Sarah's number again. I tried Triple Zero, Call Connect, all the numbers in my contacts list. Sarah's mother answered every time.

I got up and opened the blinds and looked out the window. I could see out to the park across the road. It was summer, in the moments just before sundown, the rays of light glinting through the trees. Kids were playing at the drinking fountain, one holding his finger over the tap to make it spray at the others. And just beyond that I noticed the houses that looked onto the park. They were the same house repeated, over and over. A red coloured brick building with a red roof. I knew this wasn't what it really looked like, but I couldn't think of what it should be. I squinted and leaned towards the glass, tried to find the real image in the distance.

It was grey outside the front door in the morning. The concrete footpath and steps were gone. Other parts of the house too, all the rooms were the same room—my bedroom—with the leaves and the stems lined along the edge of the ceiling. I tried dialling more numbers into my phone but got the same one every time, Sarah’s mother sounding bemused at my teenage voice. Why would I remember this? I could barely recall anything Sarah and I did together it was so long ago. Why would this phone call be the one thing I’d held onto? I listened to the sound of Sarah’s voice responding to mine without me speaking, and I tried to work out what I was saying in the gaps, like maybe there was some code to be cracked and that might snap me out of this loop. It was a long conversation—we used to have those two-hour phone calls where we’d talk about nothing, I remember that. It was the closest we could be to each other. I listened to the tinny, recorded tone of her voice, smiled at her laugh. And in a moment it clicked. It fell through my body and rolled out into the ends of my fingers in a wave. I remembered what this was. I lay back onto the bed and stared up at the leaves and stems, smiled as her voice continued down the line. I remembered this.

I closed my eyes as Sarah’s voice spoke, continued on, whispering to my absence.

“Okay, okay, but I really have to go now.”

“No, I do, my brother wants to use the phone and my Mum wants me to go help her.”

“No. I really do have to go this time.”

“Okay, I’m hanging up now. For real.”

“Okay, well I’ll see you tomorrow.”

...

“Hey, are you still there?”

“I love you.”

“Well now I’ve said it so there.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“Bye.”

*Andrew Hutchinson is a freelance writer, award winning author and father of two. His blog, twenty six ([www.andrewhutchinson.com.au](http://www.andrewhutchinson.com.au)), recently won the Words and Writing category in the Australian Writers' Centre "Best Australian Blogs 2014" competition. His story "Before Everything" appeared in Issue Four of Tincture Journal.*

# hail the goer

*by Stu Hatton*

Addiction turns out to be a great  
disappointment. It's not that you  
refuse to be entertained ... it just  
never lives up.

Cavities in chemical  
light, house buried under leaves,  
under amber. You string bells in  
trees to offer fair warning.

Obscurity  
ought to be enjoyed; tilt a mirror  
to the sky once more.

# i sit unfinished in breath-

by *Stu Hatton*

i sit unfinished in breath-  
body as a venerable one  
once said *there's nothing*  
*more glorious than keeping*  
*still* like a palm-stump  
or a hill hairy with  
trees yet still only as a  
lump of river froth or a  
water maze navigable  
in raw moment

*Note: samples some words/phrases from F. L. Woodward (translator), Some Sayings of the Buddha, Oxford University Press, 1973.*

For an interview between our poetry editor Stuart Barnes and Stu Hatton, check out the interview series on the *Tincture Journal* website: [tincture-journal.com/category/interviews/](http://tincture-journal.com/category/interviews/).

*Stu Hatton is a Melbourne-based poet and freelance editor. He also works as a mental health researcher at the University of Melbourne. His poems have been published in The Age, Best Australian Poems 2012, Cordite, Overland and elsewhere. He sometimes posts things at [outerblog.tumblr.com](http://outerblog.tumblr.com).*

# A Look of Revelation

*Non-fiction by Deborah Guzzi*

Symbols and sigils flood the forebrain as I walk through the metal and wired glass doors. With a whoosh of air, they close as if mocking the breath I had held in too long. Fear beaded in the sweat on my upper lip. What had once been the blissful gold-tinged vessel of apple blossom days had now turned into the hollow-boned reality of a Dali summer, a loveless leaden pit of dread. Constant sobbing, gagging, rocking did little to quell the practice's belief that I was deranged.

parents watch  
through the window  
paper cup pills

He was bald and full of “hmmm’s”, nodding as I babbled. A seventies summer started with first love in a hayfield, then ended in a heroin fright. The local quack had assured me it was all a communist plot to overtake the youth of America. Really, one should never tell their parents the truth. They certainly hadn't checked in with their brains when their seed and egg mixed a proclivity for alcoholism with a dollop of bi-polar mania. “Ahhh, hmmm,” the Doctor said. “Two weeks rest should do you fine.”

*Deborah Guzzi is a resident of the USA. She travels for inspiration: China, Nepal [during the civil war], Japan, Egypt [two weeks before The Arab Spring] and most recently Peru. She has spent years examining the foundations of belief in higher power. Much of her writing explores the topic of imbalance, whether internal or external. She has published two illustrated volumes of poetry, The Healing Heart and Heaven and Hell in a Nutshell. Her works appear in Cha: Asian Literary Review published in China, Existere Journal of Arts and Literature published in Canada, and a number of literary venues in the US and UK. She writes articles for massage and aroma therapy magazines.*

# The Favour (1901)

*by Annette Siketa*

According to the law, sequestration is a writ that authorises the seizure of property, and holding it until payment for the demand under which it was seized, is paid. But what happens if the property is never redeemed? To whom does the property belong if the original owner dies? This was the problem confronting me as I lay dying in my bed. Moreover, it was a problem I had ‘inherited’ some fifty-six years earlier.

At eighty-two years of age, perhaps I can be forgiven for fearing imaginary dangers. But the story is so strange that even now, years after the event, unexpected sounds set my teeth on edge, and objects which I can ill distinguish in the evening shadows, make my blood run cold.

The affair so upset my mind, filling me with such a deep unrest, that I could never share it with anyone. I kept it in that corner of my mind where we conceal our sad and shameful secrets, those weaknesses of life which can never be confessed.

In July 1827, being on leave from my regiment, I was staying in a guest-house in Brighton. One morning, as I strolled along the foreshore, I saw a man whom I thought I recognized. It was an old friend of whom I had been particularly fond. I had not seen him since his wedding some five years earlier, where both bride and groom had bloomed with happiness.

Now however, instead of being a young man in his prime, it seemed the passage of time had ravished him especially. His once rich black hair was almost white, and his melancholy expression and gaunt features spoke of great misery. It was also clear that he was gravely ill. We repaired to his hotel, where a medicinal brandy steadied his nerve.

A terrible event had broken his spirit. For a year after the marriage, they had lived in an ecstasy of unbridled bliss. But then she suddenly died of heart disease, and his world came crashing down.

Unable to stand the memory of it, the day after her funeral, he had vacated their home in favour of the small hotel in Brighton, where he had remained ever since. Solitary and despondent, grief had made him so wretched that he constantly thought of suicide. The latter appalled me.

“But my dear fellow, why didn’t you contact me? You know I would do anything for you.”

He slowly shook his head. “There’s nothing anyone can do... except...” He paused and looked at me earnestly. “Did you mean what you just said?”

“Of course, name it.”

"Would you go to my home and retrieve some papers for me? They are private and confidential, and I would not put their acquisition in the hands of someone I did not trust."

“A simple enough task,” I said with a confident smile. As his former home was less than fifteen miles away, I could make the entire journey on horseback in a day. It would be more an excursion than a service. “Where are the papers?”

“After her death, I could not bear the thought of anyone entering our room, so I locked them in a desk therein before leaving the house. If you would excuse me for a few minutes, I shall retrieve the keys and write a note to the gardener. He and his wife look after the house now, so there should be no difficulty gaining access.”

As he walked away, I was pleased to see that a spark of life had returned to his eyes. For my own purposes, it was still too early to indulge in strong drink, so while I waited I ordered two dishes of tea. My buoyancy was short lived, for when he entered the parlour in which we were seated, I saw by his expression that the bitterness had returned. He spoke very little, explaining that the thought of me visiting the room where his happiness lay shattered, even though it was with noble intent, had upset him.

“There are two packages of letters and some papers in the first right-hand drawer of the desk. I trust you will not read them.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said rather sharply, hurt by his words.

He sank back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. “Forgive me, my old friend. I still suffer so much.”

I left shortly thereafter under a perfect azure sky, galloping over sweet smelling grass and lush buttercup meadows. Five years earlier there had been a small wooded area in front of his home. Now however, it was a forest, and if I didn’t want to get clobbered by low branches, I had to slow down.

My caution was justified, for as I set my horse to walking pace, leaves softly caressed my face. Somewhat childishly, I tried to catch one between my teeth. Perhaps it had been the glorious ride, or the fact that I was helping a friend, but in either event, I felt full of life.

As I neared the house, I withdrew the letter for the gardener from a pocket and saw that it was sealed. I was rather annoyed at this. Despite his platitudes, did my friend not trust me after all? I shook my head. I was being over-sensitive. No doubt he had unconsciously sealed it from habit,

worried as he was.

The house mirrored the owner—forlorn and dejected, while the once pristine gravel paths and flower beds were a riot of tangled weeds.

An elderly man in his sixties, dressed in shabby britches, came out from a side-door. “What do you want?” he barked.

“Curb your tongue you insolent devil!” It was not often I exercised my superiority, but his tone had been less than welcoming. “If you use your eyes instead of your mouth, you’ll see that I am holding a letter for you from your master.”

I dismounted and gave him the letter. He read it thoroughly, and then looked at me suspiciously. “So, you are to enter their old room.”

“Are you questioning your master’s orders?”

“Oh, no sir,” he stammered. “It’s just that the room has not been opened since... since the tragedy.” To his credit, he gathered his manners and straightened his shoulders. “If you would follow me, I will show you the way.” He led me through the kitchen, up a small flight of service stairs, and into the large entrance hall.

“You will not be required unless I ring for you,” I said, ascending the main staircase.

I found the room easily enough, but the interior was so dingy that at first I could not distinguish anything of note. It also had that stale odour peculiar to abandoned rooms. I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust, and then stepped inside. It was a large room, finely furnished, with the four-poster bed dominant. It was made up as though ready for sleep. Indeed, one of the pillows bore a deep imprint, as if someone had just been resting on it.

Passing a cupboard that was slightly ajar, I crossed the room to open a window, but the hinges of the outside shutters were so rusted that I could not loosen them. As my eyes had now fully adjusted, I gave up the notion of obtaining more light and moved to the desk.

I sat in the chair and unlocked the relevant drawer. It was full to overflowing. The two packages of letters virtually sprang into my hand, but the singular papers were something else.

