



# **TINCTURE JOURNAL**

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## Editorial

by *Daniel Young and Stuart Barnes*

### Death Note

Tincture Journal has been running for five years now, and the December 2017 issue will be our twentieth, so it's with very mixed feelings that we're announcing that this issue will also be our last. Some of you may have seen this coming, since we quietly removed the ability to purchase subscriptions from the website a few months ago; some of you may be surprised we lasted this long (I know I am!); and some of you may be disappointed at seeing an Australian literary journal fade away into history.

On a personal note I'm pleased and proud of everything we've achieved in the past five years, but this begs the question: why end it? I wrote back in the beginning that I'd basically started Tincture Journal on a whim, with no idea of the quantity or quality of submissions we'd be able to attract, how many readers there would be for an Australian e-book literary journal, or how long it would last. I'm pleased to be able to say that Tincture Journal has surpassed my expectations on all levels. While it started as a whim, finishing it is not so easy, and it is still difficult to put it into words. Let me try.

Tincture Journal in its current form takes an immense personal toll: time, emotions, brain-space. Financially, over time, we've managed to keep things running and grow and maintain a healthy subscriber base without any external funding support. However, the reality of this is that it discounts the many hours of volunteer work from myself, our poetry editor Stuart Barnes, submissions readers Kirby Fenwick and Michelle McLaren, and our former proofreading and editorial assistant Jessica Hoadley. To be clear, we've all been very happy to do this work: it has been rewarding, joyful, and has given back to us immeasurably. I've had the opportunity of working with writers of all levels, all of whom I respect dearly, and I've had so many talented people trust me with their work. So while there are sacrifices, they come with rewards; but short of scaling back my day job, I didn't feel like I had the time to continue for another five years.

Another option was to continue growing Tincture: bring on more submissions readers, new editors, distribute the work by having a larger team, apply for this country's already-scarce pool of arts funding to help pay writers more, or to help pay for our people's time. My eyes glaze over at the very thought, and suddenly all I can see are organisational structures—printed, in triplicate—with meetings, and phone calls, and all the things that I try to avoid in my day job. I want to scream.

It is far better, I think, to cede the ground we've been occupying and encourage other, newer publications to take our place. While we may not have a particularly punk aesthetic, I like to think that Tincture Journal started with a very punk DIY ethos. I saw a gap in the amount of space given to certain types of creative writing in our bigger print literary journals, and much of the remaining content is presented online, which tends to only work well for shorter word counts. With Tincture leaving the scene, what gaps do you see? Do you have the drive to try and fill them? If you publish interesting work, the readership will come—I promise!

All that remains are the most important words: THANK YOU. To every contributor, both

successful and unsuccessful; to every reader and subscriber, past and present; to everyone who's supported us in ways both big and small over these years. I'd like to thank the University of Queensland for maintaining their institutional subscription since day one and the AustLit database for indexing the work of our Australian contributors. Thanks to the legal deposit teams at the NLA and SLQ for preserving the work we've published—all of which will soon be made freely available and accessible to all, so stay tuned for that (the first twelve issues are already freely available but we will extend this and make everything easier to access).

Most especially, to those who've served time on the Tincture team: Stuart Barnes, Jessica Hoadley, Kirby Fenwick, Michelle McLaren—thank you all for coming along for the ride and sacrificing your time and energy into what can sometimes be a thankless task. Let me counteract that by saying it one more time: thank you! It has meant so much to me that others wanted to share this journey and spend their own precious time helping to produce this publication. And let me say in particular to Stuart Barnes, who I'd never met until 2016 but who has been a friend and confidant regardless—thank you. We both know that Tincture's poetry list came on in leaps and bounds with you at the helm, and I know we're both proud of what we've accomplished. On that note, let me hand over for some words from Issue Two contributor and poetry editor from Issue Three to Issue Twenty: Stuart Barnes.

§

*Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph.*  
—T. S. Eliot

First, thanks to Daniel Young—friend, mentor, Tincture founder and editor—for everything he's done for writers and writing, for asking me to be poetry editor in early 2013, and for his laughter and generosity, and the kaleidoscopic trip, ever since.

Thanks to every poet who sent their work to Tincture. What a deep pleasure and a privilege it has been, reading your words. In this issue we welcome ten poets to our e-pages for the first time. If we think of their poems as epitaphs, perhaps we can think of them as prologues also. I hope knowing these poems is as satisfying for you as it is for me.

Finally, thanks to every reader, subscriber and supporter!

*Please note: existing subscribers whose subscriptions extend past Issue 20 have been contacted with the offer of a refund for the unused portion of their subscription. If you think we've missed you, get in touch via [editor@tincture-journal.com](mailto:editor@tincture-journal.com).*

*Daniel Young was the founder and editor of Tincture Journal, 2013–2017. He has a Master of Arts in Writing and has had work published in Peril Magazine, Hello Mr Magazine, Mascara Literary Review, Seizure, Verity La, antiTHESIS Journal, The Suburban Review, among others. In 2017 he won the Transportation Press 'Smoke' microfiction competition with his story 'Dalian Blood Futures'. He is slowly reviewing all the novellas at [allthenovellas.com](http://allthenovellas.com) and even more slowly working on a novel with the working title Shanghai Wedding.*

*Stuart Barnes was the poetry editor of Tincture Journal, 2013–2017. His first collection Glasshouses (UQP, 2016) won the 2015 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, was commended for the 2016 FAW Anne Elder Award, and was shortlisted for the 2017 ASAL Anne Elder Award. He blogs at [stuartabarnes.wordpress.com](http://stuartabarnes.wordpress.com).*

# Political Reflections

## Part Four: Charlottesville

*Non-fiction by Alexandra O'Sullivan*

Sometimes I feel like there's too much going on in the world around me, and it all cuts too closely to my bones. Writing anchors the important bits down, so I can manage the trauma accordingly. When I wrote a short essay titled 'The Day Trump Won' to cope with the fact that Donald Trump had become President—and to talk about myself—I expected it to end there. But Trump kept doing things, and I kept feeling things about the things he was doing.

This is my fourth piece about the Trump presidency. I planned to write a reflection on the firing of James Comey, the failed climate agreements, and the absurdity of 'covfefe'. But then Charlottesville happened—the white nationalist rally and subsequent anti-racism protests, culminating in Neo-Nazi James Field driving his car into the crowd of the counter-protesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring several others—and I felt like I'd been punched in the chest, and all the breath, all the voice, was knocked out of me.

I didn't know if—as someone who isn't directly affected—I could respectfully write about it. If there was too much distance between myself and those events. I watched the footage. I read articles from the 'many sides'. I watched Trump's reaction, then his counter-reaction, then his counter-counter-reaction. All were immensely unsatisfying. Nothing gave me the sense of justice I was looking for. I wanted to write to find it, to shorten that distance.

So, I offer these reflections as just that—reflections. An attempt to anchor something down.

§

Trump's reactions both fascinated and repelled me. His now infamous statement condemning the violence 'on many sides' shows his remarkable skill of utilising false equivalency to pander to extremist groups. But the way he glances at the camera, then drops his head and lowers his voice to repeat 'on many sides'—I can see how that satisfies some people. Trump's opening himself up, letting us see inside—inviting us in. It's more appealing than his robotic second statement, reading from a script, forcing down his personality in order to condemn a group of extreme racists. His personality resurges in his third statement, as he once again takes a set of structurally unbalanced scales, looks at them, and claims with complete sincerity that they are perfectly aligned.

It would appear reasonable, from an outside perspective, for a person to condemn both sides of an angry clash. If you completely discount historical context, then yes, it seems fair, *equal*. I read a few quotes from 'Unite the Right' members, praising Trump's initial statement as just this—fair and equal. But when one side is flattered by a statement sharing the blame, and the other side is enraged, what does that tell you about the truth of the matter?

There was something about it, about that ultra-broad thinking, and about Trump's smug expression, that felt very, very familiar.

§

“It takes two people to have an argument,” said the counsellor of the parenting program I was court-ordered to take. She lowered her voice to repeat, “Two people.”

I reeled back to the time when I was picking up my son from his father’s house. This man who I’d left many times—but now for good—had followed me outside and, completely unprovoked, proceeded to scream obscenities at me as I was strapping my two-year-old son into the back seat. I got into the driver’s seat, and he leapt in front of my car, blocking my escape. He slammed his hands on the bonnet, leant down and yelled *slut* through the windshield. Could he see me, through the glass? Or was it his own reflection, snarling back? Rage thundered through me. My foot shook above the accelerator, but I didn’t press it down.

I didn’t press it down.

§

A few weeks before Charlottesville, I’d gone to the Frankston police station with some text messages from this same ex. This situation has been going on a long, long time. I now have an intervention order on him, restricting him to contacting me only about matters relating to our child. Prior to this, his messages were wildly abusive, stream-of-consciousness type rants, writing the narrative to suit his version of events, yet doing it in a way that proved mine. Now, he satisfies himself by slipping remnants of this style into his current messages, little pieces to show me he hasn’t changed, he’s merely playing a longer game now, but he will never change. He has three intervention orders from three different women on him, with countless breaches on each one, yet the eternally hopeful attitude of the police astounds me—“there’s two sides to every Intervention Order.” I wonder how many women it would take on this side, to tip the scales in our favour.

I showed the cop the messages, and she took them to her superior for a second opinion on whether they constituted abuse. I waited for their judgement, like I’d waited many times before. I’m never sure which way it will go when reporting these things. Sometimes it’s taken seriously but mostly it’s not. “It’s not like you were in fear,” a policeman told me once. This was after I’d stood in front of my ex’s car to prevent him from drunkenly driving off with our then eighteen-month-old son, and dialled triple zero. I wondered how he came to that assumption. That someone who calls emergency services isn’t scared. That standing in front of an angry drunk’s car with my arms folded was just something I did for fun.

The policewoman handed me back my phone.

“We decided he’s not really being abusive.” She shrugged.

I nodded, unsurprised, and left the police station. *Stop being so divisive*, she might as well have said. Or even, *he’s the father, accept it!*

§

Let’s consider the words of alt-right spokesman Christopher Cantwell, regarding the power women supposedly yield against poor unsuspecting men: “No evidence necessary, just point your finger ladies, and men will go to prison. Just say the word and their reputation and careers will be ruined.” This is the same man who chanted “Jews will not replace us!” and “Blood and

soil!” at the white nationalist rally. A gross misinterpretation of power tends to cut across social issues. He is of course, along with being a white nationalist Neo-Nazi alt-right member, also a men’s rights activist.

I left the police station feeling the opposite of powerful. I carried that sense of helplessness around with me for days, the way I always do when I find it impossible to explain the context of my situation to those who are apparently there to help me. If you look at things without context, it’s much easier to slice them into two equal halves. *Both* sides are to blame for violence. Children need *both* their parents. It’s all about equality, after all.

Trump’s ‘many sides’ is the ultimate dismissal of context. Understanding the historical subtleties of racist oppression is not his priority; his primary concern seems to be spreading the blame to everyone but himself through his own special misinterpretation of events.

“It’s been going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama. This has been going on a long, long time.”

Maybe so long, in fact, that people are starting to get pissed off. Tired of having to explain their anger. Fed up with the fact that progress is so slow, and now suddenly, it’s being dragged backwards at an alarming rate. And those on the alt-right, the side against any progress towards equality, are feeling emboldened by their President, who seems to have a hard time condemning racist violence, but a really easy time condemning the ‘lying media’.

My ex has similar distraction techniques. Everyone who speaks out against him is a liar. His ex-wife was a liar and now I’m a liar. It’s funny how so many people around him are liars, and he is the only truth teller, sitting like a deity in the centre, calmly declaring that blame exists on every side but his.

After Charlottesville, I thought a lot about the distribution of blame. Not all violence is created equal. Bumping those scales of equality up to level, sometimes requires a little force, and this is often misinterpreted as an attempt to push them completely the other way—because, according to the alt-right, they are already level. Trump would claim that the left was provoking the attack, and were at least partly to blame for Neo-Nazi James Field slamming his car into a group of their protesters, then reversing back the way he came. The alt-right would claim the same, and possibly add that the protesters shouldn’t have been in the way. My ex would claim that there was no car, and that I’m crazy to suggest there ever was one.

They are all so very similar, these masters of manipulation.

## §

A family mediator once suggested to me that I just need to work on my anxiety issues—as if this anxiety had come from nowhere, with no possible historical cause or external influence. Anxiety was suddenly not something to sympathise with, or explore the origins of, but something to attack, to use as an explanation for the consequence—the disintegration of my family. The thing that got to me was the fact that this argument was accepted, not just by my ex and his loyal followers, but by trained mediators. I felt like I had a mark on me, I was labelled as the difficult one—after all, my ex was trying to reconnect, I was the one drawing away, pulling back, shrinking. I was not joining in, I was *creating divisions*. “Your silence is abusive,”

my ex told me once. I thought, *how can silence be abusive?*

“What about *my rights*,” said a man on the news, complaining about his local council’s decision to cancel Australia Day. Because the right to have a day off for a drink and a barbie, that’s what’s important. Not recognising the historical significance of the date of Australia Day and the impact it has on those Indigenous Australians who don’t want to join in the celebration, who want to instead *create division*. Listening to him, to his emphasis of *my rights*, feels like when my son makes me play opposite day, and I say I don’t want to play opposite day, and he tells me that because it’s opposite day, it means I really do want to play. There is no way of answering that. I’m being manipulated by a seven-year-old. I want to cry.

The truth of the matter is slippery. People can claim anything. They can claim they are being discriminated against because they are being told to stop discriminating against others. When I was a child, we used to bob for apples. I’d watch my reflection, distorted in the disturbed water, as I tried to grab and lift the apple free. The truth feels like that apple right now, I can taste it as I scrape my teeth across it, but I can never sink them in, it turns and turns away from me.

## §

In my writing, I always try to lift something free, to hold it up in the light and see what it looks like. But so often, I just fall deeper into that bucket of water with the bobbing, turning apple. Maybe that’s happened now. Charlottesville cut so close, was such a head-spin for me. The President is meant to be a protector, the ultimate father figure, but he is failing to protect those that need it most, and instead choosing to pander to those that need it least. I know how it feels to be passed over like that, though I don’t know what it is like to face the racist oppression in America. But I think about it, and I oscillate between my personal crisis and the crisis of the world. When I get tired of worrying about one I switch to the other. It’s good to have choices. It’s like democracy. Such great choices.

The thing I do know, in both cases, is that vigilance is vital. We must stop messages of hate from spreading. We must stop them as soon as we become aware of them. This is the reason I take every text message to the police. It is an attempt to stop the spread of hate. It’s a mostly futile attempt—but what’s the alternative?

Really, I want to know, what’s the alternative?

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## Moederland

### Part Four: terra in/cognita

#### *A postfiction series by Johannes Klabbers*

*The country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality and its primitive unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? [...] All it has given me is the world but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colours and the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations.*

—Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*

*In speaking of this desire for our own far off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency.*

—C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

#### Prologue

*i can't work.*

*i can't write.*

*there is nothing i can do.*

*i have to write something for tincture, they are waiting for it, my last piece for the last issue of tincture, the last episode of moederland. the deadline was wednesday. but i can't write. can i write that i can't write? can i write this? maybe this is the only thing i can write.*

*i go for a long walk.*

*it's so beautiful. the autumn air is soft.*

*there was a death in the family, unexpected, violent. the funeral was the day before yesterday and all of a sudden i am here. i was never there before. for all but one of the major life/death events that occurred in the circle of family and friends over the past forty years i've been in australia on the other end of a phone, saying ... what?*

*what can you say on the phone?*

## One

I have big news. I saw a leaf fall. It wasn't just any leaf. It was one particular leaf. I was there to see the falling of one particular leaf. The only leaf to fall in exactly that way and I have something to tell you: Australia and Europe are different universes—and what I've done is move to a different universe and that universe is slowly revealing itself to me, ever so slowly, one falling leaf at a time. You can visit that other universe but you will not experience it as someone who lives there, someone who is *of* that universe. Why is it *not* another universe? We allowed science and technology to tell us that it is not a different universe. When James Cook came back he said, oh it's 'just' on the other side of the earth, it is down under and they are earthlings, same as us. Different colour some of them, but still ... and now technology allows us to talk to someone who is there at the same time, cheaply. Except it's not the same time. It's the middle of the afternoon there and it is early morning here—and it is spring ... tra-la-la ... but it is autumn here.

We were eager as beavers to allow science and technology to tell us all sorts of things and we believed them all. We watched the flower of the enlightenment turn into the rotting fruit of neoliberalism. We had nothing left. We held the dust of what was in our hands. We were bereft.

What is needed is a completely new way to think about all the things and what it is to be a human being. We have to forget everything we think we know and everything we think we understand and everything we believe in and everything we feel, and begin from scratch, with nothing. No assumptions, no assertions, no facts, no frameworks, no standards, no non-negotiables.

*Ah, peace at last.*

*What am I?*

*How do I begin to think about that if I've let go of all my assumptions and assertions?*

*How do I even know if this is where I should begin?*

## Two

I was born stupid<sup>1</sup> and short-armed, but apart from regularly reminding me of my short arms, usually in an annoyed way when she was making me try on a coat in a shop, or a jumper, and the sleeves were too long, my mother never tired of telling people how intelligent I was. And like most people I guess, I just assumed that parents always spoke the truth. So I worked out how to roll up my sleeves and create the impression of intelligence, mostly by looking thoughtful and sad. The latter was easy enough since I was sad most of the time. My hamster died and we buried it with a little ceremony in my grandmother's garden and I dug it up again a week later to see if it had turned into a skeleton yet. A few weeks later by way of consolation I received a kitten I named Kees after one of the workers who was digging up the street. I chased Kees around the house for hours on end until she had a fit and passed out. My father revived her by moving her little paws backwards and forwards across her chest. And then, when I was nearly six, he left me and my mother for a younger woman with bigger breasts.

It took me a long time to work out that my mother was wrong and that parents are capable of saying things that are not true. For example my father was an inveterate liar and a great practical joker. He loved the idea that a child would believe anything you said. Once he told me that chewing gum was made from old bicycle tyres. It was not until I was thirty years old that I

suddenly realised this was not the case. It's not that I actively believed for a quarter of a century that chewing gum is made from old bicycle tyres. It's unlikely that I gave it any thought at all, but my five-year-old self had stored it in the part of my brain responsible for the things about which there is no doubt. And when I accidentally bumped into this 'fact', he'd been dead for more than ten years. It was like the last pocket money cheque he sent me (which arrived the day after I got home from his funeral), only funnier.

### Three

I went to a talk this afternoon by this guy. He is asking us to believe that Australia is in a different universe!

Well figuratively speaking he's right of course. I mean kangaroos! Hellooooo! And Tony Abbott! Do you know who that is? A guy like that would evaporate in Europe. He wouldn't be able exist. It is not possible. And what about Derryn H—

I've stopped listening.

No no, he clearly said: this is not a figure of speech. He was actually asking us to believe it. Believe me, he said, I know. I was there for nearly forty years. I went there when I was twenty and then, when I was almost sixty, I came back. And I'll tell you this for nothing. Australia is an entirely different one of the ten to the power of five hundred universes.

*yes australia is another universe. there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say to console someone on the phone. what they need is for you to be there, to see your tears, and they need you to see their tears. you need to be in the abyss together and hold hands or hug and say: "You must go on. I can't go on. You must go on."*<sup>2</sup>

### Four

My father loved to laugh and he loved to make people laugh. I think that's why my mother fell in love with him. I, too—too often—reach for a joke. The problem with him was that he also loved a drink or three and my mother didn't drink, nor did my grandmother, nor anyone else in her family. Drinking was disapproved of. This would later turn into a problem for everyone. But his alcoholism was still in its early stages when he married my mother, and it's easy to hide your drinking from people who don't drink: it's just not within their realm of possibilities that you would go to a bar after you kiss them goodbye at the end of the evening, instead of going home to go to bed and sleep.

My father was known as 'De Blauwe Buik' or Blue Gut on account of his girth. 'Blauw' is the equivalent of drunk-as-a-skunk in Utrechts, the local dialect. It's also a reference to the dark-blue uniform worn by the police who employed him, although after a few years he became a plain-clothes cop and managed to land the job of enforcing certain by-laws. One of the laws was ensuring that the fireworks that are sold here in the last months of the year for use on New Year's Eve contained no more explosive than they should. Some of the confiscated fireworks found their way into my eager hands, much to the consternation of the local residents who were subjected by the then unscrupulous me to serious explosions in their letter boxes and the

common stairwells of apartment buildings. But his favourite task was making sure that his favourite bars closed on time when he was on night duty. As long as he was drinking there, they could stay open without fear of prosecution.

