

Balloon: festschrift

by *Alinta Krauth*

It was clear that your mother was a bad influence on you the day that she walked into the side of a moving truck. Being unaware of the severity of colliding flesh with rusty metal, she stepped onto the road too soon after waiting for a gap in the traffic, and the semi-trailer's brown and white tail end clipped her face, taking most of her cheek and the side of her mouth.

Things like that just seemed to happen in your town.

The officer (with a peculiar rag in his pocket) shook his head slowly at the scene, after chasing your mother down the footpath, who seemed to have not noticed her missing face. Of course, the minute she tried to light a cigarette she knew that something suspicious was going on. She turned and glared at the officer. How dare he, she thought.

It seemed like a coincidence, because at the time of your mother's accident you were watching monster truck videos with the girl who always wore lambskin boots. No-one ever did find out if you went all the way with her or not (but we giggled anyway). Some people said they thought her name was Julie-Ann, because they heard it being screamed from the gravel yard once. She never did speak a word. She would spend most of her days finding spider's webs to walk through, and she refused to wash them off.

She lived on Norman Street, two blocks over from the industrial estate, so it was only a short walk to where the mounds of gravel sat ten metres high behind fences of wire and broken glass. You would always run to the left fence, just behind the view of the cameras, and climb carefully over the wire. Julie-Ann would bring white balloons on strings, and for every time she cut her feet open while climbing, she would tie a balloon to the top of the fence. Once she got so tangled in barbed wire that she had to leave a lambskin boot behind, hanging, as if in a spider web.

You would climb up to the top of the gravel pile and from there the edges of the town were visible; you could see all the way to the graveyard and The Gardens beyond the dry riverbed.

"One day," you slipped words into Julie-Ann's ear, "one day I will get to see those trees close up. I will bring you back a flower, or a piece of paperbark, and any berries that I find."

You slid back down the gravel, causing it to flow out onto the dirt like a wave. It was probably the closest thing to the ocean that they'd seen in your town. Without waiting for Julie-Ann you began to climb back over the fence, but hearing a yell and feeling a bright light on your back, you turned to see a security guard with his hands on Julie-Ann's dirty clothes. She made a strangled gurgle and kicked at him. You lurched towards her, screaming her name, screaming "princess", but the guard took her inside, as if unaware of you, and closed the door behind him.

You sat and waited all night for the door to open.

It didn't.

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A few days later Julie-Ann came out of the local lockup and peered through your window with a balloon tied around her hand. Your mother, who had discovered that taping the cigarette to her mouth would stop it from constantly falling, wrote on her hand that she hadn't seen you around.

That was when Julie-Ann began to run.

She ran down Norman Street and across the Stanley Bridge. She jumped down under the bridge and into the dried riverbed that ran past the cemetery to where it became pools of stagnant water, still alive with grey and orange fish, disturbed by her feet and lambskin boot. She came to The Gardens just after nightfall, clawing her way under blackberry bushes and wait-a-whiles; that's when she saw you.

You were slumped peacefully on the garden chair. She knelt down beside you and pressed her fingers to your neck, checking your pulse. Your coat pockets were bulging with flowers, berries and paperbark. She ate the berries and wiped her mouth on yours. Sticky spider web kiss.

The officer (with a peculiar rag in his pocket) came the next day and taped off the area. He surmised that this was murder, and wrote 'possible strangulation' in his notebook.

He had found you with nothing but mounds of gravel in your coat pockets, and a balloon tied around your neck.

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My Papous and his G43

by *Konstantina Sozou-Kyrkou*

What my *papous* cherished the most in this world was his rifle, a G43 he'd stolen from a German during WW2. He had an obsession with it, always kept it under his bed, unloaded of course, because my *pateras* had hidden the bullets somewhere in the warehouse, out of everybody's reach.