I was in the process of searching, straining my eyes to decipher the inscriptions, when I heard a rustling noise behind me. I took no notice, thinking a draft had lifted a curtain. But a minute later, another sound, so faint as to be almost indistinguishable, caused my skin to shiver. It was foolish to be moved thus, and I did not turn around. I had just discovered the requested papers when, close to my shoulder, someone let out a sorrowful sigh.

I jumped to my feet and turned around. I shuddered so violently that I almost toppled backwards. No one who has not experienced such a fright can understand the gruesome terror. The soul melts, the heart seems to stop, and the body becomes as limp as a sponge.

I do not believe in ghosts, and yet there she was—tall, pretty, and dressed entirely in white. I was gripped by the hideous fear of the dead, and had she not spoken, I might have died myself.

“It is most fortunate that you are here. Now you can help me.”

Although her voice was soft and plaintive, it set my nerves on edge. I cannot state in all honesty that I regained my self-control, but pride and military training helped me to maintain a semblance of composure.

“Gladly,” I said hoarsely.

She sat in the chair I had just vacated and, seemingly out of thin air, produced a woman’s tortoise-shell comb. “Please, comb my hair. Oh, if love means anything to you, then comb my hair. It is the only thing that will set me free.”

Her thick black hair, which hung over the back of the chair, almost touched the ground, but rather than luxuriant, even sensual, it was cold and slippery to the touch. I shivered as it ran over my skin, for I had the impression of snakes, and not having the expertise of a lady’s maid, I could do little more than bind it in a plait.

She seemed happy as she retrieved the comb and stood up. “Thank you,” she said with a gracious inclination of her head and without a backward glance walked into the partially open cupboard.

I was out of the house in seconds, although how I had the presence of mind to lock the drawer and bedroom door behind me is something I will never know. To my eternal relief, my horse was standing where I’d left him. I mounted in one leap and left at a gallop. I did not stop until I reached the guest-house in Brighton. I threw the reins to the stable-hand and flew to my room, where I locked myself in.

By now it was late afternoon, and as my room faced the sea, under normal circumstances I should have felt the last of the heat from the sun. Yet I put a match to the kindling in the grate, for I was shaking and feverish with cold. I tried to think rationally. Had I been hallucinating? Perhaps I had suffered one of those temporary brain disorders that give rise to so-called “supernatural” events.

I had almost convinced myself that it had all been an illusion when I happened to look down. Caught around the buttons of my jacket were several long black hairs. I peeled them away with trembling hands and threw them into the fire. They crackled with disproportionate loudness, and for a split second I could have sworn that the flames had turned bright blue.

I was too perturbed to visit my friend. Besides, I needed to think what, if anything, I should tell him. In the interim, I sent him a message, informing him that I had secured the papers, but that due to ill health would not be able to deliver them until the next day.

They say a good night's sleep will cure just about anything. Perhaps when it is aided by a substantial dinner and a bottle of claret, they are right, for the next morning I awoke considerably refreshed. More for kindness than any ridicule on my part, I had decided to say nothing to my friend. The poor man had already suffered enough, and no good could be derived from adding to his misery. However, upon arriving at his hotel, I discovered that he had gone out the previous evening and had not returned. He never did.

Naturally I informed the authorities, but only a cursory search was made, the conclusion being that in his current mental state, which truth compelled me to reveal, he had finally committed suicide. I was not, and am still not, convinced.

*Annette took to writing after a 'routine' eye operation robbed her of her eyesight in 2009. Since then, she has won numerous awards and is the author of Double Take, a cosy murder mystery novel set in a quaint seaside hotel, and the increasingly popular children's adventure/supernatural novel, [The Ghosts of Camals College](#).*

# Circles

*by w.m.lewis*

Driving in circles  
The garage sale is thriving  
Cars the personal  
reminders of what others  
think and know of us

Items on the road  
Colourful and priceless  
The children shopping  
for something old  
Ownership a joy discovered

The happy godless  
smiling, weather like a blessing  
Warm bread the incense  
wafting through the day  
Driving round in circles

## *Synopsis*

I frequently compose poetry while in motion, be it walking, playing sport, on the bus or train, or driving around. This poem was composed during a drive on a sunny Saturday morning, when all felt good and right in the world.

*w.m.lewis is an Australian poet and writer. His poetry has appeared in Alliterati Magazine, Best Australian Poems 2011, Cordite Poetry Review, Eclecticism, Multiverses, PoV Magazine, Railroad Poetry Project, street cake magazine, and The Night Light. You can find him (a little too often) on Twitter [@w\\_m\\_lewis](https://twitter.com/w_m_lewis), and at his blog <http://whatevertheysing.wordpress.com/>.*

# Only After School

*by Anna Ryan-Punch*

She knocks on my door every afternoon at about four.

“Can Emma come out to play?” My mother’s answer is muffled. I imagine Emma’s silhouette at the fly screen, her messy curls framed by the metal curlicues of the door.

“Emma!” my mum’s dry voice cracks on the last syllable of my name. We are Emma and Emma. She’s in grade five, a year below me, so we don’t play at school, only after school. It would probably get confusing anyway, with the same name.

Mum coughs. It’s hay fever season and she says that whatever’s bloomed in the last week is fighting a deadly battle with her sinuses. “Emma!” she shouts again. “Emma’s here!”

“Coming!” I shout. I wrestle my grey striped school dress over my head and drop it on my bedroom floor. I pull on a pair of yellow towelling shorts and my second-hand Sportsgirl t-shirt, worn so soft by my sister that it’s like wearing nothing. Sometimes I rub the fabric back and forth between my thumb and forefinger and it feels like skin. I kick my school shoes under the bed. I’ve flattened their heel-backs down like the other girls at school are doing this month. Mum was annoyed about that. “Why are you standing on the backs of them? You’ll wreck them.” When I said I didn’t know, that I just was, she rubbed her forehead with the side of her hand and muttered something about “it starting this early.”

I trot down the hall, automatically avoiding the floorboards that creak. Mum is holding the screen door open and Emma is kicking the corner of our doormat. Her fringe has parted itself in the middle again. Half of it points off to one side like a signpost. She grins when she sees me and pokes her tongue into the gap between her front teeth. I stick out my tongue and curl it up to touch the tip of my nose.

Mum shakes her head. “Do you two want afternoon tea?” Emma’s nose wrinkles a little. “Afternoon tea” at my place is apples and carob and unsweetened pulpy orange juice. At Emma’s it’s Nutella, mini packets of Black & Gold chips, and Fanta.

“We’re alright,” I say.

“Hmm. Got your watch on? Come back at six thirty, okay? I don’t want to have to comb the bush for you.”

Emma and I skip along the warped grey boards of the front verandah and jump off the end.

“I’m hungry,” she says.

“Me too. Is your mum home?”

“Yep. And Dad.”

All the lights are off in Emma’s house. It’s the middle of November and everything outside is hot and bright and clear, but the air in Emma’s house seems old and trapped, like they’ve been away on holiday for weeks and no one opened the curtains. I stand on one leg on the sticky kitchen lino and draw circles in the air with my foot. Emma wrenches open a cupboard and shoves her head and arms between the crackling plastic packets. “Do you want Cheetos, or,” she rustles some more “Pizza shapes, or Tiny Teddies?”

“Is there any Nutella?” I love Nutella. Emma always eats hers in big globs, loading up the little white plastic stick as full as she can and stripping it off with her teeth. It takes me about four times as long to eat my packet. First I lick off any smears that have stuck to the foil lid, then run the stick around the very edge, scraping out a sweet thin track. I lick the hazelnut-flavoured goo off slowly, until there’s only a streak of brown spit left on the stick. Then I trace another lap, then another. Emma says I would make a good archaeologist. When I’ve scraped out every last morsel I lift the little plastic dish to my mouth and lick the tray white and clean. Emma says I don’t get enough junk food at home, and it’s made me weird.

“I think we’re out,” she says. I’m surprised to find I’m almost tearful. “There’s Passiona, though.”

“Cheetos and Passiona,” I say.

“Is that you, Emma?” A thin, high voice floats down from upstairs.

“YES!” we shout.

“Can you bring me up some Codis? I’ve got a bad one.” Emma’s mother gets migraines. I guess that’s why the curtains are usually shut; she says the light makes it worse. Emma gets out a glass and squeaks in surprise as water from the tap sprays back up out of it and onto her shirt. She pops two floury white discs out of their foil and drops them into the water one by one. Plink. Plink. They fizz quietly and smell a bit like metal.

I follow her up the stairs, counting the marks on the back of her legs. There are five mozzie bites, two small bruises and one long scratch from when she got caught on a tree-branch last week.

I can hear the shower running, and as we pass the bathroom on the way to Emma’s mother, a

cheerful voice says “Hi girls.”

“Hi Dad,” says Emma, and keeps walking. I glance up. Emma’s dad is standing naked in the shower, washing his armpits. I can see his penis. He gives me a small wave.

I quickly look down at the brown carpet again. “Hi Mr Steen.” I hurry after Emma.

“Just put it on the bedside table, love.” Emma’s mother’s voice is tight and soft. It sounds like it hurts her to talk. The bedroom is hot and musty and everything looks dark brown. The sheets are twisted into a coil at the bottom of the bed, and two pillows have fallen to the floor. It makes me feel tired.

I keep my eyes carefully turned towards the wall as we walk back past the bathroom, but the shower noise has stopped.

We take our afternoon tea outside. The fresh air hits my face and I feel like I’ve just dived into the sea. The sluggishness in my limbs disappears and I run round Emma in circles, singing the Lipton tea jingle in a fake-operatic voice. She laughs and I see the little green flecks in her brown eyes. “Let’s go to the tree,” she says. We half-walk, half-run through the tangle of Emma’s garden, trying not to spill our drinks. At the base of the big tree we both stop and look up. “It’s a Stink Tree,” Emma once told me. “They’re really hard to kill and they grow really fast. So we just left it there.”

“Why is it called a Stink Tree?” I had asked. I pressed my nose to the leaves, but they just smelled like plant.

She shrugged. “If you get the seeds, bash them, then spit on them, they stink.”

We down our Passiona in sticky gulps and I tuck the Cheetos packet into my shorts. Emma grips hers between her teeth and we swarm up the tree. Our feet know the steps, and we each have our favourite seats up among the smooth branches. Mine is a trio of limbs, perfectly arranged to make seat, back-rest and foot-rest. Emma’s is a curved fork that she can nestle into, her legs stretched up along a branch. Sometimes we climb higher, testing how far we dare to go. I always chicken out when the branches get thin enough to bend under me, but Emma goes further, swaying towards the top of the tree and grabbing handfuls of curving fronds to force them to take her weight. Sometimes I dream that the branches splinter and tear under her feet and I see her bounce from limb to limb all the way down the tree, smacking her arm against one branch, her head against another. In the dream I see her lying in a tangle on the grass, leaves and sap and blood clogging her brown hair.

