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Editorial

by *Daniel Young*

Living in Sydney's Kings Cross, I sometimes feel too far removed from the natural world. Sydney has its harbour and beaches; grey-headed flying foxes swarming over the Royal Botanical Gardens; and sulphur-crested cockatoos eating their way through the exterior of apartment balconies and windows. But the city, suburbs, cars and crowds overshadow all of this and—especially as winter begins—it's very easy to get caught up in the daily grind and overlook nature altogether. Every day I trek up and down the concrete-lined wind tunnel of William Street, a grim tidal flow between home and work. Even the natural phenomena of wind and rain come with a 'city-like' effect: dead umbrellas, mauled and left on the side of the road, or stashed half-heartedly into the tops of bins.

So maybe that's why, in a journal without themes, nature has taken over and commanded such a presence in this issue. Benjamin Allmon takes us to Killarney in Queensland's Southern Downs and camps on the Condamine River not once but twice: with and without the latest mod-cons. A number of other writers investigate our relationship with animals, and the various moral quandaries that can arise. Humans are animals too, and in 'Rim-Compactness', Emma Rayward examines this in a refreshingly direct way.

And then there's death. Zimbabwean writer Chido Muchemwa examines the traditions she has left behind, focusing on the *kurova guva* ('striking the grave') ceremony, and Kathryn Morgan takes us to a Torajan funeral ceremony in 'Funeral Party', her Sydney Writer's Room award-winning story.

In other fiction, previous contributor Robin Reich returns with his uniquely structured story, 'The Third Bolaño', while Matthew Masticova proves that second-person narration can work at length with his 7,500-word story, 'To Rest'. As always, there's much more besides, and I'm particularly thrilled to present the first chapter of Julie Janson's new novel, 'The Crocodile Hotel', now available from Cyclops Press.

Our poetry editor Stuart Barnes has interviewed Julie Maclean and we've got three of her poems, plus two from regular contributor Tiggy Johnson, who we're very happy to welcome back for Issue Ten. There's also poetry from Chris Lynch, Lee Todd Lacks, Mary Petralia, and—since I had no idea where to start—let's kick things off with "Where to Start?", a poem by Yi Yu.

Happy Tincturing!

Where to Start?

by Yi Yu

What if everything were in reverse?
Eating to get hungry,
singing to hear silence,
writing to erase the traces of existence,
to touch the world as it is only after you die.
Reading to recognise no words,
finding a partner to feel lonely,
and dying to be born.
The glacier lies back.
Water flows up to the sky.
The man has been coming here for fifty years,
saying “hi” everyday.
Is he saying goodbye?

Synopsis

This poem was inspired by a video I watched about a Tibetan man who lived near a field of glaciers in Tibet. He started shooting photos of the glaciers in the 1960s, and continues on to this day—collecting in the process half a century of photographs. While watching the video, I was struck by his demeanour when he was talking with a reporter at the site where he took the photographs. He kept sighing, as his sorrowful eyes gazed up at the melting glaciers on the mountains around him and, interspersed with this scene, the camera panned on the photographs he’d taken over the years, showing their slow but steady dissolution. The scene as a whole was powerfully moving. Responding to this, the poem reflects the emotions of approaching the end of life, the end of existence, and questions the nature of working cycles.

Yi Yu, originally from China, writes in English and Chinese. She started writing poetry in English from summer 2012.

The Third Bolaño

by *Robin Reich*

In homage to Roberto.

The Part About a Death

Joseph Ratu, who was never a chief and possessed no such regal ancestry, dreamt his home island in the Pacific had been abandoned by the human race, a race that long ago genetically engineered humanity and had dispensed with many of the traits he possessed, namely pride, integrity, and humility. During the dream Joseph became aware that he had died more than six centuries ago and he lucidly discerned he was thousands of kilometres away from his homeland-bound twelve-year-old daughter. Then he awoke, pained, to a sound from another universe. In the freezing pre-dawn hour he heard a knock, then many knocks, on the door of the unpowered caravan he shared with his nephew, who stirred above him. The knocking sounds continued, some at the same time, from all around the shell of their abode, from the rows of grape vines in the isolated farming area outside, from the rest of the world that had been so far away.

Joseph's nephew got down from his bunk and opened the door. Narrow beams of light made their way into the caravan. Joseph fearfully remained in his bed and couldn't see who had so uncannily interrupted his sleep. Then he heard a woman speak, as if she read from a script. The soft female voice slowly calmed Joseph as he tried in vain to hear exactly what she said. After a few moments Joseph's nephew implored him to come outside. They both cautiously exited the caravan and were temporarily blinded by flashlights. Joseph understood, from what seemed a far-away void, that the people who surrounded him were immigration officers who held a warrant to search the area. Joseph was promptly separated from his nephew, then silently escorted away by five officers toward a fleet of vehicles that were parked on the nearest road, a few hundred metres away. Joseph was bewildered as, in turn, he looked at each of his captors. He thought he may have been in another dream, a dream of bad luck. Then they arrived at a grey Volkswagen van and Joseph was instructed by an officer to sit in the side door well. He was advised that a statutory interview would be conducted to determine his present and future immigration status. Joseph spoke his first words of that day when he told the officers he would not talk while he was apart from his nephew. First light appeared, the air became colder, and the officers tried without success to interview Joseph.

Half an hour later an officer walked from the caravan to Joseph and introduced himself as Officer Ryan. Officer Ryan held a passport in his right hand as he advised Joseph that he knew who he was. He told Joseph that he had spoken to head office by phone and that he knew his entire immigration history. As well, Officer Ryan revealed to Joseph that records held by the immigration department showed he was an unlawful non-citizen, with no right to remain in Australia. He offered Joseph a vague deal: if he cooperated and participated in an interview, it would be helpful for him in the future. Joseph found it difficult to envisage a future in which he would have the good luck to be helped, but it seemed to him the only hope he had, and he said that if he was reunited with his nephew, he would be cooperative. Officer Ryan said OK, unclipped a handheld radio from his belt and requested another officer bring Joseph's nephew to the van.

While in close proximity to each other, Joseph and his nephew were interviewed by separate immigration officers. Joseph was interviewed by Officer Ryan. Joseph answered with ease the simple questions first asked of him,

such as his date of birth, nationality, where he lived, how long he had lived in the caravan, what work he did, what money he had, his family composition. But the interview became more difficult for Joseph as Officer Ryan wanted to confirm with him all the applications he had made to the Australian government, applications he was only obscurely familiar with, as his expensive migration agent, with whom he had long ago lost contact, had prepared and lodged the associated, complicated paperwork. Officer Ryan listed the applications Joseph's agent had made on his behalf in the previous eight years: a Protection Visa subclass 866 application to the Immigration Department; an application for review to the Refugee Review Tribunal; two applications for review to the Federal Court of Australia; and a direct intervention request to the Minister of Immigration.

Joseph didn't know with certainty if the information presented to him was true, but he sheepishly acknowledged what his migration agent had done for him. He realised that in the eyes of the immigration department, the list of applications represented the life he had lived since his arrival in Australia. Joseph listened to all the unfamiliar words, the dates and details of so much documented action attributed to him, and thought the picture of the life depicted by Officer Ryan was not that of himself, but of an unknown person, a more official person, and he once again felt as if he were in a dream, as if everything around him was unreal. Joseph told Officer Ryan that all he had actually done in Australia was work covertly on various farms, practically every day of the past eight years. All the money he had made he sent home to his family. But that remembered life now seemed illusory to Joseph when compared to his official record. He felt like he hadn't properly lived in Australia at all.

After Joseph and his nephew's interviews were completed, Officer Ryan told them that a decision on whether they would be detained or allowed to go free on a bridging visa would be made during a phone call to his manager in Canberra. After twenty minutes their fate was remotely sealed. Officer Ryan relayed the decision. They were detained and would be transported to Villawood. Joseph and his nephew were told to pack all their belongings and be ready to leave in fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes was all the time Joseph and his nephew needed to pack every material possession they had accrued in Australia. They and their belongings were loaded into the Volkswagen by immigration officers. As they were about to leave, Officer Ryan told them that if they needed to go to the toilet they should do so before they departed, but warned that an officer would need to be present with them while they went. After some consideration, Joseph and his nephew both declined the use of their makeshift toilet in the nearby bush. They remained in the back seat of the van that would transport them to the renowned Villawood, the tacit meaning of the place clearly understood by them both.

Immigration officers that day captured many unlawful non-citizens on and near various farmlands in western New South Wales. The record haul was triumphantly reported by the Public Affairs section of the department hours later. At the time, Joseph and his nephew were unaware of exactly how many other non-citizens they joined in the van convoy that materialised on Burley Griffin Way and snaked its way along the countryside toward Sydney. They didn't say a word to each other during the journey for fear that the rear of the van was somehow bugged, and Officer Ryan, who drove the van, would have been able to hear them talk, despite the clear, thick Perspex that separated the captors and the captives.

Three hours into the journey the convoy stopped at a large service station. Officer Ryan parked the van at a nearby car park, then opened the side door and asked Joseph and his nephew what food and drink they would like; he would pay for their sustenance. Joseph and his nephew said no, no food, no drink. Officer Ryan suggested they should eat something, maybe a pie or a sausage roll, at a minimum have some water. But Joseph and his nephew again said

no. Officer Ryan said OK, it's up to you guys, but I'll leave the door open for awhile so you can get some fresh air, at least. The opened door afforded Joseph an unobstructed view of a scene that was repeated at least a dozen times in quick succession: a detainee was held by two immigration officers and marched from their holding van to a nearby public toilet block. Another immigration officer soon joined Officer Ryan. After they quickly conferred they advised Joseph and his nephew that it was their turn to go to the toilet. Joseph said no, no toilet. Officer Ryan was astounded. He said he knew they hadn't been to the toilet at all that day, and he advised there would be four hours more travelling until they would get to Villawood. You *must* need to go to the toilet, he said, and he reached into the van to grab Joseph. But Joseph quietly said no, no toilet, and he and his nephew receded as far back into their seats as they could. Officer Ryan said OK, then closed the door and left for the toilet block by himself. Five minutes later the entire convoy was ready to roll on.

Joseph watched the procession of vans leave the service station, a long conga line of wheeled human containers, and he had a sense of déjà vu, or something like it, in which he saw his future and felt its aftermath. In this strange time, he sat alone on the ground of an island the size of a traffic roundabout, miraculously suspended metres above the earth. He knew his family and friends didn't know where he was and that they would never find him. Then he sensed an unfamiliar young girl, who told him it was dangerous to sit under the invisible, latticed network of wires that were above him; the wires transmitted secret information via gigantic seeds that pulsed irregularly, and sometimes the seeds inexplicably dropped from the sky. Joseph looked up and saw hundreds of seeds traversing through the air at various altitudes and at great speeds. Then Joseph lowered his eyes, at which time the sense of the girl evanesced entirely. Joseph considered the warning and cautiously levitated to a height he considered was higher than the highest wire, to a small, floating, fenceless balcony that overlooked his island. Then a teacher who taught Joseph when he was twelve years old joined him on the balcony and warned him to get down from up high, that it was far too dangerous up there in the sky. The teacher added, again in rhyme, that Joseph would never be a real tree, a useful life was not for he. The teacher reminded Joseph of a promise he had once made and how Joseph had not yet delivered on it. Then Joseph looked down from the perilous balcony, saw a sea of set concrete below, and felt compelled to jump.

No matter how hard Joseph tried to think of anything else as he stared outward from the back seat of the Volkswagen van, all he could see was his future repeated, over and over again. On every occasion, when the teacher provoked him, Joseph tried to will himself to behave differently, to do anything to defy his teacher's prediction, but every time he jumped to what he knew would be his death.

Officer Ryan thought of Joseph and his nephew's refusal to use the toilet, on multiple occasions, as intriguingly strange behaviour, and he thought the small token of rebelliousness, or whatever it was, served no purpose whatsoever. It was the only subject Officer Ryan talked about with other officers on the vehicle radios for the rest of the journey. He recounted all he knew about Joseph and his nephew's bodily functions, from dawn that morning to the last pit stop that afternoon, and asked if any officer had ever before come across such a situation. The dozens of officers he spoke to told him that they had never, in all their years in the department, come across such weird conduct. No officer knew what the actions of Joseph and his nephew meant. But they all knew that Joseph and his nephew, if they hadn't already soiled their pants, would have to be in pain.

As the convoy breached the outer security fence of the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, Officer Ryan gave up trying to understand Joseph and his nephew, and dismissed their behaviour as statistically improbable, like a lottery win. Or, more likely, as he considered all the people he'd detained throughout his career, statistically probable, like a lottery loss.

The Part About the Officers

1. Victor Morales and Maria Contreras are officers of the Department of Immigration in the Australian Public Service.
 - 1.1. They are categorised as Public Affairs Officers.
 - 1.1.1. Public Affairs Officers are copywriters.
 - 1.1.2. Copywriters have existed within the Department of Immigration since its inception.
 - 1.1.3. There are hundreds more copywriters today than there were in 1945, the year of the Department's inception.
 - 1.1.4. Modern copywriters are required to respond to facts; facts are determined by a small conglomeration of officers of the Department and people from the Minister's office.
 - 1.2. Victor and Maria, as officers of the Australian Public Service, are nominally required to abide by a Code of Conduct, as set out in the *Public Service Act 1999* (the *Act*).
 - 1.2.1. The Code of Conduct is self-governed by other officers of the Australian Public Service.
 - 1.2.2. The Code of Conduct proclaims what behaviour by officers is considered right and what behaviour is considered wrong. Of course, there is no other way to consider right and wrong within a bureaucracy, so this is correct.
 - 1.2.3. It is enshrined in the *Act* that the Australian Public Service, regardless of its actions, shall always be of good reputation. As such, the good reputation of the Australian Public Service is not dependent on analysis by any person who might consider its repute. This must also be correct.
 - 1.3. Australian Public Service Officers correctly believe they are doing the *Act's* work.
2. Victor and Maria are lovers.
 - 2.1. They are both married, but not to each other.
 - 2.2. The government-certified marriage partners of Victor and Maria are not aware their partners are lovers of another.
 - 2.3. Victor and Maria are both twenty-four years old.
3. On Monday, Victor and Maria did not go to work. They both called in sick.
 - 3.1. Instead, they visited the National Art Gallery and enjoyed a touring Inca art exhibition.
 - 3.2. Then they had lunch at a Spanish Tapas restaurant, specialising in fashionably exotic Latin American dishes.
 - 3.3. After lunch they drove to their secret spot: around the perimeter of HMAS Harman, past the Woods Lane Closed sign to the end of Woods Lane, to the border of the imagined lands of the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales.

- 3.4. They made love for an hour in the back seat of Victor's tinted-glass four-wheel drive, under the shade of transplanted Guadalupe Pines.
- 3.5. Afterwards Victor drove Maria back to her car, which she had parked at the international airport earlier that day. They then drove their vehicles to their respective homes.
4. Tuesday came next. Victor and Maria continued in their roles as Public Affairs Officers.
- 4.1. They produced approved versions of recounts that, most importantly, would engage with consumers of the represented facts.
- 4.2. Secretly, Victor and Maria found their work contemptible and hilarious.
- 4.2.1. They joked they stood on the shoulders of midgets, but only on the occasions they allowed themselves to believe their internet-era jobs had any history at all.
- 4.2.2. Mostly, they considered themselves as new.
- 4.3. They completed their assigned daily tasks within a few hours. For all the other hours they spent at the workplace, they engaged in a contrivance to while away their time.
- 4.4. Victor and Maria's favourite contrivance was to play a post-psychological game they called *Love Literature in Australia*.
- 4.5. The precept of the game was for Victor, then Maria, to write love notes to the other while assuming the identity of an unknown client of the department. The notes were written on Post-it notes and hand delivered.
- 4.5.1. It was essential to the spirit of the game that the notes be written in such a fashion as to somehow denote anonymity.
- 4.5.2. The object of the game was amusement.
- 4.5.3. The more earnest the notes, the more amusing the game.
5. That afternoon, Maria and Victor commenced a new round of the game:
- After we lost contact, I despaired. I could not give you the blessings of my heart.*
- We suffer together the deep pain of missing.*
- We are interlinked hearts.*
- I feel I have you in my heart, even dream you at night.*
- I hope the separating time will not last long.*
- Such sweet scenarios haunt my mind.*
- Comfortable and warm relationships are of the utmost importance.*

Gradually, I felt it is very warm to have your support.

Love is not a game, you have my sincerity.

Sincerely yours is how I end my life if I cannot be with you.

6. In most instances, words are only words.

6.1. Except when power is predicated on words.

The Part About the Contracted Guard

Bruce Wayne watched the soft collisions that occurred during his twelve-year-old son's Rugby League game and thought they were somehow orchestrated, as if young boys were designed to crash into each other, fall down, and bounce right back up again. During lulls in play he conferred with other fathers on the sideline when they loudly complained about the seemingly never-ending changes to the rules of the game that were handed down each week by administrators. Judging by the confusion on and off the field, it was apparent to all observers that the young players and referee could not adhere to, nor enforce, the current rules. In fact, the plot seemed lost entirely.

After the game, Bruce gathered all the kids' playing jerseys, loaded them into a large duffel bag, threw the bag into the back of his people-mover van, and ordered his son to put on his seatbelt for the short journey home. On arrival at their house, Bruce's son immediately made his way to the computer and within moments displayed real joy as he witnessed moving images of the recorded misfortune of others. Bruce went to the laundry and shoved the jerseys into the washing machine. While he waited for the washing cycle to finish he told his wife that the boy's team had lost, then sat down to watch sport highlights. When he heard the bird-like sing-song that indicated the wash was finished, he put the jerseys into a basket and walked out to the rusting Hills Hoist in the backyard. As Bruce hung the jerseys on the clothes line he recalled in amazement how, one-hundred kilograms ago, his body was also once clothed by such small strips of fabric. When the last jersey was fixed by pegs, he stood back and cherished the meaning of his son's team, and the silver-coloured government-sponsored badges on the jerseys that proclaimed the benefits of exercise flashed in the sunlight. He went back inside, kissed his wife on the cheek, then left for work.

Bruce cheerily announced his arrival to the ladies at the front security desk by stating that Vice Captain Wayne of Squadron B was reporting for duty. Again. They laughed politely and took his backpack for screening as he made his way through the full-body scanner to get inside the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. He made his way to the men's change room, got into his uniform, then walked to the guard's recreation room. He looked at the whiteboard near the entrance to the room, which officially recorded the number of detainees within Villawood. In large letters it read 266, six more than when he last looked on his way out the previous evening. In brackets next to that number, unchanged, was the humorous note that four detainees were still on holiday. The detainees who had escaped the previous week were still on the run.

Bruce filled a Styrofoam cup with instant coffee and sugar. He added water from a Zip Hydroboil that hung on the wall above the mini-kitchen sink. He sat down at the near room-length line of tables and grabbed one of the newspapers that was within arm's reach. Pradeep sat down next to him and asked if he'd heard what had happened last night.

What this time? Bruce asked.

Smitty nearly killed Macca at changeover last night, Pradeep said. Macca was hanging shit on Smitty, telling him how duds only died or escaped during A Squad's shift, and he told Smitty that they shouldn't be called 'A Squad', more like they should be called Death Squad.

Bullshit! said Bruce.

No bullshit.

That's fucked.

It's fuckin over the top, ey.

Bruce went back to his coffee and newspaper. Pradeep flicked a few pages of his own paper, then asked Bruce if he'd heard anything about his transfer request.

Not yet, said Bruce.

Fuck, you must be hanging for it. How much you get paid for working on that fuckin island? You get full guvvie employee rates, dontcha, and allowances? Twelve months there and you'd be set for life. You'll get it for sure, mate. Why wouldn't they want The Batman? Me? They'll never pick me. The only way I'm getting out of this fuckin place is in a body bag sent home to Temora. And I know who's gunna kill me too, it'll be one of the crazy duds locked up in C Block for sure.

After an uneventful shift, Bruce had dinner by himself at a KFC store on the way home. It was past his son's bedtime when he made his way into the house, his wife too was already asleep. He placed his backpack on the kitchen table, went to the fridge, chugged some coke from a three-litre bottle, then headed straight back outside for a walk. It was a hot, humid, cloudy night. He went through a park that led to bushland on the outskirts of the suburb. He traversed a track he had walked many times as a way to clear his mind. His memory of the ground beneath him and the glow from the not-so-faraway street lights were the principle aids that prevented him from stumbling. Then, at the periphery of his vision, Bruce glimpsed a barely visible light that ever-so-slightly radiated from a grove. He evaded thin stems of mallee roots as he moved closer to the light. Bruce discovered that the light emanated from a phone that was held by a young girl, who was maybe twelve years old and sat crossed-legged, engaged with her screen. She wore short shorts, a crop-top, and was bare-footed. She noticed Bruce and smiled at him. Bruce walked closer to her.

How much would you pay for this? the girl said precociously as she straightened her legs, apart.

What ... what, Bruce stammered, ... there's no rationale for this.

Well, it's not *actually* about the money, the girl said.

Bruce considered the girl and her reply, and how it seemed she hadn't heard him right, that she had misunderstood him, and walked closer to her. How she smiled made him recall the people he had guarded during his previous contract, when he watched over the silly utter-nutters at the Caritas Inpatient Unit of St Vincent's Hospital, and how all of them, even the foreign silly utter-nutters who had only been in Australia for a few months, who barely spoke English, who suffered acute bouts of utter-nuttiness far from family and home, believed in the same conspiracy,

the one where the Prime Minister, and the Premier, and all the Ministers, and all the other politicians, and the Police Commissioner, and all his staff, and all the clergy and laypeople, they were all pederasts, who were all secretly in cahoots, who all abetted and covered-up for each other, who regularly engaged in paedophilic acts, who shared and exploited young girls and boys. And all the silly utter-nutters were outraged that the public, the people of Australia, hadn't revolted against such cruel overlords, although the silly utter-nutters never themselves acted on their outrage, but were simply madly content in their utter-nuttiness.

Far away from any official decree, but within an iniquitous regime, Bruce continued to walk slowly toward the young girl.

Notes on The Third Bolaño

- The story's title is related to Roberto Bolaño's *The Third Reich*. I've wanted for some time to name a story by transposing Roberto's and my surname from that novel title and by-line, and to pay homage to the works of Bolaño, in some small way, by writing a story incorporating some of his themes and techniques.
- In Bolaño's *The Third Reich*, the main character is an aficionado of a war game called *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich*. In my story, there are characters who play a game called *Love Literature in Australia*, a title borrowed from Bolaño's novel *Nazi Literature in the Americas*.
- My story is inspired by the suicide of Josefa Rauluni at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/send-my-body-to-fiji-detainees-final-words-20110627-1gnndo.html>
- My story is in three sections, which are named similarly to the sections of Bolaño's *2666*.
- The first section, The Part About a Death, is an imagining of Josefa's capture by the Immigration department.
- The Part About The Officers is in a format in honour of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom Bolaño called the greatest philosopher of the 20th century (although I regard Wittgenstein as a poet). It attempts to show the internal logic (or otherwise) of the Immigration Department.
 - It is also an attempt to display a story in a format similar to that of legislation.
 - The legislative act mentioned in this part, the *Public Service Act 1999*, is real.
 - Also real, at s13(11)(b) of that Act, is the enshrinement in law that the Australian Public Service shall always be composed of integrity and good reputation, no matter what actions are conducted in its name: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/psa1999152/s13.html
- In The Part About The Contracted Guard, the character Bruce Wayne refers to people he once guarded at the Caritas Inpatient Unit of St Vincent's Hospital (a very real place) as *silly utter-nutters*. This nomenclature for the mentally ill is based on the name of the Chilean writer Sillie Utternut, which is actually a pseudonym of the Chilean writer Carlos Ruiz-Tagle Gandarillas, who may have been the inspiration for the alias name of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, which is used by the main character in Bolaño's *Distant Star*, Carlos Wieder. (Andrews, C 2014, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*, Columbia University Press, p.45)
- I stand by the obvious comparison I make in my story between Australia's cruel immigration network (on the mainland and various islands) and the female homicides in Ciudad Juarez, the homicides that were so brutally imagined by Bolaño in *2666*.

Robin Reich lives in Ulladulla, NSW and is a trained primary school teacher. He considers writing thusly: analogous to the task of an animator from the 1940s transferring hand-executed artwork from paper to animation cells, thousands and thousands and

thousands of times, producing great depth. He believes his desire to publish writing is purely ego-driven. His first published work was 'The Trout', which can be found in Issue Seven of Tincture Journal.

Mutiny in a Backwood

by Carly-Jay Metcalfe

We sleep with our own derision,
slipping on placentas of half-truths.
A troubadour buckles down, trapping a moorhen.
Strangling its neck in a slow panic,
he skulks away as if the bird is an Oxford secret.

Sidestepping a flannel flower,
he pushes through a dense backwood,
each breath a memory.
His face rubicund, belly just as stout;
the bird's neck, dangling from its downy trunk—pendulous, then still.

Carly-Jay Metcalfe is a Brisbane based writer and death midwife. Carly-Jay is one of six poets in Bend River Mountain, which will be published by Regime Books later this year. Her website can be found at www.carlyjaymetcalfe.com and her blog is www.bruisesyoucantouch.com.

The '69 Exchange

by Benjamin Allmon

The Bargain

It is 1969, and Kari Helle is twenty-four. He buys the most expensive tent Oulu, Finland, has to offer: the *Tena Pallas Vaeltajien Telttä*—The Roamer's Tent. It is the only one with a separate fly, and at 10 lbs is unbelievably light. Excited, Kari goes camping with it in the Arctic winter (as you do).

The tent survived—not just that experience, but also repeated efforts by his wife to 'relocate' it as the years conspired with mould and rust to carry it over that mystical barrier from utilitarian item to sentimental artefact.

Almost half a century later, Kari's photographer daughter Laura hands it to me, thereby fulfilling her end of our peculiar bargain: sourcing a forty-five year old tent as a means of comparing how things have changed in camping since.

My end of the bargain is to sleep in it tonight, '69-style.

"Good luck," she says, in a tone indicating she thinks I'll need it. I scowl at her; she is entirely too happy about all this.

"So, is it easy to set up?" I ask, looking dubiously at the canvas sack she's handed me, hearing the rattle of pegs and poles from within.

"Mmphmmph," she mumbles, but I am only half-listening. I peer inside, but the light is fading; all I can make out is the dull gleam of a tent peg that looks like it once did hard time as a shoehorn.

"It's not going to collapse on me in the middle of the night or anything, is it?"

"Almost certainly not," Laura replies, struggling for a tone of reassurance and not quite making it.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Only that I'm pretty sure I was conceived in it."

Good. Because the double entendre of "'69" wasn't enough. My eyelid twitches once, twice. "I'll see you at dawn," she says, giving me a solicitous pat, as though it may be for the last time.

I set off with the *Pallas* hoisted under one arm, rattling like Marley's Ghost ... or perhaps the Ghost of Camping Past ...

The Location

We are staying on her aunt's 150-acre property north-east of Killarney in a place called The Head, in Queensland's Southern Downs. The Head is so named because it harbours the headwaters, not just of the Condamine River, but also by extension the Murray-Darling catchment. The rain that falls here has a long journey ahead of it, longer than any other

in the country: 3672 km, all the way to Adelaide's kitchen taps.

I trudge upwards through cattle pastures in the bleak twilight, following the Condamine towards where it flows down from the belly of Mt Superbus. Here the river is inches deep and a foot across, cold and clean and untouched by any hand before my own. I maintain a subdued pace. There is a light drizzle falling, cold and steady. It is late April and the earth is slowing down, readying for winter.

Great rafts of cloud swirling about Superbus' head hide the sun's departure behind the Main Range, and the valley is plunged into night. Suddenly this doesn't seem like such a good idea, spending the night in 1969 while my smug photographer drinks hot chocolate on cushions in front of the farmhouse fireplace, cackling, occasionally, at my fate.

I have left behind the good grazing land and entered a crumbling arroyo; beyond is the dark, sub-tropical Gambubal Forest and the mysterious origins of this long, long river. I decide to venture no further and set the *Pallas* down only a few feet from the river. It is just on nightfall, and I have run out of time to find a better place to camp than in the riverbed. If the rain intensifies I may well be on the way to Adelaide myself.

Evening, 1969

The tent is a nylon A-frame with a segmented crossbeam that attaches to a vertical pole at either end, also segmented. It takes a shameful amount of time to figure out which bit connects to which; the assembly quickly descends into a deranged Boy Scout version of 'Dem Bones'.

Some of the poles have inexplicable springs inside them, resulting in improperly-connected segments flying off into the undergrowth like crossbow bolts. Finding these again in teeming darkness is not quite as much fun as I would've imagined.

Getting the structure erected is the next task, and here I fare no better; I very nearly end up in the river clutching spring-loaded bits of pole and cursing the long-dead makers of the *Pallas*.