He used to tell me the story behind this rifle. How he fought during WW2 alone with eight Germans at the Greek-Bulgarian borders, killed them all and then stole the rifle from one of them. Along with his leather boots. The soldiers of his platoon had all been killed and he alone had to fight hard for his life.

"Filled them with bullets, the bastards," he'd say. "Like a sieve they were, alright." He looked out the window with jittery eyes as if the scene was taking place, at that moment, in front of him.

Papous cleaned the rifle every single week, to keep it from rusting. "Watch to learn, my boy," he used to tell me and I sat on a wicker chair opposite his bed and watched. He did it with great care and attention, methodically, like a real gunman. He straightened his back as much as he could and held the rifle with pride in both hands, then propped the butt against his right shoulder and aimed at anything or anybody who was near him at the moment, his favourite target being *yiayia*.

"Take this *diavolo* away from me!" she'd scream and shield her head with her hands.

He kept at it, loved to frighten her out of her wits. He'd chuckle, his eyes naughty and then he'd say, "Bring me a tumbler of olive oil and some cotton wool, woman."

Yiayia stopped what she was doing, stood in front of him, arms akimbo, glowered and said, "Again? There's nothing wrong with this *diavolo*, *christiane mou*. Why do it so often? We'll run out of oil because of you."

"If we run out of oil, that's because you burn it in the *kandili* every night, woman."

"But..."

"Fetch the oil or..." *Papous* said with a gruff voice, raised his right arm in demand, threatening to hit her, his brown eyes round and wide like Easter biscuits. He often demonstrated such mock attempts to hit her but I'd never seen him actually do it. "Do you want my rifle to rust? That's what you want, eh?" *Yiayia* tilted her head disapprovingly and went to the kitchen. The same motif was repeated every time *Papous* decided to clean the rifle. *Yiayia* tried to persuade him out of it, but he always won.

Papous hawked a goblet of phlegm and spat it with force into the fireplace next to his bed. He cleared his voice as if he was about to sing, frowned his lips in total absorption, and the procedure started. He took off the magazine and placed it on the bed. He spent some time taking the bolt assembly out. He had an aluminium rod under the bed, which he dragged out, and snatched a patch of cotton wool out of the piece *Yiayia* had brought him. Dipped the wool into the tumbler with the oil and then wrapped it around the tip of the rod. Then pushed the rod from the bridge end through the bore all the way to the muzzle and pulled it all the way back. He did that several times with new pieces of cotton wool until the last one came out clean, and then held the rifle up and peeped into the bore. "Now, that's a good job, son," he sighed with satisfaction. "As clean as a whistle." He then pinched an old sock which he also kept under the bed and rubbed the barrel and the wood with it briskly. Wiped the inside of the magazine with the sock too. When the cleaning was over, he put the bolt and the magazine in place and laid the gun against his pillow, casting glimpses of pride at it every now and then. Until it was time for his nap, when the rifle

was placed under the bed again.

My *papous* was always on the watch for a possible war against Greece. Every night, when the news was on TV, at full blast, he demanded total silence from everybody present and pricked his ears like a cat stalking a mouse. The only TV set in the house was in his room, which was his bedroom as well as the sitting room, and it was indisputably occupied by him when the news was on. I knew his *pateras* had died in the second Balkan war and he himself had fought with the Italians and the Germans and this alone could explain his preoccupation with war.

When the news finished and he realised there was no imminent war against Greece, at least not until the next day, he leaned back on his bed and snored the night away. But it was too late for me to watch my favourite serial, and in a while *Pateras* switched the TV off and sent me to bed.

I was a student at the university of Athens when I went back home to my native village for the summer holidays, only to see a different *Papou*. *Yiayia* said he must've had a stroke, because he often talked gibberish and had an obsession with war. A real one this time. I was sleeping in my bedroom when a noise woke me up. It was raining cats and dogs all night, the rattling thunder making the house shiver and groan. I suddenly saw *Papou* in front of me, rifle in hand. A sudden bolt of lightning made him look like a trembling giant, his armed shadow looming over me.