Most of what constituted his beat, the railway station and the streets surrounding it, were demolished to make way for a brutalist shopping centre and a mass of grey soulless buildings that are now themselves having to make way for other, shinier but equally soulless buildings, just as they were beginning to be somewhat softened by familiarity.

As for the old town, where the buildings and streets remain more or less as they were for centuries, in the old shops, instead of bread and secondhand books, they now sell fashion—or interesting objects, old and new and new-but-made-to-look-old; and things from dead people's houses; and all the banks have been turned into restaurants where extraordinary food experiences can be had.

You might say the family on my father's side were street smart, always looking for a way to turn situations to their advantage and succeeding for the most part. For several centuries they made a good living running one of the inns in the centre of town where you could change your horses, have a meal and get a bed, as well make use of a range of less savoury services. But the family on my mother's side spent their lives cleaning other people's houses, working in the fields, and wishing they were just a little bit more intelligent and well read and less poor—and pretending that they were. So this is where I got my gift. I just did what everyone else did. This stood me in good stead when I moved to an English-speaking country where, when I had little or no idea what was being said. I did what migrants across the world have done for centuries. I tried to look intelligent and act as if I understood, by nodding and smiling. And generally it worked pretty well. I only got caught out a few times. Not many people are game to challenge other people's understanding; if it seems like you do (or should) understand, most people assume that you do.

## Five

*“what's the first question?” i say into the voice recorder.*

*the first question is not 'what can i do?' but 'are you able to do anything? are you capable of action? do you have agency? autonomy?' note: i don't say freedom, i sing it (à la Richie Havens at Woodstock at the end of a three-hour set, like a mantra) 'freedom... freedom... freedom' but i won't use the word in a conversation. i am sad to say the meaning of the word 'freedom' has expired, it has been corrupted by capitalism and neoliberalism and third-rate right-wing politicians whose every other word is freedom—and one of the most odious is here, in this bloody country. but at least he is not the president.*

*what's the second question?*

*wait. there is also the other part of the first question.*

*the dark side of the first question...*

*are you able not to do?*

*are you able to not do what you must not?*

## Six

You might say *this*, right here, is my undoing. What was undone here, what was imposed on what exists, I somehow carry with me—if I can be said to exist. During the four decades of my disappearance, in London, Sydney, Hobart, Newcastle, Wagga Wagga, Melbourne, I continued to thinkfeelknow as if those spaces, these details, were still there somehow.

Unlike the ones that stayed behind, I had not been confronted each day with the objective reality that soon after I left they had demolished most of the parts of the city that still live in me. Because my mother worked until six I was able to roam the streets in the hours after school and I loved to stand in places like the post office and the station and watch people come and go and smell the well-worn leather briefcases and darned socks, and cumin-cheese sandwiches and currant buns and hard-earned cash in the pockets of the travellers and see the way the sun came through the curved windows and fell on the steel guard above the tickets counter, and the peculiar instability of the light emitted by neons that spelled C-H-A-N-G-E.

During my first year back here I walked the streets, bereft. I kept hearing the voice of my grandmother, clear as day, saying the street names—if I talked to her, I could almost bring her back—and seeing Saskia G, who lit up every room she walked into in 1972, waiting for a bus or crossing the road and going into Subway.

## Seven

*the funeral is in what they call a 'mourning centre' here, in the woods of the far north—i am from australia, but in this small country which is my motherland that means a mere two hours away. the cousin i've been avoiding since i arrived because his wife is a racist schoolteacher who teaches non-white children has been co-opted into driving my mother and my brother and me to the funeral since i don't have a car. i fell out with the wife when she proudly recounted telling a mother who was speaking moroccan to her friend that 'in the netherlands we speak dutch'. "who are you to tell people which language they should speak?" blah blah. can you imagine the rest of the conversation?*

*when we get out of the car i wonder if there is anywhere in the southern hemisphere where you can experience this unmistakable indolic smell, maybe in a Tasmanian forest? it's not decay but it's close. something is dead but it's still capable of doing something, of having an effect, like the body in the coffin over there.*

*"Perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story. (That would surprise me, if it opens.) It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don't know, I'll never know: in the silence you don't know."*<sup>3</sup>

*many words are spoken, not many of them ring true—people are addressing the coffin and using the word 'you' when referring to the dead man. i don't know who they are: they are his*

*people and i didn't see him for thirty years—and then his wife gets up to speak. the silence doubles. in her black shiny shoes which squeak as she makes her way to the front, are pink shoelaces. she is clearly an experienced public speaker, quite comfortable in front of a crowd and it is a crowd—there must be more than two hundred here. some of us know that all was not well in the marriage but most don't. you wouldn't expect her to refer to this in her speech but she does. she reads a poem she wrote. there is a moment, when everything stops. time stands still. she mentions the wind, there was a sudden breeze in the room, she said, and that's when she realised she is alone now, he is gone. she resists alluding to the supernatural and i am grateful, but she cannot resist repeating the line about darkness and light, which is actually the weakest image in the poem.*

## **Eight**

I ceased to exist in my motherland in 1972, but when I speak Dutch no one can tell [I'm not from around here](#). My problem is I don't have fluency. When I try to have a conversation about poststructuralism or ontology or subatomic particles, what comes out is a trickle, stumbling, awkward. But here I am in easy conversation with an old man (slowly) walking a small bulldog.

I just about gave myself a hernia cycling to the other side of the city on my fold-up bike to see if the house my father lived in is still there. I've resisted buying a proper bicycle, as an act of refusal to become more like a normal Dutch citizen. The bike is a little rusty but it gets me around, albeit in an undignified and uncomfortable way. And I have to peddle twice as much as a normal Dutch citizen because the wheels are quite small.

The man tells me he's lived here since 1965. I ask about the church I was hoping to see. At around the time he came to live here I fell off the wall surrounding the church playing soldiers and broke my arm in three places.

I know for certain the church used to be right here but there is a difference between one person knowing something and another person, who has been here more or less continuously the whole time, knowing it too and saying so. This is where language and culture begins. This is where the intricate entanglements of meaning which constitute, with one or two other minor additions, the entirety of our humanity, originate.

The small bulldog is growling and straining on the leash. He was expecting to be home by now and he doesn't understand the delay—or perhaps he does, but he doesn't care for it. The man tells me he's seventy-eight—or was it eighty-seven? They say the numbers the other way around, starting from twenty-one, they say one and twenty. He may have said seven-and-eighty or eight-and-seventy. I tend to hear and remember the numbers back to front and I am forever dialling wrong numbers and giving too much or too little money to shopkeepers who regard me wearily.

The real problem with life (and living) is that it is entirely relational. What one's 'life' is consists entirely of phenomena—and relata, relationships between things, whether living and/or sentient and/or conscious, or not, and intra-actions<sup>4</sup>. What this means is that the 'self' and one's 'life' are, if not actually one and the same, then an inseparable unity—the self is relational. But we think of our lives/selves as a more or less stable object that exists for a certain period in time, regardless of context. But when the relational self, that 'object', ceases to exist in that

particular context, it doesn't make sense to think of it as the same object.

I show the old man the scar on my arm. "This happened there." I point at the approximate spot on the ground where I came to after losing consciousness for a minute or two due to the intensity of the pain. I clearly remember the uncanny feeling of seeing a shard of bone protruding from my arm. He looks with interest at the impressive scar. "It was quite high ... the wall around that church," I offer. "Nou nie eg<sup>5</sup>," he says in perfect Utrechts, a dialect which I now realise requires at least a few missing teeth to pull off. I spent the best part of the first fourteen years of my life, when I still had all my teeth, trying to unlearn, or at least disguise it. Now I like to turn it on when I'm talking to people who speak what they call Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands<sup>6</sup>, and watch their faces.

We say goodbye, both of us somewhat reluctantly, but he's begun a tirade complaining about the churches disappearing and all the mosques that are being built, so it's time to go. This is what's happening in Europe now. An ordinary conversation in the street on an almost-but-not-quite-spring-like day can turn into a racist tirade at the drop of a hat.

And then it passed. It became a city to live in. It's the city where I live.

## Nine

*you don't see the devil coach horses or the hedgehogs, they mainly come out at night, but they're here.*

*you buy a bird feeder and hang it on the balcony but you don't put any food in it yet. it is too early. there are still plenty of berries and grubs and seeds around. let them forage! a curious koolmees<sup>7</sup> arrives to have a look. she is determined that something to eat can be found. she recognises the shape of the device and its placement and she knows that humans put things to eat in there. or perhaps she doesn't know about humans. she just knows about food and other birds and cats and the stars and the wind.*

*You must go on.*

*I can't go on.*

*I'll go on.<sup>8</sup>*

*it's four o'clock.*

*it's getting dark early now that daylight saving has ended.*

## Epilogue

Saskia didn't become a famous actress as we all thought she would, but a normal Dutch citizen with two big dogs that she loves and nice shoes; she goes on skiing holidays and changes her profile picture often, so Facebook tells me. I wrote her a message but I didn't send it. Who wants to hear a voice from the past?

In a previous version of the world, it was more interesting to be from somewhere else than to

be from 'here'. But now everyone is anxious and afraid and we don't trust people that are not from around here. But where you're from shouldn't matter in the slightest, except to yourself, in your imagination and your dreams and the memories and ideas about places that haunt you. Now, what matters is where you are. And now what matters is whether you accept 'the new normal'.

Hawfinches have come to eat the hawthorn berries.

I left Australia but I'm from Wagga Wagga, I'm from Melbourne, I'm from Hobart and from Dover, just south of Hobart, and I'm from Newcastle and from Sydney, Rozelle, Forest Lodge, Gladesville, Pyrmont, and from London SE2. Most of my dreams are set in Wagga, although it rarely looks like Wagga.

And now I wait for dreams set in the Botanic Gardens and by the Yarra River, with flocks of white cockatoos screeching overhead, in the early morning before it gets really hot.

## Footnotes

1. Apologies to Gerard van 't Reve who began an autobiographical piece with the sentence, "I was born stupid, as my father used to say." As I explain here, what I suffered from was rather the opposite—but it's such a great opening I couldn't resist appropriating the idea.
2. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*.
3. Beckett, *ibid*.
4. These words and concepts are borrowed from Karen Barad and probably I am using them not quite as she intended. See her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.
5. Well, not really.
6. lit. General Civilised Dutch—as spoken by the then Queen and the people who rule the country, and own most of the buildings and all of the money.
7. A great tit.
8. Beckett *ibid*.

## RIP Tincture

*Thank you so much Daniel Young and Tincture for commissioning me to think about what it meant to me to move to the other side of the world for the second time in my so-called life, during my first year back in Europe and to write about it. RIP Tincture. Sadly missed but twenty issues to treasure! A wonderful achievement. And good luck Daniel. Finally, some time to write...*

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



## On the Proper Disposal of Limbs

*by Shastra Deo*

Please

bury it. Mark it  
with stones arranged  
like the constellation of Virgo.

Pelops has no place  
in night skies;  
defer to Demeter

instead. Incineration  
is popular but I want to be able  
to find it again.

Formalin preserves:  
keep it on the mantle  
or send for cleaning

and articulation. The latter, and  
no one can know  
where the flesh goes.

Bury it. I want it whole  
when I light candles and stand  
for séance, step and stagger five

feet like that doomed  
surgeon-soldier, join hands  
with my sisters, and go

dancing.

*Shastra Deo was born in Fiji, raised in Melbourne, and lives in Brisbane, Australia. Her work has appeared in Cordite, Meanjin, Peril, and elsewhere. Her first collection, The Agonist (UQP 2017), won the 2016 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize.*

# John

*by Tristan Foster*

I saw John Berger at Malpensa Airport. He was alone, legs crossed, sitting deep in a lounge chair and reading a book on Goya. A floppy canvas bag by his side. He had been dead for at least six months. The book was clothbound and he leafed through carefully. Lovingly. As if in his hands were original prints and he had all the time in the world.

I sat across from him, a low coffee table between us, a local newspaper open in my lap. On one page was a story about children being bombed in Syria, on the other was the photo of a small boy covered half in dust, half in blood, and surrounded by ruins. His stoic gaze was terrifying. Any shock he felt had already faded. This was just a setback, another one, the latest of many. I couldn't decide if the tragedy here was that he had been in a bomb blast or the idea that this was one of a string of tragedies in his brief life.

I closed the newspaper and folded it in half. Slid it under my seat so it was out of my sight. John's hair was white but woolly, thick enough to grab. Eyes you could trust. He reclined in a pose that was clearly familiar to him, hunched but relaxed, the book in his large hands propped against his thigh; his reading pose.

So I wouldn't be caught staring, I snapped the elastic off my notebook and uncapped a pen. Flicked to my meeting notes, pretended to scan. The mood in the boardroom had been a curious mix of extreme formality and lightness, as if everyone was waiting for the solemnity of business to be lifted so there could be smiles and small talk. The Chair of the meeting was a woman, middle-aged, blonde streaked hair cut short, long fringe obscuring her eyes. Stern, spoke with her hands. One of her eyes, the most obscured, seemed darker than the other, maybe from blindness, maybe just a deeper colour. Another senior delegate had prepared a PowerPoint presentation but there were technical difficulties and it couldn't be shown, which seemed to bring relief. When I understood where the meeting was going I spent the rest of the time trying to resolve the enigma of the eye. The Chair mistook this attention for interest and often answered questions put to her in my direction.

I dodged the end-of-meeting drinks and caught the lift to the lobby with Mark Willems, the man who had prepared the failed presentation. We exited the blue-green tower and stood on the street in the late twilight, him telling me about pottery. This region was a centre for ceramics in the ancient world, did I know? I could feel the building above us, the tower towering, hostile, mad at me and the world for its algae complexion. Up there was policy and budgets and hand wringing. A slippery, barely concealed contempt, even. Down here this man, his tart coffee breath, his high forehead spotty, spoke about how he found pottery to be meditative, despite it being a dying or even dead art. I could tell he was just happy to have the attention of a young woman. It's all dead art, I wanted to say, but didn't, just nodded and grimaced before reaching out for a taxi. From the moment the door closed, the driver began speaking at me. Heavily accented. He honked and zigzagged across busy roads, accelerated through narrow alleys, jammed brakes, and spoke the entire time. I grabbed my necklace; the desire to slap over Mark's cold, damp vases and cups rose in my chest, up my throat. It occurred to me, then, fleetingly, the way that a thought skips across our awareness like a flat stone, that the world had been picked clean of generosity.

While I watched John—Mr Berger? Johnny? JB?—turn through the Goya book—like he knew the pages well and nothing could surprise him—I imagined Mark at his pottery wheel, shoes and socks cast off but suit pants still on, singleted, a hangdog expression on his face and cigarette hanging from his lips. Who was I thinking of? Pollock. The black and white video of him working at a canvas on the floor of his studio. The squint and grin of the troubled man—the reverse time bomb. A man about to implode. This was imprecise. Mark Willems was not troubled. In fact, I'd barely noticed him in the meeting.

The Syrian boy—would being that close to the blast not also have deafened him?

I'd inadvertently booked into a hotel in the suburbs, far away from the centre of town. It was pink-walled, kitschy. My room had a view of planes taking off; when the jet lag kept me awake I sat up to watch them, listening to their stormy rumble and guessing where they were going. Bora Bora, Albuquerque, Ulaanbaatar. The sight filled me with a profound melancholy which I took with me into sleep. On my first day in the city I stepped away from the laptop to attempt a tour of the neighbourhood but found only a dusty convenience store and an empty internet café. A butchery, two sleepy pig heads in the window. Cuts of meat. Salamis hanging from racks. Stray cats waited out front, each flicking a tail tip and eyeing me lazily. I was trying to lure one in when the siren of a police car erupted over my shoulder, making me jolt, as if what I was doing was criminal. I watched it speed away, then decided I'd seen enough.

I knew of John because of an ex-boyfriend. Actually, several years together meant he was more than that—a partner. Isn't that what they say? Polite acknowledgement we were unmarried yet the electricity of the relationship's early days had dissolved. That there was something transactional about it. He'd bring books to my flat and soon had a stack on his side of the bed. On long weekend mornings we threw the curtains open, made bitter coffee and passed these books back and forth. Something by John was always in the pile. Poetry, too.

The window had a view of the neighbouring apartment block, suntanned brick, the balcony directly across. A lady would appear, fat cheeks, kerchief over her hair, bundle of wet washing under her arm. While she pegged the clothes to the line, she looked into our bedroom. Looking in at us looking out. I assumed she could see us, disheveled and very nearly naked; her tight-lipped expression never changed and so it was hard to tell.

Those had been simpler times. I worked at the energy plant—no overseas trips to discuss bullet-pointed environmental impacts in PowerPoint presentations that didn't work. Every lunchtime I went to the breakout room to eat. I sat at the back; the plant workers, almost radioactive in their glowing high vis, were usually done with their meals by the time I got there. The breakout room had a television and most days they watched surfing, the blue wave sometimes catching its rider, other times not. There was some disagreement—a few of them thought the surfing was improved, that it was more hypnotic, with the sound off. This was what they argued about, whether the sound should be on or off. They fought for the remote control, grabbing at it and wresting it from each other, holding it high in half-seriousness, each trying to have their way as cool, conditioned air swept our necks like the wash of broken waves.

The old ball and chain, they also say.

One day he told me he was leaving. No reason, just was. Whispered an apology. We stared at each other in silence, waiting for something to wedge itself between us. I wanted to say no, this

was what we were doing and it had to continue. It was not for us to choose. When he left carrying a bag of his belongings I went to the bathroom and saw in the mirror that my lip was bleeding from biting down on it. These were the things he'd tell me, that I was staring, biting my lip, drawing blood. His responsibility; mine was to tell him he'd missed a spot shaving, had cream on his earlobe, poppy seed in his teeth. I knew then things had shifted.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I went out onto the balcony and repotted the rosebush. No gloves, no seat, just my bare hands and my knees pressing into the hard tiles. I spilt dirt everywhere and kept having to interrupt thoughts of never doing this or that again by reminding myself of something my mother once said when I was a child: men either leave or they never leave but should have left. It was a rare moment of insight from the woman, a fleeting drop of the guard. She was talking about my father, who never left but should have absconded one night and not come back. Escaped to the tropics where he could laze under the yellow sun in a slouched hat and shorts that exposed the wispy hair on his legs. We waited for the day we would wake up to a post-it note goodbye. Instead, he stayed and wrapped his car around a tree one Easter while I was flying back from Norway. It was one of the first meetings I attended; my minders took me to an abandoned whaling station on a brown stone beach. It was banded with a long white path of whale bones.

My dreams were about him for a long time afterwards. Of, in fact, both men. Dreams in which everything turned out differently. Why else do we dream.

In his essay on Goya, John imagines the moment in which the artist's wife dies. Goya is outside, sketching the gardener at work and tending to a print drying on the clothesline—in other words, making art.

“Do you know how much is unforgivable?” Goya says. “Do you know there are acts which can never be forgiven? Nobody sees them. Not even God.”

*Tristan Foster is a writer from Sydney. His short story collection Letter to the author of the Letter to the Father is forthcoming from Transmission Press. He is also a co-editor-in-chief at 3:AM Magazine.*

## She Dreams of Leaving His Country—1963

by Jane Williams

I dream it this way—we will leave  
his country with its thick skinned skies,  
the toil of making frayed ends meet.  
Let someone else eat every part  
of the pig but its grunt. Where I'm from  
oranges are no more exotic than potatoes  
and sunshine softens even the hardest  
edge of longing. That's where we'll settle.  
Wed before I'm showing; those first few weeks  
struck from the calendar, wallpapered over  
in pea green and saffron. No family  
but a few close, close-mouthed friends.  
How we'll laugh at TV's The Housewife  
of the Year as if the joke could be on anyone  
but us, anyone but me. Buckley's.  
Instead we will learn how to cook together—  
inventive dishes with unguessable origins.  
This will be the beginning. Good luck to us.  
I will translate Bodgies and Widgies, teach him  
how to jive. He will sing the baby asleep and me  
awake, the lilt of his voice only ever tender.  
Our children will love and outlive us—  
*Sorry for your troubles* never reaching our ears,  
our hearts, never once meant for us.