Eventually, luck and prehensile toes get the thing up, but getting inside the tent is not straightforward either; the zipper has not worn the years well, and crumbles at my touch like one of those Hammer vampires when the sunlight hits it. Drenched and shivering, I worry open a tiny gap and squeeze myself through.

The smell of mildew is strong, but somehow comforting. I wonder when it was last used, then Laura's tale of conception bobs jauntily to the surface, and I hastily think of something else. I have my guitar, a candle lantern, and a battered copy of *On the Road*. As I recall, Kerouac died in '69—went off-road, you might say. It doesn't get much more off-road than pretending it's 1969 nearly a kilometre above sea level in the Great Dividing Range. Especially as the temperature plummets, carrying with it my appreciation of the conditions of yore; the tent is damp and draughty, the walls as thin as old parchment, the tent flap unable to be sealed shut.

Unable to source an authentic '69 sleeping bag, I had blithely decided to simply sleep in my clothes. With the temperature now in single figures—as my IQ must have been—I picture Laura, nodding off on the couch while the fire burns low, farmhouse-warm and unaware that just outside a new ice age is commencing. She got the better end of this exchange, although given the revelatory diminutiveness of my IQ, it was perhaps not the toughest battle she's had.

The rain continues to fall on the roof, running in tiny rivers down the creases caused by uneven tension due to the rushed erection. Everything has become sexualised; '69, The Head, pitching tents, erections, conceptions ... I lie down, overcome. Troubled, I doze off without eating dinner.

Night, 1969

I wake sometime later in utter blackness, utter silence. Outside, the rain has stopped. I poke my head out and sample some 1969.

The silence is a physical presence, but as I grow accustomed to its nocturnal, sonic body, I become aware of intricacies in its homogeneous hide. The rustle of the night wind through the long, uncropped grass, the throaty chuckle of the Condamine endlessly amused in its infancy by the miracle of its own existence, knowing nothing of the journey ahead of it—long solitude in the barrens of the West, the slow torpor of Coorong dotage.

The heavy, bestial grunts and snorts of some large animal resonate in the stillness, their proximity impossible to gauge. I sit, afraid to move or draw attention to myself—it would be all too easy to imagine the owner of that primal grunt crashing through the flimsy walls of the decrepit *Pallas*, trampling my shivering bod.

Beyond the tent is unrelenting, depthless night. But I slowly become aware, as I had aurally, of variations: the blacker arm of the Main Range encircling the valley like a protective embrace, the explosion of galaxies above like droplets of foam from some unimaginable wave that broke aeons ago, and reflected in the virgin river's onyx flesh below. Everywhere I look, some new component of the night reveals itself.

So too the mind, freed from the chatter of a thousand voices, is at first blank. Then, slowly, thoughts and memories wink into existence like stars no longer seen because of life pollution—they are *always* there, simply overwhelmed by the internet, the television, the radio. But here, camping in 1969, they return like old friends I've put off seeing for no good reason, and I wonder why I listen to all that other stuff in the first place.

We gained a lot by congregating and building and inventing our way to 2014, but maybe we lost as much as we gained. Our pockets can only carry so much, finite harbours of exchange.

I decide against breaking the silence with the guitar, breaking the darkness with the lantern, breaking my thoughts with another's, even if they are Kerouac's, who perhaps would have understood why. Instead I lie down on Kari's old sleepmat (which looks suspiciously as though it began life as insulation) and let the night be what it is.

Morning, 1969

I awake with a feeling of being watched.

There is a presence; I can feel it.

Peering out of the tent flap, I forget to take the next breath.

I am surrounded by bulls—a wall of crowded, jostling black cow-flesh, silent and staring, nostrils flaring. Their

size is hallucinatory. I grow uneasy; I've certainly eaten enough of their brethren for them to hold a grudge.

The tenuous ribbon of the Condamine is all that separates us, should they smell my fear and deem me worthy of a trampling. I am naked apart from an old pair of cut-off jeans, and the only weapon I possess is my battered acoustic guitar. If pressed I could serenade them, although what to play a ferocious cow? 'Moooon River?' 'Rawhide?' No, might touch a nerve. 'Cow-ard of the County?' Too close to home, given my nervousness.

The young bulls' breath steams from their nostrils in the frigid dawn air, their eyes gleam with what can only be bloodlust, and as I launch into an ill-advised rendition of 'Bulls on Parade', I see Laura coming over the ridge, small and unwitting.

"Watch out, Lau—"

I taper off as she spots the herd and removes her jacket, waving it above her head and saying "shoo!" in a mild voice. I brace for the bulls' reaction, wondering how I will explain the loss of my photographer, but they turn and, upon spotting her, flatten their ears in obvious fear and take to their hooves. Some cast backwards glances as they flee, in case she is giving chase. They no longer seem quite so menacing—Laura would be 55 kg soaking wet.

"What were you about to say?" she asks as she joins me, camera swinging from one hand.

"Nothing," I say, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"You OK? You look a little freaked."

"I said I'm fine—"

"Did the cows scare you?"

I say nothing, make a show of inspecting the *Pallas*' stitching.

"What were you about to do? Sing to them?"

The Finnish haberdashery skills really are one of the unsung aspects of Scandinavian culture.

"Did they like it? Or did they moo you?" she says. A snort escapes her.

"Nobody can ever know about this." I say without looking at her.

"Make me breakfast and you have a deal."

Cold has seeped into my 1969 bones, and it will only be banished by a successfully smouldering fire. But the wood I've found is wet, like everything here. The floor of the *Pallas* is an extension of the walls of the *Pallas*, with nothing so frivolous as an inbuilt groundsheet. I may as well have slept in the grass—the floor is soaked, as is my shirt, which acted as a pillow last night. I have newspaper, but it, too, is unenthusiastic about being up so early.

One unexpected boon is the old bits of 1960s billy-stand ironmongery I sourced. By using its framework I maximise the airflow to the extent that even wet wood can be coaxed to burn, at least enough to thaw out frozen appendages and warm baked beans to an acceptable temperature. They are for Laura—in my opinion, there is no

temperature at which baked beans are acceptable.

I watch the camp fire smoke drift along with the river and think how a few minutes ago, that smoke was a page from yesterday's newspaper, containing dozens of bits of information about our civilisation, a record of who and what we were. And, just like that, it vanishes into the high country dawn air. As the day brightens, so the 1969 dream dims. I am no longer cold.

Night, 2014

I sit watching the light bleed from Wilson's Peak. I am outside the modern tent, on a high knoll overlooking the valley cut by the Condamine over millennia. As the sun sets, the valley is draped in shadows, pooling in the deep hollows and spreading outwards. I can just make out the *Pallas*, still slouching by the river at the base of the ridge. It looks forlorn and forgotten, a refugee from another time, when the music was different and today's retirees were just leaving the nest.

Up here, the sun still limns the fluorescent orange tent in vivid fire, allowing me to inspect it—it is a *Sea to Summit i-Explore* belonging to Laura's husband. At four years old it is not quite at the cutting edge any more, but it will serve our purposes.

Instead of a guitar, I have Laura's iPod with speakers ... instead of Kerouac, I have her iPhone, and instead of the flammable lantern, I have an LED headlamp. With her husband's propane stove replacing the Iron Age billy stand and a sleeping bag that makes the bed in my home seem decidedly spartan, the transformation is complete, with one exception.

"You have no idea how to use that, do you?" Laura says, pointing to the iPhone in my hand. I look at it, laden with apps, I presume. I've never seen an app, have only the vaguest notion of what they are and do.

"Absolutely none," I say cheerfully. Laura looks at me, as though debating the merit in trying to explain it to me. Her face clears. "Don't press anything," she says, and sets off for the farmhouse.

"But how will I know when it's apping?" I call out, the fear suddenly upon me.

"You won't," she yells without turning.

I look down at the iPhone. Sod her, I think, and poke the screen like I saw her do earlier. It beeps companionably and tells me it is 13° C with a 65% chance of rain in the next three hours. I am cheered by its unexpected forthrightness and enthusiasm.

Several hours after nightfall, it's 10° C and there's a 98% chance of me throwing the wretched thing as far as I can into the night. It beeps and tells me it is 836m above sea level, now 837, no, 836, *now* 835, 4, 3, now it's face down in the corner, beeping occasionally, unperturbed by its prone position.

Laura's iPod contains approximately 87 hours of music, she informed me, but through some cruel twist of fate I have managed to jam it on one song, looping endlessly. It is, naturally enough, Wham!, imploring me to wake them up before I go-go. I wasn't aware this was what Laura was into ... although, it would explain her dance moves. As the *basso* voice heralds the impending enthusiasms by intoning "the jitterbug" for the seventeenth time, I'm feeling pretty

jittery myself. I cannot turn it off—I've tried. Heaven knows I've tried.

The headlamp is an improvement on the lantern, not just because of the reduced fire hazard but simply because my hands are free to do other stuff. In retrospect there is always the risk of what could be dubbed Luddite's Delight, which goes hand in hand with a tendency to romanticise the past and issue blanket statements like "things were better in the old days". Some were, others weren't. The headlamp is a definite improvement.

But the iPhone—frivolous doodad or essential oracle? I pick it up again and inspect it. Like so much of what we invent, it seems a little bit good, a little bit bad, and mostly irrelevant. Do I need to know the barometric pressure is 1012 and in a state of flux? Probably not. Do I need to know a storm is on its way? Maybe. If I've got my young son with me, make that probably. But the danger is that relying on this stuff short-circuits the best apps of all—my senses, my wits, my instincts.

Beyond the stark glow of the iPhone screen, the night is even blacker than it was in 1969, and as long as I keep this device on, the dark will remain the frightening, featureless mass it currently is. I lay it down again to cut the light, but the ghostly green afterimage hangs over my vision for a long time.

Unable to sleep as the iPhone glows and beeps and iPod George warbles on about being unprepared for masturbation and yo-yos, I think of the night before, and in more generous terms than I had at the time. I was colder, wetter and less comfortable, but the night seemed richer than it does by the LED glow, my thoughts like the Condamine, smooth and flowing free. Long thoughts.

Long thought is impossible with the Internet. Humidity is 73%, barometric pressure dropping. It may rain. Outlook is unclear, check back later. Not to be outdone by George, the iPhone warbles too. I pick it up and see that Laura has received an email. It is Facebook, telling her about interesting pages on Facebook. Another warble. This is from Umberto, telling her she needs to start gambling online at the Ruby Palace before it's too late.

I gingerly return the phone to its prone position. It's too late, all right. As George tells me I put the boom-boom into his heart yet again I realise it has gone beyond all human endurance. It's time I went-went.

I tug the broken zipper up and crawl into the *Pallas'* mildewed embrace. It is mercifully silent ... at least, 1969 silent. Not a warble or beep to be heard. I don't know what the weather is doing, and I don't care. You've got to have balance. Be willing to let go, relinquish control, or the illusion of it. Disconnect. But in a 2014 sleeping bag, and with a headlamp to read that Kerouac magic.

What we exchanged in order to get from 1969 to 2014 was a culture, an era, a set of things agreed upon by a group of people tied together in time. But technology's advance means that nobody ever says "this will do, let's stop here for the night". Our tech-driven culture is like the Condamine River, always moving forward, incapable of stopping or deviating from the programming laid before it. A cynic might say it is all downhill from here.

But like the river, it *is* possible to meander a little, linger by the banks, and—if only for a moment—turn a deaf ear to tomorrow's siren song.

Morning, 2014

I wake before the dawn and make the trek up the ridge to the modern camp site, where I will meet Laura for the dawn shoot. Under my arm I carry the *Pallas* in its canvas sack. It no longer feels like the Corpse of Camping Past, but a time-travelling vessel to a world where nobody knows where you are, and better still, can't find you. The only GPS you're likely to encounter is a Geriatric Pole Segment.

The first rays of new sunlight transform the *i-Explore* into an inflamed boil on the green buttocks of Mt Superbus, nuclear orange and faintly beeping. Even at this distance I'm convinced I can hear George, indefatigable, still wanting to hit that hiiiiigh.

The propane stove makes short work of breakfast, and packing down the tent is nearly as easy as erecting it was—that's another thing that has improved with the years, the move away from tents that require complex *capoeira* manoeuvres and a thorough grasp of engineering principles to erect them.

The rising sun bestows upon us temporary halos as Laura comes to stand beside me, and we look over the river on its way out of the valley and off across the country. We are silent for a moment, thinking of all those miles.

Then she turns to me and says, "What did you prefer?"

I look at the propane stove, the exchange we've made for the camp fire of '69. What we exchange is usually convenience over satisfaction—it's easier to cook with the stove, but it's more satisfying to watch your companions warm themselves and their baked beans by the fire you built.

I don't answer, because I don't know the answer.

"Would you do it again?" she asks, another good question. It is one of her gifts, along with photography and bovine-wrangling.

"Yes," I say, honestly.

The sun climbs a little.

"Do you hear that beeping?" she asks.

"No," I say, lying.

Benjamin Allmon's work has most recently appeared in The Writers Bloc, The Writer Magazine, Punchnel's Magazine and Aurealis. When not writing he makes up songs that involve pigs so that his two-year-old son can make oinking noises.

Abandoned Bodies on Everest.com

by Julie Maclean

On the cusp of the monsoon
jaunty nimbus are hysterical
about the summit
as insects enter the Death Zone

Puffed up in bright gear
hungry in the hunt
with necessary oxygen
and rubber tubing
up and over the lip they go

Lashed by a string vein
they follow a well-tramped track
past solid ghosts
some in sitting position
in wait for the ventriloquist's
hand to warm life back

Too crisp to carry down
awkward across snow bridges
they guard instead

Are noted, feared
one with eyes open, locks horizontal
in mischievous winds
blown over the precipice at last

Green Boots, the Korean, one step short
of a warm igloo
one breath short of glory
and the echo of Francys
to the tumbling man
Don't leave me

Being Burden

by Julie Maclean

Sometimes I am a horse carrying
a tourist along a familiar trail across the desert

and when I see my best friend carrying a complete stranger
appearing like the sun

then disappearing over the horizon
like a reluctant moon and on another path altogether

I am in terror of being forgotten
I call and call even when she has fallen away

Rough Trade On

by Julie Maclean

By coffee time an emu & her minstrel chicks
have stopped to let us pass

White-faced calves in droves
clutter the bitumen
Eyes swivel at passing trucks
where hardwood frames lamb rump
in Warholian repeat

En route to slaughter
there's the stench of piss,
cloven-hoof clatter

Beneath the horizon
the Murrumbidgee River
shimmies in a tree mirage
pushing the boundary

I trip over a wafered hip bone,
drought-broken
it forms a skull
in my imagination

Yarndi, Smack, Ice & Kit
now travel the Long Paddock to Bourke

So sweet to be young in badlands made fat
where saltbush grows thin under Sturt's marked tree

Interview with Julie Maclean

by Julie Maclean and Stuart Barnes

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

I come from a line of independent women and very kind men who taught me the value of reading and the power of education. When it comes to language I have always been a sponge and I have to thank my father for that. He would sit for hours first reading to me, then listening to me read and taking me to the library on a Saturday morning. I could read when I was four thanks to him. I loved the way pictures of dogs and children came alive in a simple, repetitive narrative. The much maligned Janet and John graded readers gave me a super power. I loved the sound of words and the force they could wield at my core. When I wasn't skipping and playing Hide-and-Seek, I was playing Libraries with Lesley from the council flats.

From then I loved words and building a vocabulary in competition with my dad, triggered by the stalwart of all 1950s homes, the *Reader's Digest*. When I got to secondary school I adored French (and my young, cool French teacher), but to my eternal disappointment felt that Latin was pointless and fuddy-duddy. All those battles and references to Sparta and Troy bored me to death. If we'd taken a field trip to Pompeii or Rome it might have been a different story. I gave it up in Year Nine and have been too lazy or scared to take it up since.

Great teachers and beautiful literature have been my saviours. In primary school when I was nine Miss White was a strict, Quakeresque battleaxe. We had to recite poetry for end of year assessment and I chose something from the *Oxford Book of Verse*. It was Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Spring' and I have never forgotten it, or him. I still find his poetry thrilling. His love of language was visceral and I can see his influence everywhere still. That year I won the poetry prize, which was a book token. Dad took me to Blackwells in Clifton where ceiling-high bookshelves groaned under the weight of poetry. I still have that poetry book with my name carefully inscribed inside the front cover in proper ink and in a stiff attempt at italics. I went back to Blackwells last year and the bare floorboards and high shelves had been replaced by carpet and low rows of shiny new publications. I found about six poetry titles in the whole place. It was a dismal disappointment.

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

My mother had a strong hand in my first poem. Left to my own devices it might have been free verse but rhyme was the order of the day. I was five and I remember how we spent ages trying to get the metre right. It was a nonsense poem after Spike Milligan about a robin sitting on a nest with treacle running down its breast. I was always more interested in reading poetry than writing it until about eight years ago. All my creative energy had gone into teaching English, which I don't regret for a minute. I loved it. I never thought about writing until I found myself with a small child in an unhappy relationship. The upside was a surge of writing. I can't remember exactly which journal published my first poem. I think it might have been *Divan* and, if so, was about a bag lady from Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, where I lived at the time. Thinking back, she might have been a cross-dresser. She wore parachute pants, a crash helmet and used to thread tea bags in her dreadlocks. She carried a shopping bag and would show me pieces of broken glass lying in the bottom. These were her 'baby'. I'd had trouble conceiving at the time and had gone through miscarriages so her

broken baby resonated with me.

3. How and where do your poems take shape?

In front of a screen on my iPad after something I've heard, read, seen or experienced. I never handwrite. Too slow and I can no longer read my own writing. I have a collaboration going with a close poet friend in the UK where we send reply poems to each other within a two-week window and we have to respond to some aspect of the other person's poem. I got the idea from UK poet Judy Brown. It makes us think and write. We're heading for a pamphlet. Once I have the opening line I work quickly using free association to see where it leads and find if I tamper too much I can lose the essence and sometimes vitality of a piece. I return to a poem after a day or a week and look at the problems, tweak, leave again, then revisit sooner or later. More and more I enjoy the research aspects of writing and where this leads. I often feel inspired to write after a few days of concentrated reading. I should kill my darlings more, I suspect. I rarely pass my work on for comment. Themes seem to change every few weeks. Recently, I could see the value in mentoring when an editor actually phoned me and asked me if I could let the last stanza go. I could see how I'd let the poem run to fat.

4. Reading for a BBC Programme, Sylvia Plath explained: "['The Disquieting Muses'] borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—The Disquieting Muses. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting." (Sylvia Plath, Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, 1981)

What art forms influence your poetry?

Surrealist art has influenced my work. I have to thank Pascale Petit for that. It was her response to Frida Kahlo in *What the Water Gave Me* and a residential I attended in 2013 that inspired me to write in a more imaginative way. I love galleries, museums and documentaries on any art form and will gladly give over a Saturday and Sunday afternoon to SBS and ABC to indulge this passion. A recent visit to MONA had a profound effect on me: when I walked in I cried at the physical magnitude of the place inspired by art on my favourite island, Tasmania. I find the space inspirational and exciting on so many levels. To find Henry Darger in his own gallery was breathtaking. It would be difficult to find a gallery in the world that matches the scope and vision of David Walsh. I would love to visit Naoshima, the island of surreal art in Japan and I have those clay warriors in Xi'an on my bucket list.

5. Tell me about 'Rough Trade On', 'Being Burden' and 'Abandoned Bodies on Everest.com', the poems of yours that are in Issue Ten of Tincture Journal.

'Abandoned Bodies on Everest.com' was written after a macabre look at this website and the moving stories behind the souls left on the mountain. The tone is probably a bit odd because I have mixed feelings about the tragedy of lost life versus the desperation we humans display in order to be validated or feel alive and the lengths some of us will go for recognition and a sense of meaning. This is where I have a love/hate relationship with social media, which sometimes feels so narcissistic that it becomes unbearable.

'Being Burden' was inspired by a radio documentary I heard about this phenomenon where horses fear abandonment when they see fellow horses moving away from them and out of sight. Of course, my poem is really

about mortality and losing everything in death, which I think about quite a lot after the death of my own father who, in the face of death, and after a lifetime of being dignified and moderate, told me he was terrified. He was losing everything. This shocked me and I feel the need to get my own feelings in order quick smart. That means I do not want to fear death but go to it with equanimity, which most of us faithless souls do not. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is by the side of my bed for those wobbly moments at Wolf Hour and I find a less socially engaged life makes me feel peaceful and happy.

‘Rough Trade On’ was written after a night in Bourke, a key country town along what used to be known as The Long Paddock, where cattle were driven from Queensland to Victoria in the days before motorised transport. We were advised not to walk the streets after dark because crack cocaine and crystal meth now seem to be the biggest business in town and visitors are vulnerable to attack. This outback place seems to distil the past and present in a toxic and tragic brew. I travel to the outback quite a bit and am constantly disturbed and ashamed by the mess we leave behind in our greed and curiosity.

6. How has your poetry been influenced by others’? By teaching English? By moving from the UK to Australia in the Seventies and, more recently, to the coast?

I would say that Shakespeare, GM Hopkins, WB Yeats, DH Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, Keats, Joni Mitchell, the Beat Poets and Plath influenced my early attempts. Now I have the time to read widely I find influences come from far and wide, mainly contemporary poets; I love the language in the King James Bible and although I’ve only dipped into it in places, it’s breathtaking.

The migrant experience affects me more and more the older I get. I’m becoming nostalgic and that has informed a lot of the poetry in my debut collection *When I saw Jimi*, which was my way of capturing an earlier time in a memoir. In the Seventies I was running away from early marriage and suburban life and looking for adventure and no responsibility. In moving to Australia in 1976 aged twenty-four, I eventually came to the emotional place where I belong everywhere and nowhere. This was positive in the early years, finding family duty cloying, but now that I have an ageing mother and lifelong friends approaching a vulnerable time in their lives I feel the separation keenly and I also feel guilty for leaving. This melancholy detachment gives rise to reflection and poetry, so it can’t be all bad. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been such a bolter. Life might have been easier. These days I tend to be influenced by travel to new places, the natural world, human folly (mainly mine) and art.

7. Tell me about Scandinavia, which inspired your pamphlet Kiss of the Viking (Poetry Salzburg, 2014).

Scandinavia was a surprise and a half. I was expecting cutting edge design and fabulous-looking tall blonde Vikings and what I found was understated calm and a confidence in the architecture and the people, most of whom were of average height with brown hair. I saw very few tattoos or dyed hair, nobody wanting to be noticed above the crowd. I found a pastel gentility (except in Christiania, Copenhagen, which was all drugs and pit bulls). The contemporary and traditional rub against each other comfortably in some ways but are now challenged by the influx of refugees and an acknowledgement in some quarters that Nordic Noir has some basis in reality. It had only been a year since Breivik had set off that bomb in Oslo and murdered those beautiful young people.

As an Anglo/Australian I felt undercooked somehow and detached. As a young country, I feel we have too many

qualities of the adolescent and I came away feeling that we need more self assurance, greater curiosity and a respect for the quiet and unassuming where the introverted and philosophical trump the brash and superficial. It was also embarrassing that everyone spoke fluent and sophisticated English but that we didn't have more than one word of their language, *Tac*, for thank you. The weird thing was, I felt unnerved by the silence, the perceived emptiness, milky light and long, long days. I did miss the bright and brash and the rush of Aussie life. We seem polar opposites in so many ways. I loved seeing Munch's paintings and the Millenium tour as homage to Stieg Larsson; above all, the heritage listed cemeteries; Woodland and Assistenz, where death is handled democratically, fearlessly and simply in the Lutheran tradition. No tacky plastic flowers on those graves. And I loved the other side of Copenhagen, where most people ride to work on old fashioned Malvern Star type black bikes with baskets and no crash helmets and no Lycra.

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

The explosion of online journals of varying degrees of quality means that it is possible for almost anyone to see their poetry published. This is fabulous for the dilettante and it means that readers can find their preferred style, but if you want to be taken seriously you have to discriminate and be on doggerel alert. Once it's up, it's up forever. What I find difficult is the cost of subscribing to print journals in this country. They are wonderful to have and to hold but so few people get to see the poetry and it's so difficult deciding where to invest. I swap around every year. And as our reach become global it gets even harder to choose. I applaud websites like Josephine Corcoran's [And Other Poems](#), which publishes previously published poetry. It's been terrible to see so many excellent journals go under even in my short time in the poetry world but market forces and different levels of engagement will prevail. I think journals should charge a nominal fee for submissions or accept upon purchase of a publication. While digital will dominate in the future when they get the formatting right, there will always be a place for the lovely hard or soft cover and it's so good to see so many pamphlet publishers, publishing to order so not suffocating under piles of dusty remainders and some producing high quality, beautifully designed books.

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

In recent weeks I've read contemporary heartbreaking Lithuanian poets in an anthology compiled by Poetry Salzburg. I've recently returned to UK's Jon Stone and Pascale Petit, US' Sharon Olds, Tony Hoagland and Frank O'Hara and Canadian Don McKay. I tend to dip in and out of international online poetry a lot. I've been reading Alice Oswald's *Dart* and listening to a radio broadcast of her poem 'Tithonus'. She is one of a rare breed of poets who can read their own work impressively. I like to check out *Best of UK*, US, Canadian and Australian poetry to feel the zeitgeist. In the latest *Poetry* I found Michael Derek Hudson whose work I really like for its meaty attitude and language play. He hasn't published a collection because I don't think he's bothered to try. He's very, very good.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/michael-hudson>.

If you asked me in a month's time I'd give you another list.

Julie Maclean is the author of Kiss of the Viking (Poetry Salzburg), When I saw Jimi (Indigo Dreams) and the e-chapbook You Love You Leave (Kind of a Hurricane Press, US). Her poetry and short fiction appears in The Best Australian Poetry (UQP) and is forthcoming in Poetry. Julie blogs at www.juliemacleanwriter.com.

The Crocodile Hotel (Novel Extract)

by Julie Janson

Chapter One: Arrival at Harrison Station

Jane Reynolds stared out of the Land Rover's window. The drive from Katherine was a nightmare, it struck deep into her heart, but she was somehow elated, the craving for change always won. Mercifully, her son Aaron stayed sleeping, perspiration on his forehead. This was pitiless heat, searing forty-degree heat suffocating the flat plains and lime-green grass spiked with spindly grey-white trees and red boulders thrown like giant's toys on a moonscape that went on and on.

The Department driver, resolutely silent for hours, managed a half turn of his head then a nod to outside. It was the Churinga Roadhouse. He climbed out and leant against the car door. "How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Old enough, I guess. You can get a feed here if you want."

"Thanks." She nudged Aaron and smoothed his hair. Together they pushed the restaurant door into sudden noise and movement. At any moment, Jane expected an absurdist actor to set their hair on fire. Someone farted. Ghoulish rodeo clowns in red hats laughed. Dusty men in blue singlets. They chewed. Some toothless hippies picked at tinned peas and pineapple. Salad. Bushmen, jackaroos, roustabouts and stockmen hunched over plates of chips and gravy.

A bald fat man stood over the bain-marie, sprinkling chicken salt on the yellow food: shrivelled dim sims, chips, pies—all shrinking in the heat. A commercial dishwasher started rumbling. At university she'd worked as a kitchen hand, leered at by the rich boys of Basser College. No blowflies trapped behind glass food shields back there. Her graduation had been followed by unemployment, a year of staring in cake-shop windows, a year of hunger and pregnancy.

Aaron's eyes begged; he held up cans of Coca Cola. She paid the fat man and they got a seat by the jukebox. Kenny Rogers. The Northern Territory Times, grubby from earlier diners, faced her. 'Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Sack Head of State'. She spotted another headline: 'Child Taken by Croc'. Aaron would not shift from her sight. Vigilance the first word out here, in all things.

She watched the dusty Aboriginal families framed in the greasy windows. Two children blinked with pus-filled eyes in the sunlight. They clutched bright orange Twisties. Their mother stroked their backs in the shade. Single mothers worried about food. She and Aaron had slept next to each other on a small mattress in the share house. No money, no support. Definitely, she must keep hold of this new job. The fat man pushed an old Aboriginal man in a shredded flannel shirt and no shoes towards the door.

"No humbug here—you know the rules, Sandy," the fat man said. The old Aboriginal man shuffled towards the road. Jane stood up with a sinking feeling, a slight shaking in her voice. Gough Whitlam's fine words had barely carried to the Blue Mountains. She urged herself to her feet. She had to speak up.

"Why are you throwing him out?" she said.

“He’s dirty.”

“So are those stockmen.”

“He doesn’t want to be inside.”

Jane bent towards the old man. “Would you like to sit down in the air-conditioning?” she said.

The fat man held court.

“Look lady, you’re from down south, aren’t ya? My place, my rules,” said the fat man.

