

Tincture Journal

Issue Two

Winter 2013



Edited by
Daniel Young

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Editorial

Welcome, and thank you for returning for Issue Two of Tincture Journal. We've had a very encouraging response from readers of Issue One and it's great to see quality submissions continuing to roll in from all over the world. So what do we have this quarter?

Meg Henry returns with the second instalment of her column, “Inferior Bedrooms”, so be sure to head back to Issue One if you need a recap on where that left off. In fiction, we have generally longer stories than those found in Issue One, with writers from all over Australia: Fremantle, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart, Perth, Tweed Heads, Katoomba and more. Alongside these we have international guests from the US and Canada, in addition to English-speaking writers who are living in Korea and China.

A few highlights include Ben Walter, previously published in *Island*, *Griffith Review* and *The Review of Australian Fiction*, writing of two friends at odds with each other as they fish in Hobart; Shobha Rao with the misadventures of a refugee husband and wife in 1947 on “The Road To Mirpur Khas”; Michelle Faye has contributed a linked pair of stories about two brothers both as children and then adults; and on the scarier side there is Todd Sullivan's urban vampire horror story, set in South Korea. Fiction forms the bulk of the journal, so there is also much more.

Our non-fiction submissions have been very strong in Issue Two, and hopefully this trend will continue. From a strong field, we have selected a piece by former contributor to *The Lifted Brow*, Zoe Barron, about her first night back in the country of her birth after many years in Australia; comedian Nick Sun on his experience in an American reality TV show; professional singer Marnie Hirst sharing a tale of woe from her time in Japan; and finally two wonderful pieces by Jonathon Kane and Roxanne Groebel.

Scattered amongst the prose you will find the work of six talented poets, and on this note we have two very exciting pieces of news to share. Firstly, this issue contains two poems from Stuart Barnes, who has joined the Tincture team and will be poetry editor

starting in Issue Three. I look forward to Stuart's help with sourcing the best new poetry and publishing it in the journal. Secondly, Darcy Tindale, who has contributed the amusing poem “Please! Put out your bin, or bring mine back in!”, has been shortlisted for the 2013 Monash University Undergraduate Prize for Creative Writing. Congratulations Darcy!

Thanks again for your support, as readers and writers. As always, please send feedback to editor@tincture-journal.com, or find us at [@TinctureJournal](https://www.instagram.com/TinctureJournal).

enjoy,
Daniel Young,
Editor.

Inferior Bedrooms

Part Two, by Meg Henry

A month after the wedding I rent an apartment with the best man, Moose, in Pajaro Dunes. We stay up all night and go to bed together and don't turn on the TV or our phones. On the days it rains we don't leave the apartment, not even for food. We drink a case of Janz and overstay our reservation and don't talk about our feelings. We're forced out when Moose tries to dry out a pack of cigarettes in the microwave and the whole floor needs to be evacuated. We take separate taxis home and don't talk for three weeks.

§

I'm with KM at After Hours and the guy I'm sitting next to tells me his friend rehabilitates manatees for a living. Dugong, I say, and he sips his beer and says, whatever. He's wearing a plaid button-down even though it's Saturday night. He says something else but I don't respond because I'm checking my phone for a message from Moose that isn't coming. I stare at the screen, too stubborn to break first and too worried that I'm falling for him. When I look back at the table KM has torn her beer coaster into confetti. I finish my drink and tell her I want to go.

The guy in the plaid shirt follows me out past security to the street and hails a cab that we both get in.

§

At my apartment I pour him a glass of merlot. He sits on my bed, resting back against the pillows. He is tan and toned and watches my fingers work the buttons on his shirt. I feel uneasy for some reason that he's not Moose. When he asks me to tell him something about myself I take a tube of expensive sunscreen from my dresser drawer and squeeze some onto my fingers and tell him not to talk. I work the cream into his smooth chest. As I make my way down his abdomen my phone vibrates.

It's Moose, finally, but when I open the message all it says is, Have a good time? I get

up, wondering not for the first time if I'm like this because fiction tells me it's OK to be. He asks me what's wrong and I don't have an answer. I tell him to drink his wine then leave. He obeys and I realise sometimes when you think you have nothing you actually have Less than Zero.