*Jane Williams is an Australian writer based in Tasmania. Her poetry has been widely published and anthologised since the early 1990s. She is the author of six collections of poetry. While best known for her poetry, Jane enjoys writing in a variety of forms and genres for adults and children, combining photographic images with creative writing, and collaborating with other artists. Jane has been a featured reader at venues and festivals around Australia and in countries including Canada, the USA, Ireland, Malaysia and the Czech Republic. In 2016 she held a three month artist residency in Slovakia where she worked on her most recent collection Parts of the Main.*

# Hijol Trees

by *Laura McPhee-Browne*

—for *Indira Goswami*

They broke up twenty-five months ago. She counts each one lying in bed with her feet up on the wall, head towards the foot, for circulation. Sometimes the dried-out grief in her chest becomes fire. She doesn't know how to put the fire out; only that if she blows at it she makes it stronger.

Yesterday she looked at photos of him with her mother and they let themselves weep, just a little, as if they were sores. She blew at a cup of rooibos with too much honey and her mother peered and peered until she held up one photo longer than the others. It was a photo she had taken of him in Bombay. He was standing in front of a strong, intricate tree; the type of tree you would imagine nests were built in. His face was wide, mountainous. He was standing as if about to sway. She hated the way her mother wanted to tell her what the tree was called. She went to her room and lay: bored, hollow, hungry. She masturbated to porn on her smart phone, she slept.

How well she remembers some of his ways, the words he used when he was silly, or sad, or when they curled together close in the low, grim bed. Other things she can't remember at all, like why she fell out of love with him. He once told her she didn't understand. Only once, and she still thinks that other couples tell each other that all the time. Her friend Stephanie tells her boyfriend Cole that he doesn't understand her when they all go for pints—just places it out there on the table, and seems proud of what she has done. Cole doesn't mind. If she had said anything like that to him, back then, even in the stark of their aloneness, he would have been so ashamed. She doesn't understand any of that now anyway. She just wishes that things mattered when they happened, instead of weighing nothing like air in the moment, and crashing down on you later, when you were raw and cold. Rounded, crumbling bricks dropped square on your heart. Wasted feelings, so big they really hurt.

Once you have missed someone, you are missing someone; once someone you love has gone missing, you learn how many other people are missing too. She wonders why they don't announce every single missing person on national television. She would commit their precious faces to memory, watch out for them wherever she went. She knows how spiked and lucid the pain is.

## §

When she knew for sure that he had really gone, and that no one at all knew where he was, she flew back to India and laid her head against every Hijol she found. It was stupid, and she had no appetite left to eat but she would have vomited up her uselessness if she could have. Some of the trees spoke to her briefly. He had last been seen in Toronto, but she felt he had wanted to nest home. They confirmed this, in tired cloudy voices made of leaves. She stayed for four short weeks and saw him everywhere.

*Laura McPhee-Browne is a writer and social worker from Melbourne. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as Meanjin, Overland, Seizure, The Suburban Review, LiNQ, Tincture Journal, Scum Mag, and Verity La. She was highly commended in both the Rachel Funari Prize for Fiction 2016, and the Hope Prize 2016. She is currently working on two things: a novel about two Australian girls in Toronto, and a collection of 'echo' stories inspired by the short fiction of her favourite female writers. You can find her at: [lauramcphuebrowne.com](http://lauramcphuebrowne.com).*

## **We Cannot Trust the Subtitles**

*by Carmen Leigh Keates*

*After Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev*

As I watch, aware that we cannot trust  
the subtitles, I know I must listen to the Russian  
as if the Russian were a herb laid on a wound  
and that the meaning, like a healing-over, will come slowly.

The horse enters the burned cathedral as if it is not a horse  
as we understand but someone come to say:  
*This is the day I will help you.*

*I'll teach you how to sniff out food. You place one foot, then sniff,  
then walk one more step and sniff again.*

*Survival is accuracy. So this time,  
you'll listen to me.*

And what does Andrei do but see the horse  
as another soul? He lets it cross  
the boards unfronted though he, like us,  
does not understand Horse.

*Carmen Leigh Keates won the 2015 Whitmore Press manuscript prize, leading to the publication of her debut poetry collection, the cinema-themed Meteorites, which was shortlisted for the 2017 QLD Literary Awards. Carmen has a PhD in writing from UQ and with the assistance of the Australia Council for the Arts, she travelled in 2016 to Scandinavia to research new work. Carmen is co-editor of Foam:e online poetry journal.*

# Chumi Falls Out

*by Barry Lee Thompson*

Late Monday afternoon, and it was turning into one of those weeks for Chumi. His boss asked to speak to him about an email that had been sent round the office in error earlier that day. He said the tone of the message had been inappropriate. Somewhat abrasive, he suggested. He asked Chumi if he'd been drinking. "Just a half at lunchtime," Chumi lied. His boss said he was disappointed. Disappointed to the extent that he looked down at a piece of paper on his desk instead of saying anything further. Chumi stood up, said he was also disappointed, and left the room.

Chumi sat at his desk and stared at the computer screen. His colleagues tried to offer advice on how to deal with his boss. "He'll forget about that email soon enough," they told him. "Just stay out of his way for a while," they said. "I don't care if he never gets over it, the cunt," said Chumi. They didn't offer any more advice. No one spoke to Chumi for the rest of the day.

The following morning, things were much worse. His boss wouldn't even look at him. The colleagues skirted about and smiled weakly, in non-committal ways. Chumi felt he'd been put into some kind of dog's house. His response to this was to become more withdrawn. This grew throughout the day. When he was leaving the office that evening, he'd had enough. He waited at the doors and when no one paid any attention he shouted at his colleagues to fuck off, the lot of them. Then they looked over, and the whole office was quiet.

On the way home, he called into his favourite bun shop. The old woman who owns the shop was working behind the counter. She gave him three red bean buns, but one of them looked flat and pallid, a sad cold thing. "What the fuck is this?" he said to the woman. She smiled weakly and rushed out to the back to grab her daughter to come and figure things out. He saw the daughter looking through in a puzzled way. But he was too hungry to wait for a resolution, so he picked up the buns in their brown paper bag and left the shop.

When he got home he ate the buns quickly, including the pallid one. But he ate them too quickly, and this upset his chemistry and made him feel as if life were happening through a slab of smoky glass. He drank two cups of strong unsweetened black tea to chase the fats and the sugar in the buns.

He sat around the flat in his underwear for the rest of the night, watching cheap and nasty television. He'd tried reading one book after another but had felt disconnected from everything he saw on the pages. And he didn't write anything that night for the first time in months. He'd fallen out with books, with words, with poetry. It was turning into a particularly bad week.

He stayed up so late that it was light outside when he finally set his alarm and put himself to bed. After only an hour's sleep he telephoned in sick. His boss said he hoped that Chumi was feeling better soon, and that he should take as long as he needed to get well. His boss seemed understanding, too understanding, and spoke quietly and carefully as if Chumi were infirm.

Chumi stared at the phone for a while after the call ended. Then he called back and told his boss that the reason he was sick was because of his job, and that he didn't think he'd feel better



anytime soon. He couldn't really imagine ever feeling better, he said. Not at that moment. His boss said that Chumi should get plenty of rest, and keep in touch about his condition. Chumi asked him what condition, but there was a click on the line and the connection was dead.

He went out for a walk. There was a group of ducks on the river, near the wetlands. One of the ducks swam towards him. He told it to fuck off, and it moved away. He sat on the edge of the river with his legs drawn up, hugging his knees. It was a warm morning, so he took off his shoes and socks. His socks were slightly damp where his problems had seeped out through the soles of his feet. He dangled his feet in the water. The ducks swam away, far from the slick of worry on the water.

The fisherman with the hat smiled, but Chumi didn't feel like being near the fisherman today and so he didn't acknowledge him. He just stared across the water at the large houses on the other side, and he fell out even more than usual with the people who lived inside them. He hated those people with their cars, their investment properties, their shiny children and the private schools they attended, and all their wholesome family plans, and the topics they smiled smugly over at dinner parties that stank of wine and linen and roasting meat.

He put his shoes back on but without his socks. He threw the socks into the river. "Look: two fish," he said to the fisherman, pointing to the socks floating away.

He walked further along the river, to the old meat packing factory. Two men were having sex inside one of the disused buildings. It was cool and dim in there. He watched them from the doorway for a while. When they finally noticed him, one of the men started grunting for dramatic effect. But Chumi was in no mood for grunting. He told the men he was going to call the police if they didn't put their filthy cocks away. "Is that you, Chumi?" the grunter said. "No it fucking isn't," said Chumi, and he moved out of the building.

He visited the café where he usually had thin overheated black coffee and sweet egg toast on the weekends, and this time, for the first time ever, the women in the café were friendly. They smiled, their eyes sparkled, and they asked him if he was enjoying the day. He thought that perhaps he was witnessing a mid-week attitude. "It's too late for all that now," he said. They looked at each other. He drank his coffee quickly, burning his tongue on purpose. Another customer was watching him from over the top of a battered paperback. Chumi wanted to grab the book from the man's hands and toss it onto the floor and stand on it. He told the customer the coffee in the café always tasted filthy, like old dishwater, and then he walked out, taking the sticky toast with him. He felt the women and the other customer watching as he walked away.

His best friend telephoned. Chumi wanted to throw his phone onto the ground to silence it, but he didn't. "Is everything okay?" the friend said. "They told me at your work that you were sick." "I am sick," said Chumi. "Sick of it all." "What's wrong?" his friend said. "Just leave me alone," said Chumi, and ended the call. Then he changed his mind. He imagined his friend wondering why the call had ended that way. So he called them back. "I'm sorry," he said. "Ignore how I spoke just now. I'm not myself today. I'll call you tomorrow, or the day after. We'll talk then."

He arrived home. His neighbour offered him a lemon from the tree in his front yard. Chumi took the fruit, sniffed it and said that it smelled old. "Old and fusty," he said. His neighbour looked confused. "Fusty, I said," said Chumi, wondering if there was such a word. "I bet it's all

dried-up inside,” he said. “It’s no use to anyone, this lemon.” He threw the lemon into the road. It almost hit a passing car. “You’re driving too fast!” he shouted at the car. The car stopped. “Cunt,” said the driver from the open window. Chumi moved towards the car. The car drove off.

Inside, he closed the curtains and sat on the couch. The room smelled of all the people that had ever lived there. And he’d never been happy with the couch. It had come with the unit, and was too big for some things, too small for others; too wide, too high, too hard, too soft. Too fucking too. He moved into the kitchen, spilling spores of bitterness on the hallway carpet as he walked.

He stood at the window in the kitchen, hating this and hating that. Falling out with the lot of it. He made coffee. Now we’re talking, he thought. This tastes the way coffee should taste. He took it to the table and sat with his hands wrapped round the cup, as if he were cold. And although it was a warm afternoon, he did feel somewhat chilled. Perhaps it was because he was thinking about the friend who’d called earlier, and about his next-door neighbour Pino and his lemon tree. And the duck, the fisherman, the people in the cafés, the men having sex. He wondered if the fisherman would greet him the next time he was at the river. There was so much to think about, too much, so to manage it all he compiled a list of his thoughts so he wouldn’t lose any of them, and then he checked it over before closing the notebook.

He liked this quiet and contained situation, sitting at the table, drinking decent coffee. He heard a clock ticking faintly, but there was no clock, in the kitchen or anywhere. Maybe it’s in my mind, he said aloud. Maybe it *is* my mind, ticking slowly, keeping time.

He finished the drink. He stared at the brown stain at the base and sides of the cup. He made more coffee. This time, he left the cup on the bench and went to the window.

Outside, on the steps of the disused municipal building opposite, a man was sitting with his elbows on his knees, smoking and gazing up and down the lane. The man was tattooed blue at his neck and arms. He was alone, and occasionally he looked at the window of Chumi’s kitchen, because Chumi’s place was right in front of him.

Chumi moved to the side in case he might be seen. And then he wondered what was wrong with staring out of a window, his own window, but he kept to the side anyway. On days off and at weekends or early in the morning or late at night, he liked to sit on those same steps of that building, occupied with nothing but smoking and watching the lane and staring over at his own windows.

He washed the cup, dried it, put it away. He sat at the table and opened his notebook again. He’d become tired, and ended up falling asleep with his head on the pages, and when he woke the room was shot through with sodium glare from the streetlamps. He went to the window. The man was gone from the steps. The lane was deserted. He took his packet of occasional cigarettes from the back of the cutlery drawer, lit one and looked around the kitchen. He grabbed his keys and left the unit.

Outside had chilled. He sat on the steps and huddled and shivered and looked towards his own kitchen window. There was a light in the window, as he’d left it. He turned to the wall at the side of the steps and noticed a fresh item of graffiti, a single word near to where the man

had been sitting earlier. It said 'disrupt'. He wanted to find the tattooed man and talk to him about his word choice.

He finished the cigarette and ground it out on the step, left the stub, and walked in the direction of the river. He crossed the wooden bridge, and went a few streets until he was in the neighbourhood of the grand riverside houses and their chichi dinner parties. He moved along from one house to the next, then the next, and then the one after that. On and on, all the houses lined up brightly like ornate creations inside a patisserie fridge.

He came to the front of a huge iced wedding cake of a property, sprawling grandly across its immaculately trimmed lawns. There were five long shiny cars parked along the driveway and on the street immediately outside. There was a porch and beneath its lantern he could make out two people talking and smoking and laughing occasionally in low confident chuckles. The scent of a rich tobacco drifted over from where the people chattered.

Chumi watched from within the shadows, and wondered if there was anything he could do to disrupt this way of life that he was witnessing. There are many ways to make a presence felt, he thought. He could remove all of his clothes, and find some fallen tree branches and light them into a burning torch. He imagined running naked across the front gardens, naked and chanting and carrying the fiery torch high above his head like a beacon, capturing the night, claiming the streetscape. That would upset the peace, remind the houses that there were lives and worlds beyond this street, discomfit the people on the porch and their friends and acquaintances inside the house, take them a little off the way they were feeling right now.

The smokers disappeared inside the house but the porch lantern remained on. Chumi lit a cigarette. He stared long and hard at the house. It was the kind of house where his boss might live. The sort of large, rambling place, exuding confidence, that a person in his boss's position might be able to afford and maintain. A place where there will always be expensive wine and warmth, always an abundance of food; and sometimes laughter, but when the laughter comes it is often hollow. This was a house where the bathroom glints and smells of citric cleaner, and the shirts in the wardrobes are whiter than snow and bone dry.

Maybe they're having a dinner party, thought Chumi. Maybe he's in there right now, the boss, with his wife, and the kids are in bed, and the dinner guests are seated around the dining table. The boss is glancing around the table at each of the assembled guests in turn. He takes up a large knife, and then another knife, and he adjusts his stance as if he's about to perform some difficult and important task, but all he's doing is carving a joint for his guests so that they will all have slices of juicy meat on their plates.

There'd be exactly the right wine for each course, carefully pre-selected. The conversation might occasionally flag a little but in that case the boss will reach inside his mental repertoire for something to talk about, something to regale the table with. It is effortless and confident, this pulling of conversational gambits out of the hat, because enough happens in the days of such people to furnish a flowing conversation. "Oh yes," he'll say at one point, raising his eyebrows and sliding the cork out of the bottle of wine like he's taking his dick out of his wife after ejaculating. "Oh yes, let me tell you about a situation with this fellow at work. Chumi, he's called. I can tell you this because you're unlikely to ever encounter him. The other day he lost it in the office. Such a carry on! Unprofessional conduct: drinking too much, that sort of thing. He's slipped off the conveyor belt. Lost the plot of life, so to speak. He never had much of a

grasp in the first place. I had to take him to one side, have a quiet but firm word and send him home.”

The lying cunt, thought Chumi. There was no sending home involved—he’d gone of his own accord.

“So he went away with his tail between his legs,” says the boss, and here his wife has a look on her face that the boss can’t see because he’s not paying her any attention, because he doesn’t care what she’s doing, because she doesn’t really matter to him or the show that he’s putting on for the dinner guests. It’s a good job that he can’t see the wife’s expression because it’s not an adoring look that it carries. She’s let the mask slip because she’s tired, and it’s a look she has of being not quite sure if this is the way that one should conduct a good life. It’s a look of regret for the life she has constructed with this person who talks in unkind ways about the people he works with. “I told him to get his act together,” says the boss, and having poured the wine he begins to place slices of carved meat onto the plates that his wife has warmed in the oven and brought to his side. “Just between ourselves,” he says, looking directly at his best friend’s wife who he flirts with every time he’s had a few, the one who he’ll kiss on the ear and whose arse he’ll touch at the end of the night, “I think he’s headed for a breakdown. It’s only a matter of time,” he says. He begins to pass the loaded plates around the table. Soon they will eat the meat and chew the meat and the warm greasy mixture of blood and fats and juices will dribble down their wobbling chins onto the table cloth, staining the cloth pink, bright pink, like the insides of the creatures that the meat has come from. “Some people,” says his boss, “just won’t ever be able to handle life. It’s a pity, of course,” he says, glancing at the faces shining in wait, each one eager for its serving of flesh, “but there will always be those who simply don’t fit.”

The guests are either full of wonder and respect for this man who makes a great deal of money and knows how to push people around, or they are feigning adoration because when you’re a guest at someone’s dinner party you have to effect a certain attitude, a certain way of respecting the host.

Chumi considered ringing the doorbell to barge through and give the entire gathering a piece of his mind, a demonstration of physicality, to show them who was really in charge. But of course this wouldn’t be his boss’s house. What a far-fetched imagining! If it actually did turn out that his boss lived in the house, then it would be so enormous a coincidence that Chumi would be forced to admit to the existence of greater powers in the universe than he’d ever acknowledged or thought possible.

He shook off his fancies and turned and left the houses behind. At the corner of the street, he was surprised to see the man with the tattoos from earlier veering towards him. Here is coincidence! thought Chumi. He smiled at the man. He stopped. The man stopped too. Chumi wanted to ask about the fresh piece of graffiti that he’d noticed near the steps of the disused building, and he was getting ready to form a non-accusatory question but the man spoke first. “Toil away, if you choose,” he said, and laughed alarmingly loudly, his eyes rolled back to reveal expansive and swollen whites. “Toil away, toil away,” the man said, and his eyes fell forward so that he was looking right into Chumi’s face. “Or walk away,” the man said and he laughed again. “Walk away, because when you’ve finished everything you have to do, when you’ve finished it all, then ...” He stared widely over Chumi’s shoulder.

“When I’ve finished, what?” said Chumi, hanging onto the words. “What then?”

Then the man smiled and was still for a moment, and then he looked left and right then walked quickly but unsteadily away, laughing all the time. Chumi watched him go. He finished his cigarette and lit another but it tasted strange and he ground it out against the wall. He walked from street to street in the steely night and encountered no one. He sat on the landing by the river for a while. Here a few quiet people came and went like vapours. Eventually he walked home. On the way home he made a decision to go back to work the following morning—or rather, he would return to the office, but not to work. He would show up at his workplace for all the world as if it were going to be a regular and entirely predictable day.

*Barry Lee Thompson writes short fiction. His work is published in Australia and overseas, and has been recognised in a number of literary awards and competitions. The development of his first story collection is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria, and Varuna, the National Writers House. Visit [barryleethompson.com](http://barryleethompson.com) for more information.*

## The Common Sense of Bats

by *Paul Scully*

If you could penetrate the cleft that is shadow  
and depth in the rock-face, you would find

us hanging from the roof of a goblet-shaped cavern,  
in chrysalid pods, at wing-folded rest. Purblind,

you might think, whereas our insight is profound,  
for it resides in our eyes and our ears. Our kind

sends calls to the world that resound on return to flaps of skin  
kitted like drums on the sides of our heads. We unwind

the pitch of the waves that engulf us to explain the terrain.  
We touch the face of the earth, its mien enshrined

in a forested brow, in an eye-lit lake. The stories  
they tell: An inchoate swell? What sings in the land behind

this discourse? What pivots unbidden? Our thought is mating  
and forage, things we can hold: for us, it is no matter, no mind.

*Paul Scully is a Sydney-based poet. His second collection, Suture Lines, was published by Guillotine Press in December 2016. His work had been published in print and online journals in Australia and the USA.*

## Livin' on a Prayer

*Non-fiction by Yen-Rong Wong*

It is a Thursday, and everything goes perfectly. You are your parents' first child, and you are everything they could have asked for. You are your father's favourite birthday present.

I wish your parents good luck. I know they are competent, but they will still need it. Children are finicky, fickle things. You never really know how they will turn out. I know they will try their best, but I also try not to get too ahead of myself.

Your parents ask for advice, and I am more than happy to oblige. Can't give away too many of my secrets, though. There are some things people have to learn for themselves. They must not be afraid to fail—how else would they learn? And they have much to learn.

§

Dear ——

Thank you for the lovely day today. It was a lot of fun. We went to the museum and I saw the whales.

I would like a little brother or sister, if that is possible.