“It’s racist. Let him stay.”

There was a boom of laughter.

“Why don’t you piss off? Go on, away you go.”

Jane felt everyone watching; she took Aaron by the hand and walked to the door. The fat man waddled past her and put down a bag of bottles of Coke, placing it outside the door. The old man, breathing heavily, rested on the step. He pulled the bag to him and looked at Jane; his eyes seemed blurred and sightless. She tried to hold his look. She felt useless. It wasn’t her business; she had to learn to keep quiet and stop trying to interfere. The roadhouse owner, the fat man, had rights. The customers, the paying ones, were always right, weren’t they? She looked back at the faces. Some smirked.

Aaron touched the old man’s shoulder.

“Want me to carry your bag?” He smiled and saluted at the little blonde boy. Jane assisted the old man to stand, aligning her forearm under his like a tiller to guide him back to his family beneath the tree. The family women averted their eyes. They saw a whitey do-gooder. Aaron put the drinks bag down gently.

“Yeeai, good boy.” The old man touched Aaron’s hand and held it for a long moment.

“You OK now?” said Aaron. Jane smiled at the quiet scene the two were making in the midst of the doom. The children under the tree ripped into the Cokes and swigged. Their eyes were blooms of infection. Did she have some ointment that could help? Who was she to think she could help anybody? She was barely able to help herself. Was this somehow her fault too? The guilt and misery etched on people’s faces seemed to go on and on. No one escaped the sense of powerlessness. Neither blacks nor whites could shake free of how to be around each other. The Department driver was wiping off the windscreen.

To Jane, every broken man on the ground was an incarnation of her mentally ill brother. He would pick up cigarette butts from the streets around Balmain and roll them into smokes with newspaper. He never begged, but suffered the indignity of being thrown from pubs for not having enough money for a beer. His blue eyes and heavy forehead spoke of his Aboriginal grannies. Each tramp was her brother in need. There but for the grace of God go I.

Jane bought a box of oranges from the fat man, carried them to the car. They had a long way to go, hundreds of kilometres. The driver put out his cigarette and called to Jane to get back in. The air was a furnace, no air-conditioning. It smelt like a decaying cow. She stared out the window: the blue horizon cut the world in two, and it was vast and

uplifting. She felt so alive. This was her new life, transmigrated to Mars. Ghost gums, small reptiles flattened on the road, and bloated bodies of dead kangaroos. Aaron began to count the dead while a bustard walked slowly along the road, oblivious to an approaching eight-carriage road train.

The car turned off the bitumen onto a bulldust track with holes so big that you could lose a car in them. Rainer River, south of Arnhem Land, was scorched country. They drove through hundreds of kilometres of cattle stations with no fences. Stark grey-green beauty.

On Harrison Station there were soaring wedge-tailed eagles, egrets, blue cranes and galahs. A mirage shimmered, broken-down bulldozers rusted on yellow dirt, water tanks teetered on wooden towers. A meat house, fowl house, dog house and humpies for three hundred people. The Lanniwah houses were made of paper-bark and tin; some were canvas, with pots and billycans hanging in the trees. Mangy dogs lay in heaps on bare earth and the soil glinted with camp pie tins and broken bottles. Pandanus dillybags hung like fruit on bare wooden poles and precious suitcases jutted from beneath iron bed frames. Lanniwah children played on the hills while their parents sat by small fires.

One bent-over old woman with a stick walked by surrounded by blue-and-red dogs. Jane watched her stop and stare at the government Land Rover; she had a magnetic presence. A sense of incredible excitement grew. Jane could see that the demountable school was about four hundred metres from the teacher's place, and the camp was further off near a hill of stone. The big house for the Boss and his family was very close to Jane's new home. It was possible to look into their bedrooms, as they had no curtains; it was uncomfortably close. Still, it might be better than television. The pretty lily-covered billabong rippled a short walk from where Jane stood.

Jane lifted her son from the back seat as he woke up. They crawled out of the car; the heat hit them like a shovel. A forty-three-degree haze floated towards her; bleached bones bordered the road. Jane staggered and wondered how anyone could live out here.

Aaron seemed oblivious, and she watched him as he ran around the yard skipping and hooting, exploring their new home at Harrison Station: a large demountable home, a caravan parked on flat orange earth, white painted stones and dozens of shrunken geraniums. Jane took it all in. There was hardly a tree, and the wire mesh fences were falling down—they wouldn't keep out Brahman bulls or dingoes.

"See you later, enjoy yourself. I'll be back after the Wet, maybe five months, with some school supplies," said the driver.

"Hold on, please—don't leave."

"Look lady, it's a flaming long way back to civilisation and I'm tonguin' for a cold beer."

"Wait, what if I need something?" she yelled.

"Like what?"

"Something."

"You won't be able to call—no phone out here in hell. You had the interview with Mr White at head office. You wanted it. You got it. Good luck, sweetheart."

He threw their suitcase onto the ground, grunted, spat and headed back to Katherine, a five-hour drive through deep bulldust. Jane watched him go. The hot air choked her and she couldn't catch her breath. She smiled at Aaron. Yep, everything was just great. Her caravan gleamed with round ugly edges. There was nowhere to hide; she was naked.

The landscape was gutted by the annual floods that washed away the topsoil, leaving billabongs with stranded twenty-foot long crocodiles. Jane stood battered by dry wind. Blue-grey clouds pulsed with blinding bursts of sunlight. It was an alien landscape with the silver caravans placed like tin cans covered in dust, waiting to be towed away if the numbers at the school dropped. The Department said the people might move on at any moment, looking for seasonal food and ceremony.

God almighty—what had she done? She found it hard to breathe; the isolation was going to kill her. Jane calmed herself by bending down and breathing slowly and repeating, "I can do this. I can do this." She squatted on the ground. She doubled over, hands on her knees, time stopped; something was caught in her throat, an eternity of fear. She looked at her hands, the trembling fingers. She saw a round white pebble and stooped to take it in her palm. The stone felt solid: it was a message, and she was feeling space and time in a bright light. She put the stone in her pocket; it would protect her.

Aunty Emily, her Darug aunt, had advised her to take this job: take a chance at a new life; get away from poverty and sadness. Get away from the memories of her father Samuel dying. Jane picked up her suitcase. This would be a great new beginning; she would be a wonderful teacher and her son would thrive on the outdoor adventures. It was going to be all right. She could do this amazing thing.

Jane thought about her place, her Aboriginal blood. It circled in her mind, all the way to the Northern Territory. She knew she was of Aboriginal descent; she had grown up with her father being called 'Abo'. She heard his voice from a distant 1959, when he sat in the backyard of his brick Housing Commission home. "It isn't smart to call yourself an Aboriginal. Your kids might get taken. You won't get a government job," she heard him laugh. He didn't want that kind of job, but his kids might. Many families had lost children with interference from the Aborigines Welfare Board. Samuel's brothers and sisters were quiet on the subject: they learnt table manners and kept the secret. She watched him carve her a yam digging stick entwined with a snake design, as his skin went black in the sun. Her aunts said her father's dark skin was the result of jaundice as a child, but Jane thought that unlikely.

Jane had been called 'a little white blackfeller' when she ran fast in school sports. She had long legs and dark eyes, and a thatch of blonde hair, while her brothers and sister had 'lubra lips'. Jane had known this family secret but it had seemed a distant thing.

She took a wedding ring out of her bag and slid it onto her finger. She unfolded the Education Department appointment letter.

"You have been appointed for one year to Harrison Station School. This position is conditional upon you being a married woman as the accommodation is suitable only for a couple."

She scanned the horizon. No, there did not seem to be any prospect of a husband. The gossips might think that perhaps Jane's husband had run off or never existed.

Cove river in Boronia Park. She is a descendant of the Burruberongal people of the Darug Aboriginal nation, Hawkesbury river. Julie has had plays performed at Belvoir St Theatre Sydney and has been shortlisted for the Patrick White Award and the Griffin Award. Her plays Black Mary and Gunjies have been published by Aboriginal Studies Press. Julie's first novel, The Crocodile Hotel, was published by Cyclops Press in March 2015. www.cyclopspress.com.au. www.juliejansonwriter.com.

Ode to My Extra Pinkies

by Chris Lynch

I have only my mother's word
and the small nub on each whole hand

to prove I once had twelve fingers.
Somehow it's sad to say I used to be

a postaxial polydactyl, my little paws
snipped soon after birth. Sometimes I imagine

that one day we'll have the technology
to bring them back. (The kind doctor will advise

against it, but I'll sign the form and roll up
my sleeve—get my ruler out every week, update

the chart. Maybe start piano.) That raw jolt when I
knocked my stumps against an awkward edge

faded, finally, in my teens; the remaining nerves,
poor things, held on as long as they could.

It was my mother who did it. I suppose some
small screaming part of me still blames her.

Oh little pinkies, it should have been me
tying that cat gut around your throats,

boiling the kitchen scissors in the pot
when you went black.

Synopsis

This is a true story, though not everyone believes me when I tell it. My mother's a nurse, and we lived in Papua New Guinea at the time. Apparently polydactyly is quite common, occurring in 1 out of 1339 Caucasian births.

Suburban Night

by Chris Lynch

He has six smooth arms for holding, all
of them hooked, and his mouth, an elaborate
machine, speaks only chemicals wet with
insect dreams. Beneath the hard black
chitin of his covers you can hear the purr
of clear, crumpled wings. His eyes do not
apologise: could not, even if he thought
that's what you wanted. With unclosable eyes, he
flew into the wrong house, hit you and was held
like a pinball, for a moment. Hide your hot, still
light awhile, open all your doors to darkness,
and he'll find his own way out, a dodgem car,
punch-drunk, hurtling from one wall to the next—
then six arms dangled in warm night air, buzzing
with the sudden inexplicable wonder of flight.

Synopsis

This poem was inspired by a beetle flying into an old Queenslander on a hot summer night in Brisbane, and a kiss.

Chris Lynch is a Brisbane-based writer and teacher. His poetry has appeared in Apex Magazine, Blackmail Press, Brisbane New Voices II, Islet, page seventeen, SpeedPoets, Stars Like Sand: Australian Speculative Poetry, and the Jean Cecily Drake-Brockman Poetry Prize 2013 Anthology, among others. He blogs occasionally at www.chrislynch.com.au.

To Rest

by *Matthew Mastricova*

You touch yourself at night. You wonder if Adam will notice. Even with the lights out he'll probably be able to see you. His body will be a pale crescent that rumbles in the night. Turning, mumbling, smacking his head against the pillow.

You convince yourself he won't notice. This boy is a solid sleeper. You think of him as a boy even though he is older than you. It might be the way his voice cracks when he is excited or how he calls his parents every day. It's possible that it's simply because he still wears graphic tees and sweatpants out in public.

You wonder what he would think if he ever woke up to see you splayed out naked on your bed. You wonder what he would say, if he would say anything.

§

You've already been living in the new apartment for three weeks by the time Adam moves in. This is how you planned it: you would move in at the beginning of the summer. You would set up the utilities, the internet, the cable, the furniture, the kitchenware, the first aid kit, the cleaning supplies, and all of the posters. He would bring his clothes, his backpack and his share of the rent.

You knew before you even finalised your lease that this would be the case, though, so you can't really complain. Remember during freshman year when you saw his dorm for the first time, and his roommate looked at you as if to say "save yourself"? You ignored him then because you had no other friends but Adam, and you kept on ignoring him because you liked that Adam bought a lot of booze, and he always asked if you wanted in on liquor runs. He wanted you there with him at parties when he was hitting on girls he barely knew. He just wanted you there, and that was more than you could say for anyone else freshman year.

Sure, you made friends eventually, good friends. Friends who treated you to dinner on your birthday and always returned the stuff they borrowed and would stay up late to help talk you through whatever newest drama was keeping you up at night. Friends who kept wondering how you could even stand a guy like Adam, let alone be his friend. They just didn't understand; Adam was essential. You liked the same television, the same music, the same movies. You could just sit and watch movies for hours with him. Just being in the same room as him, hearing him talk, seeing the way he chewed on his lip when he was concentrating, could make you feel like you never left home.

So what else could you say when he asked if you wanted to get an apartment together? You wouldn't seriously leave your first college friend out to dry just because he had a few bad tendencies, would you? And yeah, a one-bedroom apartment is a bit more cramped than you'd like, but it's all he can afford. It's not like you haven't had roommates before. But as you're driving towards the airport you think of his old roommate. If he was in the car with you, he'd tell you to turn around and just forget about Adam. Leave, never look back, save yourself.

Twenty minutes after Adam's flight is supposed to land, he calls you to say, "Hey buddy, my plane just landed. Mind swinging by the airport to pick me up?" You have already been driving around the airport for forty minutes. You have internalised the drive so well that you nearly forget to stop the next time you pass the departure gate. He knows, he must know, there's no way he could possibly not know how anxiously you've been waiting for him, but when he

gets in your car he says, “So do you know what I learned?”

He doesn't wait for you to answer. You may as well not even be in the car. Adam talks loudly and quickly and you only half listen. You are trying your best not to pay attention to him but you still hear enough to understand. You hear: clubbing, huge rack, and perfect teeth, and that is more than enough. Adam talks with his hands, miming out every detail he can remember even though he knows you can't see him. You try not to react when his knuckles brush your forearm, but Adam is so engrossed in his own story you doubt he'd notice anyway.

He is wearing khakis and a plaid button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and no one would know he just flew in from California just by looking at his milky skin. He has chopped his hair off. It looks much better this way. At some point you realise that he changed the radio station from NPR to classic rock. It's something you would have noticed right away, something that would have pissed you off, but right now it's choose two, lose one: the radio, the road, and his voice. You almost merge into a motorcycle on 376 and accidentally cut off a Jeep. Adam says nothing when the driver honks at you and flips you off. He continues telling stories until you say stop in front of the building and say, “Alright, this is it.”

He steps out of the car with his backpack and suitcase. Part of you is worried that he won't like it and part of you knows he could've come to the open house. He could've checked it out afterwards. Instead he told you he trusted your judgement.

“This is it?” he asks you.

“This is it,” you say.

§

On the fifth Thursday of the semester you stay home to study, and at 2 am Adam comes home drunker than you have ever seen him. You are still studying, retracing each problem set step by step. He falls on the couch and starts slurring so bad you can barely make out what he's saying. You get “dive bar” and “horny” and “number” and you think you might have heard something about “vomit”.

“Don't vomit on the couch,” you tell him. “I'm not cleaning up after you. Seriously, I still have two chapters to get through.” Adam laughs. You bring him the trash can and go back to your problem set. You don't even get through a problem before you feel his hands on your shoulders.

“Do you need something?” you ask.

“I want to know what it's like,” he says.

“Know what what's like?”

“Hooking up with a guy.”

You hear yourself tell him, “I have a lot of work to do. You're drunk. You are going to regret this.” He laughs because he knows and you know that all your excuses are just that. He is drunk and clumsy and reeks of alcohol but he still manages to kiss you.

You have dreamed about this before. You imagined the way his body would fold into yours, the way his mouth

would latch against your own. Hooking up with Adam was a dream you never woke up from unhappy.

This is nothing like that. He tastes like three-dollar beer and Camel Lights, and he's all teeth. You make a half-hearted attempt to break away, but he keeps pulling you in. He climbs on top of you. You don't fight this. His body is a precious weight and grounds you like you imagined it would. You feel his face and then his chest against you, and you shouldn't be so into this, but god it's turning you on so much.

He tries to unbutton your shirt, and he stops kissing you because the buttons slip through his fingers, and he can only focus on one thing at a time. He sits back and your cock is right there and can someone please unzip your fly before you bust through it?

"You need to get off me," you tell him. "I don't want things to be awkward between us." You try to lean away but your chair only leans so far. You should push him off, but he's so drunk. What if he hits his head? What if he vomits all over you?

"It's not going to be awkward," Adam says. "I want this. I'm a little drunk, yeah, but I want this. Believe me."

Who can blame you for not believing him? Adam, on top of you, wanting you, it's too much like a dream. You've seen him hooking up with girls at parties. You've walked in on him watching porn—straight porn. It's not hard to think that you could wake up in your bed any second, alone. That you could feel his body pressing against your own and then turn to see him curled up in bed. But he feels so real, so warm against you—can anyone really blame you for swatting his hands off your shirt and unbuttoning it yourself? Adam smiles and you smile back, because who can't smile at a face like his?

You kiss him. You rip off his shirt. You guide his hands to where they think they should go because hey, this is your first time too. You lead him to the bedroom and you ask him one more time if he's sure, if he's absolutely sure, that he's not making a mistake.

"Shut up and take off your pants," he says, and you listen. He fumbles with his belt, but manages to slip out of his jeans. You take a minute to devour the sight of Adam only in his boxer shorts, and then you pull him into bed with you and kiss him exactly the way you dreamed you would.

It's only natural that you fall asleep together.

§

When you wake up the next morning, Adam is sleeping in his own bed. You should get up and shower and cram for the exam you neglected, but instead you simply watch him, wondering what will happen when he wakes up. Will he start sleeping on the couch? Will he tell you how much he enjoyed it when you made him come? Will he still be your friend?

He wakes up only a few minutes later and the first thing he says is, "Shit, what happened last night? I can't remember anything." Your jeans are still in a pile with his jeans. He's still only in his boxers.

"Anything?" you ask.

"Anything," he says. You try reading his face but you can't tell if he's lying or not.

“You got shit-faced and got some girl’s number,” you say. “You passed out almost right after you got home.” Does he notice that you paused before you answered? Does he care that you’re still staring at him as he tries to will his body to work?

“Right, right,” he says. “Yeah.” He lies back down and closes his eyes. It does not take long for his body to go limp. You want to join him, to rest, to dream, but it’s 7.30 am and you should really cram for that test.

§

The girl he flirted with that night was Jessica Anne, a senior studying something that has to do with theatre, but isn’t acting, and you meet her two weeks later. Adam introduces you quickly. If you were into girls, she’d be a girl you’d want to sleep with. Good teeth, good fashion sense, looks embarrassed when she realises Adam never told you he was bringing her over. He rocks back and forth on his heels. His smile is taut. Somehow he manages to look less at home than she does. Even though he doesn’t ask you to leave, you do. He probably just forgot to ask if it was OK if he brought her over. It’s not the worst thing he’s ever done, but you should probably set up a code or something so you know he’s bringing someone over. The last thing you want is to walk in on Adam fucking some girl.

“I probably won’t be back ’til tomorrow,” you say. “I work better on campus and I’ve got this bullshit problem set due.” He doesn’t even say goodbye when you walk out the door. It only bothers you a little more than you think it should.

You call Dennis and ask to crash on his couch, and of course he says yes. The two of you order pizza from Domino’s and play Grand Theft Auto. You get a text from Adam: “You’re the best. I owe you. BIG TIME.” When Dennis asks you what the shit-eating grin is for, you shrug. It’s just Adam being Adam.

Dennis gives you this pitying look, but he doesn’t say anything. You become a semi-permanent fixture at his apartment. Sometimes you don’t go home for ten-hour stretches and Dennis jokes that he can start to see your imprint in the couch cushions. When he is in the bathroom you wipe down the couch and, hopefully, any remnants of your stay.

“This is kind of ridiculous,” Dennis says to you on the eighth night. You are sitting together at his kitchen table trying to learn about black body radiation. Lecture notes, notebooks, and pizza boxes with cigarette butts ground into them litter the table.

“Yeah, I don’t get this at all,” you say. “What the hell even is a black body anyway?” Dennis is a smart guy. He probably understands black body radiation, but you hope he doesn’t. Then maybe you wouldn’t have to worry about the words that will ride the trail of smoke from his mouth.

“I’m talking about Adam,” he says. “Doesn’t this girl have her own place? It’s not fair to you, you know? You pay just as much rent as he does. And of course, I’m not kicking you out or anything, but doesn’t it bother you?”

“I don’t mind,” you answer. You think of how happy Adam must be to have the apartment all to himself, how great it must feel to wake up next to another person. It’s not that much of a sacrifice. “I mean, I would want him to do the same for me, you know?” Dennis looks at you and he doesn’t even have to say the words he’s thinking—*Stop being stupid. He wouldn’t do that for you.* You stop crashing at Dennis’s after that.

Maybe you are stupid, but Dennis doesn’t know what you know. He doesn’t know that you jerked Adam off, that he fell asleep in your arms. He doesn’t know how cigarettes have ruined Adam’s breath. Dennis doesn’t know that

ever since that night you've noticed Adam watching you. Coming out of the shower. Undressing. You wonder if, at night, he watches you. If he lies awake like you, questions and hypotheticals rippling through his thoughts when all he wants to do is just shut up and sleep because there is always something to worry about in the morning.

§

You decide that it's time you started acting like a real gay and started hooking up with strangers. It's simple—the more time you spend hooking up with other men the less you'll spend thinking about Adam. You download an app but don't make an account. You uninstall it, and then reinstall it. You install a second app. Then a third. You don't use any of them for days. You finally make an account on the first one. You spend too long agonising over the details (Is my body type stocky or large? Do I look like a slut if I put that I'm looking for 'casual encounters'? Do I look desperate if I put that I'm looking for a hook-up and a relationship? Is it lazy if I just check off everything? God, how do I even describe myself? Do I have to describe myself? Will anyone even care?)

You don't find the never-ending wellspring of men you imagine, but you get messaged ten minutes after you post a picture. His name is Amos, and he's attractive enough that you agree to meet up for coffee. You don't tell Adam.

When you meet Amos, you wonder if the first meeting will always be this jarring. He is shorter than you expected, shorter than you, and a bit too muscular for your taste. He has the slightest touch of a lisp. He holds your gaze as if he owns you. You hurl questions at him the second they form in your mind.

“What's your major? What music do you like? Have you ever been out of the country? Are you a dog person or a cat person?” (“Communications. Uh ... I don't know, a lot of stuff. Anything but country or rap. No. I'm allergic to both.”)

You've barely finished your coffee when he asks you if you want to chill at his apartment. You let him drive you there even though rule #1 of online dating is to never let anyone drive you anywhere. But then again, he smiled at you. He answered your questions. The whole afternoon had gone perfectly—why deny it the chance to get even more perfect?

He plays Top 40 on the radio with the windows down and you feel like an absence in his car. You rub the collar of your shirt between your thumb and index finger. Don't screw up. Don't screw up. Don't screw up.

At Amos's apartment you watch South Park and drink Yeungling on his love seat. He snakes his arm around you and you lean into him. You want it to feel natural. You want to be able to look back on this moment and say that the contours of your body matched perfectly. You want to say that Amos kissing you felt like the planets aligning, like a chorus of angels singing, like every problem you ever had melted in his mouth. Instead, your neck feels cramped from leaning on his shoulder for too long. His breath smells like burnt coffee. There is no tenderness in his kiss, only a gluttonous wanting.

He straddles you on the couch. His erection presses against you. He runs his fingers through your hair like he wants to own you. He buries his face in the nape of your neck and bites. He perks up when he hears you moan and bares his teeth in a grin. He unbuttons your shirt. He doesn't just explore your body; he conquers and claims. South Park is still playing.

“Let's go someplace a bit more intimate,” he says. He takes you by the hand and leads you to his bed. He gently

shoves you on to his bed and takes off his shirt. He unzips his fly and steps out of his jeans. He tells you that you turn him on. He tells you that you're attractive, that you're so fucking hot. He climbs on top of you. He tells you he's horny, he wants you so fucking bad. He plays with your nipples and makes you moan. You try to do the same but he swats your hand away. It feels like there is not an inch of your body his mouth does not know. He tells you to suck him off. You try to tell him that you've never done that before, that you don't know how.

"It's easy," he says. "Just watch your teeth." He steps out of his underwear and he is in front of you and you freeze because it's just all going so fast and it's nice and you're horny but it's all going so fast and should you tell him to put a condom on and he says: "Isn't this what you wanted?"

§

You splash water on your face and keep the water running. You let the sound of running water flush out the questions. The bulge of your stomach, the small tuft of hair along your chest, the birthmark on your left breast; you don't recognise them as your own. Is this the man your parents raised you to be? What would Adam say if he could see you now? Your cock is throbbing against your undershorts. You keep the sink running as you finish yourself off. You can't stay here anymore. If you touch Amos again you might scream.

You tell him you need to get going. You grab your shirt and walk out still half-naked. You leave the door open. You feel exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. You walk to the nearest bus stop and pray for one to come soon. You feel an emptiness gnawing your bones. You feel like you're full of dirt. You feel like your body is being crushed by the weight of its own filth. You cannot get his face, his voice, the feeling of being desired out of your mind. You want to scream. You want to cry. You want to do everything that you think will undo this desecration. The bus is already eight minutes late and every second is another fracture, another step closer to losing it right there in the street. It takes another ten minutes for the bus to arrive. You are amazed at the resiliency of the human body, of your body. You're amazed that you can swipe your card and walk to the nearest seat and not betray the fact that you are rotting from the inside out.

You vow to never meet someone off a hook-up app again. It takes you a week of watching Adam and Jessica Anne together to change your mind. After all, it can't all just be guys just looking to get their rocks off. Maybe if you make it clear that you won't do anything on the first date things will be better.

§

No matter how many men you meet, Adam's sleeping body still haunts you. You double down your efforts. You renege on your decision to stop hooking up. You hook up with guys you're not even attracted to. It feels like there is a new guy every week, and their names all start with the letter A: Aaron, Alan, Arthur, Austin. There is an endless march of A's and they all leave you empty.

Then you meet Brendan.

He contacts you through a dating site, and it's clear he reads message boards for people learning to date online.

"Hi, how's it going?" he says. "I think it's cool that you study physics. What about it interests you?"

If only you had something more interesting to say than "my parents threatened to cut off financial support unless I majored in a science." Luckily, he doesn't seem to mind. If anything, it intrigues him even more. "Well then, what do

you care about? Have you started thinking about what you're doing when you graduate? Why physics instead of anything else?" The questions seem endless. You try to keep your guard up, answer as sparsely as you can, but he still manages to make you feel like more than just a piece of meat.

The two of you message back and forth for a week and a half before you finally ask him to get coffee. He messages back immediately: "Sure! What does your week look like?"

Here are the facts: he's from Cincinnati, and he's cute. He just moved to Pittsburgh to work for a small software development company. He likes the same kind of movies you do but he has no taste in music. He owns a ferret. He speaks three languages: English, German, and French. He is older and probably more experienced than you. He's looking for friendship and long-term dating, but who really knows with stuff like that. Maybe he'll be willing to compromise for just a friend with benefits. You tell yourself not to expect too much.

You try to keep him at arm's length: Did you see the Steelers game last night? ("I'm not really a big sports guy.") What do you think of Pittsburgh so far? ("It's OK. The Chinese food is infinitely better here than back home so that's always a plus.") Seen any good movies lately? ("I just started to get into Miyazaki's stuff. It's pretty good so far.") Yes, the questions feel staid. Yes, you know you're not exactly the most exciting first date. But remember, the lower your expectations are, the less you'll mind that the sex will end up being just one step above masturbation.

You finish your coffee, but he shows no signs of urgency. Despite your best efforts, you start having a real conversation. His smile is radiant; it reaches every part of his face. You can't help but smile with him. Another hour of watching his smile and the barista kicks you out. You take your argument about musicals (you can't stand them, and Brendan thinks they have an undeniable artistic integrity) outside.

You start walking him to his car, and you keep talking even after you get there. He asks if you want a ride home. You accept, knowing full well that cars are actually just less comfortable beds. He drops you off and doesn't try to kiss you. He doesn't suggest that you suck him off in the back seat. He asks you if you'd like to get dinner the next day. You think he's cute and funny, and maybe he'll be the key to splitting your affections. You accept.

§

For the third date Brendan invites you over to his apartment to hang out. You iron your favourite button-down. Adam lets you use his cologne. It's a rare moment of solitude. Jessica Anne may not be sleeping over every night anymore but it feels like she's become an unofficial third roommate. She even keeps a spare toothbrush in the bathroom. Not that you mind her all that much, but it seems like only one of you can exist in Adam's mind at a time, and you'd much rather it be you than her.

You sit together on the couch watching television as you bombard him with questions. How do I look? ("Good.") Does my breath smell? ("Go rinse with some Listerine and you'll be fine.") How will I know if he actually wants to, you know, do stuff? ("You will. But seriously, Pete, don't worry too much. Whatever happens will happen. Just don't go in with the expectation of having sex and you'll be fine. Really, you'll be fine.")

"I don't know what I'd do without you," you say. Adam smirks and pats you on the back. He doesn't hover, or linger, but snakes around you and pulls you into a side-hug.

"You'd probably never leave the apartment and cry yourself to sleep every night," he says with a shit-eating grin

on his face. You shove him playfully and he lets you go. He smirks at you. His crooked teeth. The feeling of your hands against his body. His arm around you. If he was your boyfriend, this is when you'd kiss him. Not a serious kiss, just a cute one. A peck on the lips. And then he'd lock his arms around you and pull you against his body, and you'd kiss again and again and again.