"Quick, Niko! Dress fast! We have to go to the mountain. The Germans are coming." I didn't know what to do. I tried to calm him down.

"There is no war today, *Papou*. The war's finished. The Germans are our friends now," I told him, but he stared at me baffled and impatient.

"What are you talking about? Can't you hear the bombs?" he yanked at the blanket and pulled it away from me. "Fast, I'll go wake up your parents. We have to take cover." He stumbled out of the room, the rifle's barrel hitting the side of the door with a clang. I then heard my *pateras*'s reassuring voice telling *Papou* not to worry and that everything was a nightmare he'd had. When later I went into his room he was fast asleep, the rifle right next to him, muzzle in his fist.

The following morning he was having a bath. When I stepped into the bathroom I saw him serene and red-cheeked, lying in the tub, water up to his chest. His white curls were dripping, glistening patches of pink skin on his head, the fringe stuck on his forehead like a silver lace. He looked so much younger than his eighty-two years of age.

"Add more hot water, woman. I'm chilled to death in here," he said. *Yiayia* was next to him, rubbing his back with a sponge. "How are you, my boy?" he smiled when he saw me. "Fine weather today, isn't it?" he said, pulling a towel from the rails to his right to cover his nakedness. I was surprised to see that the rifle was nowhere in the room.

It had taken *Papou* a long time to get used to our newly fitted white enamel bathtub. At first he lied to *Yiayia*. He said he was going to have a bath, closed the bathroom door, filled the tub with water, squatted next to it and upset the water with his hands, making splashing noises. All the time he was in his clothes, and he only changed into clean ones after he'd emptied the tub and was as filthy as before. Living all his life in the mountains, he wasn't accustomed to water. Never had a swim in the sea. Hated it. He wasn't used to having baths either. He was probably afraid he might slip and drown. In the past he washed in a dented, tatty aluminium basin once a month, but now that the new tub was installed *Yiayia* insisted he had a bath once a week. *Yiayia* caught him red-handed one day. Since then she never let him have a bath alone on the pretext of being needed to scrub his back and hand him the towel.

I left the warm fug of the bathroom to the cool dirt yard, which smelled of wet earth and basil. I sat at a wicker chair and looked at the small streams the rain had formed along the edges of the inclining yard, clean water now caressing the gravel that the rain had carried down from other parts of the yard. I always loved these sudden summer rains. Seemed to be cleaning the place from the stuffy air and the dust that's settled on everything: animals, plants, trees, people. One could see through a clear frame now, in every minute detail, not through the stupefying haze of the heat, which often distorted our vision.

Papous came out of the bathroom, straight-backed, smelling of scented soap, his lips blueish. He had shaved, and his cheekbones protruded like red lumps on his lean face, which had assumed a more civilised, formal appearance. "Shall we go to the *kafeneia*, boy?" he asked me. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Sure," I said. "Wait till I change into a new shirt."

"Don't you pester people with this war stuff. They've got their own troubles in their minds, don't want you to scare them off," *Yiayia* scowled at *Papou*.

"War, what war? The only war I know of is the one between me and you," *Papous* winked at me.

All the way to the *kafeneia* older and younger people exchanged a *kalimera* with us and it surprised me that *Papous* remembered everybody's names, as well as some of their wives, as he inquired after them. Our shoes and his walking stick crunched against the gravel, and he was careful enough to keep away from any puddles that had formed in the storm last night. If I hadn't witnessed the event the previous night, I'd have thought that *Papous* was in his highest spirits, without a care in the world.

We reached the square down the road and went to the *kafeneio* opposite the church. We sat at a round, iron table and *kyr Stavros* came to take our order. We both had ouzo with olives, feta and tomato. A friend of *Papous* sat with us, and *Papous* treated him a tumbler of ouzo. I later saw an old school friend of mine and went over to his table. When I came back, *Papous* was talking, full steam ahead, face flushed, vigorously gesticulating, his worry beads rattling in his right hand. I heard him say to his friends, "Our priority is the country's weaponry. In case of a war we won't be able to defend ourselves. We're doomed." When he saw me, he stopped and changed the subject.