*very good. now it's time for bed.*

§

It is a Friday, and you are in the car, on the way to some strange lady's house. You are a fast learner. You learn hundreds of Chinese characters, your numbers, the English alphabet. You learn to read. You love to read. Your parents have to wrench your books away from you, to tell you not to read at the dinner table, and later on, not to read while you are in bed.

§

Dear ——

Thank you for the books. They are very nice, and good to read. Thank you for the sponge cake, and the chicken soup with the *somen*.

I would like more books, and for my little sister to be less annoying, if that is possible.

*bedtime, now.*

§

You've moved, recently, you, your parents, and your sister. It's a large house, with a pool. Your parents didn't originally want a pool when they were looking for a house, because it would mean a lot of maintenance. But you loved the house, you said it was perfect. They asked me

too, your parents. I don't know that I said anything concrete, but they ended up going for it anyway.

§

Dear ——

Thank you for your help with moving house. Actually, with everything to do with the house. It's been a hard decision, and I—we—appreciate your advice. I know it's further away from the practice and school than I would like, but I truly believe this is the house for us. I also know that it might be more difficult from here on out, so—

I hope you will continue to look after us, just to make sure we're all right. I hope I will do my best by my daughters.

*mama, my tummy hurts!*

I hope you will continue to look after us.

§

The strange lady's house isn't far from yours, down the road that your parents joke is called King's Road, because 國王路 sounds similar to Gowan Road. There is a gate at the front of the house, and you don't really know why you are there. Your parents make you talk to the strange lady, and she tells you about a thing called the abacus. You can do maths on it, she says. She shows you the abacus, then talks to your parents some more.

After you leave the house, your parents ask if you want to go back to learn from the strange lady. You are adamant that you don't like her. There was something about her that you didn't like.

Your parents are amused by your tenacity. They eventually find you a teacher you like. You learn your times tables, you learn how to do maths—you learn how to do maths in your head. Later on, your classmates will consider it some kind of superpower. You shrug. You've practised it, is all. Practice makes perfect.

§

It is a Saturday, and you are going to your first piano lesson. Your teacher's name is Eunice. She teaches you to sit straight, how to lay your fingers on the keyboard. She teaches you the names of the notes, *do re mi fa sol la ti*, and you learn that they correspond to letters, CDEFGAB. She teaches you what they sound like, and that each white key is one of these notes or letters. You learn that there is a treble clef and a bass clef, and later you will learn that there is a tenor and an alto clef as well.

Eunice is just a student herself, but you don't know that. To you, she is an adult. You listen to her, and she teaches you how to read those *do re mi fa GAB* and make them into melodies. She gives you stickers when you do well, and you have a real knack for it. You end up with rows and rows of stickers in your sticker book.



Your parents buy a piano. It is fourth-hand, and ivory in colour. It costs a fortune to move from the old house to the new house. It is a little old and ratty, but you love it. You and your sister will draw on it, make it rattier than it already is. It gets tuned, once, and you get to see inside the guts of the instrument, strings hammers steel wood and all. It is almost hard to believe that you can make music out of it.

You will have three more piano teachers. One will tell you you'll never be good at music because your hands are too small. Another will be recommended to your parents by one of your mother's patients, who comes over and listens to you play. He says you have 天分, which doesn't mean anything to you, except a lot of smiling and a new piano teacher.

§

Dear ——

Thank you for the new piano teacher. She's nice, even while she's strict. I've started learning some music theory, which is very interesting.

I'm sorry for talking over the teacher while she was trying to tell me something. I'm sorry for not going to help my sister when my parents were getting angry at her for backchatting.

Please forgive me.

I would like to be able to get better at piano without practising. I know that's technically not possible, but they keep saying that with you all things are possible. So which one is it? I would also like to get an mp3 player or an iPod. I want to be able to listen to some different music.

§

It is a Sunday, and your family is at church. Church, for now, is a rented school hall—the school hall you sit in every Monday for assembly. Sunday school is located in the school's music rooms, just behind the hall. There are red songbooks distributed at the beginning of every service, and bibles for those who don't have their own, or who have forgotten to bring them along. You like the songs. They make sense to you, even if you can't read all the words. You imagine yourself playing them on the piano.

You learn a song that helps you remember the books of the bible in order, but only in Chinese. That one isn't in the red songbook. You learn the Lord's Prayer in Chinese, and there's a bit there in the middle that's similar to the way some kids sing *el-em-en-oh-pee* in the middle of the alphabet. Later on, you figure out it's that way because of the cadence of that particular sentence.

§

Dear ——

Thank you for school. I don't have many friends, but I'm learning a lot, and having heaps of fun.

Please forgive me for stealing from Mum's purse. I just wanted to be able to buy some stuff of my own. Please also forgive me for stealing from the newsagent, I knew mum would never buy me any of those pens I liked.

I would like to have more friends. Or at least, learn how to make more friends? Or new friends? I've been trying, but I don't really know what I'm doing wrong. Please help me.

§

You are baptised with your sister, in matching red dresses. You are probably six or seven, and you wear a headband with a frog on it. You get a bible for your efforts, one that reads from right to left, one where the pages are tinged with red. *I cannot help but think that was some kind of sign, or at best, some twisted kind of irony. Maybe it was a warning that I was too silly, or maybe just too young, to heed.*

§

Dear ——

Thank you for today, and thank you for the baptism ceremony. It felt a bit strange, with the water and the kneeling, but it wasn't too bad at the end. Thank you for the bible and the food at the end.

Please forgive me for not paying proper attention during the sermon. I know I should have been listening, but reading is just so much more interesting. I was reading the bible, at least? I don't know if that counts for anything.

Please help me to be a good Christian.

*I didn't really know what it meant to be a good Christian, at the ripe old age of six or seven. I don't even know what it means to be a good Christian now. I guess all I can hope for is to be a good person. And I think I am that. At least, I think I try to be.*

§

Your favourite book of the bible is Esther. It makes sense, considering the dominance of masculine figures in the rest of the Old Testament. Sometimes you like Genesis and Exodus, and sometimes even Samuel 上 and Samuel 下. Of the New Testament, you read the gospels, and Revelations. They're the books that have good stories, and you're always up for a good story.

*Dad was the one who taught me how to pray. I can't remember how old I was, but I knew I had to clasp my hands and close my eyes. There's a structure to it, he says.*

**First**, you thank God for all the good things that have happened. They don't have to be particularly special. After all, God does so many wonderful things every day. *Sometimes this seemed so facile. I'd end up saying thank you for the weather, or something equally benign, just because I felt guilty about not being grateful for anything.*

**Second**, you ask for forgiveness. *The implication is: you're a sinner. You must have done something wrong, somehow.* Again, it doesn't have to be anything big.

*you're a sinner.*

**Third**, you ask God for the things you want, or the things you think you need.

§

Dear ——

I don't really know what I'm doing. I don't really know what's happening. I guess—thank you for the food we had today.

I'm sorry for cheating on that Chinese test. I'm sorry for scratching and biting my sister. I'm sorry for skipping out on cello lessons at school.

I would like some help with school, if that's okay. I don't know what I'm doing wrong, I don't know why the other kids won't talk to me. Is it because I spend too much time in the library? Or because I don't like the same things they like? I don't know.

§

You eventually end up reading the bible three times, twice in Chinese and once in English, but all you really remember are the stories. You never forget how to sing the song that lists all the books of the bible, no matter how much you want to forget it. You never forget the Lord's Prayer. *Sometimes a tune from one of those songs we sang in Sunday School will get stuck in my head. I only know the words in Chinese, and it becomes a strange, jarring, linguistic earworm that won't go away. It's a reminder that I will be forever stuck with this version of God, of religion.*

§

It is a Monday, and you have run to the counsellor's office. It is the middle of the day, between lunch breaks, so everyone is inside their classrooms. The school seems empty, like it is on Sundays before and after church. You are clutching one of your exercise books. It is full of your writing, but on this particular day, it is a brief sentence from one of your teachers that has sent you here.

You are trying not to cry. It happens anyway. You are embarrassed, even though no one sees or hears you.

*It is an exercise book that has been turned into something called a 'reflective journal'. Every week we get half an hour to reflect on an event that has happened that week. It's an interesting way to introduce ten- and eleven-year-olds to the idea of conscious introspection—but at the time, it was a chance to write, and I took that chance with both hands.*

You knock on her door and she is surprised to see you. She ushers you into her office, and you see the sandpit that she made you play with in an effort to coerce information about your parents from you. She asks you what's wrong, and you tell her, spluttering and sniffing and wiping away your tears, while also trying to protect your exercise book from getting wet and crinkled. You show her the comment your teacher has made, one that accuses you of being arrogant, and that you cannot make friends because you are socially inept. The counsellor pauses. She tells you that your teacher might be right.

You tell your parents about this, about the bullying. They tell you to pray, and I am pleased. I wait for your prayer.

§

Dear ——

Please help me.

I don't know what to do.

I'm supposed to pray, so this is what I'm doing.

But I've been doing this forever, every night. And nothing has changed.

Please help me.

I want to die.

Is this what having depression means?

Do I have depression?

I don't want to go to school.

§

A couple of weeks later, the teacher that scrawled that line over your writing repeats the same words to your parents. *Look at me now, I want to say. Another part of me wants to be angry, to tell them how much that one sentence fucked me up. I wanted to learn, but not like this.* Your parents are impassive. They tell you to pray.

## §

It is a Tuesday. You wake up, and against the crisp morning air, you realise your father has gone to hospital. He is all right, I wish I could tell you that. But I can't. Or you won't listen. I don't know which one it is.

Your mother tells you what has happened, and you pick yourself up and go to school as usual. You like routines. They keep you in check. You don't tell anyone at school what has happened. After all, family stuff stays private. You keep telling yourself your father is all right, (I know he is), but eventually, you break.

## §

---

I don't know what to do. I thought you were supposed to help. My parents keep telling me to pray, that prayer will make everything all right. But I've tried that, and it doesn't work. It hasn't worked. Maybe I just don't have enough faith, but I don't know where to get more of that. It's not like I can go to a shop and buy some. I wish I could borrow some from mum. She seems like she has enough of it to go around.

## §

It is still Tuesday. For a while it always feels like Tuesday. You go through the motions—sleeping on the ninety-minute bus ride to school, going to classes, studying for exams. When you first visit your father in hospital, he scares you. He thinks he's going to die (he's not going to, not yet), and he makes you promise to look after your mother and your sister. *I know he's fine (or at least, I think I know)—the transplant went well and the doctors are taking good care of him. But I was fourteen. And I didn't know it, but I was battling demons of my own.*

## §

---

If I lie really, really, really still, will I eventually disappear?

I hope so.

I don't want to wake up tomorrow. I wonder how that would feel.

I guess mum and dad and my sister would be upset.

## §

*I think I fall in love for the first time. I convince myself that I've fallen in love. Later on I'll realise that wasn't it at all. He looks after me. He makes me go and see a counsellor, even though I have a severe distrust of counsellors. (That woman basically saves my life.) I ask him if*

*he'll remember me in five or ten years if I die the next day. He replies the only way he can—kindly. I wish I could thank him for his patience, but*

*we didn't keep in touch. He moved schools after that year. Ironically, I don't even know if he will remember me now, and I'm still alive.*

§

---

Fuck you.

Fuck this prayer bullshit.

But I can't stop it.

It's ingrained into me, to ask you for help when I need it.

Fuck you.

§

It is still Tuesday. Tuesday seems endless. You have gotten used to the crying. It happens spontaneously. You don't know how to control it, so you have just gotten used to it. Some of your friends claim that you are attention seeking. Strangely, that doesn't make you cry. It makes you angry. But to avoid emotion altogether, you study. You do more homework, more study, cram your head with numbers and words and characters so there is no space for emotion. *It's the only way I could stand it, the emptiness.*

*But slowly, I found my way back. There was a person there, under the emptiness and the blackness that seemed to stare all the way into my soul.*

§

---

I did this myself, yeah? I did this myself. I got through it myself. I helped myself. None of this is your work. Fuck you.

§

You're growing up, too fast for your parents to bear. *I don't even know if they have noticed—whether it be because of Dad's health, or because they're so focused on maintaining this image of me being the perfect child.* For them, it is heartbreaking. *I wonder if they've noticed I'm not really into this whole religion thing any more.* Even I don't have the heart to tell them.

§

It is a Wednesday, and you have sex for the first time. It doesn't hurt, and you're surprised. It doesn't seem like much of an event, and you're surprised at that too. You think you'd feel it more—not physically, but emotionally, mentally. It has been ingrained in you, after all. No sex before marriage. The idea of the virginal, clean, pure, girl. I feel somewhat responsible for that. Just goes to show that you can't really trust society with anything, no matter how good their intentions are.

*I feel bad for having sex. It was consensual, and it felt fine. Physically, I mean. He was kind, and asked me if I was all right afterwards (though I wish he would have paid that much attention to how I was feeling when my clothes were on). But I felt like I was betraying someone: my parents? God?—though I knew I wasn't betraying anyone at all. I shook it off, after that first time. The next day was my birthday, after all.*

You go home, like nothing has happened. Like you've just gone to uni, as you were supposed to that day, instead of fucking in this guy's mum's apartment. It happens a couple more times with the same guy, and then you move on. I try not to judge, but it's in my nature.

*It happened again, later. The sex, then the guilt. I think I felt guilty for enjoying it, and for enjoying it so much. I felt like I was letting God down, letting my parents down. But I wasn't.*

*I wasn't, right?*

§

It is a Thursday, and you have just told your mother you are moving out on Saturday. She is not impressed—though you expected this reaction. You are growing up too fast, she thinks. She knew you had wanted to leave, but she didn't know it would have played out this way. She says some things she regrets to try and get you to stay, even though she knows that nothing she says will work.

She gets angry, but she is crying. She thinks she's done something wrong, and she lashes out at you. You know she's hurting, and you want to be sympathetic. *But she wasn't there when I was hurting. She refused to listen.* You're being selfish. *But I had to be. I have to be. I knew I had to leave. I had to do this for myself.*

*I was the one who earned the money for the bond, who paid it in advance. I did this myself.*

You're being selfish. It would have turned out so much better, if you'd just let me handle it all. I am not upset, just disappointed. You have no idea how much you have yet to learn.

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## Gone to Mexico

by Alice Allan

After 'The Disappearing Poet' by Anthony Lane, The New Yorker, July 4, 2005

At Weldon's house police found  
wallet/watch/sleeping bag missing  
socks in the sink, a cat called Lonesome.

He'd already bolted Nebraska  
where bats corral pests  
and shucked off New York's hissing Capote

*(Why don't you want to be a success?)*

San Francisco was a new way to hide  
except

*Things are pretty bad.  
I may go to Mexico  
to stay.*

From the lion fish bridge  
maybe it was just a matter  
of walking

answering anyone who asked

*I'm Kees.  
On my way south  
to see the Dance of the Flyers—*

*men dressed as birds  
who climb the World Tree  
and pray for rain by falling.*

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## Alternative Rock

by Nigel Featherstone

It was when I slid The Church into the car stereo that I realised he was still with me. I had been in the Blue Mountains to photograph two young women—twins—who had finished their medical degrees and whose parents wanted portraits to mark the occasion. Although very easygoing, the sisters were physically exquisite, as fine as movie stars. My first thought was to give the images a *Picnic at Hanging Rock* feel, which would not have been difficult since the house, a Victorian mansion, was perched on a rise that was edged with white-trunked eucalyptus trees. But I decided to go with a more traditional aesthetic, one of grand, familial elegance, taking the portraits in the high-ceilinged study of the girls' grandfather, who apparently had been an influential surgeon. The shoot was trouble-free, done by noon, and the family invited me to stay for lunch, which continued into late afternoon. Just before I left, the twins' mother, a striking woman herself, turned to me and said, I had no idea that photographic portraiture was so creative.

It's all about going beyond the surface, I said. Imagination is the key.

My dear, imagination is the key *to everything*.

I agree, I said and smiled.

A moment later she leant into me and said quietly, Are you happy, Sebastian?

What a question, especially when I had only just met the family and had been hired as a professional to provide a professional service.

I said yes, I was happy.

She took a sip of her wine and said, It's just that you look a little ... out of sorts.

I told her that my partner, Justin, had been overseas for a month for work and there was another month before he would return.

I always miss him when he's away, I added.

Oh you poor thing, she said. Do look after yourself.

I spent the next day walking along the edge of the Megalong Valley escarpment, leaving my camera gear in the hotel room—despite the crowds of tourists it was really quite blissful because the sky was clear and there was a hint of spring warmth in the air. I found a café in Katoomba for lunch, taking the opportunity to send Justin a text message: *I hope you're enjoying Prague, but I can't wait for you to be back—the house feels empty. Even my car misses you.* And then, late the next morning, I was on my way home, driving the Oberon back road, relaxed and happy, all things considered. I knew the portraits of the twins would work out well and be appreciated by the family (I had shown the parents the Polaroid test shots and they had nodded enthusiastically) and a day of walking in the bush had been a tonic for the busy year I'd had, including the commissions that had taken me to Bangkok and LA, so I was hardly in a

position to be jealous of Justin's travels, though it was true that I couldn't wait for him to return to our crumbling place in Crookwell.

But then I had slid *Starfish* into the stereo, the opening song 'Destination' was on; the thrum and echo of the guitars. And there he was: Nate Aitken, sitting in the front passenger seat.

It's nice we've crossed paths like this, I said, turning to look at him but only quickly—the back road goes through some dramatically undulating country, and it was so very green, but it's a drive that requires concentration.

I see you've brought some music to listen to, said Nate.

I know that it's a bit of sentimental thing to do, I said, but I chose two old albums to listen to on this trip. I had *Daydream Nation* by Sonic Youth for the drive up, which was wonderful to hear again, and *Starfish* for the drive home. It doesn't sound too shabby, does it, considering it's thirty years old!

Not too shabby at all, said Nate, though in a slightly forced—and condescending—tone, the way he often had, especially in the later years.

The two of us *crossing paths*, to the point that we were in the same car: it was a stroke of luck more than anything else. Nate's sister Ruth, who I still see regularly, even though she, too, is married with a child, had told me that he, Nate, had been commissioned to design the renovations of the original Lithgow cinema, which was being turned into a boutique hotel, and perhaps that might be an opportunity for the two of us to see each other again. How long has it been? Ruth had asked me out of the blue; she had sounded cautious, as if she didn't know what might eventuate by asking the question. Twenty-five years, I'd said in reply. Which shocked us both, but it was the truth: I hadn't seen Nate, the older of the Aitken siblings, since I moved into Justin's place in Canberra back in 1997. After days of contemplating the various scenarios—I even had a dream about it—something clicked, like the way your body can jolt when falling asleep. A text to Nate, saying that if he happened to be in the mountains at the same time as me, well, maybe we should meet up; that would be good, came the response. For some moments I considered those four short words, as if expecting to discover they were untrue. We arranged to meet at 1 pm at the Lithgow cinema, which I imagined to be an almost fanciful Art Deco building, and then I would get him to Goulburn, where Ruth would take him to Canberra so they could spend a few days with their parents—on the drive down from the mountains we could catch up.

It sounds fresh, Nate said now, referring to the CD playing on the stereo.

Then he smiled, perhaps wanting to soften his tone from a moment earlier.

It does, I said. Very much.

The melodic runs of Steve Kilby's bass and his baritone, silky smooth and enticing, the intricate drumming, and Marty Willson-Piper's elaborately powerful guitar work—all of it reminded me of paisley shirts and black waistcoats and skinny black jeans and pointy black boots. But in no way had the music dated, most likely because of the lack of technological trickery that spoils so much contemporary alternative rock (of which I still buy a lot, and hope I always will).

Nate said, Now comes the unmistakable sound of ‘Under the Milky Way’. It’s so familiar, overly so, you could say, but perfect all the same.

And there he went back to being pompous, the pompous though talented and successful architect that he had become, that he was always going to be.

When I met Nate for the first time, in 1987, me eighteen, he seventeen, and a boyish seventeen at that, stick thin and barely shaving, he was a fun-loving, carefree presence. Despite being a conscientious university student, which was something he had tried to hide as much as he could, because, it seemed, no one wanted to be known as a ‘girly swat’, as the saying goes, he was forever making jokes and laughing, always looking for some kind of adventure or lark—one time I came back from getting something to eat at the refectory to find that he had wrapped my studio space in butcher’s paper, which he had spray-painted with the words MAKE ME A MYSTERY LIKE CHRISTO! So often we waggled lectures to go for a drive in the country. Sometimes we would go as far away as the coast, which at the time felt like a different world (compared to Canberra, that’s exactly what it was). We would listen to our favourite albums, something by The Smiths or The Cure or Siouxsie and the Banshees or, of course, The Church, which meant *Starfish*.