We finish our Cheetos and lick the lurid orange powder from our stained fingers. I stuff the

empty packet into my shorts pocket and Emma hangs hers upside down on a tree branch.

“What do you want to do? The river, the trailer, or the swing?” I never play inside with Emma. She’s my outside friend; outside of our houses and outside of school. She came to my birthday party once, at McDonalds. It took me all year to convince my mother to let me have it there like everyone else did. When they brought out the ice-cream cake, I thought she was going to explode. There was me, six of my school friends, and Emma, and it was a bit weird. We didn’t quite know what to say to each other when it wasn’t just the two of us digging holes or making rope swings.

“Trailer first. Then we should do twizzling again, with the broom.” It’s like this every afternoon. We swing like pale monkeys across the rungs of the bare trailer cover back and forth until our hands blister and our arms shake. We build wobbly cubbies with roofs of long grass down at the river and dangle our pale feet in the water like leech-bait. We spin in laughing circles with a broom til the garden shudders in our eyes and then fling the stick down and try to jump over it. It’s a shock to find my face suddenly pressed against the grass as the world tips sideways. We don’t play make-believe like I do with my other friends. We don’t pretend to be other people or act out births, deaths and marriages. When we talk at all, it’s about where to put our hands, how deep to dig, how high to wind up the swing before letting it spiral out. We are everything physical.

By the time the blue hands on my Swatch creep towards 6.30 pm, I’m damp with sweat and ragged with laughter. My ponytail has slid loose and long pieces of dark hair swing in front of my eyes. There are grass stains on my shorts and my face. Emma has given up on pinning back her curls and slid her scrunchie onto her wrist instead. We lie on our backs in a corner of her garden, chewing sourgrass and slapping at the mozzies. The yellow flowers wave above our heads on top of their fat juicy stems.

“Got him,” says Emma. I rise up onto my elbows to look. A flattened black tangle of legs sticks to her skin, trailing a red smear that clings to the hairs on her wrist.

“That’s your blood,” I say.

“Might be yours too,” she says. She flicks the crumpled mosquito body away but leaves the blood on her arm.

“I have to go home. Bye.”

“Bye.” I leave her lying in the sourgrass patch and press through the lilly pilly bushes that separate our houses. I can hear my parents talking as I let the screen door rest quietly behind me.

“Kay came around yesterday,” my mother is saying. Her voice is still stubby with hay fever. I

stop outside the kitchen door. Kay is Mrs Steen, Emma's mum. "She wanted to talk to me about Barry." I can't hear my father's reply. "I know," says my mum. "I did my best, but I hardly even know her except as our neighbour. I don't think she has anyone else to talk to about it, poor love. She was crying by the end." I chew on my lip and trace the grooves in the door-frame with my little finger. Barry is Mr Steen. My father speaks again but the only word I can make out is fish. Fish? "He is," my mother clangs the oven door open and shut. "I think there was a fair bit she didn't let on about, too." She sighs. "Where's Emma? I told her to be back by six thirty."

This time my father's voice is closer to the door and I can understand him. "Probably not quite time to drag the river yet, love. You know how those Emmas lose track of time when they're out there being wild creatures." I jump back from the door and then step forward again, as if I've just come home. I open the kitchen door and my father stands in front of me, his arm outstretched towards the knob.

"Aha!" he exclaims. "My knight in shining towelling shorts!" He swings me up onto his hip, even though I'm a bit big for it now. I grin at him and he wrinkles his nose in mock distaste. "You smell like a compost heap, Em."

"Emma, *look* at your shorts," says my mum. She presses her bottom teeth forward and sighs. "Take them off so I can put them in to soak."

Dad slides me down his leg to the floor and I pull off my shorts.

"Go and have a quick shower before tea, see if you can get the stains off your face. Hey, Oranges-in-a-bag—" I turn at the doorway. That's one of Mum's nicknames for me (she says my bum looks like two oranges in a string bag).

"Make sure you chuck your undies in the wash, don't just leave them on the bathroom floor. That's your dad's job."

Dinner is hunza pie. I poke the wholemeal crust around my plate and think about Nutella. Maybe Mrs Steen will have gone to the supermarket by tomorrow. That night I dream about running water and hot brown rooms.

One afternoon Emma doesn't show up at the front door. I push through the lilly pillies and hesitate before knocking on the Steen's front door. I wait, then knock again. Eventually I hear footsteps at the door. Mrs Steen pulls it open and squints down at me. Her face is red and her nostrils look all swollen. There are dribbles of mascara down her cheeks and her eyelids puff down against her lashes. "Oh Emma, don't mind me," she says, then clears her throat claggily. "I'm just watching Steel Magnolias and having a bit of a sook in the sad parts." She smiles shakily. I glance behind her into the lounge room, but the TV is turned off.

“Um, is Emma home?” I ask.

“Oh sorry hon, no, her dad’s taken her to the beach. Aaron’s down visiting and they all went straight from school.” Aaron is Emma’s half-brother. He’s sixteen and lives in Brisbane with Mr Steen’s first wife. He smokes weed and is going to drop out of school instead of doing year eleven and twelve. I know this because I listen at kitchen doors a lot.

“Oh. Okay. I’ll see her tomorrow.” Mrs Steen nods vaguely and pulls the front door closed.

Emma’s dad took us to the beach once. He had a new camera and wanted to try out some black and white film. He took photos of ripples in the dunes, and crumbling sandstone islands. He took some of Emma and I swimming and sitting on the rocks. He was going to bring some copies of those ones around for my parents, but it turned out that Emma had her eyes shut in every single photo. “Typical,” he’d said.

I trail home and play hospitals with my Barbies until it’s time for tea. That night I dream about undertows and the prickly rocks down at the river mouth.

When the last day of the school year is over, Emma and I sit on the warm dirt at the river bank with our feet in the water. I plait long blades of grass together and try to tie them off at the end, but they always tear. “How long will you be in Adelaide for?” she asks.

I look across at her, but she’s staring at a drop of water hanging from her fingertip. “Three weeks,” I say. “We’re staying with mum’s friends after the wedding.”

Emma nods. The drop falls from her fingertip and makes a silent circle on her knee. “Want to build a raft?”

“I don’t know,” I say. It’s the end of grade six. Next year I’ll be in high school. I’m starting to feel too old for all of this. “I’m pretty tired. I might go home soon.” Emma doesn’t say anything, and after a while I get to my feet and climb up the river bank towards the road. That night in my dreams I gather armfuls of long grass and lay them over a grid of branches. The rough blades grab at my hands.

When we get back from Adelaide I feel taller. “Three centimetres in a month!” Dad raises his eyebrows. “You’ll be overtaking your mother by the end of the year.”

Mum is sorting masses of dirty laundry. “I don’t know why we ever go on holiday, all it does is make washing.” I’m still looking at my new height on the door-frame. “Why don’t you go over and see if Emma’s home?” Mum says.

I shrug. “Maybe later.” I trail off to my bedroom and survey my shelves. I’m starting to think about putting my dolls and teddies away in the cupboard.

“Emma!” Mum’s voice calls from the kitchen. “Can you come back a minute?”

I roll my eyes and trudge back to the kitchen. I step on the squeaky boards extra hard. Mum is standing next to the pile of mail that arrived while we were away, with a piece of paper in her hand.

“Love,” she says, “The Steens moved away while we were gone.”

I frown. “What?”

Mum looks down at the paper. “It just says they’re moving away and sorry they missed saying goodbye. Did Emma mention that to you?”

I instinctively look out the window over towards Emma’s house. I shake my head. “Where did they go? Does it say why?”

“It doesn’t even leave a forwarding address. Oh Em, you would have liked to say bye to Emma, wouldn’t you? You guys have a lot of fun, barrelling around outside like mad things.” She pauses, then tilts my face up to hers with a cool hand. “Are you sad, honey?”

“It’s okay,” I say, turning my face away. “I think I was starting to outgrow her anyway.” Mum folds up the letter and puts it back in the envelope. “Can I go outside for a bit?”

“Come back in for tea. You know the drill.”

I slip between the lilly pilly bushes and walk slowly up to Emma’s house. I cup my hands around my eyes and try to peer into the lounge room through a gap in the drawn curtains. I can’t make anything out. I circle the house, peering in each window and feeling like a burglar, but I can’t see in anywhere. Frowning, I head down towards the Stink Tree and strip a handful of seeds from a low-hanging branch. I crush them to crumbs with the heel of my shoe, work my mouth vigorously, and spit. I lean in, pause, and then breathe in deeply through my nose. I breathe out, breathe in again. There’s no smell.

Dinner is hunza pie again. That night, I don’t dream at all.

*Anna Ryan-Punch is a Melbourne writer and critic. Her publications include work in Southerly, Overland, Antipodes, The Age, Quadrant, Westerly, and Island. She also blogs at [annaryanpunch.blogspot.com](http://annaryanpunch.blogspot.com).*

# Mrs Fernandez

by *Su-May Tan*

*Apams*, curry puffs, *goreng pisang*. It's curious how Rizman's childhood is peppered with memories of these foods—not the foods per se, but the images they conjure when one brings them to mind: Mrs Fernandez stepping out of her grey Saab, flashing a smooth white calf, pink plastic bag in hand. She was always impeccably dressed, and on that day, which Rizman remembers so vividly, she was wearing a purple and brown dress, grasped at the waist by a leather belt.

The following Saturday they bumped into each other again when Rizman was not in uniform and Mrs Fernandez was in jeans, a thin gold chain gracing her collar bone.

“Are you getting anything?”

Rizman shook his head and watched Mrs Fernandez enter the coffee shop. She emerged bearing a brown paper bag. “What did you get?”

“Croissants.”

He watched her red nails crinkle the paper, ever so lightly. The folding of the bag was a delicate dance that hinted at how she would approach its contents.

“What's that?” she said. “Kabuki?”

“No, *The Sandman*.” He handed her the book. She said she liked Hiroka, she had the whole collection. He said he did too. He had never met anyone her age who liked comic books.

“Do you want to come up?” she said.

§

Her studio was upstairs. Yes, she was an artist. “A wannabe,” she said, laughing. Rizman didn't laugh, he said it was cool. He stepped into the living room which was filled with not much at all. In fact, there was nothing living-room-like about the place except for a sofa in the corner. The rest of the room was filled with plastic boxes, easels, tubs of paint.

There was a faint smell of turpentine but the air seemed fresh, almost fragrant. Rizman looked at his watch.

“Did you say you have tuition?” said Mrs Fernandez.