Meg Henry reads and drinks in excess. Often at the same time. She likes damaged men, instant coffee and intellect. While she is renowned for bad ideas, she is also an award-winning writer from Queensland. Follow her [@TheMegHenry](#) or visit inferiorbedrooms.com.

Body Poem

by Rachael Mead

after John Glenday

My hair, the untameable statement of eucalypt claiming sky.

My bones, the foetal range curled from Ashton to Uraidla, valleys folded softly against my ribs.

My brain, encrustations of street art tucked away in Stirling's back-ways, fluorescent anxieties layered with imaginings, sporadically whitewashed for public approval.

My blood, the shimmer floating over every summer surface, the wind combing snarls from acacias.

My eyes, dams drying to crow-footed squints or overflowing with excess. Always staring at the sky.

My tongue, the knobbed drift of creek stones, loathe to shift from its cool, dark bed.

My heart, a gently breathing brown kelpie, asleep.

Rachael lives on a property in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia and is currently completing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Adelaide. Last year she had a short collection of poems, Sliding Down the Belly of the World, published with Wakefield Press and her full length manuscript, The Sixth Creek, was both awarded a Varuna Publisher Fellowship with Picaro Press and shortlisted for the 2012 Adelaide Festival Literature Awards unpublished manuscript prize.

Dialogue

by Ben Flake

No, to be honest it hasn't had any effect on me at all. I mean, it's a shame, what happened, but I really don't think I had any responsibility for it so I haven't been dwelling on it. I mean, the responsibility really isn't mine. I expected—I had the right to expect—that I could call the police, I would call the police and they would just handle things, just, you know, keep the peace. That's what's supposed to happen and I don't think I was naive if I expected that to happen. I've got a store to run here. I can't do that with some maniac messing around in the parking lot, making the customers uneasy. He was *asked* to stop. Several times. And—maybe it was the right call, even. I mean, looking at how he reacted when the police showed up. Who's to say he wouldn't have done that with a customer? Or one of us? So, no. No, it really hasn't. I did what anybody else would have done, and if it didn't go the way it was supposed to, well, that's out of my hands.

Ben Flake is an English teacher at Nanjing's prestigious China Pharmaceutical University.

Blowie

by Michelle Faye

Davey trailed behind his older brother Tom as they followed their father and two uncles across the stretch of beach. They walked in succession, like ants, or soldiers marching out to war. The older men balanced rods across their broad, bare shoulders and the tackle jingled and click-clacked with every step. The sun was close to setting and they had to reach the bay and set up their gear before they lost light.

He was a lanky kid and usually light on his feet, but the men were moving fast so he was forced to take leapfrog steps to keep up. The men's footprints were large, deep holes in the wet sand and with every step he tried to land each of his own footprints into theirs. His brother appeared to be doing the same thing and, although he was taller than Davey, even he appeared to be struggling. He could see the crack of his brother's bum beginning to appear out the top of his boardies. *Looks like it'll be a full moon tonight*, he thought to himself, and laughed, remembering all the times Tom had said the same line while dacking Davey on their driveway, in car parks, at Woolies, even on the school oval one time.

They were the kind of brothers that mucked about like that, gave each other a hard time, but always had each other's back. At school last term a year seven boy was shoving Davey around, scabbing for money for the canteen. He kept tugging at the straps of Davey's bag, trying to yank it off his back and throwing him around in the process. Davey was on the verge of squirting some tears when suddenly, from nowhere, Tom's at his side swinging his own schoolbag into the year seven's head with all the force of a superhero and screaming *HERE, CHECK MY BAG YA DICKHEAD!* Tom ended up getting a week's detention for that one but the kid never bothered Davey again.