*Taking drives into the country: just like we were doing now.*

Being sure to keep my eyes on the road and my hands on the steering wheel to navigate another series of twists and turns, I found myself imagining Nate leaning over to put his hand on my thigh, on the tight black material of my jeans, the jeans that were similar to the ones I used to wear when we were younger. Because I had sometimes done that for him, and he had sometimes done that for me; one time he drove while I played with the back of his neck, with the soft curls of the mullet he had. I didn’t know what I was doing, neither of us did; it wasn’t as though we were hoping it would lead to anything in particular—it just felt like a nice thing to do. And then, in the car, on the Oberon back road, as if he had read my mind, he did it: he leant over the handbrake and gear stick and gently rested his hand on my thigh, just as ‘Under the Milky Way’ was coming to a close. I felt the warmth of his hand, of his fingers and palm, as though it was really just the light of the sun coming through the windscreen.

A moment later I took my left hand off the steering wheel and rested it on the warm, soft, back of his hand. I squeezed his fingers.

He said, You haven’t changed, Seb.

Neither have you, I said.

And neither has this album.

Everything’s the same.

It’s hard to believe, isn’t it.

Yes, but I’m glad we’re doing this.

We drove on like that, one hand resting on another hand that was resting on a thigh, until a severe corner, almost a U-bend, forced me to lift my hand and put it back on the steering wheel. I then decided that for both our sakes I should focus on driving—I'd not driven that road before, not in that direction, and it would hardly be a good outcome for us to die in a car accident after all this time. With Nate's hand still lightly on my thigh (it now felt as though his hand was made of air rather than skin and bones), I reheard what he had said: *You haven't changed*; and my reply: *Neither have you*. Which could not have been further from the truth. We had thirty years of adult living under our belts. No longer do I have enough hair to make the fringe that once hung so low I could get it in my mouth; I shave my head these days. Both of us were heavier, as middle-aged men have to be, though I was grateful to have spent quite a few Sundays during winter riding my pushbike out of Crookwell on the quiet rural roads, and the weekly yoga classes that Justin and I have been doing for a year have made both of us feel more flexible, and lighter, and, yes, younger.

How's Hannah? I said.

Nate lifted his hand from me and then brushed something off his dark-grey pants, which were appropriately professional, being neither casual nor formal.

He said, A bit lost, you could say.

For a moment I found the honesty—even intimacy—of his answer a surprise, but then I realised we had already reached 'Lost', the fourth song on *Starfish*.

How so? I said.

With our son getting older and more independent, Hannah doesn't know what to do with herself. I think she misses being a mother of a young child.

She hasn't worked?

Yes, part-time, in a doctor's surgery. Office administration.

She doesn't want to go full-time?

No. Nate laughed. Bloody women, hey!

There it was: his misogyny, which had always been present, though all those years ago I didn't know the attitude had a name, nor did I know what I was to do with it. If I'm being frank I liked it, because it meant—or at least suggested—that he may not have liked girls after all, that he may have liked me. He *did* like me, that was true, because he had often said to me *I like you*, and sometimes he ramped up the words to *I love you*.

How I loved him back.

If it was a scene in a movie it would be ridiculous, but I swear it is true: on the very first day of Orientation Week I walked into a small faculty room to put my name down for a tutorial group, Basic Design 1, something like that. And there he was, Nate Aitken, standing by himself.

The way I remember it, he smiled—he had a thin face, his eyes a little too close together, but when he smiled it was as though he did it with his whole body—and I smiled in reply and we were friends from that day onwards. *Best friends*. How many months, or weeks, or days, did it take for us to use that phrase in reference to each other? Does the answer matter? And that was something else he sometimes said to me (*did to me*) when, as so often I seemed to be doing, I was going deep into a particular issue, deeper than he thought was necessary: *Does it matter?* Yes, answers matter. Though, as I think about it now, perhaps questions are more important.

How's Justin? he asked as I came to a stop at a set of road works (out in the middle of nowhere) and just as 'North, South, East and West' came on the stereo, the fifth track on *Starfish*, which seemed more than appropriate because by now we had taken so many corners that I barely knew where I was heading.

He's good, I said.

He's into ... fashion, isn't he?

As if Nate didn't know. They had met, not long after Justin and I started seeing each other. The social occasion, a dinner in one of Canberra's popular Italian restaurants, was awkward, the conversation hard-going and tense, but I could not have expected anything else. Despite both Justin and Nate being designers, and both being ambitious, Nate had always been vocally proud of his work, as if architecture was the most important profession in the world, while Justin, who has always worked hard and is unswervingly passionate about fashion, knows that at the end of the day he does nothing more than create clothes for people to wear. Hannah, the woman Nate would marry, was at the dinner, and she was friendly and engaging, but even her amiability could not dispel the friction at the table. Afterwards Justin said to me, I doubt Nate and I are going to be friends—he is such a prat! It was rare for Justin to be negative about someone; within days of us meeting he had said that he liked to focus on the goodness of people. I nodded and said, But he wasn't always that way.

Yes, he's still a fashion designer, I told Nate in the car. It's a bit of a cliché, isn't it. But he's superb at his job, and highly regarded by his peers, and his retail label has become one of the longest-running in Australian fashion history. Our place in Crookwell is almost entirely due to his success.

I guess he can do a lot of his work over the internet these days?

At least Nate was trying to take an interest.

Yes, I said. He restructured his company a little while ago so his role now is as fashion consultant, which he loves. Most of all he enjoys mentoring new designers. He's such a steady, easy-going presence, both at work and at home.

And you take photographs for a living.

You know me, I said, I always had a camera at hand. Still do.

But you would have made such a good architect.

I enjoyed studying it, as you probably can remember, but I didn't actually enjoy the practice

of it. I don't have a practical bone in my body.

Like most architects.

I suppose. But really I just liked taking pictures of buildings, which became taking pictures of people.

I've seen one or two of your photographs, in newspapers.

They have been the award-winning ones, of famous people.

I had wanted to make that statement, perhaps I even *needed* to, in order to make it clear that I had done well as a portrait photographer, at least as well as any other portrait photographer. It was hard-going at first but these days I'm paid handsomely—the parents of the twins in Katoomba won't see much change out of \$5,000 and that doesn't include reimbursements—and Justin's connections, which are global, have helped me to extend and expand my career, even if I rarely do fashion photography because I've never considered myself especially good at it.

Nate said, I just always saw you as being a career architect.

I guess life had other plans.

As is its way.

The stop-go man turned his sign and waved us through.

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'Spark' came on, which is one of the more rock-n-roll tracks on *Starfish*, the drums front and centre in the mix, and it felt appropriate that I turned up the volume. Nate began drumming his hands on the dashboard. Huh: a forty-seven-year-old architect of note pretending to be the drummer in an alternative rock band from the 1980s! But I suppose stranger things have happened.

Just as I came to that rather pedestrian conclusion, Nate said, Turn off.

Sorry? I said.

Pull over onto a side road.

What for?

Where's your sense of adventure?

He laughed then and turned to me and smiled.

I said, I promised your sister that I'd get you to Goulburn by 5 pm.

Plenty of time, he said. Take this dirt road, the one on the left.

Despite knowing that we really didn't have *plenty of time*, I did as suggested.

The dirt road took us through a barren expanse of dairy paddocks that then dipped down to face the western side of the northern tip of the Blue Mountains. We were in unfamiliar territory; the landscape, as spectacular as it was, had nothing to do with Nate and me and the past we had once shared.

Stop here, he said.

I pulled over onto the road's shoulder, hoping there wouldn't be broken glass—the last thing we needed was a flat tyre. Not once have I had to change a tyre, and I doubted I knew how; I also doubted Nate knew how.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car.

We stood at the barbed-wire fence and looked back along the winding road we had already travelled. By now it was 2.30 pm, and daylight savings had not yet kicked in so the shadows were just starting to darken and lengthen; in the afternoon light the paddocks appeared almost unfeasibly green and lush, as though they had been artificially fertilised, and perhaps that was true.

God's creation, said Nate.

He had always been religious, and he'd been raised in a religious family, his father a lay-preacher in one of Canberra's Pentecostal churches. As strange as it may seem, Nate's religiosity was, for me, part of the attraction: I was intrigued by how a talented architecture student, and a fun and funny guy, could have a deeper life, one he kept mostly to himself. Back in Sydney, where I was from, my family had attended church—the sandstone Anglican variety—at Easter and Christmas, but that was it. As a university student in Canberra, however, and testing various waters, I started going to church every week, a Uniting Church not far from the university, Nate often coming with me as support. Sitting beside each other on the pews, sometimes our hips or thighs touching, we would sing the songs and do the prayers and listen to the sermon and say 'peace be with you' to the people on each side. Afterwards, when back alone together, it felt as if we had shared something profound: a fundamental meaning, a clarity of purpose. I did believe in God, and during that period I read the Bible regularly (Nate gave it to me), and I prayed most mornings and evenings, but it would take some years to understand that, really, I just wanted to be with Nate, that I wanted what he had. No, that isn't true. I wanted him to *share* with me what he had.

Did he want something of me? I don't recall us discussing that, but I do think I had brought from Sydney some kind of cultural sophistication, though thinking about it in those terms now makes me sound self-important, and maybe that's exactly what I was. But I adored music. I had grown up on a heavy dose of Midnight Oil and The Cure, and whenever we had enough money Nate and I would go into Canberra's city centre and spend hours browsing in Impact Records, which to us felt like a shrine, though one of a different sort. We liked studying architecture, and we worshipped God, but music was our obsession.

Nate gave me a love of God. I gave him a love of alternative rock.

Not long ago I got myself re-baptised, Nate said, both of us still standing at the fence. It's something I'd wanted to do for years, he added. He was almost whispering now and his tone

was soft, quite feminine; it reminded me of how he used to sound before the pomp and pretension of architecture smothered him. It had been such a source of fascination to me that a person who was so committed to his faith could also adore a profession as vacuous as architecture. Perhaps *vacuous* is too harsh a word, though it is not hard to argue that contemporary architecture is mostly surface. But at the fence he had told me something that was obviously important to him and I needed to be kind.

I'm glad, I said.

High above, a yellow-tailed black cockatoo moved across the sky.

Do you still have a faith? he asked.

None at all, I'm afraid.

None at all?

I've spent years taking photographs of the human face. I guess I believe that in the human face is all we need to know.

Do you remember how sometimes on our drives in the country or down to the coast we used to stop and pray together?

Yes, I remember. We even took Communion once or twice.

With Coke and chocolate.

Oh jeez, all the Coke and chocolate!

I had made that light-hearted comment but really I was remembering how taking Communion with Nate—stopping the car and going through the ceremony while in our seats, yes, with Coke and a few squares of Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate as the blood and body of Our Lord Jesus Christ—was the most intimate act I knew. My heart would pound in my chest and my breathing would quicken, my throat would tighten, and most likely I would have become sexually aroused. As difficult as it might be to believe, most of the proceedings would be carried out while we were holding hands and, afterwards, we would lean into each other and embrace, and we would stay in our embrace, our bodies interlinked. Never before had I felt so close to another human being.

They were special moments, said Nate.

I realised then that as we looked over the paddocks we were holding hands, and I was aware that he had been the one who had reached out.

I've worried about you, he said.

What for? I said, though really I meant, you've worried about *what* exactly?

That the gay community would change you.

I've always been my own person, you know that better than anyone.



I do, but there's an unsavoury side to the lifestyle.

Nate, it's hardly *a lifestyle*.

All those men who want to fuck each other up the arse.

He said those words with such hate, such venom. And he said them while holding my hand. (If a farmer had been looking on he would have thought he had a gay couple standing on the edge of his property.) How was I to respond? I wanted to say, is that why you're seeing me again after all this time, to attack men whose love for each other is sexual? I wanted to say, you don't understand. I wanted to say, what's it to you anyway? I wanted to say, have you imagined me and Justin having sex and felt revolted? I wanted to say, you're making assumptions, accusations, judgements. I wanted to say, are you jealous?

But I said nothing.

We should go, said Nate, and then he squeezed my hand, once, twice, as if trying to send a message, some kind of Morse code. Or make an apology. But an apology for what? For what he had said? Or for not being able to give me what I had wanted during the five and a half years of our friendship?

As we got back into the car I remembered how one morning after he had slept over at my group house and my housemates were out he had given me a hug in the kitchen and I'd felt his erection press into mine through his jeans; the movement—the pulse—I felt from him was true and real. But ...

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We drove on, and I made sure to stay a little above the speed limit to make up for lost time. On *Starfish*, the song went from 'Antenna' to 'Reptile', which is one of the album's signature tracks. Nate and I once went to see The Church play at the ANU Bar; the band was an hour late coming on stage and disappointingly aloof, arrogant even, but watching Marty Willson-Piper play the urgent opening notes of 'Reptile' on his Rickenbacker guitar was a highlight of my twenties. Marty Willson-Piper: rock god. Nate Aitken: lover of God; and lover of me, in a way, though not in the way I had wanted, not that I knew what I wanted. I wanted us to be close, closer, as close as two people—two young men—could be. I wanted us to be connected, entwined; I wanted us to know each other inside out. But I didn't know how to translate that desire into something *of the body*. Whenever we stayed over, at my place or in his family's home (which smelled like a church), we would sleep in t-shirts only—even though we never shared the same bed (at his place I slept on a brown velour mattress that he would pull out from beneath his single bed), being almost naked with him seemed to me the most erotic thing, especially if I was lucky enough to get a glimpse of a private place as he removed his underpants, a line or a crease. One night at his house we were fully naked beneath our doonas, so it must have been summer, and he asked me to close the door; I got up and as I put my hand to the handle I heard him say, 'Oh, *oh*.' Had he seen too much of me? Did his body keep reacting in a way that was beyond his control? Another summer's night, I woke and looked up to see that he was lying naked on his back and in the moonlight I could just make out the resting shadow of what I longed for but would never touch or even see properly; a few seconds later he pulled across the sheet to cover himself up. Had he wanted me to see him like that? Had he

wanted me to reach out and touch him? And why hadn't I taken the initiative to ask if I could touch him?

Because I was scared. Because I didn't know how.

(It would be another seven years before I met Justin, who was patient and gentle. There's no rush, he told me, just relax. And when it happened it felt like the most natural thing in the world, and the most beautiful.)

In December 1991, university came to an end and Nate moved to Perth to start working in the practice for which, a decade later, he would become a director. The night before he flew out we sat on the edge of his bed and he put his arm around my shoulders and he held my hand and he wept and said, You've changed me. How had I changed him? Had he found a deeper appreciation of music? As if that was all it could be. But would he ever admit to anything else? If anything, *he* had changed *me*, turning me into a church-going Christian. The next morning, within minutes of his departure, I felt heartbroken. I didn't think that I could stay in Canberra because all the roads reminded me of him. Ever since that day when we signed up for the same tutorial group we had been inseparable. During holidays, when I returned home to Sydney to earn a few dollars sweeping factory floors, money that would keep me at university for another year, we wrote to each other. One holiday, when he had an internship in Brisbane, Nate wrote and said: *Please don't tell anyone this but I miss you more than my sister, and I adore her.* Invariably his letters were signed off with *I love you* and I would stare at those three words; more than once I ran my fingers across the ink. Sometimes he would add a PS: *I'm inspired by your ever-growing faith.* Those words made me feel uncomfortable, and disappointed—maybe his love for me was nothing more than an expression of Jesus's love? Surely, I hoped, it was more than that.

In July 1992 I flew over to see him; I stayed in the Northbridge terrace he shared with a wren-like girl who said to me, I worry about Nate, he's like an egg, so fragile, he looks lonely. In truth he had a girlfriend, and it was obvious he was fond of her; I met her at a pub on the Friday night and the next day the three of us went to the State Gallery—I did my best to be polite and friendly and not notice how the two of them held hands as we looked at the art on the walls. Later that evening, Nate and his housemate having gone to bed (odd, to realise now, that his girlfriend had not stayed over, but then again Ruth, who gave up her faith in her early twenties, has since told me that she thought her brother remained a virgin until getting married), as I lay in the dark on the couch downstairs, I felt a wild roar build in my belly, in my chest, in my throat. It came out as though I was being exorcised: I screamed in the dark, a fierce, guttural yearning. It must have sounded as if I had been stabbed, or I had stabbed myself. I got up, dressed, and despite the cold I spent an hour walking Perth's inner-city streets. I knew then that it was over. I knew then that it *had* to be over. I was twenty-four, almost a *twenty-something*. I had to find a way of living in a post-Nate world.

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The last track came on: 'Hotel Womb', a song that was the perfect way to finish an alternative rock album—reflective and melancholic, but also upbeat. We listened to the song from start to finish without talking, and Nate refrained from his dashboard-drumming. The song faded and the CD came to a finish.

Nate said, I enjoyed that very much.

It's a bona fide classic, isn't it.

Sure is.

Should we play the album again?

That, I think, would ruin it.

I knew what Nate meant: we'd had a perfect hour; trying to repeat it was unwise, and probably impossible. I switched the stereo to *AUX* and on came a shuffled selection of tracks from my thumb-drive: Pet Shop Boys, Peaches, The Dears, The Go! Team, Arcade Fire, Jon Hopkins, Battles. Despite the goodness of this music, the greatness even, none of it had anything to do with Nate and me. I just drove on while staring at the road ahead, my hands gripping the steering wheel.

## §

Back home, the hallway and rooms cool, silent, and empty, empty of Justin, I put my photography gear in my studio and then, feeling tired from three hours of driving down from the mountains, I showered. I made myself a vegetable stir-fry for dinner then watched the TV news absently—it felt as if I had been to another world and was taking a while to readjust. Later, after doing the washing up and then pouring myself a whiskey, I went into the lounge room, slid *Starfish* into the stereo, and lay down on the floorboards in front of the speakers. I knew that it really was the wrong thing to do, that I shouldn't have tried to revisit the album so soon after rediscovering it and listening to it while driving. But as soon as 'Destination' came on I was back there, in the car, and driving country roads with Nate Aitken. Midway through 'Under the Milky Way', I picked up my phone. We text each other very rarely, perhaps only once or twice a year, and I haven't seen him in years. I haven't seen a photo of him and he doesn't use social media so I don't know what he looks like; I imagine that he might have a stylish, close-cropped beard, that he might be a little grey-haired, that he may or may not have become heavy-set (certainly he wouldn't be the stick-thin, seventeen-year-old uni student who I had once known). I took a photo of the album and then sent it to him with a text message: *I've just been to the Blue Mountains on a job and took this album to listen to in the car. Have you listened to it lately?* He wrote back within minutes: *Strange, that album always reminds me of you.* I stared at the screen, at those eight words. How much it meant to me that *Starfish* connected him to me, in the same way that it connected me to him. Despite everything, whatever we once had still existed, as a heady jumble of memories, sure, all of them true (or based on the truth), but we were still together. If we loved each other then, we loved each other now. How could that be? Because first love has a way of scoring itself onto our bones? Does forbidden love have a stronger power? Oh, as always, I was over-thinking it.

When the CD came to an end for the second time that day, I tapped out another message, this one to Justin: *Call me when you can. I need to hear your voice.*

*Nigel Featherstone is an Australian writer of adult fiction and creative non-fiction. He is the author of three novellas published by Blemish Books (2011-2014) and his novel Remnants was published by Pandanus Books in 2005. He is also the author of 50 short stories published in Australian literary journals including the Review of Australian Fiction, Meanjin, and Island, as well as in the US. Nigel's non-fiction has been published by Fairfax Media, and has also appeared in Overland,*

BMA Magazine and The Millions. In 2014 Nigel was commissioned by the Goulburn Regional Conservatorium to write the libretto for an original song-cycle, with the score being composed by James Humberstone from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. This work, titled *The Weight of Light*, is currently going through a creative development process at the Street Theatre in Canberra and will have its Australian premiere in March 2018. Nigel has been awarded residencies at Varuna, Bundanon, and the Kingsbridge Gatekeeper's Cottage, courtesy of the Launceston City Council, Tasmania. In 2013 he was a Creative Fellow at UNSW Canberra/Australian Defence Force Academy.

## Drive-reading Dorothy Porter's 'Foggy Windows'

by *Luke Best*

Scanning book spines and traffic,  
drive-reading in drizzle,  
double-danger, *The Bee Hut*.  
I stop on a green, split the book—

windows wound. *And at once I knew*  
*I was not magnificent—*  
a song: a lug of the good oil.  
Falsetto breaks the news

a little sweeter. Melancholy's  
always been a loyalist; subtle, too.  
Horns are obnoxious. They can wait  
for the next green. I'm on my second read,

dropping myself in the poem,  
*huddled far from the highway aisle.*  
There's a rapping on the window.  
The glass is thick as fog. I keep it wound.