“No,” he said. “I just finished.” His mother would be there soon. He could already picture her in the weather-beaten Honda Civic, crouched over the wheel. *How was tuition, Babu? Are you ready for the exams?* Babu, this was her name for him, meaning ‘little boy’, though one would hardly call him little. Rizman touched a row of necklaces hanging on a rack. She’d made them herself. “It’s therapeutic,” she said and Rizman wondered what kind of therapy a woman like her would need.

She filled up a kettle with water and put it on the stove. She had such a gentle way about her. If she were an animal she would be a gazelle.

“How about me?” he said. She looked at him sleepily and he regretted he’d asked.

“A wolf,” she said. Rizman looked up. He had expected a frog or a meerkat, some strange creature you’d find in a hole.

This was the way the conversation went between them, somewhat hazy, somewhat dreamy, as the words floated around the room. When the clock slid another notch, Rizman got up to leave.

“I like this one,” he said, pointing to a painting on the wall. It was dark and grey with swirly lines that swallowed him up.

§

The next time he got dropped off at Maths tuition, he didn’t wait for his mother’s car to disappear.

“I brought that graphic novel you said you liked.” Mrs Fernandez stood at the doorway before opening the door fully.

“Come in,” she said.

“Are you busy?”

“No, not really.” They made tea in the kitchen then moved to the two wicker chairs on the balcony. And so it began, weekly meetings whenever he could. After tuition. Before football. When he said Ravin’s mother was giving him a ride back.

It did not occur that many times, but it was often enough to be engrained in Rizman’s head for years to come. Not specific occasions but nuances, like the sunlight that flitted through the ferns on her balcony. And a certain smell, like tea or berries, which reminded Rizman of her whenever he stepped into a jungle.

§

Years later, when Rizman would be with one of his girlfriends, the image of Mrs Fernandez often visited his thoughts. Once a girl asked him what was wrong and he said nothing. But a strange nostalgia hovered over him for the rest of the evening. This had happened to him before, with another girl, and it was a sign that things were about to change.

It was always the same. As soon as they spoke of love, as soon as it was time to take that next rational step, he would withdraw into himself and the whole thing would shrivel up into awkward silence. One day a girl he had been seeing for almost a year said, “What are you trying to prove, Rizman? Is there someone else?”

“No,” he said. He mulled over her words for weeks. He wrapped himself in work, in new activities—scuba diving, hiking, social work—and then the next person came along.

§

She had brought home yam fritters that day. The pink sack lay on the marble table, still hot from the oily pan it had come from. She was outside in the terrace with the little girl on her lap. Rizman looked at her for a second. She didn’t look back. He followed Joshua to the kitchen and they polished off everything, including some *murukku* from the cupboard.

They returned to Joshua’s room and resumed their Galaxy Battles. Rizman accumulated 9,332 heads and destroyed a record-breaking 71 aliens. He stepped out of the room, red-eyed and stiff-backed. Mrs Fernandez was nowhere to be found. Rizman hopped onto his bicycle and slid down *Jalan Limau Purut* only to see a grey Saab turn the corner. He didn’t need to follow her to know where she was going.

§

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“I saw your car and—”

“It’s nice to see you.”

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she said. She let him in. This was the latest he’d ever been there, and the air smelt different at this time of the evening. Fresher, more moist. Rizman sniffed his shirt to see if it was him.

“What have you been working on?” he said. Her face tensed up.

“Have you got any more Neil Gaiman stuff?” she said. She squealed at *The Sandman Infinity*

he whipped out. They spent the next fifteen minutes on the sofa. Rizman was terribly aware of her body next to his, every curve of her waist beneath that purple dress.

There was a space between them but it was as if there was no space at all. Rizman was too scared to move, too scared that she would move away. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he sat up.

“What's wrong?” she said. She was sitting up too. The evening light poured in behind her casting a shadow on her face. Her hair glowed. It glowed like it had a life of its own, the dark brown curls framing her soft face.

“You're very pretty,” he said. She laughed and said, “And you're very sweet.”

“You have really nice ankles.”

She laughed again. Mrs Fernandez narrowed her eyes at him. She looked like a child. She leaned forward and the pendant at her neck dangled in mid-air. Just as quickly she smiled and said she had to get back to work.

## §

When Rizman reached the age of thirty-five, when he was supposed to have had all the weightings of a man his age, he bumped into Mrs Fernandez again. It was in a back lane in Bangsar where he had just parked his Volkswagen GTI. He would not have noticed her had he not been keeping an ear out for snatch thieves.

He was in fact surprised that she was walking there by herself, in a long sea-green skirt that swished and swashed as she strode. To say she was the same delightful creature as before would be a lie, but she had garnered a certain weight to her bearing that only motherhood and the graduation from it could bring. It was this weight that pulled Rizman along as they strode towards the café lights of Jalan Telawi.

“Where do you want to go?” Rizman said. He stopped outside the glass doors of Alexis although his original plan was to go to Pelita.

“I was just going to go to the *mamak*,” she said.

“How about Pelita?”

“That would be great.”

They sat at a table at the back, next to a *neem* tree, though you could hardly notice it at that

time of the night. The plastic back of Rizman's chair creaked as he watched her studying the menu. It occurred to him then that he was the exact age she had been when they last met. He told her about his recent spate of business trips. She updated him on the kids. Joshua was working in Scotland. Her daughter was a barrister and worked for Screen and Partners.

"How about you?" he said. "You still painting?"

"Yes, I live in the studio now."

"What happened to the house?"

"We sold it."

Joshua's father died five years ago. She mentioned this without sentiment. They spoke about other matters almost immediately, catching up on threads that had been left from years before. Finally she said, "Do you like your work?"

"Not really." Rizman observed the people walking by, in particular, a girl in a short grey dress and heels, her age betrayed by the way she tottered and clunked down the five-foot way.

Rizman wondered when the people here had gotten so young. Or perhaps it was he that had gotten old.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Sure."

Before he could speak, Rizman's phone vibrated on the table. He looked at the screen and put the phone away.

"You have a girlfriend?" said Mrs Fernandez. There was a split-second pause before he replied, "Sort of."

## §

She lay beside him, her glossy hair splayed on the pillow, curls and ringlets that twirled in all directions. She looked just as she had in the studio that day. He stared at the curve of her back, the soft, white sheets under her arms. An image of his mother flashed before him then disappeared. There was a thud of newspaper hitting concrete, a motorcycle that sped away. Rizman closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

*Su-May Tan is an advertising copywriter and mum who lives in Melbourne. She tries to write between kids, work and life. Originally from Malaysia, she has had one story published in the Silverfish New Writing 6 anthology and another shortlisted*

*and commended in the Mslexia Short Story Competition 2014.*

# The Happy Mule

by Frank Scozzari

Their mistake was obvious, Jagger knew. They had pushed too hard and too far for a mountaintop that was unreachable. They had committed the most deadly of mountaineering sins, feeling invincible in the face of nature's fury. And now, like a thousand climbers before them, they were going to pay the price.

"If we can follow our tracks back down to the ridge," he said, "we can make it back down to Trail Crest."

Rick, who sat opposite on the wooden bench, nodded his head, but his blank stare told that he knew different. In the minutes before reaching the summit hut the snow had been coming at them sideways. Still now they could hear it piling on outside.

"Why leave at all?" he asked. "I mean... maybe our chances are better staying? We stay warm, we stay alive, and we wait for the storm to blow over."

"And if the storm doesn't blow over?" Jagger said. "...if it goes on for a week or two?"

"Or three days for that matter," Rick replied.

There was silence again, except for the sound of the wind howling outside. Jagger looked up and listened. He could hear the wind whispering through the ceiling cracks, like the sirens that had called them to the summit.

*How was it that two experienced climbers could have gotten themselves into such a mess?* he thought. *It was the Sierras. That's how.* The storms always come from the west, from the Pacific, deceptively, unexpectedly, from where you can't see them until they're on you. And then you're caught in it and there's nothing you can do about it but try to fight your way through it and try to survive. He recalled the news about the search and rescue climber found frozen to death just one week before, barely eighty feet from his tent. Dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, he had gone out for an autumn climb and could not make his way back in a white-out. He had not even a simple wind parka with him in the event of a snow flurry.

*How could he not make eighty feet?* Jagger had asked himself. *It's easy when you can't see the hand in front of your face,* he now knew.

They too, had climbed out of the Portals the day before in eighty-degree heat wearing nothing but t-shirts and shorts. By mid-afternoon, the heat rising from the high desert floor formed huge

thunderclouds along the eastern slopes. It was typical of late October, so they thought nothing of it, but by the time they reached the timberline it was completely overcast. The following morning they found themselves staring up at large droplets of rain and ice coming down against the nylon of their tent.

“With each passing day the snow will be that much higher,” Rick said.

“And we will be that much weaker,” Jagger added.

“And our toes will be that much more frozen.”

“And we’ll have no trail to follow.”

“We go?” Rick asked.

Jagger nodded his head.

The heavy steel door swung open with the full force of the wind behind it. They stepped out into the whiteness and looked southwest, into the direction from which they had come, and they could see that their tracks, which had been knee-deep in the snow just moments before, were already gone, buried in the snow.

“This way,” Jagger shouted, stepping forward.

He disappeared into the white haze and Rick followed at his heels, leaning low into the wind to keep from blowing over.

They cut diagonally through the snow, down across the large buttress which formed the backbone of the mountain. There were trail markers at first, dark rock pilings that peeked above the snow. But soon the markers were gone, covered by the heavy snowfall, and they made their way by memory and intuition. About a quarter mile down, the backbone steepened. Ahead they could see a cliff, strewn with talus rock and granite boulders.

“Is this it?” Rick asked. He shouted loudly so he could be heard over the sound of the storm.

Jagger wiped the snow from his goggles and looked west. It was difficult to see anything beyond a few feet, but from what he could make out, some dark blotches of talus rock steeply below them, he believed it to be the place where the trail switched back to the west.

“Yes,” he shouted back. “I think it is!”

He pulled the scarf back across his face, tucked the end of it down the neck of his collar, and

turned east, heading down along a steep white slope below an incline of huge granite rocks. Within minutes he knew they had made the right choice as he could see a trail marker ahead perched on the top of a huge, granite boulder. He turned back and waited for Rick, who was now stumbling through the snow.

“Are you okay?” Jagger yelled out.

“It’s the altitude,” Rick shouted back, inhaling the cold, thin air greedily into his lungs. “Keep going! Don’t stop!”

Jagger obliged, slogging on through the thigh-deep snow. The descent was steeper now and more difficult, nearly impossible to find sure footing between the snow and a smooth granite ledge which rose above them.

Further down, they saw the dark outline of granite pillars. It was the Keeler Needles, Jagger knew, rising into the clouds—the saw-toothed ridge that marked the crest of the continental divide, beyond which was Owens Valley and the warmth of the desert sun. It was a heartening sight. The ridge itself, a narrow rocky staircase, would provide a navigational respite and from there it was a direct, angular descent to Trail Crest.