The nightly sudden wakings were an everyday reality back at home, and *Papous* got more and more agitated until he fell ill and got nailed to bed. A stroke, this time confirmed by the doctor. *Pateras* told me on the phone that his G43 was always by his side; he now slept with it but didn't have the strength to clean it anymore.

I was wondering why *Papous* was so hooked on his rifle when *Pateras* revealed to me one day the true story behind that G43. *Papous* had told him once. He was fighting at the Greek-Bulgarian border when one of the Germans shot at his weapon and destroyed it, injuring his right arm. He was left there behind the dyke, helpless, in the middle of the battle, of no assistance to his comrades. The Germans outnumbered the eight soldiers of his platoon and finally shot them all. He had to play dead when they approached to check on their victims and that's how he saved his life. When they left he snatched the G43 from a dead German and he had kept it since then. He'd always felt responsible for the death of his comrades, for his inability to help them in that crucial moment.

One night I saw him in a dream. He came into my bedroom, rifle in hand, looking very solemn and told me, "Give me some oil my boy. I want to clean my rifle. Got a war to fight." I stood up, went to the kitchen and gave him a cup full of olive oil. He took it, looked at me in the eye and told me, "Tell her to stop crying. It really gets me when she does that," and slowly walked out the main door. I was woken by the ringing of the phone. It was my *pateras*. *Papous* had died that night. I could hear *Yiayia*'s wails in the distance.

"I know," I told him. "I know. He's been here. Take care of *Yiayia*." *Pateras* thought I was being absurd but

I knew *Papous* was somewhere cleaning his rifle, fighting his own, private war.

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A Bird's Guide to Flight

by *Chloë Callistemon*

Letter-winged Kite

Elanus scriptus

Abstract

Black and white Ws and Ms of kites hunt scuttling pieces of the moon's O—those Ss and Zs running through the Mitchell grass and gibber. The kites fly cursive through the night, red eyes searching commas over the Diamantina until they spy scrawls and dashes. They stall and hover ellipses against the stars. They clench then fall, clutch then rise—their hunter's U.

Chloë Callistemon is a Brisbane photographer and arts eclecticist. She has been a Jack Stamm Haiku Award finalist, performed as a bird as part of a.rawlings's GIBBER, and has a work in an international anthology trying to save rhinos, among other things. Has pen and camera, will travel.

Has Elton John Ever Performed at Macquarie Shopping Centre? Or, a Tiny Dancer Beneath the Ice Rink

by *Dave Drayton*

I seem to remember it being after a few drinks. I'd like to think it was the same evening my father and I overindulged in a bottle of Lochan Ora, but I may just be trying to make the whole thing seem more dramatic in retrospect. We'd had a few drinks at home, were shooting the proverbial and the conversation soon turned to music. Dad was telling me how he'd given away all his LPs when I was around seven or eight, his reasoning being that he didn't think any of the kids (I have four siblings, which makes this even harder to believe) would be 'into' records—where are you, Captain Hindsight?

He had, however, held onto one record, a copy of Elton John's sixteenth studio album, *Jump Up!*, released on 12" vinyl in 1982. It was not simply because he was an Elton John fan—a trait I inherited; the potential for genetic transference of such a trait (Elton is a dominant gene) is actually more likely than your child having green eyes, according to science (again, I'm a case in point)—but because it had been signed by Sir Elton himself.