**Note:** the lines in italics are from the Bon Iver song, 'Holocene'.

*Luke Best is from Toowoomba on the Darling Downs where he was born in 1982. His manuscript Percussion was Highly Commended in the 2017 Thomas Shapcott Prize. He is currently working on a verse novel.*

## Decompression sickness and other ways to pass the time

by Aidan Christopher Tan

*Ring;*

it's the fourth call tonight, so the cry of the

*ring*

sounds hauntingly familiar, but someone must, so on the third

*ring*

I pick up and answer, "Hello, Here to Hear Helpline."

The line is quiet. I push the receiver against my ear and hold my breath. In the stillness, I make out a barely audible exhale. I close my eyes, keep my breath held, and listen. There's nothing. And then it's there, vesicular, vanishing, but somehow, it's there. It almost feels intimate, a stethoscope against a stranger's chest. Each breath comes like a memory and leaves like a thought, out of nowhere and all at once.

Once, standing ankle deep in the wet sand, I thought that I heard the Pacific Ocean in a conch shell. The conch shell, I theorised, was an Earth-bound black hole in thermal equilibrium, absorbing the temper of the tide and emitting a lost Vivaldi, 'The Four Seasons of the Submerged'. Turns out, there are no oceans in conch shells, only the attenuated frequencies of ambient noise in a calcium carbonate cavity. I prefer the ocean.

I let go of my own breath, hiding the sound behind the distance drawn as I lean the mouthpiece away. I wonder why breathing out makes more noise than breathing in, why, if every breath taken is inspiring, each one ends with us sighing? There's another hushed expiration through the earpiece. It's heavier, barely, but enough to know that something is coming to an end. It's been a minute, maybe more, so I say, softly,

"Take your time."

But she doesn't. She speaks suddenly, her breath gone, submerged beneath words. I don't know why, but something is wrong. She keeps on talking. The surface is still, and nothing has changed. I shift in the stiff office chair and sit a little straighter. She keeps on talking. The air conditioner is uncomfortably cool. I try to slide away but the black telephone cord won't let me go. She keeps on talking. The glass-walled room feels claustrophobic.

That's it. Her voice isn't bruised, isn't broken, isn't choked, isn't strangled, isn't what it should be.

It's calm.

§

I glance down at the luminous red display of the car's centre console. It's 1.56 am. Before me

the road rushes beneath bald tyres as the night bends around the white light of the high beams. The night? Or perhaps the morning? If midnight is the middle of the night, then 1.56 am must be late in the night, but if the day begins at midnight and the beginning of the day is morning, then 1.56 am must be early in the morning. The speedometer needle edges over the 120 km/hour mark. It's night, I decide, easing my foot off the accelerator pedal. I glance in the rear-view mirror. Behind me the darkness seethes at the eerie red tail light, swallowing the asphalt to reclaim the night. Was it named the Red Sea before or after the bloodbath? I wonder if Moses looked back as the crest of the Red Sea crashed down on the Egyptians. I wonder if he looked back up Mount Sinai as he pronounced "Thou shalt not kill" to the Israelites, and felt fear.

I feel myself yawning. The high beams reflect off a 'STOP REVIVE SURVIVE' sign. I keep driving. The road is straight since the land is flat, and at night the Sirens sing. I grip the wheel tighter. The last radio channel sank into the quicksand static over an hour ago, submerged to the elegy of some country song struggling against the white noise. Now, save for the hum of the engine, it is quiet. In the distance, the darkness is bent into a thin horizon, stretched taut against the starved curvature of the earth, its ribs pushing up against the sky. When I was younger, I loved the night sky, for it made the world feel so big. Tonight, it makes me feel so small.

I notice a distant light in the rear-view mirror. Out here, only road trains travel at night, fuelled by a concoction of diesel, No-Doz Plus and Winfield Reds. Once, reading Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, I learnt that the closer you are to a gravitational mass, the slower time passes. When the Brobdingnagian frames of 100-tonne road trains pass by the old Toyota Camry, time does slow, though less out of physics and more out of fear. Suddenly there's a guttural growl as the tyres drift onto the shoulder rumble strip, and I throw my gaze back to the road as I veer the car away from the edge. In my peripheral vision, I can still see the faint bokeh light floating in the rear-view mirror, but I dare not look for the road demands attention. In daylight, the barrenness is only broken by the occasional white cross. At night, they are far from vision but, when monotony becomes the conjoined twin of fatigue, they are not far from thought.

But I do look back, and I understand why Lot's wife looked back as Sodom was consumed by fire and brimstone; why Orpheus looked back to Eurydice only moments from the light. The faraway glow hangs like the bioluminescent lure of a deep-sea anglerfish. Behind it, the darkness waits with the gaping mouth of a baleen whale, opening up like Jonah in the confessional of a beast's belly. Who wouldn't flee from Nineveh? A second light appears, this time in front. Another road train. The flatness distorts the distance. It will take six minutes, maybe more, before the road train charges past, shaking the car as it does.

Then I see a dead kangaroo. Its sandy brown chest lies open, an accidental altar to the night, the calling card of a road train. Gone. And another dead kangaroo. Head bent backwards in rigor mortis, eyes gazing westward one last time. Gone. And another. Forelimbs tortured together in one final prayer. Gone. And another. Bones jutting out of sunken skin. Gone. It doesn't stop. Their bodies flash by like ill-fated Morse code, their hindlimbs breaking the white lines of the road. I feel sick. There's so many, oh God, there's so many.

Suddenly, a dead kangaroo appears in the middle of the lane. I swear, swerve the car into the oncoming lane and swing it back across the double centre lines. I shift my foot to the brake pedal and the speedometer needle falls to 90 km/hour. The light in front is getting brighter, brighter. I switch the headlights to low beam and the darkness instantly closes in. I weave the

car around another dead kangaroo and feel the bump as the left front tyre rushes over its tail. I glance in the rear-view mirror—the light behind is getting larger, closer.

And then I see it: another dead kangaroo in the centre of the lane. The lights in front and behind are blindingly bright; too late to swerve, too late to stop, I hold my breath.

There's a deforming bang as the bonnet collides with the body. The car jolts and I jerk forward. I can hear the dead kangaroo being forced beneath the car. The road train in front stampedes past and the car shakes and the road train behind honks, veers out and overtakes, and all the while I can hear the body being dragged between the asphalt and the car. I slow the car down, and before I stop, there's a bump, and I can no longer hear the dead kangaroo. I bring the car to a stop. The tail-lights of the road trains in front and behind are long gone. I pull my left hand from the steering wheel and raise the hand brake. My hands are trembling. This time, I don't look in the rear-view mirror. I close my eyes and whisper to myself, there's nothing you could've done, there's nothing you could've done, there's nothing you could've done...

Oh God.

I can smell the dead kangaroo.

§

She stops talking. There's a moment of silence, too soon, too late, and before I can ask, she answers, "I took them half an hour ago, there's nothing you can do." Her words ring like the final notes of 'The Last Post'.

"But you called tonight," I try desperately, my voice quivering, "and that tells me that there's a small part of you that wants to live. Where are you right now?" I can see myself in the car, rushing towards it.

"No," she replies calmly, her voice drifting, "I called to say goodbye."

"It's not too late," I try again, "tell me where you are." I can almost feel the steering wheel beneath my fingers.

"Thank you," she says softly, her voice sinking beneath the waves.

"No, no, don't go," I plead. The white lights in front and behind are blindingly bright.

"Goodbye," she says.

There's a click. The line is quiet. There's nothing I can do.

Oh God.

I can smell the dead kangaroo.

*Aidan Christopher Tan is a medical student studying at the University of New South Wales. He is fond of short stories and very short bios.*



# Fluted Bone

by *Steve Toase*

These days, birds could be made of anything. Seeing one in a tree you could no longer rely on it being a bundle of gristle and fluted bone. Not these days.

The songbird on my grate was covered in grains of soot, the silver of looped thread feathers visible here and there through the dirt. Thin legs of plastic straws, damp sherbet just visible through the red and white parallel lines printed on the outside.

I reached out my hand, palm down against the cold of the stone. Outside the window a jackdaw with skin of old video tape tore apart something red and sinuous. I ignored the tearing noise and tapped my finger against the millstone grit. The songbird felt the vibrations and hopped across, legs bending in places other than the knees.

With claws of carpentry splinters it clung to my skin and stepped across my fingers as I turned my hand for it to nestle in my palm. A flurry of wet powder fell into my lifeline from a small crack above the bird's knee. I resisted the temptation to collect it with my tongue.

I'm not sure why I called it a song bird. The creature had no voice and no joy to sing. We had much in common. In the garden the jackdaw burrowed its face, turning black feathers crimson. The scavenger looked up and saw me, then its attention flicked to the song bird trying to sleep in my hand. With a leap the jackdaw landed on the sill and began smashing its shellac beak against the windows, seeking out earlier spiders of scars in the glass.

"Did you see that?" I said to the bird outside, holding up my hand. It ignored me and continued working on the weaknesses.

Opening my fingers I looked down at the knot of legs and wings. Then back at the beak trying to keep my attention.

"Alright! Alright," I said, the Jackdaw ignoring me, the song bird asleep. Walking to the kitchen I opened the back door and placed the dozing creature on the step, slamming the door before the jackdaw got any ideas.

Through the veined glass I watched the scavenger tear apart its victim, looping the glittering cotton feathers into its own, sticking its beak shut with the sherbet. The cracks in the window were getting worse and no one was coming to repair it soon. I watched for as long as I could, then reset the trap in the fireplace.

*Steve lives in North Yorkshire, England and occasionally Munich, Germany. His work has appeared in Cabinet de Fees' Scheherazade's Bequest, Not One Of Us and Cafe Irreal, amongst others. In 2014 his story 'Call Out' (first published in Innsmouth Magazine) was reprinted in The Best Horror Of The Year Anthology. Most recently, Steve has been working with Becky Cherriman and Imove on a commissioned project called [Haunt](#), about the haunting presence of Harrogate in the lives of people experiencing homelessness or vulnerable housing in the town. To read more of Steve's work please visit [stevetoase.wordpress.com](http://stevetoase.wordpress.com).*

# **incomprehensia : an instruction sheet for post-verbal poetry**

*by Scott-Patrick Mitchell*

hear, no words verb  
unheard the verse is post  
verbal, an emotive guttural  
hurdle of babble, babel  
murmur

flashback to dance Gregorian  
chants, neume to this, note  
how notations suggest a  
gradation of now a voice  
should burble & girdle  
semantics as suppressed  
pinpricks, meaning in absence

stutter / gutter / mutter  
flutter / shutter / rebutter  
on a mat  
on a pier  
ass or nounce  
like for like for like  
for like : facsimilia  
i am an invoice you'll ounce  
pounce to pronounce this  
poetry

in you it a throat  
rant  
sigh  
cough cough  
clear your throat  
mumble this bit i wrote

wheeze these  
screech suddenly  
bubble as if in drowning trouble  
drop all consonants  
now anti-vowel a vowel laden aisle  
try & speak backwards  
lynch black lodge phonetics into this text as if twin peaks  
go inaudibly high & repeat  
: without words heard this still has ocularity, a love

can't you seethe

now, in a clear tone, monotone  
say

: when an experiment ends repeat it to verify findings ¶

*Scott-Patrick Mitchell likes to do stuff 'n' things. By 'stuff' he means writing poetry which appears in Contemporary Australian Poetry (2016). By 'things' he means doing one man shows such as THE 24 HOUR PERFORMANCE POEM. By 'likes to do' he actually means loves to do, coz it makes his heart sing. Visit [www.facebook.com/scottpatrickmitchellpoet](http://www.facebook.com/scottpatrickmitchellpoet) for more info.*

## Scientist versus Writer

### *Non-fiction by Maria Saba*

Hunched behind my computer, I blink a few times to coax the quivering words on the screen into focus. After three hours of typing and retyping a scene, my eyes feel as dry as the desert where the story takes place, my neck like an iron rod. I lean back and close my eyes. My father's solemn voice echoes in my mind. "Writers and poets have always starved," was his caveat at our weekly poetry recitals, where my siblings and I gathered at the dining table and took turns to read out the poems of Molavi (known as Rumi outside Iran), Hafiz, and Sa'di, among others. Rumi's verses whirled out on my sister's soft voice, and the rhythm and melody propelled me to leap, to fling my arms open and float about, but the fear of my father's reprimand contained me to a mere tapping of my foot.

The weekly poetry recitals were my earliest introduction to a world beyond the everyday, as were the stories I heard from my mother, aunts, or sisters. Words in stories spoke to me, and in poems, they played music too. At school, my passive delight in words transformed into the act of writing. All Iranian school children wrote weekly compositions with set subjects such as "Wealth or Knowledge: Which is Better?" or some kind of description of the seasons or Nowruz holidays. When our second grade teacher Mrs Amani announced the subject of the first composition—how did you spend your summer vacation?—I immediately picked up my pencil and began writing about our trip to the Caspian Sea and got the highest mark. Compositions did not worry me until a tearful classmate (I will call her Maryam), holding on to her mother's skirt, showed up at our door. Maryam's mother asked mine—not me—for my help with her daughter, who failed composition on a regular basis. My mother, without asking me, offered my help. In those days, children were not asked or consulted, but were supposed to do what they were told.

It never occurred to anyone that I might not know how to teach composition. After a few failed efforts at herding her scattered thoughts and patchy sentences into a few meaningful lines—without knowing that was what I was doing—and Maryam's lack of interest and constant sighing and snuffling, I gave up. "Why don't I write one for you?" I suggested, trying not to hurt her feelings. She didn't look insulted but rushed out onto the swing in the garden and left me labouring over how to write a second piece about knowledge being better than wealth—the latter was not a real option, but put there for us children as a call to refute greed and worldliness. Chewing on my pencil, I pored over how to say the same thing in a different way while Maryam romped about in the garden and our mothers chatted over tea. When the bitter taste of the pencil's carbon core hit my mouth, the idea of immortality from a poem by Hafiz struck me. After many permutations of my limited vocabulary, a new piece emerged, championing knowledge because not only could it result in wealth but also be transferred to others and hence be immortal.

Maryam received the best mark, which had been mine until then. I did not begrudge her but found it funny coming second to myself. The thankful mother appeared at our door, this time with tears of joy, and asked for more help. And my mother offered it again. For the rest of the year, every week, I wrote two compositions on the same subject, one of which Maryam copied and handed in as her own (sorry Mrs Amani). Occasionally I grumbled to my mother about the extra work, but secretly I enjoyed it because writing the second one was a challenge, with a reward I could sense but not articulate at the time.

Later at school, my fascination with words, stories, and poems found competition in the intrigue of numbers, mathematical puzzles, and science. In third grade, a science lesson about The Curious Farhad, an observant boy of my age, engrossed in understanding the physical and natural processes, tipped the balance in favour of science for me. Sitting inside the door leading to our garden on a cool fall afternoon, I read ahead of the class about Farhad's observation of worms in the garden after rain, his question of where they came from (the sky along with rain, the air, or the earth), his methodical testing of his hypotheses, and his deduction, followed by a discussion with his father, who told him about who scientists were, and what they did. As I closed the book, I glanced at the persimmon tree in the garden and declared, "I want to be a scientist."

At high school, to my parents' delight, I pursued mathematics and science, but writing sprang up when least expected. At fifteen, after an argument with my mother, I summarised my grievances in a critical commentary on my family, sent it off to my mother's favourite magazine, *Zan-i Rooz*, and forgot all about it until a particularly nosey neighbour brought a curious article to her attention (sorry Mom). Getting published in a magazine I wasn't supposed to read until long after I was eighteen did not go all that well in the family circle, but as far as I was concerned, I had said nothing but the truth, and they had only themselves to blame for my writing.

Later in Canada, I went into science at the university despite my English teacher's advice that I should take up writing. "If you do one thing in your life, make it writing a book," said Mr Butterfield, looking over his glasses. In the last class, he went so far as wagering that I would write a book one day. I didn't try hard to hide my sneer; in my lack of wisdom and foresight, I saw my path paved by the university admission and two scholarships. Now that I am writing this piece, I feel I should look him up and ask, "How did you know?" And tell him that he won the bet. Though writing a book took about two more decades.

After eleven years of training in science, I graduated with a Ph.D. in theoretical chemical physics and began working as a postdoctoral fellow. My body glued to a wobbly chair behind a computer in a dingy, windowless office, I revelled in the mystery and the beauty of the physical world and its mathematical models. Despite the poor working conditions and lack of monetary compensation—my highest salary was \$36,000 per year with no benefits—I was content to contribute to human knowledge, and was respected for that. People often told me how they admired what I did, how they couldn't imagine themselves taking up such a challenge or making such a sacrifice. The latter usually came after seeing my office or learning about my earnings.

Writing accompanied me through these years, when for a while, I enjoyed the best of both worlds. Every now and then I wrote a review or carried an interview with an artist or a thinker (often Iranian), and the results were published in newsletters or local ethnic papers in print and later online. But soon my family circumstances changed, and I had to make a major decision regarding my career. My employment was tied to a university or research organisation, and wherever that institution was. As a writer I would not be restricted to any city or organisation, because I could write anywhere. So I left science to pursue writing full-time.

I could not afford a second university or college degree in fine arts or literature, so I registered in a creative writing workshop at a community centre, and the instructor encouraged me to consider fiction as a medium. As I attempted to write fictional passages and drafts of

short stories, I realised that fiction was very different from essays, reviews, or interviews. My language skills (English is my second language), though adequate for reporting or establishing arguments, proved incompetent in narration, description, scenes, and dialogue. Suddenly the stock of words I had proudly accumulated over a lifetime of collecting seemed insufficient, if not inadequate. I had to learn all sorts of names, such as that of the bone in the centre of the chest, connecting the ribs, or unusual verbs like ‘aggrieved’ or ‘nettled’. Surprisingly, these verbs never came up in science, and scientists are not necessarily a joyous lot, I can tell you.

Learning English for a second time was an experience both humbling and daunting. While honing my language skills, I attended workshops and writers’ groups and complemented these with a great deal of fiction reading. Skills I had acquired in science such as methodical analysis and identifying patterns proved to be very useful when examining other writers’ works to figure out how my favourite authors achieved their seamless transitions in time or place, or shifted imperceptibly between narration and scene. Not all my skills were transferable or even desirable. The hardest part was undoing my comfortable ‘show and tell’ way, perfectly legitimate if not mandatory in science, and relying mainly on ‘show’.

Within a year I finished my first short stories and submitted them to magazines and journals. A flood of rejections followed. This had never happened to me in science, where for the most part, publishing was objective in the sense that the reviewer’s or editor’s inclination or taste did not play a part in printing an article. As long as scientific work was sound and up to date, the resulting paper would be published, though revisions or clarifications might be required. I was too unfamiliar with the ‘other’ publishing world to see the curt “Sorry, it’s not good for us” email without signature, date, or greetings, as a big (albeit not the best) effort on the part of an overworked, underpaid editor. I took it personally. Other nicer rejections did not help. Once again, the discipline, the perseverance, and the habit of continuous reading and writing I had practised in science came to my rescue and helped me persist until finally one of my stories was accepted. And then another. And I kept on going.

My life as a writer went on, similar to my life as a scientist, since I worked with little pay and great satisfaction. The shift from science to literature required adjustments and changes that I learned to make. The only exception is how my work as a writer is viewed by others: often not as work.

Friends call me and ask what I am doing. “I am working,” I reply. “Doing what?” They sound genuinely perplexed. Then comes another question. “So, when will your book be out?” I bite my lip lest I say “Books don’t just leap out of my head every few weeks.” The same friends never asked me what I was doing at the university. In fact, they hardly ever called me there, for the fear of disturbing my ‘work’.

Recently at a car dealership I was asked what I did. “I write,” was my response. “So, you are unemployed.” My application for leasing the cheapest car in the dealership was turned down. I stopped myself from arguing when I remembered Mavis Gallant’s remark in an interview, “When you say you are a writer in Canada, they demand three month’s rent in advance.”

And it is not only writing itself that does not come across as work, but all the essential things any writer has to do, such as reading. Nobody envied me when I read scientific papers on the folding of proteins or on pattern recognition. It was a given that I needed to read to learn and keep up with the field. Now that I read stories, novels, or essays with the exact same purpose, I

see smirks, envious sighs, and occasional comments such as “Yes, I also like to read” or “If only I had the time.” Most of these people have little difficulty finding time to watch sports, change their hair colour and nail polish, or socialise—some of which I never do, and others only when I must and with a great deal of internalised guilt, feeling that I am neglecting my work.