He waited for Rick to emerge from the haze. He looked slow and disheveled with icicles hanging from his face.

“Are you okay?” Jagger asked again.

Rick nodded.

“It’s the ridge,” Jagger shouted cheerfully. He motioned with his hand down to the south. “We can be at base camp in a couple hours. We go fast?”

Rick nodded again.

Together they headed down the ridge, quickly, negotiating the granite pathway between ice and snowdrifts, blasted by winds on both sides. There were huge granite spires that provided protection from the wind. Each time they stepped behind one the wind would die down, but each time they stepped back out they were met by a blustery stream of cold air. From one rock shelter to the next they fought their way downward, trying to gain as much ground as they could as quickly as they could in fear that if they did not, they would be blown off the ridge or frozen in the snow.

Running seemed to make it better, Jagger thought. If they ran, maybe their feet would thaw out? It amazed him that he could walk at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when

they hit the earth.

They crossed an ice bridge, beyond which the ridge narrowed even more. The roar of the wind made it nearly impossible to communicate. Each time Jagger looked back he had to wait longer for Rick's dark figure to emerge from the clouds. But when he would emerge, like a ghost from a white abyss, his hand would be waving forward and he would shout, "Go! Go! Don't stop!"

But the intervals of time between seeing Rick and not seeing him grew longer. Each time Jagger waited, the ghostly apparition would reappear more slowly, its hand waving forward with less enthusiasm. The urgency to move and go quickly weighed upon Jagger, and despite Rick's lagging, Jagger did not want to stop. *A mountain is not something you conquer, he thought, it is something you survive. And to survive you must be as unyielding as the mountain itself.*

Again he found himself standing there, waiting for Rick for what seemed to be an eternity. And as he stood there, he could feel his legs stiffening up.

"Come on Rick!" he yelled into the whiteness. He felt himself shivering all over. "Rick!"

Once again the ghostly apparition emerged from the clouds, stumbling, its hand no longer waving forward.

Now the whiteness seemed eternal, and before the dark blurry image emerged again, Jagger felt himself losing his sensibility. Each time he lifted his head to look forward, coloured spots shot through the sky. When he looked back he felt the blood throbbing through his head. He could not recall when he had last seen Rick, nor could he wait for him. All that was mortal within him told him that he must go, and go quickly. Yet he stopped once more and gazed back into the milky haze.

*He's a tough guy, he thought. He'll make it fine.*

Down through the wraithlike swirls of snow and ice, he rushed. He could feel the mobility of his legs restricting further. It was happening, he knew; his joints were freezing. He knew he must overcome the overwhelming desire to cease and rest. He recalled the many mountaineering stories of men fighting for their lives, as they fought now, who had stopped to rest only to find themselves unable to move again, and it caused a great fear to well up inside him.

Continuing down, stumbling in a quick, mindless shuffle, his thoughts drifted. With every stride his mind wondered further away, and it enabled him to escape the fear of his current predicament. He recalled a time in his distant past—a beautiful summer day in the Sierras. Early in July, when it was hot in the valley but spring in the high country, and the meadows were all green

and full of flowers and the creeks were brimming with crystal clear water of melted snow. The trail ahead was gentle and inviting, winding its way up through the forest into a high valley. He felt the weight of his pack comfortable on his back, felt the buckwheat brushing against his leg, the warm sunrays which came against his cheeks, and the cool breeze from the snow of the mountain peaks which intermittently crossed his path. He could smell the odour of pine and the junipers, and the violets and woodrush which had sprung along the creek.

*It was the odour of nostalgia, he thought, as the wind bit coldly at his nose now.*

So many times as a child, he had gone to the mountains with his father, and they had walked through these beautiful meadows, crossed through patches of latent snow, watched the wind blow the treetops back and forth, and made a campfire along a creek. They had made beds of pine needles and laid a tarp upon them, and slept comfortably and peacefully in their bags. So many memorable experiences... It was why being in the Sierras, for him, had always been like being in the cradle of his mother's arms, or being warm next to a fire in a mountain cabin, next to an old friend cheerfully exchanging experiences of adventure and mountain triumphs. The rivers and streams of the Sierra, the annual snowfalls and spring melting, was a rejuvenation of life, he knew, bringing back to the earth all that was taken in the dark winter. The experience of nature, and being in it, replenished his soul. Every foot he stepped into the wilderness was for him like stepping a foot into heaven. And of all the wildernesses he had ever walked in, the High Sierra was unmatched in its splendour and grandeur.

There was that time he had come across the dead mule in the grass. It was in a high meadow near Piute Pass, and he was alone at the time; he remembered seeing it there, suddenly, along the side of the trail with its rib bones exposed in the sunlight, protruding from its hide. It had been there since the summer before, likely frozen and covered in snow during the long winter, and now was beneath the warm sun again, continuing on its natural path of decay.

The hide had dried and had split open in places, exposing some of the skeleton beneath, but it was also intact in places. Its brown, fur shone brightly in the places where it remained. The head had decomposed considerably, its eye-sockets were dark and hollow, and where the hide had pulled back from the teeth, it exposed them in a way that made it seem as if the mule was smiling.

*And why not? Jagger recalled thinking. If one could choose a place for eternal rest, why not choose a place of absolute serenity? Here where nature rejuvenates itself every year.*

Dying was something he knew little of, but living was something he rejoiced in and relished. He recalled the delight of taking the last few steps up a hilltop covered in wildflowers, feeling the tall, wind-blown grass brush against his legs and the pack-straps tight against his shoulders. He remembered diving into a crystal clear pool beneath a waterfall in a hot tropical paradise and

feeling the coolness of the water all around him; he recalled the warm rush of air coming up from a Parisian subway tunnel as he descended on a cold night; and the time he walked through a bamboo forest with a woman he loved and how they had stopped and listened to the tall wooden shafts clicking overhead like wind chimes.

*To live is to dance like no one's watching,* he thought.

Now the wind blew cold against his face, biting deeply into his skin. The amount of time that had past since he last saw Rick was uncertain, but seemed considerable. And in fact, the amount of time that had passed since they left the summit hut was unknown to him as he had lost all concept of time. Though his legs were still moving methodically forward, the angle in which he could bend them had severely constricted. Each step seemed shorter. It was an effort just to extend them, reaching eagerly for a smaller piece of frozen ground each time. Yet if he stopped, he knew, even for a second, his legs would freeze. He was a gaunt old man, he thought, hunched over and hobbling; or a fish trying to walk on the frozen earth with his fins.

And when he thought of it, he felt the fear coming back. It was nature that did the taking, and the greatest of all takers were the tall mountains.

He passed through another rock formation that blocked the wind, shutting it down like a switch on a fan, and there was a place at the base of the rock without snow that looked warm and lovely, like the lap of a beautiful woman in which to lay one's head. If only for a moment he could stop and rest, he'd curl up behind a rock and get warm. But then he would never straighten his legs again, he knew.

Again he came out from behind the rocks and was slapped by the wind. He could no longer feel it biting his face. The throbbing in his head was gone now and there was only numbness. The grey sky was full of colourful sunspots. His body felt unevenly balanced. His equilibrium had lost its centre. When he touched his nose there was no sensation. Nor could he feel his legs, although they were still moving beneath him, they did so as if they were not attached to his body.

He came past another large west-facing rock, and in the moment he stepped behind it, he was again out of the wind. And like before, he saw a place at the base of the rock where no snow had reached, and it looked warm and inviting, like the arms of a lover. He thought of the happy mule. So nice it would be to lie in the tall grass of a high meadow, warm in the summer sun. *For all of eternity to be basking in sunlight!*

§

He awoke in his right mind, curled up in a ball on a rocky ledge. For some time he lay motionless, the genial sunshine pouring upon him and saturating his frozen body with its warmth. He looked up

and saw the clouds breaking. He had vague memories of his flight down the mountain. He recalled the wind and the snow, but for how long he had been beaten by it, for two days or two weeks he did not know. In his mind he saw only the sunshine and the dead mule in the tall grass, smiling, happy and content.

And from the meadows below the timberline, where the sun was breaking through the clouds, came the odour of pine and junipers, and of the violets along the creeks. He could imagine the mule lying there in the grass, the warm sun on its flanks, the smells of the meadow sweetly breathing in through its nostrils.

And now he imagined himself there in the meadow, and he could smell the junipers himself as if the wind had caught their scent from the icy canyons below and brought it up to him.

*Frank Scozarri's fiction has previously appeared in various literary magazines, including The Kenyon Review, Tampa Review, Pacific Review, The Nassau Review, Berkeley Fiction Review, Ellipsis Magazine, South Dakota Review, Minetta Review, Roanoke Review, Reed Magazine, Hawai'i Pacific Review and The MacGuffin. Writing awards include Winner of the National Writer's Association Short Story Contest and three Pushcart Prize nominations. Frank's story "Children of the Tides" appeared in Issue Four of Tincture Journal.*

# Proximity

by *S. G. Larner*

*Janice*

The sounds melded into a seamless cacophony: the lunging dog's throaty growls, Briony's shrieks of laughter as she struggled to control him, Philip swearing and the repetitive strikes against wood as he wielded the hammer. Outside of this chaos I stood, one hand on my hip, the other shading my eyes, watching them grow smaller and smaller as the distance between us grew. I squinted up at the three grey lumps huddled in the tree and wiped the sweat from my brow. With the noise roaring in my ears I retreated to the cool of the house.

The stark white tiles in the kitchen glared at me. I pulled the goat meat from the freezer and dumped it into the sink to thaw, tensing my shoulders at the inevitable backlash from Briony. Outside the dog's growls had turned to thunderous barks. Philip yelled, "Shut him in the garage!"

Moments later Briony tore through the house with the dog on its leash, a panting, unruly whirlwind that swept through and let the front door bang behind.

The hollow hammering thuds continued uninterrupted.

*Philip*

The sun burned Philip's back as he hammered nails into the wooden posts. Each blow was punctuated by a muttered "fuck"—better to channel his anger into this than take it out on something living.

He glared up at the koalas. "Why did you pick my yard, you buggery things?"

Sweat dripped into Philip's eyes, stinging them. He wiped his forehead and stretched, tossing the hammer into a tuft of dried grass.

Janice had said, just get rid of the dog. The first time she'd seen him her eyes had widened and she'd moved behind Philip. Every now and then she'd say something about how dirty he was. Then he was banished outside. But he was Briony's dog, she'd had him since she was a little tyke. And she did look after him. Showed the dog more love and respect than any of the human members of the household. If only she'd try to get along with Janice.

He surveyed the day's efforts. Not bad. Another full day and the run would be finished.

“Knock off time,” he said, saluting the koalas before retrieving the hammer and heading into the air-conditioning. There was a beer with his name on it.