With the kind of storytelling confidence only achievable after a few Lochan Oras (let's run with it) Dad regaled me with the tale. Elton John had performed at the Macquarie Shopping Centre (I recalled him as saying it was the official opening, which proved problematic down the road, but more on that later), on the ground floor near the water feature, and following his performance he did a signing. He had somehow managed to misspell both my parents' names while autographing Dad's LP: writing Nick, as in Nicholas, as 'Nic', and Jo, as in Joanne, as 'Joe'. Poor spelling aside (I reckon give the bloke a break, he was probably jacked up on goofballs) Dad was pretty stoked about this little piece of musical history, and had kept it when tossing the rest of his vinyl to the curb. It now took pride of place in an armoire beside a largely unused record player that was coated with a film of dust.

While still coming to terms with the fact that he'd tossed so much vinyl, I was nevertheless floored by this story (and perhaps the Lochan Ora). This is Sir Elton John, the man that nearly put my folks in the poorhouse last time they paid to see him at the Opera House, and he's playing a fucking shopping centre? It just doesn't compute.

He's got a CBE and a star on the Walk of Fame. I asked Mum to confirm the tale and she told me pretty much the same story, except, rather than being excited (and warm with liquor) she sounded a little put out—Dad had failed to point out that lining up for the autograph had involved a wait of over two hours, and Mum wasn't quite as much of an Elton fan.

Having no reason to disbelieve my parents, and having had them independently corroborate one another's recollections I saw it as my duty to inform people of this absolutely odd piece of pop history whenever the chance arose. When I regaled people with this tale there were generally three kinds of response:

1. Shock/disbelief, followed by a proclamation that can be approximated by the all-encompassing synonym for the majority of the words used: 'awesome'.
2. Mild interest.
3. Disbelief. Not like the first kind. Just genuine, 'bullshit mate' disbelief.

To this first group I would most often smile and high five the listener for sharing my joy in this bizarre pop cultural factoid. Further, I was encouraged to continue to regale yet more people with this tale.

To the second group [and, more specifically, those within the second group that a) currently, or at some point in their lives, had lived near or frequently ventured to the Macquarie Shopping Centre; b) had an interest in the music of Elton John; or c) both a and b] I felt an overwhelming urge to grab them by shoulders forcefully and shake them while raining down on them with spittle and rhetorical questions: Do you not realise how awesome this is? Why the hell was Elton John at the Macquarie shops? Who is he, Paulini? I did, however, manage to resist this urge—as would now be clear, I’m a big fan of Elton’s music, which for me goes hand in hand with my stance as a pacifist, circle of life and all that shit—instead ending the conversation simply feeling rather miffed.

The third group of recipients of this tale proved the most problematic because, like stubborn and difficult four year olds, they did not offer any real reasons for not believing me. They simply told me that there was no way Sir Elton John would have done such a performance, and proceeded to behave like ostriches with heads submerged in sand when I asked them what reason my parents would have for generating such an intricate web of lies. And more to the point, why would they mislead me by corroborating this reminiscence with (if these doubters were correct what would in fact be) a 12” copy of *Jump Up!* with a forged Elton John signature and a greeting that misspelled not one, but both of their names?

Frustrated by unreasoned disbelief, I sought further proof that Sir Elton had in fact performed at Macquarie Shopping Centre. I Wiki’d, Googled, and trawled. Elton John’s website, unsurprisingly, made no mention of the show. Nor did his fan site, Eltonography, though it did inform me that his 1982 Jump Up Down Under tour in support of the album included shows at venues like Melbourne’s Festival Hall and six back-to-back shows at Sydney’s Horden Pavilion, both a far cry from the food court. Perhaps more surprisingly, the Macquarie Shopping Centre’s website made no mention of it. God knows why, it’s a publicists dream.

Informing a friend of the saga one night, she pushed me to action, and, once again with the courage of the Dutch, we dug deeper into the Elton mystery. We sent an email to Macquarie’s enquiry department seeking some kind of confirmation. Seeing that they had officially opened in 1980 I had reasoned such a grand occasion perhaps called for the presence of someone as equally grand as Sir Elton; at the time, Macquarie Shopping Centre had been the largest of its kind in the country. The reply came, my hopes were raised, only to be dashed as I was informed that Elton John had not only not performed at the opening of the centre, but that he ‘had never performed at the Macquarie Shopping Centre’ ever.