That is not your life. Your life is twenty minutes before a dinner date. Your life is sitting on the couch watching The Daily Show with Adam and swallowing the nagging feeling in your throat that your date with Brendan is dirty and wrong and unfair and maybe you should've just said no.

§

You wake up in Brendan's bed the next morning, his arms around you. You remember last night, grabbing at him, trying to pull him so close to you that he became you. Did he know you would stay the night? He seemed so nervous when he answered the door: forced smile, tense body, words springing from his mouth like a loosened coil. Regardless, he kissed you. After Chinese food and stilted, nerve-wracking conversation, he put on *Spirited Away*. Then he kissed you.

"Is this alright?" he asked. You smiled and kissed him back, and you don't remember any of the movie after that. You never thought you could spend so long just kissing and touching someone without racing in to something bigger, but an hour and a half later you're kissing the place where his neck meets his collarbone and he hasn't even taken off his boxers yet.

"You're amazing," he said, and you believed him.

You still do, almost naked and curled into his body. He is warmth, comfort, what you felt you were owed when you finally realised you were gay. You can feel his chest rising and falling with each breath, and you close your eyes and let yourself be lulled back to sleep.

You wake up when Brendan kisses your neck, and you smile. There is a small bruise on his neck that wasn't there the night before. You can't help but admire your handiwork.

"Good morning," he says. "Want some breakfast?" You answer with a kiss. He pulls you in closer. Neither of you actually move to get breakfast until your stomach starts to gurgle. You try to downplay it but he notices. Of course he notices. You're waiting for him to snark at you, but he just looks at you and traces circles in your chest.

"You're cute when you're embarrassed."

He offers to take you to IHOP. Of course you say yes. "I'd love that," you say as he starts putting his clothes back on. Even fumbling with his socks you think he's attractive. You slip your clothes on and follow him out the door.

You expect something to feel awkward, at least a bit, but it doesn't. You talk and you eat and you enjoy yourself. When he drops you off at your apartment building you almost ask him if you can just go back to his place. He promises to text you later and you leave feeling like a door to your future has been opened. You swear that you could still smell him on you.

You hope that Adam is gone but he is still there, eating cereal and watching cartoons in his underwear. Something about seeing him like this feels wrong. Not the "I wanna tear his underwear off even though he's my straight roommate

with a girlfriend” kind of wrong, but the “I should be turned on by this, but I’m not” kind.

“Long night?” he asks you. It’s meant to sound playful but the words come out twisted.

You grin, but you don’t know how to answer.

You settle on a quick “yeah”. You don’t elaborate and Adam doesn’t ask. You curl up in bed and find yourself thinking about Adam and how he barely even acknowledged that your date went well.

What were you expecting, streamers and balloons and a banner that said ‘Congratulations on the sex’? Not that bombastic, but something maybe. Telling you that he was happy that it went well would have been nice, especially considering how nervous you’d been. Even an ‘I told you so’ or ‘What did I say?’. Any kind of acknowledgement really. You don’t ruminate for too long, though. Brendan texts you.

“Can I see you again tonight?”

Who cares if Adam didn’t say anything.

You end up back at Brendan’s apartment that night, and the night after that. You start to sleep in his bed more than your own. Adam never mentions it, never asks you where you’ve been. Every time you walk into a room he finds a reason to walk out. He is barely your roommate anymore, let alone your friend.

Adam never brings up the fact that you don’t sleep at home anymore until he walks in on the two of you. It’s Brendan’s first time at your apartment, and you had forgotten to warn Adam. You had simply figured he would be at his girlfriend’s. If you had thought that there was even the slightest chance that Adam might throw open the door to the bedroom to see Brendan topping you, then you would have texted him or left a note or something at least.

Thankfully, he doesn’t draw out the moment. He closes the door as soon as he sees you (oh god did he hear you moaning too?) but it doesn’t matter. The moment’s gone. You apologise again and again and it never feels like enough. Brendan’s rattled but he waves you off. It’s not that big of a deal. It’s not like he didn’t know you had a roommate.

“It happens.” He gets on his clothes and tells you that he doesn’t care your roommate doesn’t know how to knock; he still wants you to call him later. He leaves you feeling weightless, but you don’t get to savour it. Adam comes back into the room and glares like you ate his firstborn son. You’re still naked.

“So that’s him?” he asks.

“Yeah,” you say, scrambling to get your boxers on. “Sorry. I should’ve warned you.” He scoffs.

“Well, at least you’ll stop jacking off to me at night,” he says. He’s wearing an ugly sneer. He is revelling in this. He must have been waiting to lord this over you.

“Fuck.” It’s the only thing you can think to say. It runs laps around your head. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.

“What were you thinking? That I wouldn’t notice? That I’d just not care?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Then what is it?” You don’t have an answer for him. He stalks over to you. “That’s what I thought.” You have nothing to say.

“You think I’m hot?” he asks. He’s laughing, barking, wild. You say nothing. “Well, here I am: have at me.” You don’t move. Adam is hovering right over you. “Well? What? Am I not good enough for you now?” He’s screaming now. “Now that you’re getting your ass pounded every day I’m useless to you?”

“Adam,” you say. You don’t know what else to say. You just want him to walk away. “You need to cut this out.” You crawl backwards away from him. You are choking on the stench of cheap whiskey.

Crawling away only makes more room for him. He kneels on your bed and throws his face against yours and everything becomes a blur. Just like the first time. The cigarettes. The drunken klutziness. The feel of his erect cock between your hands. This time, when you wake up, he is still next to you. He is crying softly into your pillow.

“I’m sorry,” you tell him. He refuses to acknowledge you. You decide this’ll be your secret. You get up, and you shower, and by the time you feel clean Adam has already left the apartment. He comes home later that night, sober and alone.

“I don’t want to talk about today,” he says.

“It’s OK.” He slinks off to bed. You sleep on the couch that night.

It’s the most you hear from him for the next three days. Things gradually return to equilibrium. Neither of you are in the apartment together for very long. For a few weeks you think that maybe you’ll survive the year living with him. Even so, you tell Brendan maybe it’s not such a good idea to hang out at your place anymore. You tell him that everything’s fine, just that Adam’s been really stressed lately and could really use the privacy.

Then he dumps Jessica Anne. No real explanation, no warning signs, just flat out tells her it’s not working. He rants about how the relationship was going to shit as he drinks Hennessy straight from the bottle. You worry about him, but there’s not much you can do except be his sounding board. Brendan is out of town and Dennis has the flu so you have no excuse not to listen to Adam. You listen attentively. You sip on a beer. You give your condolences when you feel they’re needed. You can’t get too close. Remember that Adam is your friend, but he’s the kind of friend who tries to drag you down to the darkest parts of himself.

And then he says, “Pete, I need you.” He starts crying, ugly sobs that make you ashamed to look at him, and you let him rest his head on your lap. You rub his back and stroke his hair as if he were your own. In a way, he is. If you had just kept being insistent that first night, the quivering mass on your lap would probably be getting laid right now. You knew it was wrong to hook up with him. You knew he’d regret it. So drunk he could barely walk but you still let him kiss you. Well here’s your prince, drunk and crying and single all because of you.

“I’m sorry,” you whisper. “I’m so sorry.” If he hears you he doesn’t show it, instead curling himself into you. He falls asleep in your arms and when you look into his face you see peace. You fall asleep with him in your arms.

§

Adam texts you “I think I love you” over winter break.

You don't know how to respond, and so you don't.

Three days later, he texts you again: "I'm sorry."

"It's OK." It's not, but you know he needs to hear otherwise.

When you get back to Pittsburgh, all of his stuff is gone. You can't say you're surprised, but that doesn't stop you from downing half a bottle of Jack Daniels that night. Adam doesn't have a monopoly on wallowing, after all. You know that you should text your boyfriend, tell him you're back in town and that you missed him and love him and that he should come over and make sure you don't do anything stupid. But it's already too late for that.

You text Adam: "I hate you." You text him again: "I really fucking hate you. I've never hated anyone so much before in my life. Do you realise how hard it was to live with you? Do you realise how hard it was to sleep in the same room as you? You don't even care, do you? You don't care about anyone who's not you. You never cared about me. You never cared whether I was happy or not. Well I'm fed up with your egocentric bullshit, Adam. Delete my number. Unfriend me on Facebook. Lose my email. Forget that I exist. It shouldn't be that hard for you. Douche."

Five minutes later, you call him. It goes straight to voicemail but you don't care. The voicemail cuts off with you vomiting. You did not make it to the toilet.

You are on your hands and knees like a dog, retching. You are crying. You are weak. You barely get to bed before passing out, and when you wake up in the morning you wish you hadn't. Your head is pounding and the world is spinning and your stomach can't decide if it's empty or full or both.

You call Brendan, and you tell him everything. You tell him about how much you wanted to kiss Adam the night of your first date, and you tell him how you jerked Adam off the day he walked in on you, and you tell him how you had sex with Adam the night he dumped his girlfriend and how you'd let him cry into your chest before blowing him.

You cry, you retch, you apologise over and over and over but it's not enough. No matter how many times you apologise you can't make up for the fact that Adam left you and you will probably lose the only other person in the world that you care about as fiercely. You wait for him to curse you off or to dump you or to yell at you or to cry or Christ just something that'll make you stop apologising.

"Brendan? Are you there?"

"I'm coming over," he says. "Don't move." He brings you breakfast. He cleans you up. He mops your floor. He says, "I don't know if I can forgive you." You can barely look him in the eye because you knew this was coming. You almost hope he would just dump you instead. It would hurt, but not like this. This just feels like one huge debt you'll never repay, and the only way you can try is to never talk about this again. The least you can do for Brendan is to deal with Adam's ghosts alone.

§

Even after a month, you are not used to coming home to an empty apartment. Even though you and Adam were barely there at the same time, at least there were reminders that you were not alone: the dirty laundry tossed in the corner of the bathroom, the engineering textbooks scattered across the floor, the rare empty garbage pail or clean toilet or refilled Brita filter. Now there are only the imprints of his furniture on the warped floorboards.

Brendan forgives you. You think he's stupid, and you tell him that, but he just kisses you. It's the kind of kiss that can drown a man, but you force yourself to stay afloat. Neither of you talk about Adam, but every time Brendan comes over, which is rarely ever, he seems just a bit more distant and a bit less loving. You wonder if you're the same way. You'd ask, but you're too afraid to overturn the delicate balance you've struck. If he believes this can work, then you will too.

You try to adopt Brendan's optimism, and the optimism of your closest friends, and the optimism of message boards for men who love men who don't love them back (even if they say they do in a moment of weakness) but ask you for blowjobs whenever they're drunk. You make the small changes they suggest: you stop wearing clothes in the apartment; you put up glass bottle trees. You make lists of all of the things that pissed you off about Adam and burn them: he never did his dishes on time; he bragged too much about his sex life; you always found strands of his hair in the sink; he always recycled his bottle caps instead of throwing them away; he never asked if it was OK to invite his girlfriend over for the night. You start Skyping for hours with your friends in Chicago and San Jose and Burlington. You take Brendan's advice to heart and start having sex (only with him) everywhere you can think of. Nothing works, because no matter how much time or energy you expend into being happy, you always fall asleep half-expecting Adam to be there in the morning.

§

The hardest part is seeing him. At first you tried to engage him, to pull him off to the side and explain yourself. Make him explain himself. You rehearsed your interrogation in your head hundreds of times. You practised the pauses, the intonations, and even the hand gestures. Each time he responded as if you were a pest that needed killing.

"Can we talk?" you'd ask him.

"No," he'd say. You eventually caught on and stopped trying to talk to him. He becomes more real in his absence than in his presence.

You see him occasionally, briefly, in a crowd of people, or in line at the convenience store, or at a bar with some of his friends. You feel as if the tension could tear open your skin. You tell yourself, "It's all gonna be OK. Nothing's going to happen. He's here, and you're here, and that's OK. Everything is going to be OK." It doesn't take long for you to change your route to get a better feel for the real Pittsburgh community, or decide to thoroughly examine all of the sodas in case there was a colder one, or go to a different bar because you need some adventure in your life. OK, the reasons are all bullshit but you can't even look at Adam without feeling your chest squeeze; it's just easier this way.

One day you follow him home. You try to pretend that's not what you're doing but you are an awful liar. It's one of those rare days when the weather isn't trying to kill you, when you remember that there is in fact a season between winter and summer. You are two blocks away from his house when he stops walking and faces you.

"Hi, Peter," he says. All of your preparation was pointless. The words try to escape but all at once and all you can come up with is "Hi."

"How've you been?" he asks.

"Fine, you?" you ask.

"I'm doing good," he says.

You are at a loss for how to respond. You forget why you thought that following him home would make this any better. You forget why he is so important, why his acknowledgement is the be-all and end-all. You can think of only one suitable answer:

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” Adam says. And then he leaves you. This is not the end, and you know that. You do not know what this is, and you are afraid. You are afraid of being unhinged and of realising you had given so much for the promise of nothing. You are still hurt. You are still angry. Some small part of you still really wants to sleep with Adam, even after everything that happened. But you think that maybe these feelings can pass. Maybe you will post an ad on Craigslist for a new roommate. Maybe you will invite Brendan back home to meet your family. Maybe you will finally stop looking for Adam’s shadow in your bedroom. Maybe you will finally get some rest.

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First Hunt

Non-fiction by Frank Martinicchio

Brad loaded the .22 and handed it to me. I took it in my hands and felt the smoothness of the wood. "It's heavy," I commented.

"Yeah," nodded Brad, "she's a little old."

Brad then showed me the proper way of holding a shotgun when firing, nursing the end of the gun against the shoulder and pointing the nozzle on the target. I had the .22 aimed into the open field in front of me.

"OK, now fire," said Brad.

I looked at him. "Just fire it out there?"

"Yep," said Brad.

I turned and aimed the gun to the field and squeezed the trigger. The kickback hurt my shoulder as if someone had punched it, and the sound made my ears ring. I turned back to Brad, my eyes wild. It was the first time I had ever fired a gun.

"What do you think?" asked Brad. "It's loud, hey?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "What would happen if you shot someone close range with this thing?"

Without a moment's hesitation Brad answered, "It would probably cut them in half."

Brad was my sister's boyfriend. I had known him for over a year and he was becoming one of my good friends. We were at his father's farm in the country. It was a beautiful place. Everything was green: the grass, the trees, even the lake a few kilometres west of us had a greenish hue. We were there with Brad's other two friends, Stephen and Murph. I had met those two about six months ago and liked them as well. All three were much older than me, being in their late twenties, while I had only just celebrated my twentieth birthday the previous week. As I was the youngest, I was keen to fit in with them this weekend. I wanted them all to like me.

Stephen emerged from the farmhouse carrying his rifle, Murph a step behind lugging a slab of beer.

"You ready for your first hunt, Frankie?" asked Stephen.

I nodded. "Let's do it."

We walked with Brad to his Holden Rodeo; Stephen and I were the only two with a gun. Murph and Brad said they were quite happy to just watch and drink for the first night. Brad jumped in the driver's seat and Murph next to him. Stephen and I jumped up onto the tray and held onto the rail. Murph handed us both a beer. Brad kicked the engine to life and we began to move forward.

"So what are we huntin'?" I asked Stephen.

“Roos and rabbits are probably all we’ll find,” he said.

“Why do you hunt them?” I asked.

“Because they’re pests.”

“Why are they pests?”

“Because there are too many.”

“So we kill them because they’re over populated?”

Stephen shrugged. “That’s what they tell me.”

I grasped my hands tighter around the back rails as Brad accelerated over the terrain, which wasn’t made for the smooth passage of vehicles.

We drove for twenty minutes without seeing any sign of game, and I had to admit I was growing bored.

It was with a certain relish that Stephen hit the roof with his hand and yelled for Brad to stop because he had spotted something.

“To the left!” he yelled.

The ute skidded to a stop, kicking up a trail of dust.

“What is it?” Brad asked, sticking his head out the window.

“I think it’s a rabbit,” said Stephen.

He set his beer down and pointed his gun out into the field. To me it looked like he was aiming at nothing.

“Just by the tree line,” he breathed.

He pointed his gun more specifically. I tried to follow the aim of his gun with my eyes, but all I could see was grass.

“I don’t see anything,” said Murph from the front passenger seat.

“I can just see its head,” said Stephen.

“OK, shoot then,” commanded Brad.

There was a long silence as Stephen steadied his aim then fired. He must have missed because the rabbit bounded up into view and then dashed for the tree line.

“Shit, I see it now,” I said.

Stephen reloaded and adjusted his aim as the rabbit raced for the safety of the trees. Stephen was going to be too late. He squeezed off a round just as the rabbit reached the trees. The rabbit recoiled from the hit and fell behind the

trees.

“I think he got it!” cheered Murph.

Brad accelerated and swung left, steering toward where the rabbit had been. He pulled up next to the tree line and we all got out of the ute and began searching for the rabbit. I was sure we’d find it lying somewhere, because I’d seen the pellets hit it, but we saw no trace.

“I definitely hit it,” said Stephen.

We looked for five more minutes.

“Where the fuck did it go?” said Stephen, his frustration growing.

“It couldn’t have gone far.” I said.

“You probably wounded it and it kept running for about 20 more metres,” said Brad. “It’s probably bleeding out somewhere past the tree line.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Stephen.

We all got back in the ute and continued our hunt.

Not more than a few minutes later, we saw a kangaroo grazing around thirty metres from the ute. It watched our approach, not spooked at all.

Stephen looked at the kangaroo. “What an idiot,” he laughed, and aimed his gun.

“Nah, let Frankie have it,” Brad called from the front seat.

Stephen seemed to agree that that was a good idea, because he relaxed his gun in his hand. “He’s all yours,” he said.

I had to admit, I was nervous with excitement. I walked to the front of the ute. I placed the gun on my shoulder as Brad had told me and pointed the nozzle towards the kangaroo. It stood gazing, unaware that death was staring it in the face.

I placed the nozzle so it blocked my view of the kangaroo’s chest. I must have been taking a while because Stephen told me to hurry up. I exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The gun kicked back with a deafening bang. The pellet struck the kangaroo in the chest, just as it had attempted to jump to its left, blowing it backwards and onto its side, like a boxer being delivered a knockout blow.

All three boys cried out in delight.

“Holy shit!” exclaimed Stephen. “Nice shot!”

“He’s a natural,” laughed Murph.

Brad accelerated forward. The mood of the group was electric. He then slammed on the breaks. “Oh shit, look!”

We all looked back to the kangaroo; hopping away from it was a joey.

“Shit, it must have been in its pouch,” said Stephen.

Quicker than a drunk man should move, Stephen had his gun ready and aimed at the joey. In his eyes I saw something I had never seen before, some sort of savagery. At that moment I didn't know what I felt; I was numb from the adrenaline. Stephen pulled the trigger. Metres behind the joey the grass stirred from where the pellets had hit. The joey bounded on out of view to where we could not follow.

“Shit, he's gone,” said Stephen.

“Yeah, you didn't get near him,” laughed Brad.

“Oh well,” lamented Stephen, “at least Frankie got the roo.”

We drove over to the kangaroo I had just shot and when we arrived there, I jumped out of the tray and made my way over to it. Brad got out of the ute and slapped me on the back. “Look at him,” he said to me, “natural-born killer!”

I still didn't know how I felt about all of this. All I knew was what I had done had made everyone happy, and that made me happy. We trudged over to the kangaroo. What I had expected to see was a dead kangaroo, lying still like the ones you see in the hunting shops. What I saw was very different. The roo lay on its side, its eyes wide open and staring out at a world it didn't understand. Smoke issued from its chest from where the shotgun pellets had struck it; the smell stung my nostrils. I watched its stomach heave up and down, trying to gasp for breath, but each rise in its stomach was shallower than the last; its organs were beginning to fail. It was suffering. Underneath it blood pooled, red mixing with green until the green was no longer visible.

“Blew the fucker right off its feet,” laughed Stephen.

“Must have gone back about five metres,” added Murph.

Brad chuckled and stared at the dying kangaroo. For him this was nothing new. Growing up, he'd seen deaths like this hundreds of times, maybe even thousands. “Put it out of its misery,” he said.

Stephen pointed his gun at the kangaroo's head, the barrel almost touching its eye, which was wide open. Like a coward, I looked away when he pulled the trigger.

With half its head missing, Stephen picked the kangaroo up by the tail, carried it over to the ute, and swung it onto the tray. Stephen and I hopped into the back and Brad drove us on. I avoided looking down at the dead kangaroo next to me. I did however, glance to the patch of trees where the joey had escaped. Something large formed in my stomach and it hurt every time the ute bounced on the uneven ground.

We drove around for half an hour longer, the kangaroo turning stiff beside me. Why did it feel like its one remaining eye was watching me? Guilt began to tear at me. Before we had come into the field, the kangaroo had been eating peacefully with its joey sitting comfortably in its pouch. The beauty of this place was now lost to me. It had been tainted.

The rest of the boys didn't seem to mind; in fact killing the kangaroo seemed to boost the mood of the group.

They had all started drinking faster, and their voices became more raucous and garbled. Was this the human condition? Killing to get a night's thrill? Was an innocent animal's life the price of a good night?

In the next twenty minutes we found no sign of game, and as it was beginning to get dark, we decided to head back to the camp.

I sat by the fire with a can of beer in my hand, my foot tapping restlessly. The kangaroo sat a few metres from me, stiff, still and cold by the hot fire.

Stephen stumbled his way over and took a seat next to me.

"You should get a photo with your first kill," he said.

"Nah I'll be right," I said.

"Come on," he said.

He stood up and picked the roo up by the tail, the same way he had done when he threw it in the ute. "Just hold it like this and we'll take the picture."

I shook my head. "Nah."

"Oh come on, don't be such a pussy, Frank."

"Fuck off, Stephen. I don't want to get a photo with the dead animal."

Stephen dropped the roo and shook his head. "Alright, have it your way," he said, and walked off.

I didn't care that he thought I was a pussy. They may have liked killing animals for fun but that wasn't me. I knew that now. Death, no matter how big or small, didn't wash from my hands so easily.

My thoughts drifted to the joey. Where was it now? Wandering cold and alone in the wild. Maybe it would have been better off if Stephen had shot it, making it a quick death, rather than the slow one I had given it.

Frank Martinicchio is a Melbourne-based aspiring writer. He has developed his craft while studying an Associate Degree of Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University.

His Own Man

by Elizabeth Jane Corbett

The Colony of Victoria: Polling Day – Thursday, November 15th, 1855

In the shadow of the verandah, I touched Alick's hand. "At dawn you leave these diggings a storekeeper. Tomorrow you will return an elected member of Victoria's Legislative Council."

"Ride with me today." Alick's fingers looped mine in the dark. "Just this once. No one'll think anything of it."

"It's too risky. You know that. Besides, I've gotta mind the store."

"I've been to see Titch." Alick's eyes held a gleam of defiance in the early morning light. "He's had the mare's shoes made up. Pure Ovens gold. If the numbers look good, I'll go ahead with a victory ride."

I swallowed, looking up into Alick's tight, white face. Damn Toby Titch, bringing his circus to the goldfields for the elections—and for dragging Alick into his pageantry. "He's a showman, Alick. I'd have expected nothing less. But for you, is this wise?"

He shrugged. "I don't suppose the bosses'll like it."

That was an understatement—and the main appeal, seeing as wealthy gold boss, Ned Thompson, had forbidden him to ride. But I could see by the stubborn set of Alick's jaw that I had little chance of talking him out of it. "Right then. What does Titch have in mind, exactly?"

"God knows!" Alick laughed. "A gallop down Ford Street, past the Beechworth Assembly Rooms, maybe as far as the Gold Receiver's house? He can't best decide where the profit lies. I told him I'd come to *you*. Here at the store."

"Christ, Alick! Tell me you lie."

"Well, I might have kept names out of it. But what do you think?" He leaned forward, hands tight on mine. "Ride home tonight, shall I? Mane and tail flying, on a horse shod with gold?"

To me! Here? I stood, breathing the clean, crisp scent of his shaving lather.

It was only three miles from Beechworth to the Woolshed diggings and, God knows, it would be a long day with Alick canvassing polling booths and me alone at the store. Then, on into the night at Reilly's Union Hotel, where, in the heady flush of anticipation, he'd be admired by beautiful women and courted by powerful men. But if he were to leave Beechworth, once the fast riders brought their tallies in? Come to me? Here! Instead?

Dear God. No. What were we thinking? It was too bold. Public. People would talk. I stepped back, releasing Alick's hand. "Never mind me, stay in Beechworth. Only ride home when it's safe."

Sunday, October 21st, 1855

Alick hadn't planned to run for Council, though he was well qualified for the position. He'd been a Police Superintendent back in Glasgow. A man destined for promotion.

"You'd make a fine Chief Superintendent," the Commissioner had said to him one morning. "I'd recommend you for promotion but ... there's talk, Stewart. Rumours. Surely you've heard them?"

Yes. We had heard the rumours. No one wanted a 'Molly' in the force. But what were a few snide comments, we reasoned, an occasional hissed threat in the dark? We'd be more careful, in future. In time, the talk would run itself out.

One morning, I found Alick in a pool of his own blood. After that, it seemed each week brought one of us a fresh black eye or split lip. We tried changing quarters, met in different places. But when Alick suffered a concussion, the Commissioner stepped in.

"You're a leader, Stewart. With a bright future ahead. But if you don't put a stop to these rumours ... Still, it's nothing marriage won't fix. Do your duty man. Find a girl, settle down and these incidents will cease."

Alick left the force soon after that, with a gold watch in recognition of his service, and, before beatings turned to stabbings, we set sail for the diggings. Alick knew his duty, don't get me wrong. He had integrity and a fine public spirit. Once at the goldfields, didn't he attend all the miners' early protest meetings? Write letters to *The Argus*? Help draft petitions for the Ovens district? Alick Stewart knew his duty. Only he wasn't the marrying kind.

Neither was he a man to put himself forward.

It was a soft spring evening, not long after the writs of election had been issued, that Ned Thompson, one of the Woolshed bosses, first came calling. Alick and I had just settled to a pannikin of tea when we heard a scrape of boots on the verandah. Looking up, I saw Thompson's massive frame fill the doorway and rain like dewdrops on his wild black beard.

"Those have-nots down at Three Mile have put Ryan, the chemist, up for nomination." Thompson wasted no time on preamble. "Yackandandah favour Ogden. But I want a Woolshed man in power, to represent our interests."

"Evening, Ned." Alick rose to greet him. "Won't you sit down?"

"What about it, Stewart?" Thompson fixed him with a fierce, black-eyed gaze. "We can't let the small-claim holders run our district."

Alick chuckled, resuming his seat. "I doubt the Legislative Council will be discussing claim sizes, Ned."

"You can laugh." Thompson jabbed the air with a calloused finger. "Council gave us local courts. Miners' Rights. Power to make rules for our own diggings."

"Yes, but do sit down, man, we're having a mug of tea."

"Elect the wrong man," Thompson remained standing, "they'll change the rules, take away our right to work extended claims. Damn it, Stewart, don't you see? The men of Eureka died for these things."

"I know why men died," Alick spoke low, "and what we've gained by their courage. But you need men and machinery to work Woolshed Creek, Ned. It's geology, not politics—and Council is about the future of this colony."

Besides, I haven't the means to neglect my business."

"Money's no object," Thompson said. "Think on it, Stewart. I'm determined to put you up for this."

Later, with shutters drawn, we lay like two teaspoons under Alick's possum-skin rug. He was right, of course, this man I loved. Elections for Legislative Council had nothing to do with the petty skirmishes of Ovens claim holders. The existing council had drafted a constitution and sent it to London for approval. Plans were being made for the construction of parliamentary buildings. The colony was moving towards responsible government. These were the issues of the day. Not how many men Ned Thompson employed. Or whether his claim exceeded the limit.

I shifted, throwing back the covers. It would be indulgent to stay all night in Alick's bed, and foolish. Time to head back to my quarters.

"No," Alick said, holding me close. "Stay awhile."

"Half an hour," I said, settling against his chest with a smile. "What about this Thompson proposal?"

"I spoke the truth. You know that. I haven't the funds to sit on Council."

"Two thousand pounds? That won't stop Thompson!"

Laughter worked its way up from Alick's belly to his chest. "He can't *make* me run for Council."

"You're interested though, Alick, admit it! I saw your pulse quicken."

"I'm tempted, I'll not deny it. To be part of something big again."

"We have the store. Each other. Isn't that enough?"

"For me, it's not that simple."

"It'll be dangerous, Alick. You know it will."

"No." His arms tightened about me. "Don't you see? Here on the goldfields, few marry. I could run on my own terms."