Janice handed him a beer from the fridge, a straight vertical crease marring her forehead.

“You need a shower,” she said, then, “Have you heard the forecast?”

Philip sniffed his armpits, grimaced, then cracked the bottle open and drank deep. “How could I? I was outside.”

“Tuesday. They’re saying catastrophic fire conditions.”

The beer turned sour. “Here?”

She nodded. Her straight black hair swayed, reflected the light the way it had the first day he’d met her. Shiny black like a crow. “They’re recommending early evacuation.”

Maria’s hair was blonde and wispy, and she’d fled to Sydney with Fiona, accusing him of dragging her down. *I’ll never make it in Brisbane, I’ve got to chase my dreams. You tie me to the ground when I need to fly*, she’d said. One night, soon after meeting Janice, Philip dreamt Maria was a caged songbird; the cage broke apart and she flew away. Then a Janice-tree had grown from the earth beneath the cage, cradling it in its branches.

He focused on Janice’s last words.

“Evacuation. Well, that’s what we do then. I’ll hose the house down before we go.” He lifted the beer and gestured to the lounge room. “I’m gonna go watch the end of the game.”

Janice moved out of his way.

### *Briony*

The heat was unbearable lately, no rain had fallen in weeks. The creek down the road had dried to a piss-trickle, but Attila liked to roll in the mud anyway. Should’ve been a pig-dog not a rotti.

Briony stepped inside after shutting Attila in the garage and wrinkled her nose. The smell hit her like when Trevor hit Jack after school for calling his dad a loser. In the kitchen, Janice stirred the chunks of sautéed goat. Briony watched her for a second; she was camouflaged in Western clothes, but using goat instead of lamb.

Janice glanced up. “Your feet are dirty,” she said, narrowing her dark eyes. Briony looked

down. The white tiles were smeared with brown mud. She took her shoes off and threw them back into the laundry. More mud splattered on the laundry door.

“Sorry, I’ll clean it up later,” she said and hurried past Janice.

Dad was watching the footy. Briony settled in beside him, leaned against his warm body and breathed in his beer-and-musk scent.

“Janice is making goat curry again,” she said.

“I know,” he said, taking a swig from his beer.

“I hate it.”

“I know.”

Briony poked him in the ribs and said, “So why does she make it?”

He shifted; Briony sat up. “Don’t start,” he said, “it reminds her of home.”

“She was born here,” Briony said, and made a face.

“Briony. Enough.” His voice had that sound that made her think of when Attila really wanted to bark but kept it to a restrained growl.

She stared at the screen, watching grown men shoulder-barge each other while chasing a ball around.

“I wish you’d never met her,” she said, and got up before he could say anything.

### *Janice*

The curry glistened on its bed of couscous. “Little goat turds in smelly sauce,” Briony said as she stared at the chunks of tender meat drowned in the rich sauce. “I’m gonna be a vegetarian.”

Philip swore. The dog started barking.

Briony ostentatiously picked the lumps of goat out with her fork and dumped them on the side of the plate.

Philip yelled at the dog as it growled and woofed, then said, “Briony, don’t be stupid.”

Her jaw pushed stubbornly forward, she continued building a meat hill next to the curry

mountain. When she was satisfied she loaded her fork with couscous and started eating. The dog was going crazy outside. Philip jumped up, knocking his chair over and shouting at the dog as he stormed out.

I cleared my throat. Bits of rejected goat congealed on the side of Briony's plate. She glanced up from under her lashes. I was stiff, my jaw set, eyes tight.

"Cleopatra Queen of Denial," she muttered, soft enough that I wasn't sure if she'd said it. She shovelled another forkful of couscous into her mouth, and another, until she had swollen cheeks. The dog stopped barking but its whines squeezed through the cracks. Briony swallowed and then coughed and little flecks of pale couscous rained onto the table.

Philip reappeared. He washed his hands before righting the chair. "He was at the koala tree," he said, "I put him in the garage." His words shouldered into the strained silence.

Briony shoved the last mouthful in and dropped the fork on her plate with a sharp clank. "'Scuse me," she mumbled around the grains and pushed the chair back. It squealed on the tiles like nails on a blackboard.

"I'll buy some lamb," Philip said. She shrugged and lowered the plate into the sink.

"Could you scrape it, please?" I said, and my voice sounded like it had been scraped too. Briony looked at me, then picked the plate back up and scraped the goat meat into the bin. She grabbed the phone before leaving the kitchen and went to her room.

"Philip. You have to do something—"

"I know, I'm sorry, she's a teenager. It's hard. She's finding it hard to adjust."

"It's been over a year." The look on Briony's face hadn't changed in that whole time—every time she looked at me, she saw an alien. Something repugnant.

Philip leaned back in his chair and looked away. "I don't really know how to handle it."

I shook my head. "She needs discipline, Philip. She walks all over you, and you let her walk over me. Can't you see that?"

He ground his teeth together. I watched the muscles tense and relax in his jaw. "I'll talk to her. Okay?"

*Briony*

Fiona answered the phone. “Hey, Bree,” she said. “We’re in the middle of dinner.”

“I just finished,” Briony said, “it was a bit tense.”

She kicked the bed head like Jack kicked Trevor for hitting him over the loser thing. It hurt her foot.

“Mum wants to know if you were rude to Janice.”

Briony rolled her eyes and said, “It’s not her real name anyway. It’s Jabibby or something. She doesn’t ever think about what I might want. I hate goat curry, and she knows it. I told them I’m becoming a vegetarian.”

Fiona relayed this to Mum; Briony heard her merry peal of laughter echo through the handset. Fiona said, “Mum says you chose to stay there, so you need to be nice. I think you should just come live down here.”

“Tempting.” Briony missed them both. When Mum and Dad split Mum went to live in Melbourne, taking Fiona with her. Briony had wanted to stay in Brisbane. Then Janice came along, and everything changed. Maybe the cold and lack of friends would be better than goat curry. Briony said, “Can I talk to Mum?”

“She says you need to go talk to Dad. Call back later.”

Briony groaned. “Helpful. Tell her thanks for nothing. I miss you, Fee.”

“I miss you too, Bree,” she said.

Briony disconnected and flopped down on the bed. Dad knocked on the door but she turned the light off and crawled under the covers. With the phone cradled doll-like in her arms she fell asleep.

### *Philip*

On Tuesday morning Briony cried. “What about the koalas, Dad?”

“They’re wild animals, love, they’ll have to fend for themselves.”

Her tear-streaked face transformed into a hate-filled mask. “You’re glad! You want them to die! I hate you!” She bolted outside. Philip opened his mouth to call out, but shut it again. Teenagers were tiring.

The heat smothered him as he wielded the hose against the dry tinder, raining water down upon the roof, the gutters freshly cleared of debris. That job done, Philip started to curl the hose. Smoke drifted on the wind, an unwelcome scent. He glanced up at the koalas huddled in the tree.

Stupidity. Philip unwound the hose and aimed it at their gum tree. They scuttled further up as he hosed, but he was careful not to aim it at them. Attila trotted up to investigate. He woofed once before loping back to the house.

Then Philip wound the hose and packed his family in the car, abandoning the house and koalas to their fate.

### *Janice*

The evacuation centre reminded me of the “Welcome to the Community” events we went to when I was a child. Didn’t matter that we’d been part of the community long enough for my parents to have had me and my two brothers: we were always being “welcomed”. Kind-faced white people giving to the flotsam of humanity. It smelled the same too: of musty blankets and sausages. The air-conditioner was cranked up and I shivered from the cold. The faintest scent of smoke lingered.

Briony had kicked up a fuss when they told her the dog would have to stay out on the verandah. Philip should have done more, but as usual he let her tantrum while I bit my tongue. She didn’t need any more excuses to hate me.

The mood grew sombre as we were informed the fire was nearby. I ignored Briony’s glare and murmured a prayer. I gave up the hijab and my name when I fled Melbourne, but she wasn’t taking anything else from me.

Philip said something but I didn’t understand him. The fluorescent lights made my eyes ache. “I’m going outside,” I said and stood, pretending not to hear Philip’s offer to come with me.

Outside my eyes stung and I coughed. Smoke curled above the houses across the oval. A flock of screeching birds flew overhead, heading away from the fire. I wished I could join them. Sometimes I wondered if Philip was worth the pain of dealing with Briony.

“Janice.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s too much, in there.”

“I know,” he said, but he didn’t really. He put his arm around me and stared out at the column of smoke. I remembered the day we met, a barbecue at a mutual friend’s house: him recently

separated, tall and blond and blue-eyed, with a beaming smile and an approachability so unlike the men my mother had wanted me to marry before I came to Brisbane. He'd talked to me as an equal, been interested in my opinions.

A firefighting helicopter thumped across the sky. It spewed its load of water atop the column of smoke; a white waterfall that seemed to evaporate before it did any good.

"Why were you attracted to me?" I asked.

After a pause he replied, "You seemed different to the other women."

I laughed. "Right."

"Nah, you did. Down to earth. Grounded. More sure in yourself."

"Grounded. Not like Maria."

He was silent. Then, "Janice..."

"No, it's fine. I understand. I was attracted to the difference in you, too. Surprising that you were looking for something similar to what the Muslim men I knew wanted too."

He took his arm from around my shoulders and went back inside. I stared at the smoke until the tears running down my face could have been from the caustic air, or my sorrow.

### *Briony*

Briony huddled up to Dad. "I hope the koalas are ok," she said. "It's cold in here."

Dad nodded and rubbed her arm. "I'm sure they'll be fine."

"I miss Mum and Fee."

"I know. So do I. But your Mum made her choice, and Fiona did too. She's coming up in a few weeks." Dad squeezed her. "Could you make an effort with Janice, love? For me? I know it's hard. But it's not her fault."

Briony grimaced. It was more than hard. It was more than Janice replacing Mum. At school, Trevor said Janice was a terrorist. That if Briony liked Janice then Briony was un-Australian. Trevor said his Dad said Muslims were taking over. When the people on the news talked about Libya they said *rebels insurgents Gaddafi killings* and showed pictures of men with weapons and tanks and blown-up houses. What was she supposed to think?

“I’ll try, Dad.”

“Thanks, love.”

She kissed his cheek. “I’m gonna check on Attila.”

### *Janice*

The house stood whole and unscarred. The fire had come close, licking at the edges of the property, but while a few trees were singed nothing was damaged.

Briony bolted out the back with the dog. Philip followed her more slowly. I began to unpack the essentials we’d taken with us to the evacuation centre.

Philip walked in with an odd look on his face. “The koalas are gone,” he said.

I shrugged. “That’s good, then.”

“No it’s not, Janice,” Briony said.

I hadn’t seen her come in behind Philip. She scowled at me. “They might be injured. Dead.”