Now I was the one who decreed ‘bullshit’.

Proceeding to hound my mother for still more facts about that fateful instore, she eventually produced a photograph with a few disembodied heads in the foreground, a stage barrier in the midground that read ELTON JOHN JUMP UP! TOUR 1982 and Elton himself up on stage, clad in a pink shirt, silver jacket and white Panama hat, sat at a piano, next to a drum kit, and beneath a banner that read ‘We’re really getting to know you HERE AT MACQUARIE SHOPPING CENTRE’. They’d even upper-cased my disbelief in 1982. Below that it said Elton was appearing courtesy of Grace Bros.

Reassured that my childhood had not been entirely built on lies (imagine a world where Elton John existed only in the realms of Jesus and the Easter Bunny!) I sent a moderately smug email to Macquarie, photo attached. Apologetic but largely unmoved she replied, telling me there was no record of the performance anywhere at Macquarie and directed me to Myer, who bought out Grace Bros some years ago. They have no records of the performance. Nor, for the matter, do the State Libraries of Victoria (where Myer is based) or New South Wales, both of which I was directed to by Myer, and where research librarians kindly and thoroughly researched this mystery for me in the Sydney Morning Herald Archives 1955-1995 (electronic resource), Sydney Morning Herald microfiche index 1979-1987, Informit—the source for online Australasian information (electronic resource) and

APAIS (Australian Public Affairs Information Service) 1982 index.

Myer have stopped responding to my emails. Local newspapers—*Macquarie Courier*, *North Shore Times*, *The Weekly Times*, *The Northern District Times*—have no mention of it in their archives. The State Library can't help me. And I'm left wondering why I'm so determined to know that this actually happened—I've seen the proof, or proof enough, haven't I?

Elton's music holds a special place inside me. A cassette of *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues* revealed to me the potential for music to be sad, but beautifully so. Among my dad's eclectic (and slightly fabulous) musical tastes—everything from Savage Garden to Vanessa Amorosi—Elton's was music that we bonded over. Well, that and Sabbath. And I like to think that the excitement Dad expressed a near quarter-century after the event when telling me the tale for the first time is the same kind of invigoration I'll experience when telling the next generation about the time I met Andre Ice Cold 3000 in a Virgin Megastore and got him sign to my train ticket, only to have it eaten by the barriers at Hornsby station.

Dad's since misplaced the signed LP, and my train ticket is clearly long gone. But for each of us, proof is not required—and in Mum's case, I'm sure she'd rather just forget. But in lieu of tangible evidence is the reverence with which both of us share these stories, a brush with someone who compels others to stand before mirrors and sing into a hairbrush.

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The Only Boss I Listen to Is Bruce Springsteen

by *Jessica McLean*

I'll try and tell this three-times love story without hagiography. That won't be too hard, however, as there's little about Bruce Springsteen that's saintly, except perhaps his commitment to telling stories of the working class and those from near the edge. Falling for Bruce Springsteen was, initially, accidental. Our Uncle Peter played bootlegged recordings of him and The E Street Band on audiotapes as we drove around Bathurst, an often-cold town in Central West NSW. He drove around the industrial parts of town trying to find the best deal on a replacement muffler for his car. The tapes were magic to me: how did someone manage to record a whole set without getting caught? Did the bootlegger have a tape recorder strapped to their ankle to get away with it? Must they wear boots to do such? More importantly, would I ever see The Boss play live?

It was 1986, two years after *Born in the USA* came out, an album that brought his music to a massive audience, and Courtney Cox onto his 'Dancing in the Dark' video clip. As we drove around that infrequently visited part of Bathurst, we could hear the audience getting completely swept along with Bruce's bravado. People were calling out songs and he was responding, sometimes laughing at the ridiculous suggestions coming from the crowd.