I hoped that would be the end of it. Alick owned the business. I managed his store. We both held interests in the various claims that worked the Ovens. Life would go on as it had before.

But Thompson was a wily man. 'King of Gold', they called him. 'The Boss.' A big, blustering shambles of a man, who knew miners like a breeder knows horses. He didn't come round nagging. Or send others to badger Alick. He simply put the word around, nice and quiet. Alick Stewart would run, if he had the backing.

The bosses all made pledges. We expected that. A requisition gathered over seven hundred signatures. But it was the smaller pledges, sixpence here, ten shillings there, that decided Alick in the end, notes scrawled by working men and pinned to the message tree.

"Wrote a letter when my brother died ... never uses false weights ... worked a cradle beside me on Spring Creek."

Having earned men's trust, Alick wasn't one to betray it. But Thompson made it happen, make no mistake. He had chosen his candidate.

Saturday, November 10th, 1855

On Nomination Day, Yackandandah's man was nowhere to be seen. He knew better than to run against the Woolshed bosses. Ryan, the chemist, marched from Three Mile with a ragged band, waving green and white sashes. But Alick headed a procession eight hundred strong.

We met at Lower Woolshed, bearing blue silk banners, and were joined at the Franklin by a band from Toby Titch's circus. Men juggled along La Serena Road, women swirled ribbons, Master Bruce paraded his team of aboriginal equestrians. By the time we reached Beechworth, our numbers had been swelled by a hundred men on horseback. I rode as one of them, with my red sash and black scarf, wearing the gold ring Alick had given me. But I didn't need to hide my admiration that day. He rode ahead like a Celtic chieftain—and every man loved him.

But Alick Stewart was his own man, not Titch's or Thompson's. He'd made up his mind to run on his own terms and it was right for him to do so, I saw that now. He needed the responsibility of public office, to be fired by a cause greater than his own. But if my heart knew reason, it also knew fear. For one word, a careless moment, the mere suggestion of intimacy—and this crowd would turn. Then what? Blood? Another run from town? Or worse, bodies broken at the bottom of a mineshaft?

At noon, the returning officer called for nominations. Ryan the chemist rose on the balcony of the Star Hotel and stood, white-faced and stuttering in the presence of our gaiety.

"Fool!" someone called out. "Go back to your horse pills."

Ryan put a brave face on it, I'll give him that. He'd worked as a digger, he told us, before opening his pharmacy on High Street. Didn't he know our ailments? Hadn't he nursed our cuts and bruises? He understood conditions at Three Mile and the Woolshed. He stood against state aid to religion, property qualification for voters. He wanted land opened up to men of small means. His policies were sound, make no mistake. But he hadn't the presence of Alick Stewart.

Alick stood tall and calm, in the fine wool coat I'd picked out for him that morning. Only a hint of colour high on his cheeks betrayed the nerves he was feeling. He didn't launch into his speech, babbling like poor old Ryan. He waited and waited some more—then raised strong hands as the crowd fell silent.

"Men of Ovens, a pound a year for a Miner's Right is all a man needs now to vote in this colony. Henceforth, our interests will be represented alongside men of property. These are the hard won outcomes of Eureka."

A roar went up from the assembled crowd, the Three Mile men in their moleskins and flannel shirts, the wealthy men of the Woolshed in scarves and bright sashes. For many, this would be a first chance to vote.

"I didn't plan to run for Council." Alick's eyes sought mine as his deep voice rang out over the street. "I stand in response to your faith in me. I won't waste time. My policies don't differ greatly from my fellow nominee's. To his fine speech, I would add only one thing. If elected, I will stand against currying and political favours, the violence and

coercion associated with our current, open system of voting. I will work tirelessly towards a secret ballot for all future Victorian elections.”

A clever strategy. The existing process had been formulated in a distant country, a place where landed men secured allegiance in the days leading up to an election and stood in polling rooms to ensure men voted as directed. But this was a new colony and these were working men. By emphasising the secret ballot, Alick made himself no one’s fool and everyone’s friend.

Monday, November 12th, 1855

Ned Thompson called again in the early hours of the morning. His fists pounded the door, jerking us from a tangle of satiated limbs.

“Stewart! Wake up. We have to talk.”

Alick cursed, rolling from the bed. He grabbed his trousers and pulled a rumpled shirt over his head.

“Wait here,” he hissed. “Lock the door. I’ll try to get rid of him.”

Gathering my clothes, I shot the bolt home and dressed in a fumble. Thompson wouldn’t come to the bedroom. We were quite safe. Even so, my hands shook as I set the room to rights. My mind spun excuses for being here.

“Ned.” Alick lifted the latch. “Can’t this wait till morning?”

“No. Have you seen Titch?”

“Not in my sleep.”

“He’s a damn nuisance.” Thompson kicked the doorstep. “I made allowances on Nomination Day, it served my purposes—all those blacks, misfits and catamites created a bit of atmosphere. But this is different, Stewart. Serious. Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“It may have escaped your attention, Ned. But it’s past two in the morning.”

I smothered a laugh, ear pressed against the door. This wasn’t Thompson’s first tirade, and it wouldn’t be the last. Ever since Titch had come up with the idea of a victory ride, Thompson had been set against him. No one knew why exactly. Maybe a desire to control things? A man with his kind of money could be as singular as he liked. No one dared question him.

“Time’s nothing.” Thompson strode into the store. “There’s talk, Stewart. Rumours. And you’re implicated.”

Talk. My shoulder blades pricked.

We’d been so careful since Alick’s decision to run for Council, barely meeting alone, keeping our days strictly on business terms. I couldn’t think of a single, unguarded moment, apart from tonight. This had to be a mistake.

“Christ, man. Have you woken me on hearsay?”

Thompson took his time answering.

He paced back and forth, picking up goods from the shelves—jars of pickles, pale ale, potted anchovies—and thumping them down. His booted feet drew suspiciously close to the bedroom door.

“You’ll win, Stewart. After Nomination Day, no one doubts it. But this could ruin things.”

“So you say, Ned. But you’re yet to explain yourself.”

Alick had stepped up close. I saw him clearly on the other side of the door, as if the wood were transparent—hair tousled, shirt unfurled, his blue eyes narrowed. I heard Thompson’s close up heavy breathing, too. Imagined his bulk thrown against the door. He had no reason to enter the bedroom. No cause to suspect. But Thompson was canny. I wouldn’t put anything past him.

“I’m throwing a party at the close of polls.” Thompson stepped away from the door. “Champagne. Dancing girls. A German brass band. I expect you to be there.”

“I have no other plans.”

“That’s not Titch’s tale.”

“No?”

“He’s come up with a scheme. Surely, you’ve heard the rumours? He wants you to ride that gold-shod nag of his.”

“Me! Ride Titch’s horse? You must be mad.”

“Don’t play me for a fool, Stewart. You knew about this.”

“Good God! You’ve woken me for a circus trick.”

“I’ve thrown a stack of money at this campaign.” Thompson resumed his measured tread. “Backed you to the hilt, along with all the other Woolshed investors. We’ll make sure there’s a turnout on Polling Day. But you’ve got to play your part. You’re our man now, Stewart. Working to our agenda. You’ll have nothing to do with this.”

Silence. My heart beat. The long slow intake of Alick’s breath.

“I have no prior arrangements, Ned, as I’ve said, and I’m certainly not privy to Titch’s schemes. But I’m not your bloody man, either. I never will be. Now, I think you’d better leave.”

I waited, pulse slowing, while Thompson let himself out. As his footsteps faded, I drew back the bolt and Alick slipped in, closing the door behind him.

“Christ! I’m too old for this.” He held out a hand.

“What, being scared senseless? Or roused from sleep?”

“Both,” he said. “And neither. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No?” He sank down onto the bed. “It was my decision to run for Council. I’ve only myself to blame. But I meant what I said on Nomination Day. I want to be part of this colony’s future. To shape the way we do things. I know it’s hard,” he looked up, uncertainty etching his features. “But men have a right to their secrets.”

I studied him quietly—fair-haired, lean, still a handsome man, in his thirty-sixth year. But there were shadows beneath his eyes, newly arrived. A knife-blade set to his shoulders, along with the current air of defeat and, I had to admit, some of the blame lay with me.

“Shall I go away, perhaps?”

“No! Don’t ever suggest it.”

“Only for a while. Until things settle down.”

“Don’t talk rubbish.”

“Well then.” Relief made me giddy. I sank down onto the bed beside him. “You’ll see Titch in the morning. Tell him you want no part in this circus. Then do Thompson’s bidding ... until after the election.”

“And then?” His fingers laced mine in the dark.

“We’ll manage.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “We’ll manage. Though, I’ll not do any man’s bidding. I’ll see Titch in the morning, tell him I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to ride that damn horse now, just to spite Thompson.”

Polling Day – Thursday, November 15th, 1855

I opened the store after Alick rode away at dawn, though it was far too early for custom. Wandering its dim interior, I revelled in the mingled scents of sugar, tea and warm dusty flour. My hand lingered on a pair of boots, Alick’s size, folded a shirt the colour of mine. I made neat rows of the pannikins, kettles and quart-pots we had ordered from Melbourne. Set aside a tin of sardines for us to enjoy. I’d done right urging Alick to caution, though my chest ached and my throat felt rigid as a drain pipe. There was no choice for men like us. Alick would realise, soon enough. This was the path he had chosen. For him to stand in the public eye, I must remain in the shadows, waiting.

I worked hard, fixing my mind on simple tasks, as all around me the diggings came to life. I heard the hawk and spit of men waking, a tangle of voices. The gaps in our bark roof changed from dark to light. Miners ambled past with water from the creek. Others lugged cypress and stringy bark from distant hills and coaxed licking fires into blaze. Before long, an aroma of freshly baked damper filled the air.

Over a thousand men had registered to vote in the Ovens District, with polling rooms north-east, at Yackandandah, and south as far as Buckland. Three Milers would vote in Beechworth where Ryan’s support was strongest. But elsewhere, the bosses weren’t taking any chances.

All day, drays rumbled past bringing voters to the Woolshed. Men on horseback wove in and out between clustered tents, urging men not to waste their franchise. Miners gathered in laughing knots to play cards and make music. Others hovered at the entrance of the Sunbury Hotel, firing muskets on the hour as the tally mounted.

At half past five I closed the store and walked the dusty road to the polling room. Slowly, as if I had no concern for the outcome, though my heart beat like a kettledrum. I raised a hand when someone recognised me from the store, called out a greeting. A cheer rose from the group gathered at the Sunbury's door.

"Stewart or Ryan?" someone yelled. "Show us your colours."

"No need." One by one, I met their curious stares. "Only a fool would stand for Ryan here."

"That's no answer." A thickset man stepped up close. "State your preference."

"I will," I said, pushing past him. "In the proper setting."

I stepped into the hotel lobby and turned right at the private dining room. A scuffle of feet told me the men had jostled in behind. With a shaking hand, I bent over the ledger and formed the letters of Alick's name and added my signature. The returning officer looked up, adjusting his spectacles.

"Your preference please?"

I held my breath, waiting for a telltale snigger from the doorway. A wolf-whisper to indicate our house of straw might fall. Nothing. Only this moment of shared franchise. I straightened up and met the returning officer's gaze. "Alick Stewart. He's the best on this goldfield."

§

It grew late—too late to reopen the store. I stood like a ghost on the edge of the jostling crowd, aware of sweat and fresh tobacco, the strange damp-earth smell of water races. Light flared. The drub of boots. A roar as the returning officer chalked the final tallies onto the board.

Three Mile had gone to Ryan. No one expected otherwise. But at the close of polls Alick led the Woolshed, two hundred and five to four. Men hooted and caterwauled in the gathering dusk, fired their rifles. I heard a clash of cymbals, the brassy blare of a band staring up, a cry of *Come in spinner!* from the Sunbury's gaming rooms. A grinning, gap-toothed man thrust his flask of into my hand.

"He's done it!"

"Yes." I found myself grinning back at him.

We would face weeks of separation while Council sat in Melbourne, the ongoing scrutiny of public office, the gut-gnawing fear of discovery. But tonight none of it mattered—only the weight of those figures on the board.

"You'll have your work cut out in the store."

"It'll bring changes."

"Here!" The man dug me in the ribs. "You should ask for a pay rise!"

“Now, there’s a thought.” I handed the flask back to him. “I’ll put the matter to Stewart in the morning.”

“Tonight! He’s coming tonight. Titch has got it all organised.”

“Tonight? Not likely. Thompson’s forbidden it.”

“Go on! That won’t stop Stewart!”

I paused, heart hammering and measured my words. “Stewart’s stubborn, I’ll grant you, and no great fan of Thompson’s. But even if he does ride Titch’s mare, I doubt he’ll come to the Woolshed.”

“Why not? We turned out, made pledges. He owes us, I reckon.”

I turned away, unable to fault the man’s reasoning. Alick had wanted to ride to the Woolshed, and why not? These were his supporters. If his heart held its own reasons who would have noticed? Not this grinning, gap-toothed man, or his friends celebrating alongside.

I walked alone through the blackened goldfield, hearing men talk of home and the families they’d left behind, the futures they hoped to build in the colony. As riders clattered in from the outlying districts, we learned the full extent of Alick’s victory. Groups at camp fires grew larger, their talk louder—as if men were aware of being on a bigger stage. Every so often, a figure rose like a shadow puppet to peer along La Serena Road. Others hefted logs onto fires, their anticipation flaring like sparks in the warm November night.

The men waited in vain. I could have told them that. A man must abide by his decisions and I had made Alick’s this morning. Yet, surely as I knew this to be true, I found myself wishing otherwise. Hearing hope throb in the men’s voices, seeing the naked yearning in their faces and wanting, this night, under this vast southern sky, for Alick to abandon caution. For him to ride that gold-shod horse all the way to the Woolshed.

I turned, making my back along the dusty road towards the store.

On the verandah I stopped, hand on the latch, my ears pricking to a subtle change in sounds. I heard the familiar rattle of a winch. A flap of canvas. Wind buffeting the water races and now ... beneath it all, a strange, persistent drumming? Riders! Could it be riders?

I waited.

Heard a dog bark. Then another. Shouts. Saw groups breaking up. Men ran from all over the diggings.

“It’s him,” someone yelled. “Stewart’s coming.”

The drumming grew louder. I heard it clearly now—a tattoo of fast approaching hooves. I leaned over the verandah rail, peered through the wood smoke, and breathed in cypress and stringy-bark as Alick came into view.

He rode ahead of the pack. Hatless, stock loose, his smile sought mine above the crowd. Men jostled at the front of the store, laughing, cheering, marvelling at the wondrous golden shoes, but Alick didn’t pay them any heed. He clattered to a halt, thrust the reins into waiting hands and took the verandah steps two at a time. It was bold. Far too public. But for once, I didn’t hesitate. Stepping forward, I grasped Alick’s hand and slapped him on the back, as any man would, trusting no one would notice, in the noise and excitement, that I held his hand a little longer. Or that he

leaned in close with words for only me to hear.

Historical Note:

This story is inspired by Daniel Cameron's 'legendary' ride through Beechworth on his election to Victoria's Legislative Council. No one knows whether Cameron actually rode a horse shod with gold (eyewitness accounts vary). This story is therefore neither a history nor a biography—merely one of those 'what ifs' that sometimes occur in a writer's mind. But it is not without premise. In Daniel Cameron's obituary, the Lilydale Express (12th Jan 1906) said: "He was offered the post of Chief Superintendent of the Glasgow force if he would marry, but he refused the promotion and afterwards retired from the police and migrated to Australia." Cameron, in fact, never married. He died at eighty-seven years of age, while residing in the home of a gentleman friend.

When not writing fiction, Elizabeth Corbett works as a librarian, contributes articles and reviews to the Historical Novels Review, blogs at elizabethjanecorbett.com and teaches Welsh at the Celtic Club in Melbourne. In 2009, her short story 'Beyond the Blackout Curtain' won the Bristol Short Story Prize. Another story, 'Silent Night', was short listed for the Allan Marshall Short Story Prize. She is currently working on what she hopes will be the final drafts of a historical novel: The Tides Between—a journey towards wonder, womanhood and the words by which we make sense of life.

The Track Unites Us All

by Lee Todd Lacks

Perhaps you live in the apartment building
bisected by the subway overpass,
nothing but a thin concrete wall separating
your private life from the collective stare of
the masses onboard the train.

Whereas I live at the other end of the line;
a station in the woods, which dispels
the grim isolation of this remote seaside town.

When I was young, I often dreamt about tunnels,
all of which led to my aunt's basement;
huge, cluttered, common space,
and somehow, all the world's basements and
subway stations and underground parking areas
became interconnected. My young mind
could not fathom the staggering possibility that
my aunt's basement might in fact be
a gateway to the root system of
the metropolis; a system of
such remarkable size and intricacy,
no one really knows
its full extent anymore:
with its boilers and burners,
gas mains and water mains,
sump pumps and storage tanks,
furnaces and fuse boxes,
all linked by twenty thousand miles
of wire and pipe.

Before the advent of interstate highways,
can you imagine those places that got
the track but not the station?
How many people died trying to jump the trains?
Runaways, outlaws, vagabonds,
not one of them had a contingency plan!
What was there to think about?
You simply climbed to the top of the ridge,
waited for the telltale sound,
and if you timed it right,

you could kiss your past goodnight!

Synopsis

This began as a poem that I wrote in the summer of 1996, which acknowledged the degrees to which wires, pipes, and rails connect those of us who live in urban areas. Growing up in a suburb of Boston that had no subway or commuter train access until 2007, I have always been a bit awestruck by the city beneath the city; by the inconceivably expansive substructure that delivers power to our outlets, water to our faucets, and loved ones to our doorsteps.

Lee Todd Lacks is a mixed-media artist, music therapist, and clinical counsellor who seeks to blur the distinctions between rants, chants, anecdotes, and anthems. His experience of living with significant vision and hearing deficits often informs his writing, which has appeared in The Alembic, Clockwise Cat, and Queen's Head and Artichoke. He resides in South Portland, Maine, USA, where he lives happily with his wife and young son.

Still Warm Under My Hands

Non-fiction by Jenn Johnson

The air is crisp and cool as I exit the artificial warmth of the car. It's early on a fall morning; a soft mist is rising over the fields. The cows are standing leisurely, waiting to be milked, peacefully puffing little clouds of steam out on their breath. The only sound is the rhythmic, mechanical hum and chug coming from the milking parlour. All else is still. It would be a peaceful morning, but the task I'm here for weighs on my mind. I find no solace in this gentle farmyard scene.

Up at the trailer, I change into an old button-up shirt and overalls—clothes I don't mind getting dirty. I take off my warm shoes and slip my feet into the rubber boots I left on the front porch. They're stiff with cold and my feet are instantly chilled as I slide them inside. I clump down the stairs and out to the coop.

One of the ducks hatched a clutch of eggs earlier this year, and through the spring and summer I enjoyed watching as the little family paraded around the farm. They would waddle single file, just like in the cartoons, the babies sounding their beep-beep-beeps as they tried to keep up. One day they wandered into the milking parlour and two of the little ones got cut off from the group. They called out frantically until I chased them out and they reunited with the family. They've all grown to full size now and only two are male. One has a lame wing; no one knows how it happened. He is small and quiet, and stays out of trouble. The other is big and strong and has been fighting with the only other drake on the farm, the father, each trying to be alpha. The fights are getting vicious. There is only room for one big drake on this farm. Since the old guy won't be good for eating, and since the farmers have a sentimental attachment to him, I've been given the young one. The only catch is, getting him on the table is up to me.

I grew up in the country, but I am not a farm kid. And though I want to be more connected to where my food comes from, I am realising the idea and the reality exist worlds apart for me. There are two of us, and my partner has offered to be the one holding the knife. I am immensely grateful to him for that. My job will be to wrap the duck up in a blanket and hold him down, so the cut will be clean and quick. I've seen some of the fights these two drakes have had, even tried to break one up with the handle of my pitch fork. I have an idea of his substantial strength.

I walk out through the soggy yard to the coop, rubber boots being sucked into the mud with each step. The plan is to open the coop door and throw the blanket over him as he comes out. I will hold him down while my partner ties his head back and does a quick cut. I wait at the door, blanket ready, and toss it over him. I wrestle him to the ground. My partner ties him down and readies the knife. But suddenly everything is going wrong; he is stronger than I expected, and he's freed his head. He's thrashing under my weight, pushing against me. My heart is pounding and I think for a moment that I won't be able to hold him. Suddenly, I don't want to. Suddenly, this feels so wrong, and I want to be anywhere but here doing anything but this. It's taking too long, his muscular neck is thicker than either of us expected and this whole task has become so difficult and so real. After another tense moment, I regain control. The knife is through and now it's done. The struggle subsides; I can feel the fight going out of him.

I don't cry, but I know I could if I let myself. I've witnessed this moment before, watching, feeling as the life drains from a body still warm under my hands.

Once again everything is still. The milking machine continues its monotonous hum. The cows stand and chew, gaze lazily around the yard. A warm morning sun is peeking through the clouds; I can feel it warming my cool cheeks. Everywhere around me everything is normal, only I am different. This life will not be wasted. I'll prepare a meal and I'll

be grateful. But I wonder if I'll be able to put it out of my head. My secret knowledge of a pool of blood, soaked into the field by the coop.

Jenn Johnson lives in the desert in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. She has been writing for most of her life as way to try to make sense of the world around her. She's still working on it. Her writing has appeared in The Island Tides and Silver Apples Magazine.

The Morning After (Surgery)

by Tiggy Johnson

Underwear
on the floor, beside
the bed. Remember
nothing.

Postcards from Doug, mid-70s

by Tiggy Johnson

Dear Mum, having a great time. Didn't get a lift
but we met two birds and stayed in a motel with them.

Dear Mum, here I am in Darwin working in a night club
open 'til three in the morning. I work pretty hard.

Dear Mum, I have now been to the bottom and the top
of New Zealand, have nowhere else to go except
down again or across.

Dear Mum, left my bank book in the house somewhere,
could you look for it and send it up here for me please.

Dear Mum, having a good time. Found a flat in Perth.
Find out about the job today.

Dear Mum, just came down to the post office to see
if there is any mail. P.S. Still finding it hard to get a job
so could you send a few dollars to help me, please.

Dear Mum, spent a week in Bundaberg! Having a good time,
might have a job in one of the pubs.

Dear Mum, took me a day and a half to get to Surfers.
There's no one around here I know anymore.

Dear Mum, spent ten days in Hobart, looking for work,
but there wasn't any there.

Dear Mum, sorry for not writing but have had a lot of things
on my mind. Heading to Mt Cook to see about a job
as a barman. Might be home for Xmas.

Dear Mum, have been having a good time here.
Working and skiing. Chasing snow bunnies.

Mum, had a great time until we were forced to leave.
Slept in many different places. Running out of money.
Home on Friday, I hope. Love, Doug.

Tiggy Johnson is an Australian poet whose poems have appeared widely in Australian journals and anthologies, including Black Inc's Best Australian Poems 2012. Her poetry collection First taste was published in 2010 and That zero year, co-written with Andrew Phillips, in 2012. Tiggy's work has appeared in Issues Three, Six and Seven of Tincture Journal.

Funeral Party

by Kathryn Morgan

At the market we traipsed from the car to the pig house with its smell of rodeo, fear, and prizes. My husband's niece wore a hat that flapped as she trod the road. Strung between the niece, Hati, and Abe, I floated, my sandalled feet skimmed the ground, drawing nearer to the pig house. Abe squatted, balanced the camera and photographed the pigs. They were lined up in rows and mostly placid. Each had a bamboo raft fashioned to the side on which it lay. They held off from fighting, it seemed, until purchased, and then they screamed like they were being burned alive. The shadow from the pig house slid them out into the sun, which beat down, silenced them to death. I admired Abe's neat squat, his spider-legs rooted in the dust. We left the pig house and headed back to the central market. There was everything from cassowary head medicine to coconut ice—but no mosquito repellent and no mint, which is what I wanted. I would continue to be eaten alive in the warm sour of Grandma's bamboo kitchen. We carried our goods in a woven basket. I slung it from my forehead across my back the traditional way, like Grandma. We headed down the street, away from the market to a tin shed.

We all agreed to the tin shed being a Texan saloon. The walls were wooden with a Jesus clock and buffalo horns on the wall. Women with round blow-dried hairdos and old men drinking palm wine from plastic jugs were clustered around in the dark. We stared out into the street with its plonking fat raindrops and slow wet buffaloes. A few men could be seen at points beside the road, tented in their dripping sarongs.

Hati's lips were peach, stained with grandma's orange church lipstick. Hati had led me to the doily-filled room that is Grandma's that morning and showed me all the things. I thought I might see a picture of Hati's mother in there, but there was none. There were pictures instead of Hati in her frilly dress at first communion and a stern photo of Grandma standing in a row of women at the church. I can't imagine Hati having ever been born. It is as if she was hand-made by Grandma, a patchwork from precious fabric scraps. The lipstick was beautiful on Hati's brown face. We stood before Grandma's mirror, both of us with peach lips, smiling.

"I like this place," I said, looking around, stoned on the palm wine. "I like all the wood. The wooden walls. I like the women's hair." The women, like the saronged men, were sitting on benches across the saloon, looking at us, tiny licks of smile on their mouths. Hati was sick of waiting for us to feed her, so up she jumped and bounded into the kitchen. A bouffanted woman followed her and they returned with a bowl of milk and jelly. Hati slurped and played with her new hair clips. I bought them for her, pretending to stall holders that she was my daughter. We sipped refills of palm wine.

§

Driving home, watching the land pass, I cartwheeled in my mind across fecund meadows. We were a carload of people and vegetables in the late morning, preparing to cook, bathe, and hike over a Toraja mountain and across rice paddies to a funeral party. I felt a quiet tremble within, or without, somewhere in the universe, or in the eyes of the buffalo we were passing. The car moved slowly down the road, a cool world of drizzle around us. We were coming from the market. Hati was soft and squirming in my lap—a girl old enough not to sit on people's laps. We bought her pop-ice and hairpins. Uncle Dery with a laugh that seeps out of him like breath. Abe in the front, next to Uncle Dery. Conversation bubbled between Abe and Uncle Dery. Flung from Abe, ebbed back from Uncle Dery. I was out in

those fields where we gazed, rice and lakes of rainwater blotted with beasts and scarecrows. I flapped anarchically from thought, to sentence, to car interior, adjusting the piercing arse bones of Hati. Something slithered between Abe and me, wriggled and writhed without words—perhaps it was of the woman he had been sneaking around with. She was from Java, where we lived. Relieved, a curl of ocean away from that place, I wished Grandma and Hati and Uncle Dery were mine and not Abe's.

§

We went to the funeral on foot, across rice fields in the rain and with trepidation crossed a bamboo log that bounced and quivered over a gushing grey river. Our best clothes were damp with mist. When we reached the place I found a sanctuary behind a patchwork curtain. But then my sanctuary was invaded by the sounds of dying. The red in the banners and flowers and dots and paisley swirls of the fabric bowed with the breeze to the true red—of sacrifice, of animal life. The true red, of blood, now ruling this funeral party, was not the red in the cloth of the girl who sat at the entrance shielding her face from our photographs with the same eye-squint expression as Uncle Dery. The stripes of her costume were orange, red and gold. The red glowed vibrant at the entrance, but past the bamboo archways, to the central yard where bulls stood, this red could not contend with the champion: the blood. Here, it was dull as a day-old flower. A teacher told me when I was a child, no matter how well you dye a piece of fabric, the colour red cannot stay vibrant for long. It is its nature to dull to pink or mushroom then pale rosy dusk. And as the rule of red dictates, the fountains from the necks of two buffalo turned to crimson blue, as death released the great groaning beasts from their performance.

I moved to a corner of the party, which was a myriad of temporary bamboo pavilions with rushed mats on the floor and piles of rubber sandals at their steps. The bamboo sitting areas surrounded a bloody pillar in a rice-husk-strewn yard of flecked mud. And above that pillar and the epic of two dying buffalo was a wooden home on stilts, with a traditional Toraja roof, dipped in the middle like the back of an animal.

After the sacrifices, Uncle Dery took me to the stilt house. We climbed the wooden stairs into two rooms. In the middle, birthing the two rooms, lay a casket covered in lace. There was a framed picture on top, of a boy, taken perhaps thirty years ago. Uncle Dery laughed, studying my face as I stared at the coffin. We went back down the stairs and followed a movement of people behind trussed pigs on bamboo rafts. I ducked from the procession and weaved back through the sitting houses and labyrinthine patchwork. Up the stairs I climbed, back into the two-roomed house with its closed casket and Mona Lisa boy in the photo. I needed the coffin to be open, for the lid to dissolve, for his face to show to me, with lines in it, with white old hair, with dry old lips. I wanted proof of this life we were commemorating. Like when you give someone a present you want to see them open it, because truthfully you did it to see what their face would show. Such a lavish present for this man, who was now not more, but less that he had been last week when his blood slushed through the veins of his body, pushed him through the crimson mud of this land to whatever last things he did in his life.