There also seems to be a widespread belief that having life experiences and/or time makes everyone a writer. Time is necessary for writing, but it does not make a writer on its own, the same way having life experiences, ideas, or ‘something to say’ does not make a story or a novel. It is the work of a writer to take experiences, ideas, and impressions and transform them into something universal that can affect us, reveal part of our common humanity, while engaging and sometimes entertaining us. Talent plays an important part in any field, but equally important is a great deal of training, either self-training or formal education, to master the craft, which must be accompanied by effort if the writing is to stand the test of readers and time. Interestingly, throughout my scientific career, nobody claimed they could do what I did if only they had the time. Talent, training, and effort are taken as essential presuppositions in scientific work, but are deemed trifles in a literary career.

When in science, not once did anyone suggest that I should do something else. “Why don’t you study cancer instead of Alzheimer’s?” never came up. Now almost everyone has an idea for my next story or book. Perhaps they do not realise that the implication of “You know what you should write about?” is that their idea is more interesting or more important than the one I wrote about. And there is no shortage of those who offer me to write out their life story (free of charge, of course).

The way I see it, I am the same person, working as hard at writing as I did at science, earning very little money for doing what I like, while trying to contribute to our shared knowledge and heritage. The other view, the one I struggle not to take up, perceives the scientist and the writer as two different people: one a hardworking, dedicated person contributing to society, the other a frivolous amateur who takes her hobby too seriously to bother with real work. This public perception, in my experience, happens to be the most striking difference between being a scientist and a writer, a difference I could never have foreseen before making the transition. Science is perceived as a serious business done by serious people, while writing is the pastime of hobbyist and dreamers. As Oscar Wilde put it, “Society never forgives the dreamer.” Hence the smirks.

Oddly enough, in one of the most solitary professions with its conditions, which seem perfect for producing misanthropes, I feel connected to the whole of humanity. Just as Gurgani, Sa’adi, Marquez, and Trevor’s writings enabled me to traverse to different times and places to observe life, love, loss, and mourning among people I never met, I hope to offer something about our experience of life to those to come. And every now and then when I take a break from slumping behind my computer, I reflect on those childhood poetry recitals, and how despite all warnings, and to society’s dismay it seems, I became a writer. And I wish I could assure my father, who is gone now, “Don’t worry Dad, I did not starve.” Well, not yet.

*An Ottawa-based writer, storyteller, and arts educator, Maria Saba was born and raised in Iran. She has previously published three books and many articles, interviews, and short stories in Iran, Canada, and Europe. Maria has received grants from Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Ottawa and attended Banff Centre residency and Banff Writing Studio. She is currently writing her second collection of short stories about the aftermath of the 1979 revolution in Iran.*

## colour différance

by *Alison Flett*

australian yellow  
ancient yellow  
fierce yellow  
sulphur yellow  
summer yellow  
safety yellow  
fastfood yellow  
trombone yellow  
rock yellow  
yellow-footed  
yellow-brick-road  
ochre

british yellow  
brittle yellow  
chromatic yellow  
wedding-veil yellow  
winter yellow  
wildflower yellow  
royal yellow  
quiet yellow  
bone yellow  
yellow-hearted  
yellow-hammer  
woad

### Synopsis

The poem references Derrida's notion of différance which asserts that words/signifiers cannot in themselves fully describe what they signify but must be understood in relation to other words from which they differ. Meaning in language is therefore derived by referring to an endless chain of signifiers which shift with time and experience; it is neither fixed nor 'pure' but rather fluid and imperfect. The poem likens this mode of understanding to ex-pat experiences where individuals are caught in an endless chain of comparison, trying to understand the new country in relation to the old.

*Alison Flett was born and bred in Scotland where her poetry collection Whit Lassyz Ur Inty was shortlisted for the Saltire Book of the Year Award. She has performed her work on national television and radio and at literary festivals in Britain and Europe. Since moving to Adelaide in 2010 she has been published in various anthologies and journals including Cordite, Rabbit, Southerly and Australian Love Poems. In 2014 she was shortlisted for the Whitmore Press Manuscript Award. She is poetry editor for Transnational Literature.*



# The Last Day of Spring

by *Peter Ninnes*

Saturday, 11 November, turned out to be the last day of spring for a few people, although they didn't realise it when they woke up that morning.

My kid Anastasia's under-10 soccer team was playing Auburn West. I was on the sideline, half watching the game and half listening to my friend Leo. We go back a long way. Granville High. Leo joined in year eight, after he was expelled from James Ruse High. Then onto Granville TAFE. He studied catering. I completed a certificate in electrical fitting. Leo's got a beaut kid, too, in the same team. Bella. A ranga, strangely enough, despite her Greek parents. I said to Leo, "Are you sure she's yours, mate?" But he didn't say anything. If he'd been offended, he would have called me a stupid pommy bastard.

Bella's taking a corner. It's only a kids' size field of course. She's got a boot on her like a mule. A solid northerly blows down the ground, taking the edge off the sun's heat. Bella hoicks the ball into the azure sky, and the wind pushes it into the far corner of the goal. Her team mates mob her, squealing with sweaty delight. Eleven-nil to us.

"What do you reckon's gonna be the result tonight?" Leo said.

"Nah, mate, they won't be playing tonight. It's only a kids' game. We're out of here in time for lunch."

"Idiot. Not the game. The vote. The postal thing. The result's gonna be announced on TV tonight, starting at 7."

"My money's on 'yes'," I said. "Mind you, we elected those clowns to make decisions, not come running to us every time some bozo's stirring up trouble and they can't sort themselves out."

"Yeah, and the Member for Oceanside's the biggest troublemaker of the lot," Leo said. "Anyway, I've already got a sixpack in the fridge. Why don't you lot come over? I'll crank up the barbie. With daylight saving, we can sit on the balcony and watch my big TV."

"I'll check with Val. Should be okay. We'll bring some of her *hurka* and *debreceners*."

Leo's the smartest businessman I know. He had his first job at fourteen, washing dishes in an Italian restaurant in Merrylands. Straight out of TAFE, he opened his own Greek restaurant in Rockdale. Next, he opened one in Bankstown, which was equally successful. By the time he was thirty, he was running three more establishments at Lane Cove, North Sydney and Marrickville. Two years ago, when he was thirty-five, he sold them, became a consultant, and built his little place in Northmead.

Just before 6.30, Val and I and the kid pulled up in the drive of his 'little place', a two-storey, marble-pillar-fronted mansion perched on a small rise, with views from the front balcony to the Blue Mountains. A large white fountain bubbled in the middle of the lawn. His territory was delineated by a crimped steel security fence interspersed with white concrete pillars topped

alternatively with vases draped in lengths of ivy and statues of ancient gods.

Leo's wife, Maria, let us in. She and Val disappeared into the kitchen, and Anastasia took off to find Bella. Leo was tending the barbecue on his expansive rear balcony. Away in the distance, Sydney Tower pierced the horizon. Leo was cooking up a storm of *brizola* and *souvlaki* and *kolokythákia*. I placed the plate of Val's homemade Hungarian sausages on the outdoor table.

We cracked open a couple of beers. Leo switched on the outdoor TV, a magnificent flat panel device which Leo had told me on numerous occasions had a 200-centimetre screen and was "the biggest available in the Southern Hemisphere." He'd built a wooden alcove for it—"the shrine" he called it—to shield it from glare and rain. The sports news was on.

"Reckon the Wanderers will get up against City tomorrow?" Leo asked.

"Easy. That Melbourne team are a bunch of snowflakes."

Just as the sports news ended, the newsreader reappeared.

"What's he doing back? He's meant to be having a cup of tea while they show a gazillion ads," Leo said. "Oh, it says 'news flash'. I wonder what's up?"

*We have just received reports that after months of sabre-rattling and outrageous threats, the North Korean military has launched four missiles in the direction of Guam. US defence analysts estimate the missiles will reach the island in fifteen minutes. Any Australians on the island who are watching this broadcast are advised to take shelter immediately, preferably underground.*

"As if anyone in Guam is going to be watching your stupid channel," Leo opined.

*We now go to a live announcement from the Pentagon.*

The screen switched to a view of a multi-star general festooned with enough medals to sink the *Pacific Princess*, flanked by a bevy of officers with furrowed brows and tight lips. On the bottom of the screen, a clock showed the time remaining until the missiles were expected to land. 14:23 and some hundredths of seconds, the latter of which were ticking down faster than water down a plug hole.

*The US Missile Defence Agency is currently tracking the missiles. Three appear to be on target to land in the vicinity of Guam. A fourth one appears to be malfunctioning, and its target has yet to be identified. However, it is tracking higher than the other three, and we have alerted the governments of Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia. There is no word yet on whether the missiles are armed, or if the warheads are conventional or nuclear. The United States Armed Forces have activated the missile defence strategy, and we fully expect to destroy the missiles before they reach their targets.*

13:17 until missile arrival, said the clock.

A cool south-westerly change had rushed across the suburbs in the afternoon, and Leo put a

plate on top of the serviettes to stop them blowing away.

“They’ve got as much chance of taking out those missiles as I have of pissing into this wind,” he said.

Val and Maria appeared with plates of salad.

“What’s that burning, Leo?” Maria asked.

“Shit! We were watching the TV.” Leo rushed back to the barbecue. “The bloody North Koreans have launched missiles. Three are headed for Guam, but one’s out of control and going God knows where!”

“Say goodbye to North Korea, then,” Val said.

The TV switched to a live feed from the control centre tracking the missiles. The countdown clock was still in the corner. 12:33. A graphic appeared, showing the past and predicted trajectory of each missile. The fourth missile’s anticipated landing site, in bright yellow, covered a swathe of territory from the eastern Philippines and eastern Indonesia to the southern and eastern tips of Papua New Guinea. The graphic was live. As more information was received, the trajectories and predictions changed.

10:55 to impact.

The yellow area narrowed and lengthened. The Philippines appeared safe, but now the colour had almost reached Australia.

“Blimey, what if it hits the Cape?” I said. “It’s not possible, right?” We stared at the screen, mesmerised by the morphing yellow mark.

10:08 to Guam impact.

The local newsreader reappeared, but the graphic and the countdown clock stayed clearly visible in one corner of the vast screen.

*We now cross to the Prime Minister’s residence.*

The PM appeared on the screen, standing outside his house in an open necked shirt, looking greyer and more hollowed-out than ever.

*We condemn the North Korean actions in the strongest possible terms and urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint.*

9:20 to missile arrival in Guam, according to the clock. An aide passed the PM a note. He looked as if he was going to faint.

*US authorities are currently predicting that one of the missiles, reportedly out of control, may reach Australian soil. I urge everyone to stay tuned to their televisions and keep abreast of the situation. If there is a possibility of the missile landing in your area, you should ...*

He paused, as if unable to think of any useful advice. The aide handed him another note.

*Remain calm, and stay indoors with the windows and curtains closed.*

“Remain calm and keep the curtains closed!” Leo scoffed. “For God’s sake! Does he know how much nuclear-resistant curtains cost? The man’s out of touch!”

We continued to be enthralled by the yellow patch on the chart, which was now an elongated oval, stretching from Papua New Guinea, across the Coral Sea, and hitting the coast near Mackay, which was marked on the map.

“Thank God it’s missing Cairns,” Maria said. “We’re booked into the Novotel at Port Douglas for a week in January.”

The Guam arrival clock ticked down to below five minutes. The screen showed only the map tracking the missiles, until the local newsreader reappeared.

*We now switch to NBC’s Guam correspondent, Nicole Bulmark.*

The screen showed a chaotic scene in what appeared to be a bunker, with a wide-eyed reporter in a gas mask in front of a mass of people shouting and pushing.

*I’m here in the basement of NBC’s headquarters in Guam. It’s less than four minutes until the missiles arrive. No one knows what to expect.*

She was almost drowned out by the racket behind her, but struggled on.

*When the sirens sounded, there was major panic in the city. From my window on the fourth floor, I could see people pouring into the streets, cars going in all directions. A complete abandonment of rationality and common sense. Inside this building, my colleagues were screaming and sobbing as they rushed down the emergency stairs to this room. It turns out that no food or other supplies have been stockpiled here. If the nuclear blast doesn’t kill us, there’s a good chance we’ll all starve to death or die of radiation poisoning if we go outside.*

Her voice started to quiver.

*I’m hoping to be able to give you live reports of the aftermath of the attack. This is Nicole Bulmark, under attack in Guam, for NBC News.*

“She’s got two minutes,” Leo said, looking at the clock, “before she finds out whether she’s giving live reports or dead reports.”

“Leo, that’s horrible,” Val said.

Three dots on the tracking screen, representing the missiles, were all now very close to Guam. The fourth dot was somewhat further east. The TV switched back to the control centre tracking the missiles, with the projected trajectory map in the top-right hand corner, and Nicole in her bunker in Guam in the top left-hand corner. A sombre woman staring out at us began to speak.

*Officers at the US Geological Survey are monitoring their instruments. If any of the missiles do detonate, they'll be able to determine the type of warhead and the intensity of the blast. At the bottom of your screen, you can now see the main feed from the seismic sensors in the Western Pacific.*

The clock was down to thirty seconds. The seismic graph at the bottom of the screen was a flat line. Nicole in Guam was silent, her eyes scanning the ceiling. The yellow oval on the trajectory map was inching down, covering an area inland and stretching south from about Rockhampton. I was vaguely aware of sweat gathering on my palms. The smell of burnt meat enveloped us, but the four of us were glued to the TV.

The clock reached zero. Three dots disappeared from the trajectory map. Nicole in Guam glanced around, waiting.

“Hashtag fake missiles!” Leo exclaimed. As soon as he said that, the seismic chart line spiked to the top of its range.

“Not that one,” I said.

“The NBC woman’s still alive. It must have missed wherever she is,” Val said.

“Leo, the meat’s all burned,” Maria said.

“Not as burned as whatever was in the vicinity of where that missile exploded,” Leo said. “If you’re hungry, just call Domino’s.”

The sombre woman returned.

*Observers in Guam report that none of the three missiles hit land. They all entered the sea, after which one detonated. The US Geological Survey continues to analyse the data to determine the nature of the explosion. Meanwhile, the fourth missile continues its path towards Australia.*

The fourth missile’s trajectory map suddenly updated.

“Jesus!” said Leo. “That yellow part stretches all down the coast!”

By ‘coast’ he meant the NSW coast, from Newcastle to Wollongong, with Sydney smack bang in the middle.

“Oh my giddy aunt!” said Maria, sinking further into her chair. Our shock intensified with each minute that we stared at the map, which was now zoomed in to show only the eastern seaboard. A new countdown clock appeared at the bottom of the map. Time to impact: 20:35.

As the yellow oval shrank further, the local newsreader appeared once more. Sweat glistened on his forehead, defeating the efforts of the make-up people.

*Defence officials are scrambling to determine the possible point of impact of the rogue missile. Their spokesperson has advised all residents of the eastern seaboard, between Gosford and Bundeena, and west to Katoomba, to take shelter in a*

*basement or other underground structure.*

For the next few minutes, we just panicked. We ran down to the ground floor.

“Where’s your basement?” Val asked.

“We don’t have one.”

We all stood there.

“The library! They have a basement where they keep the old books. It’s only 500 metres down the road.”

We ran out into the driveway. Leo and Maria’s house was on one of those windy roads that leads into a subdivision, and from which all the other little roads and cul-de-sacs branch. The dusky street was a jumble of headlights, crammed with cars at a standstill, horns blowing, men leaning out windows and shouting at the vehicles ahead of them, all going nowhere on the Doomsday Express.

“Let’s run,” Leo said. “This way.” None of us were very fit. In fact, you could say Leo and Maria were very overweight. We ran fifty metres and stopped, puffing and panting and holding our sides.

“It’s too far,” Maria said.

Val screamed, “Oh my God, the kids!”

We rushed back to the mansion. Anastasia and Bella were standing in the atrium as we charged in the door.

“Darling!” Maria cried, wrapping Bella in a suffocating hug.

“My baby!” Val grasped Anastasia’s shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, mummy. We were just playing.”

We stood there for a moment.

“We, um, went out to see if the pizza man was coming on his motorbike,” Val said. “Just go back to playing. Everything’s fine.”

“Let’s check the TV,” Leo said. We dragged ourselves up the stairs and stood in front of the screen.

Time to impact: 6:21.

The local newsreader was soldiering on.

*RAAF radar specialists tracking the incoming missile say that the windy conditions make it difficult to identify the exact point of impact. Currently they expect it to land somewhere in the Lane Cove area, but there is only a twenty per cent probability of*

*this being correct. Travellers are advised that all flights in and out of Sydney airport have been suspended. All residents of the Sydney metro area are advised to take shelter.*

*In other news, which may or may not turn out to be relevant, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has announced the results of the plebiscite. 'Yes' received 61.6 per cent of the valid votes, while 'No' received 38.4 per cent. The response rate was 79.5 per cent. The Federal Member for Oceanside, speaking from his electoral office, alleged widespread fraud by the 'Yes' campaign, and says he will challenge the result in the courts.*

“That loser can’t stop making trouble,” Leo said.

Time to impact: 4:02.

The sun had set, and a faint streak of reflected light coloured the sky over the city. Leo had recovered his cool. He arranged the outdoor chairs in a row, looking towards the east.

“That’s Chatswood over there, and North Sydney to its right. So, Lane Cove should be somewhere between them. We’re going to have a great view.”

“Leo!” Maria said. “Don’t you think we should at least go inside?”

“No. The way the wind’s blowing, the radiation’s all going to go the other way, to the Northern Beaches.”

We stared out across the city, keeping an eye on the clock on the TV.

Time to impact: 1:13.

“Leo, do you reckon the missile will be visible as it comes in?” I asked.

“Nah. It’ll be going pretty quick, and I doubt if it’s got any lights on.”

Leo was right. We didn’t see it. But we heard it. There was a roar, like you hear from our house in Telopea when the jumbos are taking off to the northwest. The noise increased as we peered towards the coast. Then there was a flash of light off in the distance, followed a few seconds later by a boom.

“That was it!” Leo said “Not much of a bang. Can’t have been nuclear.” We waited. Flames cutting into the night sky. The rest of the city seemed to be still, lost for words and breath. The seconds crept into minutes.

I followed Leo back to the TV. The local newsreader was just throwing to a reporter in the field, with flashing lights and smoke in the background.

*Emergency services personnel are desperately searching through rubble after a major explosion here in central Oceanside this evening, caused by the impact of the rogue North Korean missile. An entire block bounded by Bazaar Place and City Road has been destroyed, possibly including the electoral office of the Member for*

*Oceanside. We are currently seeking comment from the Honourable Member, but as yet, his whereabouts are unknown. Back to you, Rob.*

“Looks like the Honourable Member’s day in court will have to wait,” Leo said, just as the doorbell rang.

“Pizza’s here!” Bella called.

“I hope you ordered the Parthenon with extra olives,” Leo said.

Maria pecked him on the cheek. “You know I always do, darl.”

*Peter Ninnes is a former Associate Professor of Education with extensive publications on topics such as social justice, globalisation, post-positivism, and discourse analysis. His non-fiction works also include the “Hiking, Walking and Biking Nagano” series and “Nagano Onsen Guide: The Top 100 Day-Use Hot Springs”. He is currently based in Sydney, where he divides his time between writing and undertaking educational consulting and advising.*



## Catafalque Party

*by Jennifer Compton*

Mausoleum and sepulchre, and catafalque. (cat-a-falk) Delicious words, plump in the mouth, solemn, doomed, with a pretty scrabble to spell them right and get them out. Begins with an m and ends with an m, and -ulchre and -alque, if you struck them in a cryptic you might give up. And what about solemn, with an n? How perverse and jolly is that! Unsounded, but with a final intention like a subliminal hum.

I was googling catafalque because I know the word but not the thing itself exact, and chanced upon 'catafalque party'. Would that be a wake? Whiskey, and stories, and tears. But no, it's not. It consists of four sentries, a waiting member in reserve (in case someone faints?) and a commander. Arranged around a bier (not beer) sounds almost the same, during a period of lying in state. For a distinguished personage. Probably a man. Mounted.

And it must not be senior in rank to the deceased over whom it is mounted. Whom. An ultimate m. Whom on the breath rhymes with womb. Almost.

*Jennifer Compton lives in Melbourne and is a poet and playwright who also writes prose.*

# The Escalator

*by John Potts*

He's wearing a shirt the colour of a headache and he's coming straight at me. There he goes, quickly past; luckily I don't have to look at that shirt any more. I've spent too long in the heat today, the sultry afternoon, storm building up: the heat's got inside me and it feels like a migraine coming on.