“Well at least your father doesn’t need to finish the dog run. I don’t understand the fuss.”

Briony shook her head at me. “It’s because they’re *Australian*, Janice.”

I clenched my teeth, staring at the girl. She stared back, then her face went red and she looked down. Philip touched my arm. I jerked away from him, my heart fluttering as tenuously as my nationality.

“She didn’t mean—”

“Yes, she did.” I turned to Briony. “My name is Jahida. You can call me that from now on.” I turned my back on them and walked away.

### §

Philip sweltered under the glaring sun, hammering at useless bits of wood for no good reason. Briony watched as the dog bounced around her, occasionally handing him a nail.

*Why?* I’d asked.

*Because they might come back, he'd said.*

And so he was out there finishing the dog run, even though the yard was empty of koalas. And each nail he pounded into the wood drove a wedge further into my heart.

I went to the dresser and pulled out the length of fabric I'd denied since leaving Melbourne. Briony would never see me as anything but this. The face that stared back at me from the mirror was resolute. I covered my head with the blue length, pinning it at the neck, wrapping it around around my hair, hiding the black, marking myself as Other.

§

Dusk brought a dirty orange sunset and no relief to the heat. I volunteered to get ice-creams from the service station. Briony had found it hard to look at me wearing the hijab and Philip touched me like I was brittle and would shatter.

The lights in the service station flickered and dark spots swam at the edges of my vision. I paid for the ice-creams and ignored the look on the spotty face of the boy serving me. As I drove out of the service station something on the side of the road caught my eye. A double reflected gleam, the headlights briefly illuminating a small grey shadow. Several metres down the road I pulled over and turned the car off, walking back to where I'd seen it.

The koala sat with its head hanging low, its back leg at an odd angle. I took my hijab off and picked the animal up with the fabric, wrapping it as best I could before returning to the car. There was a vet I usually passed on the way home from work; maybe it would be open.

The lights were still on so I rushed in with the injured koala. The door was locked but the young blonde woman opened the door when she saw my burden.

“Oh no,” she said.

“I found it by the road, I hoped you would be able to help it.”

The veterinarian took the scared animal off me. I looked at it cradled in her arms, wrapped up in the blue headscarf, all wide-eyed and limp. “I wonder where the others are,” I said.

“Others?” She looked at me with a frown.

“We had koalas in our backyard before the evacuation. They were gone when we got back. I assumed this was one of them.”

The vet shrugged and the koala gripped her arm with its claws. “Could be. There was a koala

habitat destroyed a few weeks back, so there's been an influx of these little refugees." She blushed and continued. "The wildlife carers have been busy. We'll look after this little guy. He's old enough not to need his mum anymore, thankfully."

"Well, thanks." I hesitated. "Do you need me to do anything?"

She shook her head and smiled. "Nah, but thanks for bringing him in." She tugged the headscarf off the koala that clung to her. "Here."

I took it and left the vet surgery. In the car I looked at the hijab, soiled by dirt and blood and smelling of wild animal.

Maybe there was hope.

The ice-creams were melting rapidly, so I put the hijab on the passenger seat and drove home.

*S. G. Larner is a denizen of sunny Brisbane, where she wrangles three children and several chickens. She revels in exploring the dark underbelly of the world in her works. You can find her at <http://foregoreality.wordpress.com> and (sporadically) on Twitter [@StaceySarasvati](https://twitter.com/StaceySarasvati). Her story "Diary of a Tree-Sitter" appeared in Issue Five of Tincture Journal.*

# White Noise

by Eleanor Talbot

i

Jed pulled up to a traffic light. A man stuck his head through the window and said, “The end is coming.”

A hole had been cut in his shirt around the hump rising out the top of his back, and his face was a craggy canyon of lines and craters.

Jed laughed. “When?”

“10 days.”

A sign hung round his neck like the *Closed* placard on a shop door: *Help the Wretched*. The whites of his eyes were a shade of nuclear mustard and Jed thought of babies with three heads.

“That’s not a lot of time.”

“Then don’t waste it,” said the beggar. He rattled a plastic cup filled with coins and Jed shook his head.

The car behind hooted and he hobbled off. In the rear view mirror, Jed watched him approach a parked van, his tanned hump a polished-wood shine in the sunlight.

ii

The next morning Jed woke early. He dared not rely on his kooky, old alarm clock—lately it’d been unreliable. Several times it’d exploded into service in the middle of the night or during a dinner party, as if what it had to say couldn’t wait, while other times it didn’t go off at all.

The beggar was his first thought. He knew it was silly to take notice of a homeless crazy hopped up on paint thinners—the world wouldn’t end just like that. There’s technology for such things; Richter Scales and whatnot. But the beggar had spoken with such plain authority, like his mother telling him to eat his vegetables or not to fart in company.

“You know, I loved you the minute I saw you. We should go to France, ride up the Eiffel Tower,” he said to his girlfriend, Nancy, as he sipped his first cup of coffee of the day.

“No, I didn’t know that and why France?” She scowled and pulled a wisp of hair across her mouth, something she only did when uneasy.

“We should enjoy more of life.”

“There’s a conference in London next month. The university is only subsidising a small amount and I need you to buy me a new bicycle.”

Jed drew her into his arms and looked down at the knobs of her neck bones; the way her shoulder blades stood in peaks under her shirt. An angel with her wings sawn off.

“Let’s take a bath,” he murmured into the top of her head.

### iii

For the next week, Jed took time to appreciate the world around him. He considered it contrived at first, but did it anyway and discovered things he’d never noticed before. When he carried bags for old people, mostly it embarrassed them even though they needed the help. He smiled at babies and their mothers’ pleasure was radiant. He paid attention to people; listened more than he spoke and imagined what they were really like after the shop queues and the skinny cappuccinos and the fights with their families.

His mother told him he looked better than he had in months, even though she hadn’t seen him in months. For the first time, he felt guilty.

“Are you taking vitamins, Jed? You look like you’re eating vitamins. Nice colour.”

Jed sat down on the sofa and leaned across to his father. “What’s the score?”

His father picked up the television remote and lowered the sound. “Whassat? Oh, two-nil.”

He turned back but didn’t increase the volume even though he was almost deaf. He loved soccer and Jed wondered what he watched in the off season. Since he could remember, his father had always been busy tinkering in the garage, making model aeroplanes or repairing things around the house. When Jed was younger, he built wooden toys for him; later, he insisted the teenager learn how a combustion engine worked. In high school, Jed was the guy the other kids called when their cars had broken down—especially the girls.

He looked at his father’s fingers wound around the remote control—they veered off in impossible directions, re-routing around the painful, arthritic boulders of his joints. What did he do

with his days without the use of his hands?

“How’s Nancy doing?” asked his mother, tiny and neat with her knitting in her lap.

“She’s fine. Studies are coming along nicely.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off how she turned and looped the wool, the caterpillar of stitches transferring from one needle to the other with hardly an effort.

“...and then, dead—Jed? Jed?”

“Sorry, Mum, what were you saying?”

She sighed. “I was telling you about Barbara Leibowitz. Are you alright? You seem sort of dreamy today.”

“No, carry on. Sorry, so it was an infection?”

“They’re saying the Superbug. That’s why I’m so worried about Dad’s ear operation on Friday.” Her wool snagged on the needle.

Jed patted her knee. “It’ll be alright. As the doctor keeps saying, it’s a minor procedure—there’s no need to worry.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” she said. “I don’t know what I’d do if...”

She freed the caught stitch and cracked off at a breakneck pace. Years it would have taken to get so fast, thought Jed. *Fucking years.*

#### iv

Nancy complained he’d become annoying. She said it was unnerving the way he wanted to have sex all the time and that she was tired of his big “mooney” eyes.

“Has something happened I should know about?”

“No. It’s not a crime to let you know I love you.”

She pulled her hair across her mouth. “I liked the way it was before.”

There was no way he could tell her about the beggar and the end of the world.

Jed's boss, Gary, said his lunch hours had been too long the last few days:

"If you're not entertaining clients, you need to get on with things," he warned.

"The amount of money I've made for this bank and that's the thanks I get," Jed hissed under his breath when he'd gone.

He'd been playing soccer with some of the homeless kids in the park opposite the office. He hated to admit it—in the circles he kept, sentimentalism wasn't fashionable—but it'd become the highlight of his day. By comparison, working at a bank day in, day out, even for good money, seemed an absurd waste of his energy. Since the beggar, he'd come to dread the day he would be another old, out of work corporate wondering where it all went and what he was supposed to do next. He couldn't imagine Bridge or gardening filling the spaces; all those funerals to attend—no wonder the aged drank more than they should. Seven days ago, he'd never had these thoughts. His life choices had been solid, unshakeable; enviable even. He'd worked hard at school and university; he was well on his way up the corporate ladder. All this doubt was frustrating. Bankers didn't have existential crises—those were for people who thought they'd be actors but ended up as dentists.

His mother called just as he was going into a meeting. "Don't forget Dad. You will pop in, to say good luck?"

"Mum," Jed snapped. "He's not having a bypass for God's sake. It's a little ear op. I've got a meeting now; I'll call you back."

When he got home, he shouted at Nancy for leaving coffee cups all over the lounge. He threw her text books on the floor. "I bought the damn couch; there should be room for me to sit on the damn thing!"

Then he stomped off to have a shower. Before he knew it, she'd hopped into the cubicle and was down on her knees in front of him.

Jed closed his eyes. He had to get back to the way things were.

Outside his office, the kids called to Jed from across the park. "Why aren't you playing with us anymore, Banker Man? We need our striker."

Their shoes were grubby and broken, their clothes either too big or too small. Jed used to admire the makeshift goalposts, graffitied with their favourite club emblems. But today they were just a pathetic heap of old crates painted with crude scribbles.

The world had just been the world a few days before; now it was spinach stuck in his teeth.

“Gotta work,” he shouted back, trying to forget the next day would be the ninth day to the theoretical end of the world.

## vii

When his eyes flipped open in the morning, Jed looked over at his alarm clock. Its numbers were flashing a row of eights. He pressed the buttons and gave it a shake but still the line of digits blinked at him.

“Whassamatter,” asked Nancy, rubbing her eyes.

“The time won’t reset. Shit.” He turned the clock upside down.

“Stupid old thing. It was bound to give up at some point.”

“I don’t see why it had to be today.”

Nancy stretched. “It’s a clock, Jed. Get over it.”

After breakfast, Jed hunted for his wallet. He raked around every drawer, jacket and bag in the house and eventually found it under one of Nancy’s text books strewn across the couch. As he shifted the books to the coffee table, *The Medical Encyclopaedia* fell open on a picture of a man with an enormous bulge coming out of his back. *Kyphosis is a curving of the spine that causes a bowing or rounding of the back, which leads to a hunchback*, it said underneath.