§

After the funeral party, we went to Uncle Dery's friend's house. The house was tucked into the corner of a rice field and a mountain.

The bathroom was like any other rustic Sulawesi bathroom. A step above the kitchen, you lunge through a length of rain-drips into the private space of shut door and solitude. Alone, at last, for as long as it takes to admire the

toothbrushes, blue tiles and grey, damp-streaked concrete walls. Count the geckos, gaze into the deep square bathtub which no one ever touches but with a bucket. Speckled with exhausted mosquitoes, and if it's light enough to see the bottom, vermicelli worms that could crawl into your arse and eat your food away for months to come. As always, my bladder was on its last stretch, but I held on as I enjoyed that cubic universe. There were diamond shaped windows along the brick walls. Not quite as big as my face. I took each window in turn; peaked out to the rainy exterior, imagined what Alice felt peering through her miniature door down the rabbit hole. Knowing the picture could complete itself as I moved along the windows, I loved the restriction of each porthole: a tiny cameo of broad green leaves, lush grass, and an inclining garden. It was like looking into the light boxes my grandmother kept from her mother-in-law; slides of a bleak southern shore, aunties and uncles infantile in the scope of great-grandmother's lens; a world only one person on earth can glimpse in a moment. The final window framed chicks hopping on a bamboo pig cage, all of them shivering in the rain, and at once I had the urge to vomit.

Back in the sitting room we watched ABC. Snippets of the world: Italian election results; French workers rejecting work reform; Wal-Mart proposing an in-store bank.

§

Before the rain started we had been outside on the porch of this mountain-fold wooden house, sipping coffee and gazing into the gristle of yet another pig. Uncle Dery and his friend chopped quietly through the flesh and bone, dismembering the animal, and a little boy slipped in and out of their arms. Hati's small hands were bloody. She had been playing with a pig's tail, stretching it out, letting it bounce back, making the other children laugh. At last they rested and, with slippery fingers, grappled with coffee cups. The meat was comically arranged; a hoof here, a cheek there—a tooth protruding from a kneecap. The tail poked straight from a mound, which was the pig's arse.

"It's all so raw—so unlike Java," I said to Abe, over the lip of my coffee cup. Raindrops were coming down sparingly now and the rice fields were lustrous. Thank god for the cocoon of intoxication. The palm wine of the last few days had made this playground of carnage, food and death easier. So far from Java we felt, there on the porch gathered around meat, a pig's ear bent towards conversation.

"There are so many layers to get through before you get to this ..." I was still nauseous as I spoke.

"To what?" Abe asked, but he knew.

This raw proximity to life—feet inch-deep in mud, ankles sprayed with my own piss from when I had squatted in the forest, and blood and meat and waxed paper and Hati's hand tugging at my elbow—and to death. What the whole bleeding screaming sweating devouring day was about: death, which in Java seems more complex. You can't even say someone is dead, has died, has undergone death. They have 'departed'. They've left the show, and like Christians and Muslims, poor and rich, providing they've feared and loved God, leave the meat and flesh behind.

§

Everyone slept. The power was out and rain continued to seep down on the house, sogging up the road of raised dirt back across the rice fields. I was happy to be there, pinned in lace curtains and cane furniture, cosy in the cleavage of the land. Abe and Uncle Dery and his friend lay like sardines on a mat on the floor. Hati, optimistic, waited with eyes on the dead television for the power to return.

§

Sitting in the room with the sealed coffin, calm and cool unlike the hot bull sweat and pork fat inferno of the yard, I had wondered how he, the dead, the black-and-white teenager in the frame, would fit into this room. If his spirit existed, and managed to get out of the coffin, would he fill the room, or would he sit ordinarily at the window, square above the killing, and marvel at those wobbling great wounds—those tunnels into the hot red universe of the buffaloes' furious bodies? Is there appeasement to be gleaned from their collapse, their surrender to blood loss? Does the recently departed charge from its inane earthly vessel, soar over this bamboo and patchwork carnival to fulfil un-lived dreams—in death, in the short eternity from machete-stab seizure to stillness? In that stillness is the departed reconciled with all his unrest, the guilt he learned to feel as prickles in his ribs since childhood, the stymied lust of adolescence, the defeats and submissions of adulthood?

Sitting in that two-roomed space of the deceased man's life, peering from the shadows into the sun-licked blood of the yard—I had wondered if he was surfing that fountain from the buffalo's throat. He was not in the room. He was racing a motorbike with friends, his mother hysterical at the starting line. Why is he like this, so bent on haggling at the line between life and death? He was shutting his bedroom door, a finger held to his lips, a young woman unfolding fabric and limbs on the un-sunned sheets of his bed. He was punching back, slugging the nose of an opponent, drunk off his guts in a billiard hall made from logs.

Blood poured from the throats of the buffalo, like the dead man's first motorbike wounds, first fuck, and the punch-up of his dreams. Then there were pigs screaming and kicking from their rafts, laid around the wreckage of those beasts. Their heads faced the still-living pigs in line, and the pigs continued to bawl. They were frothy mouthed, staring into the dead eyes of the buffaloes where the departed now lived out his life's dreams, and slept.

§

Grandma was waiting when we came in. It was dusk. The kitchen was in shadow and she lit a candle as we entered. Hati, Abe and Uncle Dery peeled off their mist-damp clothes and washed themselves in turn. I stood close to Grandma, wishing again she and Hati and Uncle Dery were mine. I looked across the gloom to Abe, and past him, to the chickens in the dusk, and I placed my hands on my belly and knew what was there.

Kathryn Morgan is a writer and teacher based in Sydney, currently writing a novel. Kathryn's writing interests include social and cultural change, linguistics, social justice and South East Asia. Her short stories and poetry have been published in UTS Writers' Anthologies, Gang Re:public Indonesia-Australia Creative Adventures, Sydney University Anthology, Ricecooker, Honi Soi and Vertigo.

Rim-Compactness

by Emma Rayward

The clouds hang low and our heads hang low, and maybe if I had balls, they would hang low too. Twenty percent of the city has a cold, some form of sniffles or sneezes or scratches in the backs of throats. My skin is sensitive, like each follicle is bruised and any faint touch makes it shrink away. My hands are covered in snot. Not visible far away, unless it catches a glint of sun, because some has dried and some is on my stockings. I have forgotten to bring tissues and I can't stop it from slipping out my nose, because my throat is also full of sticky mucus that I can't swallow. It grabs onto the sides and won't let go. Some I rub into the skin of my fingers, hoping it won't be reabsorbed and come up through my nose again.

I wait at the traffic lights, hoping the clouds won't get too heavy for themselves, that their weight won't exceed their strength, but they are sinking lower and perhaps I could reach them if I stood on tiptoes, or a bench. I am alone at these traffic lights. The mucus touches the soft palate at the top of my mouth, plants its tender hooks into my tonsil crypts and uvula. There is enough to force some out of my nose, which I scoop up with my hand before it can join the corners of my mouth.

I wipe my fingers on the pedestrian button, pretending I am urgent to cross, even though I have nowhere to be. A suit comes and stands behind me, too close in a space where there is almost an infinity, or just a smaller infinity, of places he can stand. He huffs at the back of my neck and I feel tuna and mayonnaise on white bread. I feel soy latte cling to the short hairs on my neck. I feel chewing gum whispering into my ears. I feel the stench of impatience slip under my collar. I watch as he presses the pedestrian button, and I see some moistness cling to his finger, and it winks at me. She is a greedy infection. I smile back.

When the light turns amber, he squeezes past me and past the empty space all around us, and squeaks across the road. I think, *blisters maybe, cool*, and wave my little snot farewell, wishing her the best of luck. Guess it's just us left guys, I whisper to the rest of the snot inside my face, but there are a lot of traffic lights we have to pass, and a lot of pushy suits, and I know you can spread yourself thin.

I see a public library and walk into its toilet. I blow my nose on some toilet paper, but it's thin, and I still get snot on my hands. Bye fellas, I think, I'm sorry to flush you, I would have wished more for your life. It's ok, they respond, we don't mind the swim. Oh shit, I say, I'm sorry, I gotta pee. Do you want me to flush you down first? I can't hear them under the water, but I think maybe they need some warming up, they probably thrive in temperate environments, so I piss on their heads.

As I piss my weak piss, I think of my mother. I wonder when my piss will be as strong as hers, give the same ring as hers does as it sprays against the bowl. Maybe her urethra changed during pregnancy, or childbirth, or maybe she is too busy to go to the toilet as often as I do. I always thought I could call myself a woman when my stream was as powerful as hers. Sometimes I flex my cervical muscles, to contract the space out of which it flows, increasing the pressure. It will hit the front of the bowl at 90 degrees, and fly upwards towards my thighs. Once, it flew into my face. Pushing hard, I think, I'm a little constipated, I might wait to see if I can poop, so I straighten to realign my sphincter's posture.

I contemplate all the bums that have warmed the seat before mine, their touching of, by toilet-seat-proxy, my skin,

one surface that slides over another, a zap of kinetic energy exchanged as static. I wonder if the previous bums could feel any kind of connection with mine. If we passed each other on the street, would they secretly high-five each other, our bums, or perhaps some animosity, does that bum envy mine, the size, the clothing which contains it. I think all our bums have mingled. I pick up skin that your bum left behind, it grows into mine, or else it replaces some, and some of my bum skin is left for the next occupant. Six degrees of bum skin. Travelling through all the toilets in the world, we all share parts of ourselves with each other, all wearing diluted versions of each other's asses. I wonder about the quality of my ass skin, and if I can consider it my own, how much of the other have I absorbed into my self.

The notice on the back of the door reads 'do not stand or squat on the toilet seat' and 'please be considerate' and 'others use these toilets'. I know that squatting is better for my bowels, but I ought to be considerate. One consideration prioritised over another. I consider the highest consideration would be the installation of a squat toilet. A sign saying not to suggests a lot of people want to.

I want to know that libraries consider my bowels as much as my bowels consider libraries. There is a special affinity that exists between books and pooping: well-partnered, complementary. A good enough book will make you shit. Just like the first sip of coffee in the morning loosens your sphincter, the first sentence settles you in to get it all out.

A girl enters the cubicle next to mine and an explosive poop follows her behind. I smile bashfully, in recognition; the desperate need to shit versus the desperate need to appear not to. I can hear and smell you through these walls. Here is the vulnerability, the partial emptying of oneself into a ceramic bowl of water; that this waste, this abject clump of stuff was only just a part of you—something that came into you, mingled with your insides and then left you, slightly lighter, less bloated. We want to be proud of them—want to, want to—but what do we do with them? We wave bye-bye, avoid eye contact, never see the end of the line. If we're lucky it's solid but not too firm, compact but not too wide, not too green, not too black, not at all red, just right. If we look at it, if it hasn't already slipped under the bend, like our toilets are designed to do, we think, am I OK, does this poo make me OK.

This girl and her short, explosive poop, trapped gas propelling it from behind, hold their breath, some above water, some below, some clinging to the bowl or the air or her asshole and wait: for urine to follow, or more of itself, its neighbours. It was blasted out quickly before it had the chance to say goodbye. Pushed out into the cold from its womb, the little round bits and pieces try to swim to each other, to shiver and hold hands and protect themselves from tides.

Types of shits

Friendly fire

Tap ass

Period poop

After grog bog

Baby greens

Corn on the cob

Smashed potato

Butt plug

Borry

Turd

Snake

Deadly

Bullet train

Fax to Bin Laden

Roof is on fire

Cat on a hot tin roof

Methane-phetamine

Tie me kangaroo down, sport

Pringles (once you pop, you can't stop)

Ring around the Rosie

Floaties

Skiddies

Food baby

Pickle juice

Texas hold 'em

Party pooper

Poopa scoopa

Loosey goosey

Forget-me-not

Nappy nibbles

Splash back

Oil slick

Slippery dip

Peek-a-boo

Seven mile run

Silly string

Confetti

Throwing the gauntlet

Kids at the water park

Dingleberries

Releasing the Kraken

Event horizon

String cheese

Grogan

Nuggets

Doodly-squat

Hell's candy

Hot and steamy

Dingbat

Coco pops

Milk duds

Clinkers

Crowner

Ghost train

Dugong

Pinched loaf

Hungry, hungry hippo

Thunder dome

Dunder

Shart

Silent but deadly

I am relieved when my shit finds its way to the lips of my asshole. Welcome, friend, and for my companion next door, let's aim for a splash. I want her to know I am here too.

There we are, a coupla gals, hanging out, experiencing a little shit-solidarity. I am grinning with camaraderie, wondering if we will meet by the sinks, and if she is smiling too. Hey, I whisper to her, feel good? I'm glad we got to share that special moment, I feel a bond with you, like BFF4LYF or something equally significant. Do you want to flush together, maybe our pals will meet somewhere below, dance some Butoh, do some synchronised swimming or something. How much do you wipe, I ask, do you scrunch or fold, do you check the paper until it comes out clean, do you inspect the bowl, before and after flushing, have you ever had worms, wriggling under your nails when you scratched, have you ever had a doctor stick his plastic finger in you at six years old to see if you had cancer, because you would bleed when you pooped, but it turned out your asshole was just too small and your poop too big, and you would always remember it like a backwards poop? Maybe not hey, ha ha ha, but she doesn't answer, because I didn't say it out loud and she has already gone.

When I am done I wash my hands, squeeze a few blackheads from my chin and lip line, sneeze on the mirror and leave the bathroom. I have a wad of toilet paper in my pocket for future runs. I hope by now my snot has been passed on, and passed on, from suit to suit, on handshakes at meetings, on poles of buses, wheels of cars, wives' breasts, children's heads, dogs' mouths, wallets, coins, pens, more snot, tissues, toilets, everything.

The clouds outside are heavier, lower, like they're about to release themselves on us all.

Emma Rayward has recently completed her creative honours thesis titled Topology of Abject Bodies. She is interested in holes and surfaces and things moving through holes to reach surfaces.

31 Murdering Creek Road

by Paul Williams

They moved into 31 Murdering Creek Road after his dad left. Just the two of them. The five-bedroom house was noticeably sinking into the mire of its own past. But Mrs Murtoa, poor woman, had offered it up for such low rent after her messy divorce, they couldn't say no. The Queenslander stood on sinking poles. The outside featured a rotting wraparound balcony; inside, high mouldy ceilings, where water had pooled over decades, emitted the sour smell of ornate decay.

He called his room the Train Room. It looked like a station waiting room; the roof had been painted mustard yellow; the walls were maroon; the green trim flaked. His mother took the main bedroom on the other side of the house. Overhead, in his bedroom, the ceiling was weighted with rusty chandeliers. The doors from the living room to the verandah didn't open because the house sagged at both ends.

Every morning at five am, a million stridently cheerful lorikeets landed on the blocked gutters on the roof and bathed in the standing water, splashing it into the rising sun. A line of six kookaburras waited in a neat line on the balcony by the kitchen, growling for balls of raw mince. One would let him stroke its head and scratch the lice on its scalp. Two currawongs visited every day, took food from his fingers. Sulphur-crested cockatoos crash-landed on the deck to crack the seeds he scattered for them.

The 1.9-acre garden was, he discovered, an unusable swamp that sloped into a creek and drained into Lake Weyba, a salt lake only a few centimetres deep that rose and fell with the tide. At king tides the brothy estuary lapped at the bottom fence of the property. His mother forbade him to go anywhere near the stream that leaked like pus from the boil of the garden. Its stench was primeval, but for a thirteen-year-old boy its pull was inevitable.

That first night, his mother had locked everything tight, but around midnight he heard the squeak of a door opening. Then, a little after one, something cracked right below his bedroom, downstairs. He pulled the sheets over his head and waited. An hour later, he heard the thump of a body on the tin roof, more thumps, and then something—or someone—rolling off and crashing into the bushes.

In the morning, he inspected the locked doors. "Mum, were you walking around last night?"

"It's just the house breathing," she said. "And did you hear that possum on the roof?"

"I thought I heard a gunshot downstairs."

"These old Queenslanders expand and contract, and the walls crack as it cools. Here." She led him down into the basement: a long crack snaked down the wall.

"Who were the previous occupants? Were they ... murdered?"

"Don't be silly. The previous occupants are still alive. You met her—Mrs Murtoa."

"Who was, then?"

"Who was what?"

“Never mind.”

He fingered the crack in the wall. Cracks are like arguments, he thought, splitting people apart.

In the first week, and then subsequently every week after that, Mr Fix-It the builder from Yandina arrived in a ute piled with tools and machines and drills and wet vacuum cleaners, and whistled his way to the front door, to fix the leaking roof, or water pump, or guttering, or whatever.

“She wants to sell this place as quickly as possible,” the man explained as he hammered and sawed and drilled. “It’s costing her a pretty penny, but she wants it all fixed up.”

“Mrs Murtoa assured us that we could stay as long as we needed,” said his mother.

“You’re not interested in buying the place, are you?” The builder’s eyes were sharp.

The boy’s mother shook her head. “We can’t afford anything at the moment.”

“How much does she want for it?” the boy asked.

“Asking over seven.”

“Seven hundred?”

“Seven hundred thousand, darling,” his mother said. She turned to the builder. “We’re waiting for the sale of our old house to go through so we can’t even think of buying yet. And even then, we wouldn’t be able to afford anything over four.”

The boy clutched his mother’s hand. “You don’t want to buy this place, do you?”

“Of course not.”

§

But he grew to like the decay, the sagging bedroom wings, the nightly possum thudding on the roof, the widening crack in the walls which he measured every day, calculating how long it would take to reach the other side of the room. He liked the stream that oozed sulphur. And in visceral proportion he grew to hate the builder, who would arrive unannounced at odd hours, surprising his mother who had to open the door clutching her night-gown. “I’ve come to seal the cracks” (in vain because they simply widened the minute he left and spat out his filler and paint with dismissive contempt); “I’ve come to fix the leaking toilet” (but I like the dripping sound, whined the boy); “How is the shower head now, Mrs Watson, giving you a good hot shower?”

“Does he have to be here at eight in the morning? On Saturday?”

“Someone has to maintain the place,” she said. “And he has to deal with the termites.”

The termites had eaten the central beam of the house, and the upper bathroom had collapsed in a pile of moist wood shavings. The boy could hear them at night.

“Want to see a termite colony?” The builder called him into the basement bedroom and scraped away the paint

on the roof beam. Clotted dirt fell out of what used to be wood, and white grubs scurried away. The man squeezed one between his fingers. “These little buggers will destroy the whole place in no time. I’ll have to spray and replace the beam.” And with one pinch he squished the termite.

“Don’t kill them,” the boy said.

The next day, Mr Fix-It sprayed and injected poison into the walls and dug a trench of death around the house.

“This will cost her,” he said. “And she wants the cracks gone. We’ll have to re-stump the whole house if she’s going to sell it.”

The boy’s mother managed to negotiate a stay of execution. “Not while we’re in it, you can’t.”

“We’ll have to wait until you move out then.” He winked at her.

And then the boy came back from school to find his room—his maroon and green and mustard Train Room—covered in canvas sheets, stinking of paint, and the builder touching up the ceiling with a dripping roller brush.

“She wants the room white,” he said. “It’s this room that puts buyers off. Sorry, I had to move your junk out for now.”

“I don’t want it white,” the boy said to his mother. “Tell him to put it back the way it was.”

“It’s not our house, darling. We’re just renting.”

The builder couldn’t fix the door to the verandah. The cracks he had painted over showed through the layers of white.

“Yes, show him, house!” said the boy.

Every day the yellow-eyed currawongs circled the house cawing for food; every night the wall cracked and the floorboards creaked. The ghost creeping around at night was the spirit of the house itself. And he could feel its shape around him, like a father’s embrace.

Every day he inspected the cracks, managing to insinuate his pinky inside its crumbling coolness. Twenty centimetres to go.

Six months came and went. The ‘For Sale’ sign outside attracted a few potential buyers, but the boy soon chased them away by hauling the heavy furniture off the stained carpets, by pointing out the termite-eaten beams in the basement, the rotten deck, and the rusty mower drowned in the mud at the end of the garden. Would-be buyers mired themselves in the swampy earth, fingered the widening cracks in the walls, and made hurried and polite retreats.

The boy and his mother were safe.

And then Auntie Doris and her two kids came to stay. It was such a big house, his mum said, and they needed help with the rent. “You don’t mind sharing the space with Gina and Rebecca do you? Gina’s almost thirteen, so you should get on well.”

“As long as I keep the Train Room.”

They stayed in the downstairs self-contained flat where the concrete exploded every night. “Where’s your father?” he asked Gina.

“Her father is in Fiji,” answered the six-year-old Rebecca. “My father is from Africa.”

“She’s never seen her father,” said Gina. “Mine still visits now and then. But it’s better when he doesn’t. What about yours?”

“He’s just in the UK for a while,” the boy said. “Needs some time to work things out. But he’ll be back soon.”

It only took a day or so. Then he took Gina to his secret places. He looked at her black eyes and her ironic smile; she hated the builder just because he did. He showed her the man-cave garage where the previous owner had left all his stuff, including a TV and video with some old porn videos, the attic where the carpet python surrounded himself with his shed snake skins, and the laundry chute that they managed to stuff Rebecca down so she landed on the pile of dirty clothes downstairs.

Together they prised open the crack with eager fingers. And later, he took her to Murdering Creek. Rebecca trailed after them.

“I’ll show you my secret place, the actual place where people were murdered, why it’s called Murdering Creek.”

Rebecca followed. “Not you!” said Gina. “This is a really scary place, not for kids.”

Rebecca squelched after them. The water stank. The boy stood on roots that were trying to breathe through the mud, and clay squished between his toes. He led them down the creek to a clearing that opened out into the lake.

“Cool.” Gina walked right in. “It’s so warm, it’s like a bath.”

“This is where they were murdered.”

“Who? Who was murdered?”

“You, if you don’t stop following us.”

He pointed out the triangular imprints of rays that had rested on the clay bottom. “Weyba means ray,” he said. “They used to hunt emu here and fish. Peregian means emu.”

He showed her the paperbark tree growing in the shallows, its roots clutching the bank to stop getting pulled out by the tide. “This is where I come to think.”

They sat like leopards in the branches, dangled their feet in the water, and watched the anxious rhythm of the waves lapping at the roots.

“It’s beautiful. So quiet.”

“It’s creepy,” called Rebecca from the shore.

“Ignore her.”

They watched Rebecca meander off into the thickets where fallen paperbarks made neat bridges across the creek. They listened to the far away roar of the ocean, the tide against them, swayed like trees in the hot breeze. “Look!” A stingray floated below in the shallows, its fins rippling. They watched clouds reflected in the water. They listened to the silence of the past.

And then:

“Aren’t you ever going to kiss me?” said Gina.

He was not sure how to answer. “OK.”

He had never thought of kissing her. They balanced on a fork in the tree, and the knots pushed into his back as she pressed herself against him. He was dizzy enough to fall off, and had to clutch the branches with his hands to steady himself. Paperbark flaked off in his hands like pages from an old book.

“That’s enough,” she said.

“Disgusting,” came a voice from below.

“Rebecca! Go away, you little shit.”

“I’ll tell Ma.” Running now, she hurled the words back at them. “I’ll tell her you two were fucking.”

Gina’s face was dark. “She doesn’t even know what the word means.” She leaped off the tree, splashed across the shallows and Rebecca howled and plunged into the bushes. The boy heard them splashing up the stream and Gina pounding after her all the way back to the house. The sound of the builder’s drill whined.

The builder sat perched on the roof like a bird of prey. “Damn bird shit everywhere up here,” he said. “Have to replace this whole goddamn gutter.”

“They’re my pets,” the boy said, but not loud enough for the builder to hear him. “Leave them alone.”

He thumped inside to find Rebecca cradled in her mother’s arms, sucking her thumb. “What happened?”

Gina winked at him. “Nothing.”

“Oh, use the downstairs shower,” said his mother. “The builder is fixing ours.”

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The boy never believed him. Never trusted him. There was always some repair job; he was always there, surprising them at odd moments, even catching Gina in the toilet one day (sorry! sorry! I had no idea you were in here! The tiles. Sorry, sorry!), or outside his mother’s bedroom fixing the louvres, or banging at the bay window while the boy tried to do maths, as if deliberately trying to stop him thinking.

And there he was having tea with the boy’s mother outside.

The boy was having none of it. “Any news from Dad?”

“No, no,” she said. “He needs more time.”

“He’s had ten months. And three days.”

“Please, darling, I need to discuss something very important here with the builder.”

The house loved him now, he knew, and would do anything to protect him. It had embraced Gina too. He could not imagine how he had hated it. It was trying to speak to him, and he had learned its language. He loved the huntsman spiders in the corners of every room where you could not quite reach with a duster, the cockroaches in the cupboards, and the dark basement where Gina and he played and hid from Rebecca, whose wails filled the echoing empty rooms. They would stuff her down the laundry chute and threaten to block both ends and leave her there.

He loved the creek now, saw how its colour was the same gleaming yellow of the currawong’s eyes. Liked its raw name. Liked the stench of death. He dangled the name in front of his two friends like a talisman.

It drove Rebecca crazy. “Who was murdered there? Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.”

Even Gina wanted to know. He had teased them for months, but he now knew he couldn’t ever tell them what he knew, what he had read on the internet about Murdering Creek. He couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

“Nobody,” he said.

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He knew it was coming. But he didn’t know it would be so soon. “They’ve given us an ultimatum,” said his mother. “We have to leave or else buy the house.”

“Why can’t we keep renting it?”

“Mrs Murtoa has to sell it pronto. She wants us out to do major repairs. Stumping, fixing the deck, repainting the house. She thinks having us in it is giving a bad impression to buyers.”

Auntie Doris sighed. “We could pool our resources. And didn’t your house sell?”

“Four hundred.”

“We can offer five, then.”

“They’ll never take five. After all the work the builder has put into it. He says he’s put at least fifty thousand worth of work in already. She wants seven at least.”

“Make them a cheeky offer.”

In the end, his mother and Auntie Doris offered five. “It’s so run down, and termites have eaten half the basement,” she said. “And it’s cracked and rotten.”

The builder shook his head. “She won’t even deign that with a response. But I’ll pass on the message.”

He was right: Mrs Murtoa never responded. “She’s totally insulted,” his mother said. “We shouldn’t have made such a low offer. But what can we do?”

“We can’t leave,” said the boy.

“I’m sorry, darling.”

“But,” he said, “the crack hasn’t even reached the corner of the room yet.”

The builder was ripping up the mouldy carpets even as they were hauling boxes out of the rooms. By the time they were driving off, all their belongings huddled in the *Van Go* truck, he had already pulled off the gutters and piled up rotten pieces of deck. Lorikeets circled the house, and the currawongs watched from a tree.

The yellow wound in him opened. It would never heal. Never.

“It’s just a house,” said his mother. “Not a person. Just a house.”

Auntie Doris, Gina and Rebecca moved in with relatives in Brisbane.

He and his mother squeezed into a box-house in Tewanin next to other boxes where people played thumping bass and mowed all day and where you could hear fathers shouting at mothers in confined spaces.

“We must tell Dad our new address so he knows where to find us—when he returns.”

“Yes, of course.”

In the local newspaper he saw the house listed—For Sale, \$700,000—and stared at the fish-eyed photos of a house that looked new, bright, with hard wood floors in the living room, new steel gutters; white, white rooms with no chandeliers or spiders in the ceilings.

A month later, he saw the same photos of the house with a red SOLD sticker pasted over them with too many excited exclamation marks.

He was surprised at his mother’s tears when he showed her: SOLD \$500,000.

“Look Ma,” he said.

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

“Don’t cry, Ma.”

Six months later they drove past the house for a garage sale at the end of Murdering Creek Road. He didn’t want to look, but as they slowed down near the house, he saw the ute in the driveway. A white dog barking at the gate. The builder sitting out on his new deck, feet up, whistling.

The boy cried and cried and cried.

Paul Williams has published short fiction in Meanjin, Social Alternatives (AUS), Chicago Quarterly Review (USA), New Writing (UK), and New Contrast (South Africa). He has also published Young Adult novels (Parallax, Loverboy, Secret of Old Mukiwa), a memoir (Soldier Blue), a literary novel (Cokcraco) and has won several awards for his fiction. He teaches Creative Writing at the

Learning to Have a Heart

Non-fiction by Hunter Liguore

By the time I was twelve years old I had attended a Senate hearing to help pass a bill granting rights to the elderly to care for pets in assisted living facilities; I had attended a rally in Washington DC to protest laboratory testing on animals—I sat next to the actress Angie Dickenson, who lent her name to the event; I had also established my own animal organisation, We Care About Animals (WCAA), and walked door-to-door collecting money to support animal welfare, which included anything from Arctic seals being clubbed for pelts, to stray cats needing food in the neighbourhood. I earned recognition as an animal activist in my community and was even interviewed and included in a book on animal rights. But not once had I considered the contradiction of caring only for certain animals.