It's a February day when the weather is angry and wants us all to suffer. Clouds hang low in the sky like bruises, brooding there in thick and greasy light, smothering the sun but not its heat. Oh!—the sun has forced its way through: a hot shaft scorching the back of my neck—get into the shade! Pull the collar up for protection, scurry around the corner into Darlinghurst Rd, some shade there. The sun is swallowed up again: the black-purple mass is ruling the sky. Skin sticks to clothes, thoughts to mind; everything is slow and sluggish in this fetid weather.

I'm on my way to Kings Cross station: I'll escape that way.

The smell of hamburger, sizzling on a plate; a fast-food display: kebabs; barbecued chicken; souvlaki; pork rolls; chips. Grease smeared on the glass.

“Don't you!”—a shout from behind me—people turn to look, squinting through the glare. A woman yelling at a man, shoving him back against a shop; a small group has formed around them, more coming out of adjoining doors: THAI MASSAGE. PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION. DREAM GIRLS. MONEY LENT. NITE SPOT.

The woman pushes the man harder in the chest, he staggers back; there's a small crowd around them now. The woman screams, the man wrestling her into a headlock. The crowd is roaring at the spectacle: the man leads her struggling up the street, around a corner; some of the crowd follows them, laughing, pointing—I can't hear the woman. No, there she goes, running down the street; she's got away from him. The man starts chasing her but gives up, slumping exhausted against a shopfront. The onlookers jeer as he sags to the footpath.

Approaching the train station: I've never been so glad to reach dirty old Kings Cross station. There are backpackers milling around, perhaps from the hostel above the station; the businesses here are aimed at them. ADVENTURE TRAVEL. HOSTEL. FREE INTERNET. DISCOUNT TRAVEL. LOW-COST CAMPERVANS.

The entrance of the station: I have to skirt a party of drunks, sprawled on the ground, their bottles in brown paper bags. At least I'm off Darlinghurst Rd; I hurry into the station.

A young couple are struggling with their backpacks and bags in front of me: they're going down to the station too, probably to the airport and then off to the world. They look northern European: perhaps they're on their way back—to Denmark? Norway? Or perhaps they're hopping to their next destination nearby: Byron Bay? Melbourne? I hope for their sake it's at least cooler than here—I would not like for their Scandinavian skin to burn.

I follow the couple into the station and to the escalator heading down to the platforms. A screen delivers the message: GOOD SERVICE. TRAINS ON TIME. Even though I'm going no

farther than Newtown, at least there won't be delays.

I thought it would be cooler in here, but it's just as hot—and dank. Everything is slimy, surfaces are sticky to touch, moisture dripping off the station walls. The skin under my chin, on my neck, feels like swampland. Every breath of this burdened air is a struggle.

I step onto the escalator, hoping that it will be cooler at the bottom, where I can wait for the air-conditioned train to take me away. It does feel fractionally less hot, a trifle less oppressive here at the top of escalator: or is that just my relief at escaping the torrid street?

As the escalator begins to take me down, slowly, quietly, I feel a little light-headed. I feel faint, swaying from side to side—but that's passing now: as the escalator makes its gradual descent, my head has cleared. I look around, taking in my new surroundings.

The backpacker couple are ahead of me, further down the escalator, but nobody else: a welcome change from the pressing crowd of the street. I turn around: no one behind me—I'm starting to feel almost relaxed. The air seems marginally cooler, as the escalator slowly carries us down to the platforms.

I take in the tawdry advertising on the wall to the left: mobile phone plans, alcohol, banking, insurance, fast food. There are travel ads, luring passengers to New Zealand, Fiji, and one of Europe: a Eurail special offer, see northern Europe by train. I wonder if the Scandinavian couple noticed that one. But peering ahead, I can't see them anymore: they must have walked down to the bottom of the escalator and moved onto the platform. Perhaps the train is coming.

The air feels drier now, and cooler still, as we descend further below street level. Already it's easier to breathe down here. The escalator seems longer than I remember it, and steeper: I can't see the bottom. The platform should be coming up, I should be able to hear the announcements through the speakers, maybe a train approaching. But I can see or hear nothing below: all I can see is the escalator, extending down. All I can hear is the mechanical clanking of the escalator on its steep incline.

I turn around to look behind me: there's no one coming down the escalator. I seem to be the only person on this ride, as far as I can see. I experience a slight thrill at this prospect, a shiver of delight at having this long escalator all to myself. The air is even cooler now, all traces of the street's heat and humidity gone. My headache is also gone, with no prospect of a migraine. My head is clear and alert.

I look to my left, at the advertising images. There's a colourful ad for soft drink, then an enticing image of ice cream. Another travel ad, for Vanuatu. But the next frame is blank, as is the one after that. I lean forward, peering down: as far as I can see, the wall contains only blank white spaces inside the frames, where the ads should be.

I try to sight the bottom of the escalator and the platform, but I can see only darkness enveloping the end of the escalator. The view is murky, indistinct: at a certain point after the row of blank frames, the light seems to expire.

There are no sounds either, apart from the repetitive soft clanking of the escalator mechanism itself. No people, no noises from the street: just a long, seemingly endless descent on the

escalator.

Something on the left wall catches my eye: an advertising image. It's blurry, too vague for me to make out: some sort of shape, an animal perhaps—or is it a human form? It was moving, I think—or did I imagine that? Whatever it was, it's behind me now, as the escalator continues to take me down. I study the frames where the advertising images were: they are blank again, after that one brief image.

It's time to turn back. I can't stay on this escalator, wherever it's taking me. I swivel around and stare back as far behind as I can see—but that isn't far. The darkness seems to have closed in: I can make out no more than five or six steps of the escalator. And they seem very steep. I wonder how long it would take me to climb back up to the surface of the train station.

The air must be thinner: I feel weak and light-headed again. I don't think I could summon the energy to stride up against the flow of the escalator, into the darkness up there. It's all I can manage at the moment to hold on to the side as the escalator takes me further down. I slowly turn around, facing the front, resigned to completing the journey of this long descent.

Something else on the left, another movement. But this is not an animal, or a moving figure: it looks like a letter—then another—and another letter passing by in a stream. The advertising picture frame on my left is long and extended, like a screen stretching out along the wall. The end of the narrow screen is in front of me—but I can't see its beginning, it disappears into the dark. Out of that blackness comes the stream of letters on the screen: black on a white background.

My eyesight is a little fuzzy from the thinning air and gloomy light, but I focus on this long screen and its procession of passing letters. There's one: but what alphabet is it? Greek? The next one is similar: Cyrillic? The next letter resembles a squiggle: Arabic? And another is a collection of strokes: Mandarin? Japanese? Then a letter I can recognise: it looks like the letter 'd', in the good old Roman alphabet. But it's followed immediately by another type of writing altogether: is it hieroglyphics?

I wish my head didn't feel so faint, so I could apply myself to these letters and make some sense of them. But I'm too weak and mind-fatigued to analyse the flow of inscriptions before me. All I can do is watch the letters stream towards me in their jumble of alphabets. I stare at this river of letters, letting it flow on, with no meaning that I can discern. Occasionally I can make out a Roman letter, but there is no sequence to build even a fraction of a word. On it runs, seemingly faster now: a torrent of letters washing by.

Trying to follow the flow of letters and characters is making me dizzy—so I look away from the screen and peer forward, down into the dark. As the stream of random letters accelerates its motion, the escalator seems to be slowing down. I study the two or three steps directly in front of me: their movement is definitely slower now. The rhythmic clanking of the escalator has slowed as well. Leaning forward, I think I can make out the bottom—is it the platform at last?

I take a tentative step down: I realise I've been standing on the one step all this time. My body shivers: I realise as well how cold it's become down here. I'm wearing only a light shirt and summer trousers, with no protection against the cold. I cross my arms in front of my chest and hold them tight, hoping to generate some warmth, but my upper body shivers again as I

take another step down the escalator.

And it's coming to a stop! The escalator has brought me to the bottom—I can see it now—and the mechanical movement is easing down, depositing me gently at the end of this long descent.

I hold on to the side of the escalator for support as I ready myself for the bottom. It's cold to touch, and it's almost at a standstill now. I can see the end just below me, the escalator slowly, very slowly, moving to its end-point on the platform. I steady myself and step off, as the escalator ceases its motion, and I gingerly took a step forward onto the platform.

It was cold, very cold, down there, I could feel it in my bones. I wished I had some warm clothing, a jacket or jumper—anything to ward off the chill. It seemed to be colder the farther I ventured from the escalator, although I had only ventured a few steps.

I stared around me, but there was nothing to see, just a featureless landscape, leached of colour. There was literally nothing down here, apart from a mist, just ahead—the kind of mist you might see in extreme cold, hovering over ice or frozen land.

There—in the mist—did something move? It was blurry, like the moving image I saw in the picture frame—but now it was gone. I squinted into the mist but could see nothing, apart from what appeared to be blocks of ice. Was it ice? That would account for the mist, and it was certainly cold enough down here for ice. I took another couple of steps forward, my legs trembling with the cold. I wanted to touch this large block, the only tangible thing I could see.

There was something beneath the surface of the ice, something dark—and moving. I reached down and touched the top of the frozen block: a crack appeared in the ice, widening quickly—and the block cracked open. The black shapes tumbled out, sprawling onto the frozen ground: they were letters. Letters and characters as I'd seen on the long screen: a jumble of alphabets; some I couldn't even recognise. Was that a rune? A hieroglyph? There was a letter 'v', but around it were characters I couldn't place, and others in alphabets I couldn't decipher. The letters spilled out like a puddle, oozing along the ground toward the mist.

I followed them, hoping to see a sentence take shape that I could understand, or even a word. But the letters were forming a thick tangle of different alphabets: it seemed hopeless to expect any sense from that mess of characters.

I suddenly remembered the escalator. I turned around, fearful that I had wandered too far from it, that I'd be unable to find my way back. The mist grew thicker; it was difficult to see far, but I could just make out the shape of the escalator behind me. I was about to head back to it when I glimpsed another moving figure in the distance, and another, flitting through the mist. They seemed vaguely human in shape and size, but they had no substance. They were vapour, briefly taking form then dissolving into the mist.

Beyond them, farther away from the escalator, I could see more blocks of ice: bigger, stacked on top of each other. I took two steps towards them, but with each step I was plummeted into cold. This felt colder than I had ever known, an antiseptic lifeless cold. I knew that if I took one more step in that direction it would be my last. I would freeze on the spot.

I stopped. I took a step backward, then turned around and took two more steps, back in the direction of the escalator. I desperately needed to get on that ride. I found my way to it, through the mist, and lunge forward onto that long, long escalator, grabbing hold of both sides, gripping them in the cold.

But it's not moving. What good is it if it's stationary? I stare up the steep incline and know I could never walk up there to safety. My limbs are near-frozen and my head is faint. I feel that I'm about to pass out, here at the very bottom of the escalator. I drop my head and close my eyes, unable to summon the strength for anything else.

After a minute or two, I sense something. I feel it first: a weak low vibration; then I hear it: that slow mechanical clanking sound starting up; then I feel it: a gradual forward movement; then I see it: the escalator is taking me up. I throw my head back with relief. I feel my semi-frozen face almost crack with the force of a smile. I look down at the escalator, to make sure of its movement: and yes, it's definitely moving, it's moving. I let out a gasp of relief, a little cry—and I can see my breath in the cold dry air.

I'm going up, I'm going back up. The escalator is picking up speed, taking me away from this frozen place. I stare fixedly ahead and up, my hands still gripping the sides. They're not quite so cold now, a little warmth is returning as I ascend. My limbs are unfreezing: I can move my legs more freely now—I take a step upwards, then I stride up three more steps.

I'm bounding up the escalator, up towards the station and the street outside, the dirt and the glare—and I want the heat, I want the noise, I want the sweat, I want the glare, I want the dirt, I want the grime, I want the heat.

*John Potts is a Sydney-based writer. His fiction has been published in Seizure and Microfiction Monday Magazine (US). He has also written and produced numerous radio dramas and features for ABC Radio.*

# Barren

by *Rachael Guy*

The leather recliners are cracked as dry heels,  
cushions sunk with the weight of memory.  
A clock chimes every hour, the kitchen table waits.  
In a drawer, serviettes grow brittle.  
The tarnished cutlery is quiet.

Coiled on a hairbrush, my grandfather's matted  
grey strands make a tiny creature without quiver or pulse.  
In the bathroom cupboard, his razor, a cracked mug.  
Empty overalls hang slack on a door hook.  
In a pocket, his busy cursive on a small square  
of notepaper, mumbles to itself.

In my dream, their house is irrefutably empty,  
no front door, a fallen broom—  
the warmth already gone from their bed.

Trapped in a jar in the highest corner of the pantry,  
my grandmother's voice. Her blustering rage  
preserved beyond reach.

*Rachael Guy is a multidisciplinary artist working in theatre, puppetry and creative writing. Her writing has appeared in Sleepers Almanac, Overland, Australian Poetry Journal and Mascara. In 2015 she was shortlisted for the Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize.*

# The Magpie Game

by *Wayne Marshall*

The show's about to start and the boys are ready. They stand packed in a dingy metal shelter, overlooking a suburban park. At the back, one of the boys dredges his throat and spits up at the roof. The group spills into the open, pushing and shoving to avoid being struck by the enormous gob of spit that dangles down, swaying like a grotty pendulum. When it finally succumbs to gravity and falls to the dirt, the boys hurry back in and resume their positions. The tallest boy hisses *ssh*, and there's silence. After all, the show's about to start.

Twenty-five metres from the shelter, on a gravel track that splits a field of trampled yellow grass, Sean steps onto his BMX. He takes the orange stackhat in his hands and eyes the gum tree on the far side of the park. The boys shift right for a better view. They grin as their eyes meet the tree, following it as it rises, all fortress-like and gnarled, above the graffitied fence line and red-tiled rooftops. At the moment there's no movement on the bushy branches. High up, the magpie's nest is unguarded. But it won't stay that way for long. Once the bird gets a whiff of the stackhat, it'll come tearing out of the sky like a bull at a red rag.

There's a murmur of excitement among the dirty, sweat-streaked faces in the shelter.

The boys were watching on the day Sean's family moved into their street, around a month ago. It was during the school holidays, so they were lounging about on one of their nature strips, spitting, swearing, watching one end of the road and then the other, waiting for something—anything—to come rescue them from their boredom. And so when the Budget truck lumbered into the street and turned into the driveway of Number 79, with its sunken carport and knee-high grass, the boys sat up and took notice. It was an event.

Not that they welcomed Sean into the group with open arms. He was pale and gangly and acne-studded: it didn't take much to see that wherever the kid had been before this, he'd been on the bottom rung. Still, he wasn't shy in coming forward, the boys had to hand him that. The same afternoon he moved in, he came into the park and lingered on the edge of the boys' footy game. He didn't introduce himself, just stood with hands stuffed in the pockets of his black imitation Adidas jacket, smiling whenever one of the boys accidentally made eye contact. Initially they paid him no attention, swept up in their footy match. After almost a week of it though, the boys caved in and let him join the group. But it was with the unspoken agreement that he was coming in at rock bottom, replacing the current whipping boy of the group, and as such, he was going to do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

And right now they want him to take the ride.

The Magpie Game has become a yearly tradition. Every spring, around the time of the footy finals, when the magpies are at their most territorial, the boys take turns strapping on the orange helmet and riding beneath the nest. Sometimes, if they pedal lightning fast and tear dangerously across the track, one of them will make it past without being swooped. Most of the time they're not so lucky. A boy will be three-quarters of the way across, head down and hammering at the pedals, when all of a sudden he'll hear the mad girlish squeals of the others at the shelter and know he's in trouble. Next second the bird will be screeching its war cry and cracking its beak



at his neck and helmet. Normally though, unless the magpie draws blood or the boy stacks his bike trying to fend it off, he'll be all smiles afterwards, laughing and spitting and high-fiving the others as they come rushing to meet him.

But this magpie isn't like anything they've seen. Since it took over the tree last spring, none of the boys have had the courage to take it on. Unlike other magpies, it doesn't just swoop as a warning. No, when this thing comes, it comes hard. The boys have seen it in action enough to make them steer well clear of the tree. A fortnight ago, the brother of the tallest boy was attacked. He'd been crossing the park on his way to the milk bar when the bird came torpedoing out of the tree. Not only did it split his head open with its razor sharp beak, but its feet snatched his curly red hair and started dragging him off the ground, as if attempting to carry him up to its nest. It took the old Greek woman to come trotting out with a bucket of water to make the magpie let go. The boys retaliated of course, throwing rocks and sticks and whatever else they could find at the tree. The tallest boy swears he heard the sound of eggs going *splat* when his rock hit the nest.

On the track, Sean turns to face the boys. Squinting in the sunlight, he says he's really sorry but he doesn't think he can go through with it.

There's a collective groan in the shelter and the tallest boy charges out. It's just one bloody magpie, he says, holding a livid finger to the sky. And besides, he says, his screeching high-pitched voice echoing throughout the park. You promised.

When Sean still doesn't move, the boy spits on the dirt and says, Alright mate, looks like I'm gonna be forced to tell everyone at school what happened at the sleepover last weekend. In the shelter the boys look at each other with puzzled expressions.

Yeah, the tallest boy continues, his smirk a battle-hardened weapon. If you're not gonna follow through I'll be forced to tell everyone—like seriously everyone, especially Carla Healy, oh mate I'll tell her first thing tomorrow, before homeroom starts—how we caught the new kid jerking off beneath his doona at the sleepover last weekend.

In the shelter the boys break into smiles.

Yeah, one of them shouts. He was beating off over Carla.

Over a photo of Carla, says another.

Over the photo of Carla in the school yearbook, chimes in a third.

Red-faced, Sean says he doesn't know what the boys are talking about.

The tallest boy says, Uh-uh, no you don't. It happened alright and tomorrow everyone finds out. Unless you get going for that tree. Like you promised.

When the boy sees the hurt in Sean's face, he softens, telling him it's just this one thing, it's just this one tiny thing and they'll never ask him to do anything like this again.

Lowering his head, Sean whispers that he'll do it.

The boy swings and jogs back to the shelter, beaming as he delivers the boys a triumphant thumbs-up. Once he's inside, the group shuffles eagerly into position.

On the track, Sean lowers the stackhat onto his head with glazed and distant eyes. The helmet is huge on him, like a hollowed-out pumpkin. After clipping the strap beneath his chin, he takes hold of the handlebars. Next, his worn Dunlop shoes grip the pedals. Then, after a final terrified glance at the tree, Sean's feet sink down and the bike begins to move.

In the shelter the boys slap each other's thighs in anticipation.

Sean pedals slowly at first, fighting for traction on the slippery track. It doesn't take long though, and he's up off his seat and building momentum. He rides harder, faster, than the boys thought him capable of. His feet attack the pedals, powering him along the fence line and into the danger zone. He's five seconds from the tree. Four seconds. Three.

The boys spill from the shelter, clapping, chanting, as Sean flashes across the track.

The boys are watching the tree.

Sean's watching the tree.

And then, just at the perfect moment, just when it looks like Sean might actually reach the edge of the park unscathed, there's a rustle on the branches and the magpie's beak appears. The bird trots, sizing up its prey. It lets out a crazed squawk. Then it's swooping down.

The boys are falling sideways over each other in laughter.

Sean is crying, pedalling.

The bird spears through the air for the helmet.

It's show time! squeals the tallest boy.

And then it happens.

Instead of gouging at Sean's neck and helmet, the magpie's feet take hold of his jacket. The bird is flapping and Sean is pedalling and suddenly, somehow, the tyres of the bike are rising off the gravel and the magpie is carrying him into the air. When Sean opens his eyes, he shrieks. But he keeps on pedalling, going over a chimney and still further into the sky.

Silence falls across the stunned faces below. And although they're just kids, they understand they're in the middle of something here, something big, something huge, something so unspeakably massive that from this moment on their lives will never be the same, and not just because they're watching a boy being carried by a magpie through the sky—*through the fucking sky*—and not just because they have no idea what they'll tell Sean's parents and later the cops when the questions start to come, but because this changes everything, they can feel it, already, crashing through the years ahead like a tidal wave, sweeping away everything they thought they could take for granted, leaving them bitter and powerless and unable to trust anyone or anything, because how can they, why would they, when at any moment something might come swooping out of the blue to steal it away. But all that's to come and for the moment

they're just boys standing in an open-mouthed pack, watching the magpie carry Sean further into the wide open sky. Sean's legs are pedalling and the magpie's wings are flapping and in a few moments the boy and his orange helmet are just specks on the horizon, going and going and going and then gone, now and forevermore.

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