He watched his heroic brother now, skipping ahead of the men with his ratty unbrushed hair lopping from side to side as he chased seagulls from sand to sky. Tom was two years older but Davey often felt like the more mature one. Today was his tenth

birthday, and their father had insisted on taking them fishing. Although him and Tom usually loved all the same things: footy, cricket, video games, BMX bikes and Batman over Superman any day, Davey wasn't really a fan of the beach or fishing. It was kinda boring and the bait was icky and made his fingers smell fishy for days. But he saw the white of Tom's eyes grow big when they overheard their father that afternoon.

I'm gonna take the boys fishing later.

His mother had come into his room and made a point of asking Davey if it was what *he* actually wanted to do.

“Course it is!”

His father at his mother's side spoke for him. She flinched, unaware that he had been there, but still waited on an answer from Davey himself. Tom had been behind them in the hallway, hands together in prayer, silently pleading and nodding. Davey felt put on the spot with all six eyes on him, so he feigned excitement.

They reached the groin of rocks just before the sun disappeared behind the water, but not without leaving its mark on the sky. Patches of pink, red and orange swirled together like fairy floss. After dumping the gear Davey and Tom headed straight for the cliff and began to scramble up it in search of rock pools to explore. They came across rubbish mostly. Cans, broken beer bottles, lots of cigarette butts and what appeared to be a used condom, before being beckoned by their father.

“Boys! Nah! Get down! You can wait til' the tide goes out a bit.”

Davey and Tom shrugged their way back down the rocks.

“After I've had me first catch I'll show ya's how to bait a hook, orright?”

Their father wore a cap pulled so far down his face that you could barely see his eyes. It was rare that he would look you directly in the eye anyway, and Davey had become accustomed to talking to the rim of his father's cap. He had been told by his

mother on several occasions that he had his father's eyes though he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. His father had a quick temper and if you did manage to catch his eye it could sometimes feel like peering into a dark, shadowy tunnel.

“Can I cast out for ya, Dad?”

Tom was hopping from foot to foot trying to get his father's attention. Davey watched his father put a Winnie Blue to his mouth and light it. He chucked the pack into the esky and scooped up his rod all in one swift motion, then headed out into the water without saying a word.

For some time Davey sat still and ran his fingers through the sand, watching his old man down at the water's edge, calf deep in the dark waves. Everything seemed silent and still except for the white water battering the shore. Now and then his father would call out to Davey's uncles and they'd all laugh. They were gradually becoming silhouettes, shadowy figures against a painted backdrop in which the stars began to slowly show their winking faces. Davey created a pillow out of his father's red fishing jacket and sunk himself further into the warm sand. He breathed in deep; the salty night air mixed with the smell of Lynx, cigarettes and Bundaberg and made him think of home. His mother would be in their yellow kitchen drying dishes, her thin hands always moving, or maybe on the phone, crying to some unknown person on the other end of the line. The small black and white television that sat propped on two VB cartons would be blaring the “Home and Away” theme song and muffling the cries of his baby sister Ashley who would be red-faced and snotty in her highchair, wailing for her freedom.

§

Davey awoke to rain on his face, his eyes springing open to find his brother leaning over him dripping seawater from his straggly hair.

“Look bro, boobs!”

Tom had been playing around cutting up ocky bait and making pictures out of the black ink that spilled from their goopy limbs. His fingers were black and his teeth flashed

as he grinned.

“That stuff stains ya know?”

“S’if I care. Look what I found in the esky!”

Tom was holding a navy blue stubby holder in front of his crotch and swinging his hips, making humping gestures. Davey blinked hard. It had a picture of a blonde woman lying on a beach with her breasts out.

“Think chicks like this come to Rockingham?”

Tom was still dry humping her face. Davey shrugged and looked towards the water. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it; she just looked cold and uncomfortable to him.

“Maybe we should get Dad to take us to Swanbourne next time.”

“Huh?” Davey was beginning to feel cold and uncomfortable himself.

“Swanbourne...the nuddy beach. Geez mini-D, I needa teach you some things ay.” Tom chucked his stubby holder girlfriend at Davey and it bounced off his knee and rolled down the sand towards the water.

“Good one!” The brothers barked simultaneously.

“Jinx!” Tom launched his fist into Davey’s right arm.