I was raised as a meat eater. I was taught from an early age about my ancestors who were farmers and raised chickens, hogs, and other livestock for food here in the Connecticut valley and back in Scotland. Livestock was a necessity, a means to survival. If the freezer was full with meat, we didn't starve. I still have images of our pig, Wilbur, screeching for its life as it was dragged into a truck on the way to the slaughterhouse—or worse, a chicken running around my grandmother's outdoor oven with its head chopped off—it really happens.

I was taught early on that these kinds of animals were for eating. Meat was on the table at least once a week, sometimes more. I never questioned it. I never once saw that fighting for the rights of one species and eating meat was a contradiction. Further, I learned to kill flies in the house, to bury jellyfish on the beach, smack mosquitoes, set mice traps, stomp on ants, and on and on—cute seals in the Arctic got my sympathy, but not bugs or other 'pests'.

As I grew up, I maintained the lifestyle that I was raised with, and continued a meat-based diet. To further perpetuate the need for meat, my doctors explained it was necessary with the type of anaemia I have—when the blood-type diet came out, I learned that having type O also made me a meat eater. Now, it was in my blood for real!

But something eventually changed. It began with being an eyewitness to animal suffering—not just on TV or the Internet, but in person. One instance was finding a small mouse on a glue-pad at work, and sitting with it as it struggled to get free; another time a bat got stuck in my washing machine and struggled to get out. Terrified at first, I eventually found a way to set it free, but not until after I saw how innocent it was—how desperate it was for survival. When I observed for myself the suffering of another being, my heart opened.

There is a lovely passage in Frank L. Baum's children's novel, *The Wizard of Oz*, where the Tin Woodman, who has joined Dorothy on her journey to the land of Oz because he wants to get a heart, steps on a beetle crawling in the road. Baum writes:

This made the Tin Woodman very unhappy, for he was always careful not to hurt any living creature; and as he walked along he wept several tears of sorrow and regret.

As a result of crying, his jaw is rusted shut. As the reader, we already know the Tin Woodman has a heart, since he cries when he killed the beetle. He believes that since he has no heart, he has no internal guide. He says, "You people with hearts have something to guide you and need never do wrong." But in reality, being mindful to not cause harm to other beings, is being full of heart or possessing compassion. In the end, once the Tin Woodman reaches Oz, the Wizard, like a good teacher, helps him realise his own potential—that he had a heart all along.

Learning that we have a heart is one of the steps we take from a state of caring for some sentient beings, to a place where we are open and can recognise our interconnectedness and love for all. It starts when we begin to see our similarities rather than our perceived differences.

For me, this began when I considered myself less superior or important in relation to other life forms. It began when I started to ask what right I had in taking life—and even more so, when I began to truly recognise that all sentient beings contained spirit or consciousness. As I learned more about the suffering of some animals, I began to see it wasn't restricted to one group; the cow and chicken suffered just as much as a hunted whale.

Awareness comes in steps. I remember one occasion happening upon a water dish in my backyard; just as I was about to pour it out, I saw the surface ripple. I bent down and looked hard. The water was filled with a bunch of squiggling creatures. I guessed they had to be mosquito larva. My mind went right to reports I'd read on the dangers of contracting West Nile virus, and a bunch of other programmed responses that made it easy to tip the bowl and go about my day not thinking twice. But something had shifted. I started to question my reaction. Why did I fear mosquitoes? How did I learn to fear them?

I didn't dump the bowl, but instead over many days watched life grow and morph and eventually join the cycle of life, as they became fully-fledged mosquitoes. From the experience, my heart began to open for other forms of life, like spiders and strange bugs with fuzzy legs that roamed the house, and mice that came inside the attic for the winter. I found I couldn't kill anymore.

Eventually, this concern for life forms washed over into my eating habits as well, as I changed to a plant-based diet. I did it gradually and read up on ways to get protein and other nutrients without meat. What I found was a lot of new research explaining how plants had just as much to offer as meat, if not more. Over the course of a year of going meat (and eventually dairy and egg) free, I felt more energetic, my skin looked healthier, and my blood levels actually improved. While I still take iron for my anaemia, I don't rely on meat for the energy push—in fact, my cravings have been rewired to call for kale when I'm feeling low.

As I made changes to how I regarded my relationship with animals, I began to turn my focus to what others were doing. While I never spoke out or lectured anyone about giving up eating meat or not killing ants and other usual pests, I found in my circle that people noticed—it often put them on the defensive to explain why they could never give up meat. In my own private thoughts, I spent a lot of time judging them—wondering why they couldn't see the contradiction of leading a spiritual life and harming other creatures. In my head I wanted to condemn them for hunting, for squishing insects, for uprooting weeds, for not looking where they were walking—but instead, I was given three occasions to be just like them:

On the first occasion I was walking in the woods and killed a gnat just by blinking; on the second, I had moved a flowerpot near the shed and inadvertently trapped and killed a mouse; and on the third, I felt a tickle on my leg and instinctively swatted, thereby squashing a red spider. In three related instances, all in close proximity, I was shown how we often kill, even when we don't intend to. It was a humbling experience. It was a life lesson in removing the superiority of the ego, to essentially think I was better than others. It shifted my perspective, allowing me to see myself in others, thereby softening my heart and opening up to our shared experiences.

One thing we can bring into our daily practice, to open our hearts to others—to recognise our oneness with all beings—is to be mindful of programmed and learned responses. Like the Tin Woodman, we have a big heart, but may

not be aware of its capacity to love everyone and everything. Sometimes we learn new ways of leading our lives through teachers or from books, but more often the real shift comes when we are right in the middle of it.

One of the first things I started to notice was how easily I was frightened when I saw a bug—yes, a tiny, or not so tiny, bug. The amount of fear got worse the bigger the animal. I began to ask why I was so scared, and much of it went back to childhood or to different behaviours I learned, like killing any thing that moved in the house—or spraying chemicals each year around the foundation just to keep the pests out. As I began to train—to watch and be attentive in a non-judgemental way to my reaction when encountering life forms—I caught the fear, then caught the trigger, that brought the response to swat or squish or kill. Over some time, I realised that I could be retrained, that I could unlearn years of instinctive behaviour.

On one occasion, I was sitting in my shed making prayer ties when a baby skunk came into the doorway. It bobbed like a little dog, and was just as friendly. At first I sat and didn't move, assuming it would go away after seeing me—often animals have a flight response to seeing humans. With only a few inches between us, it continued toward me—I got frightened and was on the other side of the shed within half a second, cowering—then the training came in, to let go, to confront the fear. By that time the skunk was gone, and I started laughing. Here again, I'd been taught skunks are bad and to stay away from them or risk being sprayed. Instead, I regretted not having more of that moment of stillness we shared, when neither of us was scared. That moment of staying was important though—the next time I saw the skunk, this time out in the open, a few feet from each other, I didn't react, I relaxed, took a deep breath and sent it my love with a little bow; the skunk in return paid little attention to me.

It might seem unrealistic for some to befriend a skunk or to let 'weeds' have a place in the garden. If someone told me that I would learn respect and love for spiders and feel sorrow when one died, I wouldn't have believed them—despite being such an animal rights activist. But it is a process of rediscovery; it can take years to overcome our trained responses and the opinions of others. Eventually, by letting go of our patterned responses we can eliminate our biases, which spur inequality, dislike, fear, prejudice, or even hatred. If not, then we lose out on the opportunity to open our hearts and let in love. As the Dalai Lama teaches, through the words of Tsongkhapa:

If you do not eliminate the bias of being attached to some and being hostile to others, any love and compassion you generate will be biased.

Throughout the day we have moments to awaken to this knowledge, to let go of the way we've always done it and replace it with something new, allowing us to go in another direction. In doing so, we recognise that we are more similar to other sentient beings, that we're essentially interconnected, and sharing a similar experience.

In the end, we are like the Tin Woodman who started out for Oz not knowing he had a heart—yet he was the one with the biggest heart all along. We too have moments throughout the day to reawaken and reconsider our relationship with animals and insects, plants and trees, and other people, especially those not in our immediate circle, or who don't share our views.

It doesn't mean that if someone is coming toward us with a gun, we don't run, or if our house is overrun with rodents that we don't find a humane way of removing them. But rather, when we begin to recognise our sameness, we bring ourselves closer to our true nature. As Taisen Deshimaru, a Zen teacher, wrote:

If we consider all lives as equal, we return to our original nature.

Learning to have a heart starts with reawakening to what we already have inside. For me, it has become a life practice to keep my heart open to other life forms. I'm happier and more open to the unfolding possibilities. If we stay in the present moment, we have all the help we need to give it a try.

Hunter Liguore is an American writer who holds degrees in history and writing. A long-time naturalist and activist, she has written on a variety of topics that promote compassionate awareness towards the environment, indigenous rights, and endangered species. She's been named the 2015 Writer-in-Residence at the Edwin Way Teale Nature Preserve. She teaches undergraduate and graduate writing in New England, and offers nature-writing classes online. Her novel, Next Breath, is represented by Regal Literary Agency.

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Kurova Guva

Non-fiction by Chido Muchemwa

It is said, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, that the world and all that is in it was created by Mwari, ‘He who is’. In the beginning, he stayed near his people, guiding them and providing them with all they needed until they began to take his goodwill for granted and started to kill the animals and each other. They angered Mwari so much that he retreated back to the sky where the people could have no direct contact with him. While once they had dwelt with him in these lands, they now relied on those in the wind—clan spirits and ancestral spirits—to take care of them and, if they were lucky, to pass on their requests to Mwari. And so for a time, they lived in shame, always pining for the god they had driven away.

But then ‘those without knees’ arrived, clutching Bibles in one hand and guns in the other. They spoke of a loving God, one who promised to never leave them. Could this be Mwari returned in another form? Had he turned to these strange pale men after they had driven him away? Reluctantly, they accepted this new God and called him Mwari too. Generation after generation accepted him as their Father and they declared themselves as Christians. Yet in their hearts, there was always an emptiness they could not explain, and often they looked to the skies, whispering to those in the wind, hoping that they would one day convince Mwari to come back again.

Since then the two religions, Christianity and Chivanhu, have co-existed in an uneasy peace. Most of the time, Christianity seems to dominate. Business meetings begin with a prayer, schoolchildren say the Lord’s Prayer every morning and the numerous churches are filled to the brim every Sunday. But in times of crisis, it’s Chivanhu that people turn back to; tradition is what they fall back on.

No one in my immediate family is particularly religious. We hardly talk about our personal religions. My father would probably be atheist if that was the kind of thing that you could admit in Zimbabwe, a place where the question is usually “Which church do you belong to?” rather than “Do you believe in God?” My mother has started going to church in the last two years, but I think it’s for social reasons rather than a calling to faith. She lives alone in South Africa and the church provides her with a ready-made community. My brother seems to be Catholic, though you would only know it when he complains about giving up meat during Lent. My sister is very spiritual. She’s been to every church in her neighbourhood, but doesn’t attend any consistently. For her, going to church is about feeling connected to some greater being, but she feels no need to be in touch with him all the time. I’m Catholic, but only because I haven’t gotten round to finding a church that better aligns with my beliefs. I believe in God and I believe that Jesus is my saviour, but I draw the line at saints. I go back and forth on the idea of whether the deceased can intercede on my behalf.

I have only been to Mass once since I got to America. I went to 8 am Mass at a local Cathedral. It felt strange as it was my first time going to church alone. The priest’s voice echoed over all the empty seats. The songs were in Latin, which meant that I could not sing along, and of course, there were no Shona drums thumping away, calling me to praise. In the past, those wooden drums were beaten around a fire in a darkened, smoky kitchen, or out in the woods under cover of night as the spirit medium called to those in the winds, looking for answers. Now, they were beaten softly to a steady, controlled rhythm telling tales of how Jesus would save us all. It always sounded like the beat was forcibly restrained for fear that it might take a life of its own and once again beat the ecstatic beat that stirred our ancestors into a frenzy as they called to the spirits.

It's in small ways like having the African drums in church that Chivanhu encroaches on Christianity on most days. It lives on the edges, quietly reminding churchgoers that it's still around, but never being allowed to step any further by strict church rules. On ordinary days, Christianity keeps Chivanhu at bay. But when it is time for ceremonies: weddings, birthdays, or funerals, we turn back to Chivanhu, reaching back to something familiar, but also afraid of repercussions that might follow if proper rituals are not performed.

This return to tradition for ceremonies is how I ended up sitting in the back of the car sulking as my parents and I drove to Chivi, our ancestral home, for a ceremony for my dead Uncle Kutaura whose spirit was being welcomed back into the homestead. I never enjoyed our trips to Chivi. It was a hot area, so dry that in the summer the women had to dig deep into the riverbed to reach the water table below. There was no electricity, no running water and nothing interesting for a city girl like myself to do. I was never excited about these trips, but at fourteen, I was at the height of my averseness to the place. No one else my age would be there, but my mother had insisted that I attend the ceremony that I didn't really understand.

Chivanhu has a pyramid hierarchy. At the top is Mwari, creator of all. He concerns himself with big things like ensuring rain and the change of seasons. Then there are the ten clan spirits who act as guardians of the Shona people, calling them to war when need be and guiding them along a righteous path. The clan spirits protect the nation as a whole. However, for personal everyday things like protection when you travel and your good health, you turn to those in the wind, the spirits of your ancestors who now reside at your ancestral home, but who watch over you wherever you go.

Uncle Kutaura had died a year before, and for a year, his spirit had wandered lost in the wilderness that follows death. Now the time had come to perform the ceremony *kurova guva*, which literally means 'striking the grave'. After two days of singing and rituals, his spirit would be welcomed back into the homestead and allowed to join the spirits of all the Muchemwas before him.

As I've said before, no one in my family is particularly religious. I picked up all of my religious ideas either from religious studies at school or from conversations I had with the maid as the two of us walked from Mass every Sunday. My parents had always encouraged a healthy level of scepticism towards anyone who said I should do something just because the Bible said so. Sitting in the car on our way to *kurova guva*, I couldn't understand why we were going if we didn't believe in it.

"Dad, I thought Uncle Kutaura was Methodist," I said.

"He was."

"Wasn't he a lay preacher or something? He was really involved, right?"

"He was the head of the Men's League and yes, he sometimes preached in Church."

"So he believed that Jesus was his Saviour and that if he followed Christ he would get to Heaven?"

"Yes. My brother could be said to be a religious man."

"So why are we going to Chivi to perform a ceremony that will make him an ancestral spirit?"

For the first and only time in my life, my father did not have a ready answer. He gripped the steering wheel a little

tighter and exchanged a look with my mother that seemed to say, “Help.”

“We are Shona,” my mother said in a manner that invited no reply, “and that’s what we’ve always done.”

That’s what we’ve always done. How many years of tradition are gathered up into that short statement? I always feel the weight of that “we” on our drive to Chivi. The drive from Harare to Chivi is almost completely on tarred highway, a sign of modernity that cuts through the parts of Zimbabwe that progress hasn’t quite reached yet: people still living in mud huts and cooking over fires. Our route takes us through three provinces and when we see the sign that says ‘Welcome to Masvingo’, our home province, it always feels like a homecoming, as if my heart knows this is home, even if my head asks how this can be. The grass changes from the tall, lush Highveld grass that bends in the wind to small tufts of yellow straw. The cows are scrawny with lazy flies buzzing around them and the cars are replaced by donkey-drawn carts. The sky is almost always blue, with no signs of respite from the oppressive sun. This is the land in which my ancestors have lived from as early as the sixteenth century, yet this is the land I least wanted to visit as a teenager.

The sun was going down as we turned off the highway and onto the dust road that led to our village. I gritted my teeth as the car ground its way over the cattle grid and sank a little into the soft sand. We followed the road as it bended to the left. The towering hills were now behind us, blocking the only way of escape. The car clambered over the uneven road, coughing as it struggled over the bumps. Our progress was slow and I scowled the entire time, even as people we passed along the way waved enthusiastically at the rare sight of a car. We drove past the deserted mission school and came upon a rare occurrence of green in the arid land. It was a large homestead surrounded by thick hedges of bougainvillea, entwined with the fence to keep the cattle out. This was the Danha homestead, the home of the village chief and the home of my grandmother’s brother and his five wives. Usually, it was the centre of life in the village, but today everyone would be at the Muchemwa homestead. So we waved at the few people we saw and continued down the road towards home.

The Danha homestead is at the top of a small hill, the Muchemwa homestead at the bottom. As you drive down, the homestead is completely obscured by tall eucalyptus trees with thick gum leaves. As we drove down, I was hoping that just this once we would get to the other side of the trees and find that our homestead had mysteriously disappeared, but as we drove past the barbed wire fence and through the open gate, I found to my dismay that it was all still there: the large round hut with smoke rising out of the thatched roof, the large four-bedroom house, my grandmother’s small two-bedroom house and the hut that served as the bathroom. They were all there, forming a circle completed by four graves. Beyond the graves were the Takaendesa hills that the sun had just dipped behind, leaving behind a darkening sky of purples and oranges. I looked at the hills, wondering not for the first time what lay behind them.

I was the last one out of the car. The warm sand felt good against my bare feet. I helped my mother unload the car and began the tedious task of greeting all the relatives who were there. I found my five aunts sitting by one of the fires that had been lit outside and sat with them, knowing that this was the only way to avoid being asked to help make dinner. Only after formally greeting each one of them by their appropriate title did I finally look at the four graves behind us.

The four who lie there are my great-grandmother, my grandparents and Mbuya Emma, the aunt who lived with my grandmother for thirty years, though I cannot say exactly how I was related to her. She was a tiny woman, always dressed in white and it was she who had explained to me when I was six years old why we buried people in the yard

instead of at a cemetery.

On that trip, she had noticed that when we sat outside, I would always sit in such a way as to keep the graves out of sight. A few weeks earlier, my older brother had let me watch a movie with zombies in it, and I was now suspicious of all graves. Mbuya Emma wasn't going to let me be terrified of my own grandfather's grave.

"Chido, why don't you ever go and say hello to your Granddad over there?" she said. I looked at her like she might be a crazy.

"But he's dead."

"That doesn't mean he's gone."

"It doesn't?"

"It doesn't. Gravesites are places to be respected and you should avoid the graves of strangers. But never be afraid of the graves of family. Your granddad is still here and he is always with you, watching over you."

Looking back, I'm surprised that I wasn't completely freaked out by the prospect of my long-dead grandfather always hanging around me like a ghost, but I actually found it comforting. From that day, I started to play on my granddad's grave. It was a large slab about the same size and shape as a twin bed. I would pretend it was a bus, and sometimes it was a classroom, and all the while I imagined that my grandfather was there playing with me.

But that was eight years before. Now, the place was deserted. The fields that lay beyond the graves had once been green with rows and rows of corn, but now they lay fallow. No one had lived in the Muchemwa homestead since my grandmother had died two years earlier. We had to bring everything with us from Harare, from normal supplies like food and toiletries, to very basic things like brooms, salt shakers, and a board to cut the bread. Mbuya Emma had said we buried people in the yard so that we wouldn't forget them like we would if they were in a cemetery, yet now Chivi was a cemetery, a place the living avoided unless they absolutely had to be there.

It took a while to get dinner ready and serve everyone. There were at least sixty people there, with more expected the next morning. Ordinarily, it would have been difficult to find a place for everyone to sleep, but at a *kurova guva* ceremony you're not supposed to sleep. Everyone is supposed to dance and sing all night, loud enough for the spirit to find its way home. So after dinner, most of the adults headed down the road to my Uncle Kutaura's homestead, half a mile away. My aunts stayed behind saying that they didn't believe in the ceremonies, which I thought was a little ridiculous seeing as they had already made the four-hour drive to Chivi. My mother said I didn't have to go, as I was not needed until the next afternoon. This was the first time I had been notified that I actually had a role at this ceremony other than sulking on the edges and feeling awkward.

As I lay in my grandmother's old bed, I struggled to fall asleep. I could hear my five aunts quietly chatting in the next room. I kept thinking of the days when my grandmother was still alive. All four of us would be piled into the tiny bedroom: Grandma, Mbuya Emma, my sister and I. Before we went to sleep, Grandma and Mbuya would sing a church song before praying. For some reason, they always sang funeral songs. It was always songs with titles like 'We Have No Home on Earth', 'Jerusalem My Home, When Will I See You?' and 'We Are on Our Way to Heaven'. It was fine for them. They were two old ladies in their seventies. Contemplating their mortality right before bed was no big deal for them, but I was only six years old and the realisation that I would one day die kept me up for most of the

night.

Even at fourteen, I struggled to sleep as I realised that the three people I had once shared this room with were all gone. My grandmother and Mbuya Emma were dead and my sister had left for college in America the year before. My father often liked to remind me that Harare was just the place we made a living, and Chivi was really home, but I did not associate it with a sense of belonging. It had become a place I associated with death. This was a place that we now only returned to when we had to bury someone or have a *kurova guva*. This was the place where my grandparents were buried. And now my parents' generation had begun to die. Uncle Kutaura's *kurova guva* reminded me that the day was coming when my parents would also lie in this Chivi soil. And maybe one day, I would be buried here too. I wondered if anyone would hold a *kurova guva* for me. And all the while that I was contemplating death, the drums beat away, filling the night with a steady rhythm that my heart seemed to be trying to keep up with. They seemed to be saying "Tinokugashirai. Tinokugashirai". *We welcome you. We welcome you.* My uncle was on his way home.

When I got up the next morning, I could tell something was different. The day before, no one had taken much notice of me. I was pretty much the only person there under the age of eighteen, except for small children, and I didn't seem to fit in anywhere so everyone just ignored me. But in the morning, people fell silent when I approached them, like they had just been talking about me. I overheard one of my father's sisters saying, "We'll wait until right before the ceremony before we tell her. We don't want to scare her." I was terrified after that. Children do not usually attend these ceremonies and no one ever talks about what actually goes on, so I was left to come up with my own ideas of what was about to happen and my imagination went into overdrive. I imagined being offered as a blood sacrifice. I had seen the large sharp knife that had slit the goat's throat the evening before. One slice is all it would take to slit my throat. Or maybe it was something slightly less sinister. Maybe all they needed was to spill a little blood. Just a cut on my hand to shed some blood, but no serious damage done.

I stalled as much as I could, approaching my cleaning duties with a gusto that I had never had before. Eventually, at midday, I could stall no more. I slowly walked down the dust road to my uncle's homestead. It was a similar set-up to the Muchemwa homestead, the only difference being that his grave was not in the middle of the yard, but in the field under a mango tree. I knew that earlier that morning, his widow and his two eldest sons had gone to the grave with a pot of home-brewed beer and a plate of stiff porridge. A spirit medium had called to my uncle, letting him know that the food was for him.

Once again, I could find nowhere where that I fit. There were pockets of people all over the yard, but not a single group I belonged to. The old women were sitting on grass mats under the guava tree, probably gossiping about unmarried Aunt Kudzi who was looking thick around the waist. My father and his two brothers were sitting on small wooden stools in front of the kitchen with Uncle Kutaura's five sons, clapping their hands rhythmically as the spirit medium implored my uncle to return. I knew Uncle Kutaura's widow was sitting in the kitchen beside an empty hearth, the dead fire representing the emptiness that had been in the home since my uncle's death. I could not sit with my mother because in Chivi, she was *mutorwa*, one taken from somewhere else. She had different ancestral spirits so at a ceremony like this she stayed on the edges with the other in-laws. Eventually, I located my five aunts sitting on a grass mat by the granary. I couldn't help but think of how just a year before they had been sitting here at their brother's funeral and they had all been wearing their blood-red Methodist uniforms. Now they wore regular clothes, albeit more modest than what they usually wore in the city. None of them seemed particularly interested in the proceedings. They discussed their children's progress in school, the hot weather, the deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe and even the soccer score—anything but the ceremony they were witnessing. So we sat for an hour pretending that what

was happening did not fly in the face of our religious beliefs.

But then my eldest aunt said, “It’s time.” She stood up and held out her hand to me. She led me to where my father was sitting and the two of us knelt before him. She started to clap slowly with cupped hands. I followed her cue and began to clap too.

“We come to you *Wamambo* [his clan name].”

Clap. Clap.

“To ask of you your youngest child.”

Alarm bells began to ring in my head. They really did want my blood.

“Your brother had no daughter.”

I was now so afraid that I was clapping out of rhythm.

“But there must be a girl on the mat for his spirit to return.”

Wait. What? They just wanted me on the mat?

My father consented. My aunt took my hand again and guided me inside the house where my uncle’s two eldest sons, Tozi and Vavi, were already waiting. There my aunt explained that we had come to the last part of the ceremony where Uncle Kutaura would finally re-enter the homestead. The three of us would sit in the middle of the yard with our heads covered while people sang and danced. Once we were uncovered, that would signal the return of my uncle’s spirit. Two people needed to be on the mat: his eldest son and heir, and his daughter. As my uncle had no daughters, I had to stand in, or rather, sit in. That was it. All I had to do was sit. I was relieved, but also slightly angry with my aunts. Why all the secrecy? Here I had been preparing myself for my imminent death when all I had to do was sit on a mat and look sombre.

So much of Chivanhu feels like this, people whispering around you, never fully telling you what is going on. I used to think that it was because I was a child and they felt I only needed enough information to let me do as I was told. However, the older I get the more I think that as a people we no longer know why we do the things we do. We’re just going through the motions because we’re afraid to find out what might happen if we don’t. What if these ancestral spirits turn out to be real? If we did not perform the *kurova guva* then my uncle’s spirit could be wandering in the wilderness for all eternity. No matter how much we say we’re Christians, we find it hard to discard Chivanhu. It always calls us back. Even in Mass, it calls to us. The drums beat their ancient rhythm, tugging at something long forgotten in our souls. Once again, we feel that familiar sense of longing but we cannot really say for what.

I am sitting cross-legged on a grass mat under a prickly brown blanket. It is a typical sweltering Chivi afternoon and my cousin Tozi’s ripe body odour is oppressive under this blanket. The smell is only made worse by the goat’s bladder he is wearing on his neck, the mark that he is the eldest son. He sits between Vavi and me. Vavi stares intently at the ground. Even before we emerged from the house out here, his eyes were red. This cannot be easy for him. His presence on this mat reminds him of two painful realities. He is here because his father is dead. But he is also here because Tozi, despite being the eldest, cannot be the heir. He is not mentally fit. He suffered a terrible epileptic fit when he was eight that left him with a six-year-old’s mind. He is a gentle soul, but there is an intensity to him that sometimes

frightens me. He is fiercely loyal, and I know that if he felt that someone was threatening me, he would kill them without hesitation. It's slightly frightening to be loved that much.

All around us, we can hear people singing and dancing. The spirit medium calls out "Tinokugashirai Kutaura". *We welcome you Kutaura*. Under the blanket, we start to become restless. I am unsure of what exactly I am supposed to do when the blanket is lifted, but before I can come up with something, it is pulled away and we are exposed to the harsh sunlight. I slowly blink as my eyes adjust to the sunlight. Everyone is gathered around us, throwing money in a plate at Vavi's feet. I thought I would be nervous, but I actually like being the centre of attention for once. Before I can really soak it in my aunt pulls me away from the mat and we join the crowd. My part is done. Now is the time for Vavi, the appointed heir. He is still staring at the ground as people dance around him. Then he looks up and stares right at me. He seems different somehow. It would be more interesting to say I see my uncle in his face and realise that Kutaura has returned, but what I see is responsibility. As heir, Vavi is now responsible for his mother's care and his father's property as well as ensuring his father's name lives on. Vavi looks at me and I realise why we cling to this particular tradition.

Five years later, almost to the day, Vavi would look at me again with that same look and remind me of that day we sat on the mat together. It would be my farewell party before I headed to America for college.

"My dear sister," he said, "Don't forget us when you get to America."

Of the sixteen Muchemwas in my generation, eleven of us no longer live in Zimbabwe. The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy has left us scattered around the world, in South Africa, Australia, America, any place where we can make a living. When they were young, our parents left Chivi for the big city in search of better prospects. Now we venture even further, driven from our land by hyperinflation, unemployment and the dying hope of a comfortable future in Zimbabwe.

Free from familial pressures, we have turned away from traditional churches like the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church. Some of us find ourselves gravitating towards Pentecostal churches with their wild dancing, speaking in tongues and theatrics that seem reminiscent of Chivanhu. Then there are those of us who have turned away from religion altogether, writing off Chivanhu as silly backward superstition that ignorant people cling to. Whatever we believe, we don't go home for funerals or *kurova guva* ceremonies. So Vavi, as the eldest amongst us, has to stand-in for all of us at these things. He now sits on the mat alone. Whether he believes in the ritual or not, he is there because we're not.