On the way to work, Jed got stuck in a traffic jam. He flicked across radio stations looking for news bulletins. Nothing new was going on in the world apart from the usual political spats and the odd war. He’d settled on a channel playing up-tempo songs when his mother called. He was about to answer when a bird flew into his windscreen with a loud crack. He got out to examine the damage and saw it lying on the ground, its scrawny pink legs in the air. When he nudged it with his toe, its two minute, perfectly round eyes opened and looked straight at him. It struggled up and flew off.

Jed decided he had to find the beggar.

Twenty minutes later, he'd parked his car and was standing at the traffic light where he'd first seen the beggar.

"Are you alright, sir?" A thin man in grey shorts tied at the waist with a line of plastic stared at him with cheery brown eyes.

"Hello, I was looking for the guy, you know, with the hump on his back."

The man's smile broadened. He poked his tongue through gaps in his teeth. "You mean, Jigs?"

"If that's his name, then yes."

The man's amusement annoyed Jed, like he'd had a joke played on him and he was the last to know.

"He say something to you?" The merry eyes shone.

Jed winced.

The man laughed so hard, he bent over and grabbed his knees. When he finished, he said, "You're the second this month. I'll go get him for you." Still chuckling, he ambled toward a dumpster up the street.

Jed couldn't believe it. What would he say? Why was he even here?

"Hallo, Mister?" The beggar loped towards him, different shirt this time, same hole. The plastic cup of coins did an uneven lollop along with his gait.

"Just, you know, taking a walk." He stopped in front of Jed, took in his suit and tie; his shiny leather shoes. He didn't say anything. "Look, I suppose it's stupid. But when you told me the other day the world would end in ten days, I wanted to know why you said that."

"Mister, it could end." The same tone again, as if he were telling Jed about the weather.

"Yes, but you said that it *would* end, not that it *could* end. There's a difference."

He scratched his chin. "Is there?"

"Of course. *Would* means something will happen; *could* means it might happen."

The beggar's yellow gaze narrowed.

"This is ridiculous," Jed snapped. "You can't say something like that. It's irresponsible."

"Message isn't for everyone," he shrugged, looking toward a row of cars building up at the traffic light. "It's for people who need it."

Jed snorted. He had a good job, a great apartment; a beautiful doctor girlfriend he hoped would marry him. He was healthy, not bad looking. He had brochures to France in his desk drawer. If anyone needed a message, it was the drunk hunchback scrounging for money.

He flipped his hand at the beggar and made to leave.

"Hey Mister, how about some change for a sick, old man?" said the beggar, shaking his cup. The shadow his ragged hump cast on the pavement looked like tatty half-furled wings.

Jed didn't bother to answer.

## ix

"It's all connected, see," Nancy said, smiling at the gift she'd given him.

The new clock was slim and cool in Jed's hands. Encased in a light metal sleeve, it reminded him of James Bond. It linked to his music system by wireless; there was a slot to charge his tablet and phone. If Nancy were a clock, this is the one she'd be, thought Jed.

"Thanks, babe. Exactly what I need."

He hoped his disappointment didn't show—he'd planned to take his old clock to his dad for repairs. He still remembered the day his father had given it to him for his tenth birthday; how the shiny mahogany veneer seemed so adult in his pudgy hands.

"It'll last a lifetime," he'd said, with glistening eyes.

The memory irked him—Jed hadn't visited him in hospital that day. His mother left a message that evening to say he'd developed an infection but he'd been convinced by Nancy that it wouldn't be anything serious—"*Get a grip, Jed. I don't know what you'd be like in a real crisis*"—and hadn't got round to returning her call. Everything had been so strange lately, as if there was an extra dimension he hadn't been aware of before—it seemed to buzz above and below him, out of sight.

Off-kilter and sensitive, he finally told Nancy about the beggar over dinner, half hoping she'd be soft about it. She wasn't.

“All there is, is what there is, Jed. Fate, signs and all that crap—honestly, you'll end up with a bad case of anxiety,” she said through a mouthful of peas.

Stung, he didn't say another word about it.

Later, staring up at the ceiling, he was unsettled and fidgety. Thunder barrelled in the distance—rain was on the way—of course Nancy didn't hear anything. She rose and fell beneath the duvet undisturbed, with the gentle rhythm of a clear conscience. It was so typical of her, thought Jed. Nancy never struggled with anything.

x

Jed got up to watch the storm hoping the weather might soothe his racing thoughts. Tomorrow he'd get himself back on track; perhaps go to a couple of jewellery shops in search of a ring. He had a deal to close, a management position to chase.

Not even halfway through the daydream of the Mercedes cabriolet he was thinking of buying, he noticed a man standing under a tree on the street opposite, huddled into a shiny black anorak. He was looking in the direction of his apartment, not moving except to touch something hanging around his neck. Thoughts of diamonds and cars evaporated.

“Nancy, you need to see this,” said Jed, shaking her awake.

Nancy rolled over. “Huh? What's going on?”

“The beggar. You know the one I was telling you about? He's here.”

Jed ran to the window. “He's under a tree staring at our apartment.”

Nancy groaned. “Oh for goodness sake, this again?”

“Come on.”

She got out of bed.

“There. You see. He knows where I live. How does he know where I live?”

Nancy peered through the window and pursed her lips.

“You can see his hump and he’s got something around his neck.”

“Hmm,” said Nancy, pressing her face closer to the glass.

“I’ve got to see him. I’m thinking of changing my job.” Jed yanked a sweater over his head. “I must visit Dad. We’re happy, you and me. Aren’t we? Let’s get married. Let’s have kids.”

He hurried around the room, searching for an umbrella. “It all makes sense. All of it. I just had to see the signs.”

Nancy stopped in front of him. “You’re dreaming, Jed. Wake up,” she said, giving him a light slap on the cheek.

“Stop it, babe. Don’t you see? The beggar is my guardian angel. Everyone has someone who changes their life. Like Uncle Rick giving you the play doctor kit when you were ten.”

She took him by the hand and led him back to the window. The moon emerged from behind a bank of dark clouds, highlighting the peaks and creases of a pile of wet black plastic rubbish bags under the tree. She turned to him, her eyebrows raised.

“He was there,” stammered Jed. “I saw him.”

“Jed, you’re seeing things. And anyway, a disabled tramp following you home should be a problem, not a miracle. You’re losing it.”

“He was there! He wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“It was a nurse’s outfit, actually. Uncle Rick was a perve.” She let go his hand and slipped back into bed.

§

At dawn, Jed woke to the familiar roar of the garbage truck. On her way out of the bathroom, Nancy glanced at the truck and faced him, her mouth a tight line.

“I don’t know what’s going with you, Jed, but it has to stop. We need a break. To reassess.”

Jed stared at her. “Break? Reassess?”

“You have stuff you need to sort out, clearly. And I, you know, have a lot to do.”

She picked up some books lying on the dressing table. “I’ll get a bag and fetch my stuff later,” she said and left the bedroom.

§

When Jed stepped onto the pavement a few hours later, his head was swirling. He'd pleaded with her to stay, but she'd set her jaw and said little in return. He knew how single minded she could be—once Nancy decided something, she rarely turned back. Was he going mad? Had he really been dumped by the girl he was going to spend the rest of his life with before he'd even had breakfast?

He crossed the road and a taxi screeched to a halt. "Watch where you're going," shouted the driver. "You'll get yourself killed."

In his car, Jed gripped the steering wheel like a man clinging to the mast of a sailboat in a storm. He knew he had to be somewhere but couldn't think where, and he'd forgotten to put his shoes on. He needed psychiatric help, drugs probably.

Lost in thought, Jed saw something glinting on the ground under the tree where he thought he'd seen the beggar standing. He noticed it because the light was the only thing moving in the otherwise perfectly still street. It could have been a piece of rubbish spilt out from one of the garbage bags, but it was right in the middle of the pavement, magpie-shiny and irresistible—he had to take a look.

On his haunches, he gazed at a large coin, polished and bright as if it had just left the mint. Jed had never seen a coin like it. He picked it up and studied it—it wasn't local.

He looked up and down the empty road. All was quiet except for the gossip of early morning birds.

§

Back in his apartment, he sat on his bed and stared at his new clock. The dark green numbers changed from one second to the next without any commotion, no trace of the others before them ever having existed. It was so unlike his old clock, whose figures left a digital impression in the background when they switched, like teeth marks on skin.

It was five past nine on a Saturday morning. Fourteen hours and fifty-five minutes left of the final day of the possible end of the world.

He picked up the phone and dialled.

"Hi, Mum, it's me."

*Eleanor lives in Johannesburg. She has been published online and in print.*

# It's An Adventure If You Want It To Be

*Non-fiction by Calista Fung*

Today you're going to wake up in the morning and it might be raining. It might be cold. You might not want to be awake, but you're going to do it and you're going to have your shower and coffee and whatever it takes to get your butt up. You're going to listen to the drizzle outside or feel the sun warm your pores and you're going to decide that today is the day to have an adventure.

Today you're going to call your mother. Today you'll tell her you love her in a matter-of-fact kind of way at the end of a sentence because she should already know how much she means to you. You're going to spend an hour relaying the most mundane and boring aspects of your life away from home and you're going to listen to her complain about how expensive bananas are getting and her growing concerns for your potential iron deficiency. You will not try to cut the conversation short. You are going to listen to her voice and think about how wonderful it is to have a mother who loves you unconditionally. You'll think about how much you owe her.

Today you're going to sit in a café with a book. You're going to read that book over a pot of tea and feel irrationally content and all sorts of pretentious. You're going to find slivers of yourself in the book and the curling steam of your Earl Grey and you're going to stay there until you feel all at once the same and also very different. You'll dream about meeting new friends over stimulating conversation. You might imagine a movie-script romance and then you'll pay for your tea and you'll leave. You go with a smile.

Today you'll do your washing because you have to and because you want to. You'll sort different loads of whites, darks and reds and put some clothing on the delicate cycle and wonder if this is what it means to be responsible. It sneaks up on you, perhaps, until you're already ingrained in the routine you once thought only belonged to your parents. Then you'll hang up the woollen cardigan to dry in the shade as the label and past experience have taught you. You're learning.

Today you went to bed. You are alone in the place you call home, but you don't feel lonely. You think, *where was my adventure?* But then you'll reconsider and you'll say, "This was it. This was my adventure. I lived it. It was beautiful and I'm going to have another one tomorrow." You're not going anywhere until you settle into REM sleep and then you'll be everywhere at once.

*Ardent bibliophile. Full-time dreamer. Disiecti membra poetae. More of Calista's writing can be found at her blog (<http://lady-rye.tumblr.com/>) or at Thought Catalog (<http://thoughtcatalog.com/calista-fung/>).*

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