My three accompanying siblings and I stifled the urge to sing along as we drove from mechanic to mechanic, none of whom seemed able to offer the muffler for my uncle at a low enough figure. In our too-young eyes, our uncle was OLD and the one we liked to playfully attack more than anyone else. Yes, children can be horrible. So we had to pretend we didn't really like Springsteen's music as we drove around the factories of that railway town, for fear of aligning our passion with the OLD.

This denial was hard to persist with, let alone assert in the moment. The Boss had gotten under our skins and somehow we knew one day we'd see him in the flesh for ourselves. Those bootlegged tapes would not be the sum of our Bruce Springsteen dalliance. It was just a flag for the three-times, one-sided love story that now forms a big part of our lives.

Now, as a mother of a young boy myself and having spent plenty of money and love at gigs both big and small, I've seen Bruce three times. Three is an intoxicating number: there's the Trinity for Judeo-Christians; children's books and rhymes often circulate around a trifecta, be it pigs, blind mice or bags of wool; and there's often three sheets to the wind. And I've had three encounters with The Boss, which he'll not have experienced except as I was one of many thousands to love him too.

The first time I saw The Boss was in 1997 in Sydney at the Capitol Theatre. Rachel, my older sister, came too, and we joined several of our aunts and uncles at a bar in Chinatown before settling in to watch this acoustic gig. It was my first year in Sydney, having moved from Mudgee to begin university, and my first big gig in Sydney. The fact that it was The Boss made it nearly unbelievable. He played a long set, including morose tracks from *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, intermingled with more upbeat numbers, and held us completely captive. He played tracks we'd grown up with, including *Blinded by the Light*, *The River* and *Atlantic City*—all songs we had pretended to hate over ten years ago in that medium-sized country town.

That show proved Bruce is more than a big-show, mega-stadium showman. He wrangled a twelve-string guitar and joked about being *Down Under*, somehow not creepily linking it to cunnilingus, and my love was concreted there and then. He belted out track after track, mostly just on the stage by himself, and every audience member sat enthralled.

But that was my only point of contention: why the hell were we sitting still, under that faux-starry blue dome

at the Capitol, while each song invited us to dance? So Rachel and I did, especially when Bruce directly implored us to, because saying no to an entreaty from someone who gave so much on stage seemed more than churlish—it seemed stupid. The demographic of the audience, as I snuck looks to my left and right, front and back, lay squarely above forty. We danced within the confines of our chairs, and kept elbows and feet moving in jagged forwards motions rather than out and around, trying to not connect with the older folk around us. I'm gonna dance when I'm that old, the eighteen-year-old me swore. Such is the gloss of youth.

I sit here today, nearly five years from that imagined space and time of being forty years old, knowing that I'll still be making a somewhat fool of myself if given half a chance, and a gig worth such folly. Combined with a good quantity of gin.

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The second time I went to The Boss was in Melbourne, 2003, at the mega-stadium in inner-city Melbourne, the name of which changes from year to year. I think at the time I went it was the Vodafone Arena. That day, the United States of America—in alliance with Australia, the United Kingdom and a few other smaller nations—invaded Iraq. Along with some friends—including my housemate whose birthday it was—we joined an estimated 50,000 people walking along St Kilda Road to the War Memorial to voice our protest at John Howard's incorporation of Australia into that unjust battle. We walked and chanted and worried at what would come from this war that was not intended to do us—or anyone, really—too much harm. How wars can ever do that I still don't know.

Our small group snuck a drink in at a bar at Federation Square and then I went off to join my Uncle Peter, he who had introduced The Boss into our lives in the first place, nearly two decades prior. We were to meet at a bar at the venue. Hundreds of other fans clearly had the same idea and there was no clear line of sight through the masses of people. I had a mobile number to call, so I did, as I just couldn't see him anywhere. As I rang his number I heard a phone nearby ringing and as my uncle picked it up, we realised that we were only two metres away from each other.