I don't know whether my uncle's spirit truly returned that day. What I do know is that under that blanket Vavi and I ceased to be just cousins and became brother and sister. I feel a sense of responsibility towards him and I feel guilty every time he sits alone on that mat. Yet there isn't a part of me that wishes that I was sitting there too. The ceremony seems to lose meaning with every passing year, especially now that I am so far away. I feel detached and I know that there is nothing left for me in Chivi.

That *kurova guva* ceremony was the last time I ever went to Chivi, and I wonder if I ever will return. There is nothing left there except the dead. Those graves make it impossible to sell the land. They keep us attached to our ancestral home even though we have moved on. When another uncle died in 2010, we buried him in Harare. It felt like that was the official closing of Chivi.

We tell ourselves that times have changed and that our traditions should reflect that, but I think we all feel a little uneasy about burying people in Harare in a public cemetery with thousands of people they don't know. I imagine all those deceased in that cemetery gathering around in conversation after their *kurova guva* ceremonies. What do they talk about? Do they wonder why we have buried them so far away from their ancestors? Do they feel angry that we are slowly turning away from tradition? Or do they accept that this is just what we do now?

Chido Muchemwa is a student in the MFA program at the University of Wyoming, concentrating on non-fiction. She grew up in Zimbabwe and has been living in America for the last six years. Follow her work at <https://curiouschido.wordpress.com/>.

Afternoon Interlude, In Cubicle

by *Mary Petralia*

May Day mayday osprey
Honestly I want to shoot the thing
It will not stop, its causal claws
Outside my window
Screech
Scratching
A mafia in the magnolias
A siren like wires in the sky
Fish in mouth
Blood, *enfin*

Mary Petralia is currently enrolled in the MFA Program at the University of Central Florida, where she was twice-nominated for the AWP Intro Journals Project. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Anamesa: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Hitherto: The MUIC Literary Journal, Ishaan Literary Review, Kentucky Review, 99 Pine Street, and other publications. When she was two years old, her family decided to move from New York to either Melbourne, Australia or Melbourne, Florida. They chose Florida, where she continues to live on the east coast with her family while dreaming of her long lost Australian analogue.

The Dead Sea

by Kim Farleigh

David climbed a road beneath a ridge that faced the sea, the fur-like air like a hot lining on his skin. The sea was pale azure on its Jordanian side. Bodies floating in the sea's liquid taffeta made the water appear harmlessly inviting—to the inexperienced eye. Purple mountains, haze beautifying barrenness, rose behind the sea, like a violet, velvet backdrop, framing a precious stone of perfect smoothness. The road wound up the ridge to where olive trees were shading white, one-storey buildings.

David entered a pension, his shirt soaked from sweat. The manager's T-shirt had a bone-white crispness that heightened his tanned, holiday skin.

"There you are," the manager said, handing over the keys. "Salvation exists up the path to the right."

The guests shared double rooms and communal bathrooms. Trees, with gnarled, twisting branches, faced the rooms.

Belongings were already on a bed in David's room. He put on his bathers and returned to where a bus had left him in a car park above the water. The blonde, rosy-cheeked soldiers he saw on picnic benches had blue and green eyes. A brown-eyed Muslim woman was washing her son under a high tap. Her skin, David thought, belongs here. Unlike those introduced complexions there on the other side of this descending path that falls into the world's lowest point, where azure fuses into distant pale-blue translucence, confusing the distinction between water and air—liquid and oxygen having blended into a satin that hides the salinity within.

Bodies, like islands in blue ether, were floating as if in a dream. Slow ripples, slithering away from the languid, floating figures, ringed the bathers in coils of thoughtless consciousness.

People were standing under fresh-water showers between the car park and the sea. The falling water's tumbling created the constant swishing of cascades. Forty kilometres away, water use was severely restricted.

David entered the sea. Stinging eruptions ignited on his upper arms. He had mosquito bites from living in Nablus. This water, he thought, is a chemical weapon! Women could use it for rape defence! It could be used in warfare! Slippery rocks impeded his desire to leave the water quickly, his arms burning like embers.

He queued to use one of the showers on the water's edge; poison seemed to have been poured into his mosquito bites, such was the burning occurring on his upper arms and on the heat rashes that had reddened the insides of his thighs. He clenched his teeth as he stood feigning patience, but the people under the showers refused to move; thick downpours fell from big, circular shower heads onto women who kept on looking up into the water and grabbing their long, black hair and stroking it and placing it over their brown shoulders before looking up again into those lukewarm torrents that were plummeting from above, the women repeating and repeating their relaxing preening. *Come on, for Christ's sake ...*

His pain was irrelevant to the bathers. He dashed up to where there were other showers and fewer people. That sea, he thought, suits the thick-skinned. A tap sat on a pipe, the pipe reaching upwards to a shower head; fresh water poured out; he put his arms under the waterfall, relief immediate; the pain, now subdued, became a light, burning

sensation, irrelevant in comparison to his alleviation, water a luxury that he now wasn't taking for granted.

The lukewarm downpour made him recall the depictions of flowing shower and tap water he had seen painted by children on refugee-camp walls in the Occupied Territories. He felt guilty. We take these luxuries as given. But we take a lot of things for granted—not just amenities or pretences to political and social freedom. No. Our assumptions about other people's limits. Our quaint imaginations—born from normal-level egos—restrict our visions of reality. What would happen if everyone realised what he knew?

The Dead Sea, lifeless, and beautiful, was painful to touch with wounded hands. To benefit from the Dead Sea, a light-skinned person must smother themselves with cream and mud; then hope there are no unforeseen breaks in their skin. Either the sun or the salt, or both, can get you, and if the skin is broken the pain resembles an acid attack. But some people can avoid this: they float, trance-like, thick-skinned, surrounded by limestone white, thinking unnecessary—so they think.

Describing water as a sapphire brooch is a cliché, but it's appropriate here, he thought, for it infers the desire to possess without moral constraint; and that desire produces so many stories—like the guy who walked upon water. There must have been icebergs of salt that day ... The evaporation required to produce that much salt must have been supernatural. And supernatural evaporation is alive and well, producing acidic white in blue. Power decides what evaporates and what remains.

The departing sun's orange film covered the sea. Purple tainted the sky above the mountains. The atmosphere felt compacted with silk, as if a warm fabric had descended from the taffeta sky; the ridge, iridescent orange, like neon, beneath celestial porcelain.

§

A guy with longish hair was in the room, reading a book. A blue skull cap sat on the bed beside him. He had an aura of laid-back reasonableness that caused David to say: "The Dead Sea is deadly, especially if you've got mosquito bites."

David didn't know if Joshua's aura of gentleness came from open-mindedness or delusion.

"I thought," David added, "that these mosquito bites might twinge, but I wasn't expecting an acid attack."

Joshua's irises shone like the celestial blue that David had seen above the mountains.

"You need specific characteristics," Joshua said, "to take advantage of those conditions."

"I'm too Celtic," David said, "to benefit from those conditions. If the salt didn't get me, the sun would."

"I enjoy the floating," Joshua said, "but the heat gets me."

"I don't mind heat," David replied, "but my skin can't tolerate UV. Floating is out for me. I have to face the facts."

He hung up his towel.

"How long have you been in Israel?" Joshua asked.

"I've just spent ten weeks," David replied, "in The Occupied Territories, working for an NGO."

Joshua sat up.

"It's amazing that a place so small," he said, "gets so much attention. What other place this small gets this attention?"

"Israel," David replied, "is a piece in a jigsaw puzzle called the Middle East whose resources maintain our standard of living. It's also where our superstitions come from. Where there's obsession there's investment and media. The media protects investment."

Joshua looked quizzical.

"A free press doesn't exist?" he asked.

He distrusted the language he'd just heard.

"Can't you inform yourself of many different points of view?" he persisted.

"You can," David replied, "but this requires morbid levels of empirical curiosity. People want their self-esteem maintained through confirmation of prejudices. They float in dreams. Have you been along that road that runs north-south through The Occupied Territories?"

"No. Why?"

"Along that road for miles and miles," David said, "are plantations where cheap labour, bereft of rights, is used to produce vast profits on stolen land. The old villages on that land got destroyed. Those villages' surviving inhabitants ended up in refugee camps that get attacked every night. These attacks don't get reported in the *free* press. If you think I'm exaggerating, go there."

"The Palestinians are worse off," Joshua said, "because they're the weaker of the two."

"I haven't met a Palestinian yet," David said, "who thinks that Jews should leave the Middle East. They lived together happily in a civilised society based on hospitality before the Zionist Movement raised its racist head."

Joshua's crystalline eyes were now less vibrant. His now deceased British father had been a Zionist. The gentleness that had oozed from his harmless-looking demeanour evaporated, leaving a subdued distance.

"Don't look so sad," David said. "I presume you aren't responsible for ethnic cleansing?"

"You've spent too long with Palestinians," Joshua concluded.

Easy, convenient conclusions eclipse the need for research.

"Have you spent too long with Israelis?" David asked.

Joshua picked up his book and continued reading.

"Burying your head in the sand," David said, "isn't going to hide reality."

“I thought that you might have been open-minded,” Joshua said.

“What’s open-minded mean?” David asked.

Joshua continued reading.

“Well,” David said, “I’m waiting . . .”

“I don’t want to talk about it. You’re not open-minded.”

David’s cackle had a tone of cynicism that sounded as pure as snow.

“Open-mindedness implies doing research to discover the facts,” he said.

The book fascinated Joshua.

“That book you’re reading,” David said, “I’ve read twice. It points out that Jews have a history of murdering, repressing and persecuting Jews. And it’s still happening now.”

Joshua started preparing for the shower. He needed fresh water, “to escape from this disturbed prattling.”

David was happy. He loved seeing how his knowledge, born from experience, could be so disturbing for those languishing in dreams.

“It’s impossible,” he continued, “to get into a settlement without being noticed. I know—I’ve been there. Amazing how Palestinians get into places so heavily defended. Absolutely amazing. They must be invisible.”

“You’ve been speaking to too many Palestinians,” Joshua said, as he left the room.

David stood at the window and asked, as Joshua was going to the bathroom, “Have you been speaking to too many Zionists? Let them know that non-religious immigrants often have to live in settlements first before moving to the other side of the Green Line. That’d create some interesting situations, wouldn’t it?”

David’s facial lines resembled blissful shockwaves. Seeing innocent people get shot had made him give up diplomacy.

He left a note on Joshua’s bed: “No Palestinian has ever told me what I just said. My conclusions have arisen through observation and research, the pillars of open-mindedness. If you decide to use them your conclusions might end up matching reality; but that would be a huge step forward, wouldn’t it?”

§

Soothing atmosphere, like an embalming veil, sat within darkness so thick that only trees could be seen beside a path lit up by gilded effulgence. Dry, hard leaves, all-season resistant, covered the twisted, bony limbs of the trees’ eerie branches, like unyielding thoughts upon gnarled convolutions.

Two trestles sat in the dining hall, the food on another table between the two trestles, the first trestle occupied by religious Israelis, the second by foreigners and non-religious locals, ideologies separated.

Women occupied one half of the religious trestle, skull-capped men the other, all twenty years old. The two halves, fascinated with each other, communicated through song and speech, like a man with twenty heads communicating to a woman with forty breasts—and twenty heads—self-absorption producing an eccentric island of convenient beliefs. The island had been conceived to ensure a continual production of the same humanoid units.

Both sexes mixed together around the other trestle.

David sat beside a woman who was with two female friends. The woman had long, thick, black hair and blue eyes. She smiled and said, “Hello, I’m Ruth.”

“Hi,” David replied.

A chorus erupted on the religious table causing David to say “Wild, hey?”

The woman’s teeth were large and perfect.

“It’s amazing for us,” she said. “Most people their age in Israel aren’t religious.”

“They’re probably on holidays from a settlement,” David replied, “on a let’s-find-out-who-we’re-going-to-be-having-sex-with-for-the-rest-of-our-lives trip.”

Ruth’s blue eyes shivered with delight.

“It must be amazing,” she said, “to know the future.”

David appreciated the irony in her lovely voice.

“Unfortunately,” he replied, “that future never arrives. It’s so elusive.”

“It reminds me of a dream I once had,” Ruth said.

“There are so many dreams here,” David said, “that distinguishing reality from imagination is a major achievement.”

“Are you Jewish?” Ruth asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen my mother since I was five. My parents divorced when I was young. Where I come from, religion isn’t mixed up with politics so these questions are irrelevant.”

“That’s a great answer,” Ruth said.

“My guidebook,” David replied, “says that if beautiful Israeli women ask you that question then that answer is mandatory. I’m going to compliment the author on his insight.”

Oval red surrounded the bone-whiteness of Ruth’s teeth. Her ebony hair highlighted her skin’s translucence.

Her friends were brimming with curiosity.

“Where are you from?” one asked.

“The Promised Land,” David joked.

“Where’s that?” Ruth’s friend asked, furrowing her brow with ironic perplexity.

“Who knows?” David replied. “Do you know?”

“We can only guess,” the friend said.

“Some guesses,” David said, “expand with time.”

“The expanding guess,” the friend said, “inspires active imaginations.”

“The magnitude of the landscape here,” David replied, “certainly does that. It makes people believe anything.”

“And what do you believe?” Ruth asked.

“I believe,” David replied, “that it’s a conflict between those who want to live in peace with all cultures versus those who don’t. Those who don’t would have you believe anything.”

“What would we do with them?” Ruth asked, pointing at the religious table.

“I’d put them in glass cages,” David replied. “They’d be happy because nothing from the outside would be able to invade their dream and tourists would be able to stand outside the cages with a huge camera lenses, saying things like ‘Hey, Honey, there goes one now.’”

Eyes glittered like electrified beads. Ruth put a hand over her mouth to restrict her cackling.

“They could organise JC returns,” David added. “Bearded Danes could be lowered down from helicopters into the glass cages. The glass-cage occupiers would believe it was JC and tourists could say, ‘See, I told you, JC comes from Oslo.’ It’d create loads of employment for unemployed Scandinavians. The European Union would love it. Look at how many Father Christmases get jobs at Christmas.”

David opened his hands out, his face solemn, to indicate sublime descent. The three giggling women were disillusioned with their lives being affected by neurotic beliefs.

“Tourists,” David said, “could say, ‘I saw a JC John Lennon playing Father Christmas. He’ll be performing at our office’s next Christmas party.’”

§

The next morning, David entered the dining room for breakfast and saw Ruth sitting at the end of a trestle. Joshua and a German woman were sitting at the other trestle. The windows yielded a light that gave the table-tops a warm sheen.

David and Ruth exchanged smiles. Her skin’s pale translucence exaggerated her hair’s blackness, the redness of her lips enhancing her eyes’ blueness.

David carried a coffee to the table. “Hi. Sleep well?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Very well.”

The coffee’s bitter creaminess was refreshing.

“I really had fun last night,” Ruth said.

“You would have had even more,” David replied, “had a bearded Dane descended through the ceiling, hurling daisies.”

Ruth’s laughter caught the German’s attention.

“The religious table,” David continued, “would have stood up, shaking their raised hands, saying, ‘At last! We knew it! We just knew it! See, we told you!’”

He shook his raised hands.

Ruth placed a hand over her mouth to repress her laughter.

“Imagine,” David continued, “if JC had made himself a Martini at the drinks table and said, ‘Twice stirred, once shaken, three times crucified.’”

Carefree chortles leapt out of Ruth’s mouth.

“That’s the anti-Semite?” the German asked.

“Yes,” Joshua replied.

“That woman’s Jewish,” the German woman said.

“Yes,” Joshua replied.

§

Back in the room, David packed up quickly. He wanted to catch the first bus to Jerusalem. He smiled as he thought about a Jewish hotel receptionist in Tel Aviv who had joked to him, “Be careful. There are Jews out there.”

“Kneeeohh!” David had said.

“Yes,” the receptionist had replied. “We’ve been getting reports.”

“Why wasn’t I warned before?” David had asked.

“They’re trying to deceive the unsuspecting,” the receptionist had said. “Be careful.”

“It has worked,” David had replied. “I’ve been deceived.”

He was delighted six months later when he discovered that that receptionist was Ruth’s brother.

He headed down the path to the reception area to hand over his keys, the sea cobalt under bare mountains. The profound depth of that sea’s acidic salinity could only be determined by direct contact.

He mumbled “Bye,” as Joshua passed him on the path, going in the opposite direction.

At the bus stop he wrote: If something doesn't yield relief or happiness, but brings misery, this is not a reason to reduce its scale in our perception of that which is true. When people marry they don't understand that they're doing something that brings despair and happiness in equal measure. They do it because they only see one side. The other side isn't real for them. And if it isn't real for them, then it isn't real. The necessity to only see truth in selected portions maintains ideal perceptions of the future. The forward step is impossible if we're too realistic. We would drown in flooding probabilities. We ignore reality because our sense of destiny, based on what we feel will bring happiness, demands this.

Joshua came down the hill, carrying bags.

This, David thought, promises to be wonderful.

He sat on the curb, away from the bus stop. A big truck flashed by. The wind from the truck struck his face. Then silence descended—the complete extraction of sound.

Some people, David thought, believe in their open-mindedness like a religion, their way of establishing their delusion of objectivity. Faith: mock other people's perceptions, logic and experience to protect a dream.

Joshua was silent as he sat down at the bus stop, facing away from the road. The bus stop's parallel seats faced away from each other, separated by a transparent screen.

David remained on the curb. Another burst of air struck his face as another truck flashed by. Vast tranquillity then returned.

Joshua started reading a book. David observed the facing ridge. The sun had yet to make it over that barrier. A shadow fell from the ridge top, down the slope, across the road, and over the car park to the sea's edge, darkness drawn up towards the ridge.

Some people, David thought, cast shadows over events. They understand the unlimited ego. To reach that level of perception also requires an intangible inspiration—a faith in accuracy's beauty. Accuracy saves you. What you don't know can kill you. And Mister Accuracy tells you that people will do anything—people who even look like you.

The bus arrived. Joshua, boarding first, sat at the back. David sat near the front. The ridge, like an overseer, reminded David of a barrier—limiting vision, like a force reducing knowledge.

Ageing, David thought, means being subjected to increasing numbers of people who adore unfounded perceptions.

§

That night a Jewish religious fanatic sprayed machine-gun fire at the clientele in a gay bar in Tel Aviv. Difficult to fabricate a story from that, David thought. He imagined the deceased bodies twisted into strange positions by dead-weight, gravity-plunged falls, the smashed bottles, the furniture knocked over, the shaking, lip-biting, whining, grieving, tear-ridden survivors howling with disbelief, their open-mouthed, dead friends, boyfriends and lovers, wide-eyed departed, covering the red floor. He imagined a coruscating certainty glinting in the killer's eyes. He imagined the

justification, like a dust storm, in the killer's crazy head. He imagined the bitter superiority that had gone into the pulling of that trigger. He imagined the killer's vicious superiority being equal to the superiority that had been employed in the killing of other innocent people at other times. And he imagined Joshua thinking that this was unrepeatable, Jews don't murder Jews. Like fuck they don't.

Joshua's class of ignorance, David thought, will cause a disaster.

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Earth, Air, Water, Fire

by *Rebecca Dempsey*

Now: Air

I was kidding myself when we moved into 120B Albert Street. The electric city skyline loomed over us, while the row of old red brickwork of the terraces felt venerable. It was easy to love our house on sight; it was reassuring, a bit like I felt about work. There was comfort in the neat assemblage of homes and tidy arrangement of artefacts. It was all a veneer, of course. Around me, four million people didn't know the entire city floated on a basalt lake between two fault lines in the crust, a little boat on an ocean tethered between two rickety, peninsula jetties.

From the window in the kitchen, beyond the backyard scattered with Lucy's fading plastic spade and bucket, and sandpit, above the fluttering sheets on the clothes line, I could just glimpse, if I stood on the wooden breakfast table chair, the faint blue of the bay through the fog. Sometimes, I imagined its salt bite as humid breezes wafted up the street, but mostly the air was tainted by traffic exhaust and heavy with concrete dust. Certain mornings, when the wind twisted, there was a thick scent of dry dog food from the silos near the docks. On these days Lucy was fractious, throwing her bucket and throwing her fists into the ground and using all her weight to pull up straggling couch grass runners. Such times saw the city turn inward, away from the sea as our terraced street frowned towards the cloud-webbed scrapers of the CBD.

Then: Earth

A volcano is a node on the earth's surface, a reference point, but it's also a channel into subterranean depths. Through their eruptions, new soil and new land are created. But they're violent births, under pressure building for aeons. Often this creation of new matter means the death of the volcano itself. The child slays the mother. Sometimes.

It was just after dawn, late summer. It was already warm, and the red dawn and northerly breezes forebode a late change that hazy day, about 5,000 years ago. There were few other indications. Some troubled dreams among the Elders, water subsiding in the main fishing cavern and a difference in the flight paths of cockatoos. When it happened though, it was an ending of the world. First, there was the ground shaking, and then a deep booming rumble that went on and on, rising to a scream on the wind. This was only the beginning, as shooting upwards were dark clouds of broiling ash, with gigantic bombs of basalt and limestone sent careering up into the sky, only to thud deep into the ground. They thought they were molten fists punching deep into the soft belly of the earth, exploding on impact, amid hot killing clouds ejected in thunderous roars. Soil and rock and ash were airborne and sent rolling and rolling outwards across the plains and across the sea from the hill. It was only much later, as the atmosphere cleared; that the locals could see the hill was broken. Across the bay, as if in a timed response, its sister hill cracked, and threw up dark clouds in sorrow as it wept molten flows of red viscous basalt fluids down its gentle slopes, burning everything in myriad paths. After the boiling boulders smashed into the ground, the ash hardened. Nothing was left for miles around.

That night, the sky, too, countered with lightning. Cracking in jagged bolts, it lit up the heavy darkness from horizon to horizon. Ashen soil and acid mixed with the water and whatever had been left standing was soon sodden and sour, bleached by the poisoned downpour and washed out to the sea or down into the swamps to curdle.

After the night and the rain, in the creeping fearful silence, the sullen sun refused to peep out. Whatever still alive shivered and fled blindly into what was left of the bush.

Now: Earth

It takes a lot to shake human assumptions about the earth and everything around us. We so readily believe our senses. I watch Lucy learn about her world, hand-shaping multi-level sand castles and digging out moats in her sand pit until it all collapses under her unsteady bare feet. There's such joy in her chubby face. She laughs as much at the mess at the end as at her creation. She is why museums have changed so much; they're tactile, interactive, when once everything was behind glass. Dead and safe.

It's easy, then, to believe the world's a steady and reliable foundation for human endeavour. In reality, the earth trembles, it grinds and slips out from under us and throws us about. We feel betrayed, but perception is the problem. For all its reassuring solidity, the ground is layers of soil and rock and water, floating on a mucous membrane of the mantle. All made of molecules of minerals, molecules made of atoms and atoms made of parts so close to nothing as no matter. We balance on the skin of the earth floating atop particles of emptiness.

For me, I've struggled with assurance. As much as our Albert Street house was secure, I could trace the cracks between the smog-blackened bricks. Those cracks grew as the ground dried in the drought and narrowed when it rained. At night, I could hear our home's timbers settling under the weight of the red clay roof tiles. And I understood our narrow house was a mirror to the unreliability of the ground beneath. Late, when I couldn't sleep, I'd watch Lucy settle like the timbers and breathe, sleeping heavy after a day in the garden, and I would give thanks for our old house and the museum too, because they helped me understand how the earth and my child change every day.

Then: Water

A long time afterwards, when the survivors had recovered, they lamented, fingering their hard-healed scars. Their formal ceremony of mourning was almost all they had left. Much had been lost with so many of their Elders. Around camp fires at dusk, some would recall that night in whispers, remembering their angry beach, with water bubbling then spouting up through the sand, erupting with so much force, the tide uneven, sand turning so hot it became shards that dug into the flesh as the sky rained down ash and rock and the air became death. They recalled running, running heedless through the burning trees to find shelter, running in a charcoal blizzard, with animals beside them and ahead of them, united in their panic, all hurtling towards the fresh water that could wash them free of their fear and of their seared skin.

They sang about their survival, in a keening sigh above the wind, when they had to leave their home and their lake, now a still well of the dead. Brown and grey and polluted by ash and pumice and the acid, the lake had killed every living thing in the water. The pale bellies of fish corpses floated, exposed but preserved, just below the surface, reflecting the blank sky. The stench still infected their meagre possessions.

Now: Earth

At the museum, kids are fascinated and excited about how the planet lives, running around the displays. Yet every time, they're stilled into silence in the quake room, when the floor and walls jump and rock. People are so surprised by that deep disturbance, a grumble on the edge of perception. It's only in that moment that there is doubt; a sliver of awareness the world is not safe. And they aren't.

From a geological point of view, there's nowhere to run from the city. Nowhere is protected. For 700 kms west and north, the area is pitted with long dormant volcanoes and blowholes and ancient lava beds, and is pierced with drill holes for gas and for hot springs and test sites for pollution sequestration. To the south, the cold ocean is whipped up by Antarctic winds, and to the east, a wilderness, full of mythic Big Cats and Bush Fires and Lost Children. Stories to scare Lucy.

Then: Air

After the hills broke the land was changed. It was difficult to navigate, as long-remembered markers were obliterated or submerged. Yet time heals and what was black and dead was greening again, sprouting in a cool autumn, against the season. They'd followed the birds back. Birds going south, going back home, were a sure sign what was left of their world was attaining some semblance of normal. Wedge-tailed eagles whirled high above, circling on currents of warm inland winds, pushing them all further south. But it wasn't just the hunters and carrion birds. Gaudy rosellas and cockatoos in raucous groups searched for their stands of charred manna gums, and the little birds too, returned to hunt for their nectar or insects in the new shrubs along the coast. The storm petrels and gulls turned their black and yellow eyes southerly and it seemed all living things were in the air, filling the sky with their calls to home. It was natural the people followed, making new paths towards the freshening sea breezes.

Now: Fire

I've wondered often about volcanoes, not their geology, or physiology, so much as about their psychology. Destructive and generative, all surface, face to the sky, yet connected to the very centre of the earth. Their long slumbers belie their strength. They're like listening posts to the core, or eyes, connected directly to the brain along lightning-hot nerves.

It was long thought the region was dead. But the earth isn't dead; a mantle of heat rises and pushes fingers of fiery energy through the weaknesses in the bedrock, following them. Following them exactly like Lucy prods at the crumbling mortar around the bricks at Albert Street, always looking for the line of least resistance to her curiosity.

People only comprehend such events on a visceral, emotional level. Like when that deep rumble quiets the students. I'm a scientist. Trained to classify, rank and test evidence, but it hardly matters now. Everything that was my house and home is gone. All the accumulated evidence at the museum is rubble and cinders. I picture our Albert Street, subsiding into the earth, engulfed in blue flames from twisted gas pipes, the lines of weaknesses in the bricks gaping and roof timbers cracking under the weight of ash. And Lucy.

The data reveals the basalt foundation defied expectation and surety. Weak points shifted and slipped under tectonic forces, and those two long slumbering broken slopes bellowed into wakefulness once more. I was as deceived as

anyone else. It was a sly attack; there'd been so little verifiable evidence, no changes to indicate their altered opinion of the world. Our probing had been of the surface and we were wrong. So this time, instead of a tribe, an entire city was engulfed by the twin volcanoes. I watched in horror from afar, 3000 kilometres away at a curatorial conference. We stood open mouthed, in silence, and then in panic, first at the vision, then at the blank screens as the city succumbed under the red hot pumice as huge boulders splintered the concrete and glass towers, the bridges and suburbs. Finally, the huge swell of the sea filled the bay and rose up to claim the little that was left.

Home. There's no schema for understanding or for bringing back those days when we strained for that view from the edge of the kitchen chair. I see it sometimes, the haze rising from the baking summer asphalt and I see me, bearing Lucy up, nearly to the ceiling, defying gravity and aerodynamics, searching for that view of the blue smudge of the water just to hear her giggle and squeal—*higher, higher, the sea, the sea.*

What wasn't subsumed under the ash and lava was poisoned by the boiling hail of acid rain, which made a muddy sulphuric ruin of anything not reduced to carbon by fire, or disappeared by land slips. What was left even of that was then smothered by the contamination of collapsed factories and covered by salt water.

Survivors were mainly at the edge of events, to the east; wandering lost between the consumed suburbs of the plains and the burning forests of the hills. I can't. I can't listen to them. I've seen the satellite images and the footage from fly-overs. It's a new world, unstable and shifting and still too dangerous. There's no going back.

Some nights, when I'm on the verge of sleep after hours of restless waking nightmares, I hear her. It's Lucy's trilling voice, lifted high on an acrid southerly, a child-like keening, fading into a sigh for everything destroyed in one summer afternoon. Again.

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