“You're here! Great, let's get a drink!” So we did.

The buzzes began, letting the punters know that The Boss was about to take the stage: drinks were quickly abandoned, seats taken. I didn't sit with someone I knew but a friend of my uncle's, a woman, with long blonde hair and a happy demeanour. Bruce began with ‘War’ and as those questions rung out over the stadium, I felt I'd come home again. The peace and simultaneous elation stood in contrast to the dissatisfaction of my fellow concert-goer.

“This is great—we went to the protest today—Bruce is so in touch—I can't believe it's happening!” I said.

“Nah, it's bullshit. They should go there, sort it out...” the blonde woman replied. We stopped talking then and there.

During this gig, the second real time and space encounter of he who became a great love of my life, the dancing didn't stop. The stadium's scale didn't hinder The Boss getting near each and every punter as they danced. I left exultant and exhausted, farewelling my uncle and his friends drinking the night away in the southern streets of Melbourne city.

Many of my nine siblings and parents saw The Boss during that same 2003 tour in Sydney, since they were all living relatively close to there. I was a long way from my immediate family, but the similar experiences connected us. Comparisons of set lists and assurances that the Melbourne or Sydney gig was far superior consumed our family catch-ups for several months thereafter.

Ten years have now passed since that 2003 gig, with much yearning by my younger siblings for a return visit by The Boss, for they did not partake in that show. Bruce kept writing albums, touring in the northern hemisphere and supporting Barack Obama's rise to presidency. He was busy, sure, but we just desperately wanted him to come south once more. And then, like magic, he came.

It's over two months now since that gig at the end of March 2013 at Olympic Park. Bruce's Wrecking Ball tour set down in Australian capital cities and on a certain autumnal evening, all nine siblings, their partners, our parents, all my mother's siblings and their partners too, along with several cousins, shared the thrill of Bruce's most recent show.

This third encounter was euphoric. But it wasn't when he belied those sixty-three years of his by crowd-surfing, nor when he gave the ten-year-old girl the mic to sing—a moment she best never forget—and not when he warned us that our arses will tell us to dance so get ready, that I knew things were right, still, in my love for Bruce. It was also not when he sang anthem after celebrated anthem with the lights right up, relishing a devoted following, but, when the E Street Band finally exited the stage and he hugged or kissed everyone of them after singing for nearly three hours, that my highest hopes for The Boss' continued reign were, with grace, confirmed.

The only boss I listen to is Bruce Springsteen. A dear friend wove me that embroidery and it welcomes all guests to our house now—a house I share with my four-year-old son who loves The Boss as well. He likes the high and fast tracks though, first Born to Run, now Badlands and Radio Nowhere make their way on to his must-play list. He lines up his toy bongos, two stools and a small footrest as his 'drums', and plays them with chopsticks for each and every rocking Bruce track. We indulge with the zeal of the obsessed, and it unites our family. Going to that gig, for the bestowing of blessings from he who brings the non-believers into alignment with the faith of the majority, was a landmark night for us all. My dad is seriously ill with advanced prostate cancer and my mum needs a hip replacement, but they stood and danced and sang, much as they had done nearly thirty years ago. For it was then, during Bruce's heady Born in the USA days, when they were pregnant with their sixth child, that my parents trekked to Sydney for their very own first gig with The Boss. And perhaps that is really the origin of enduring obsession. I wonder if my small boy will continue his love for The Boss as he ages too: I don't look forward to the day he'll also want to disassociate from the OLD as I once did. What remains, despite these unknowns, is an unrequited love that I'll not relinquish.

As a lecturer in Human Geography at Macquarie University, Jess is interested in sharing critical thinking in creative ways. She writes a poem a day at smilingatcrocodiles.tumblr.com and has had commentary pieces published in Overland and New Matilda. Poems by Jess also appear in Australian Love Poems 2013 and Stoned Crows and Other Australian Icons.