“Well...maybe she’ll end up at Swanbourne where she belongs,” Davey joked, but Tom had already lost interest and was now poking about in the esky and intermittently throwing sideways glances over his shoulder.

“What’re you doin’?”

“Nothin’. Let’s go up the dunes.”

Before Davey had time to respond, Tom’s back was already to him and he was

halfway across the beach.

“Davey! Come on ya pussyyyy!”

Davey scrambled up and legged it after his brother.

The sand was cool beneath Davey’s feet and the air felt colder up on the dunes away from the warmth of the gas lamps. It was dark, so dark he could barely see and the lights from the coast road that flickered further up in the distance were too far to illuminate the sand hills. He could hear the sound of waves crashing on the shore and the distant hum of traffic, but otherwise the silence was as ghostly as the dunes themselves. Goosebumps began to rise up his forearms and he shivered from the cold, or fear, or his sudden need to pee.

“Tom?” His voice came out in a broken whisper.

“Tom? Where are you?”

No answer. Great. With every step, rough saltbush branches scratched at his legs and he was sure his right calf was bleeding. This was a stupid idea and Davey felt himself starting to panic. His eyes began to well up like that day at school when the year seven kid had picked on him, but he willed himself to hold it together and stop being a bloody pussy. He was ten now and ten year olds shouldn’t be afraid of the dark. Tom wasn’t. Tom wasn’t afraid of anything. He took after their father that way. Hard as nails.

Davey bent and tried to examine the damage to the back of his leg, but it was pointless in this light. *Toughen up mate*, he heard his father’s voice in his mind. He was about to turn back when he noticed a shadow over on the dune to the left of him. He paused and squinted, trying to make it out, it was probably just a saltbush. Yeah, just more shrub with cat claws for leaves, but something about its stillness unnerved him. He squinted again. Was it growing bigger? No not growing bigger, moving, moving straight towards him! It was getting closer but Davey’s legs wouldn’t go, he was stuck, he could hear the thuds of its step in the sand, could hear the rise and fall of its breathing.

“Tom? Is that you?”

Davey’s heart was pounding in his chest, it was beating too fast, he could hear it in his ears, his legs began to feel like jelly, he turned to leg it back towards the beach but something had a hold of him, was grabbing his arm.

“Hellooo Clareeece.”

Davey let out a high scream that bounced off the dunes and sounded even shriller in the open air than it had in his head. Tom’s face suddenly appeared out of the dark, his chin, mouth and nose lit up in an orange glow. He was holding their father’s Bic lighter beneath his chin and smiling creepily.

“Gotcha!”

“Fark...” Davey was still trying to catch his breath “...you!”

“You scream like a little girl.”

Tom was using the lighter to inspect the ground before finding a clear patch of sand between the scrub and sitting down. The flame kept going out and every few moments they were plunged into complete darkness.

“I’m going back.”

“No don’t.”

Davey could hear Tom shaking the lighter fluid, before his face appeared out of the black again. He sat down opposite his big brother and drew his knees to his chest in an effort to try and keep warm but in that moment he felt very aware of himself; of his girlish scream, his close call with tears, his skinny, scratched up, jelly legs that nearly gave out on him. His father and mother were always arguing: *He needs to toughen up, no boy of mine is gonna—He just has a delicate nature—acts like a fucking girl.*

He pushed his legs back out from under his chin and sat with them apart the way Tom

was sitting opposite him, chucking a spready, elbows on knees.

“So...what now?”

Tom fumbled around, one handed in his coat pockets, before pulling out a crumpled cigarette.

“Birthday present.” He grinned.

“Where’d ya get that?”

“Esky. C’mon, let’s try.”

Davey watched as Tom put the wrinkled cigarette to his mouth and lit it, the same way their father did. Puffs of smoke hung like cobwebs in the night sky. He thought again of home and his mother who would be trying to put Ashley down with bedtime stories. Fairies that live in gardens or sleeping princesses in castles, waiting on kisses from dashing princes. He secretly wished he were back there, in his blue room, snuggled beneath the Batman doona, under a ceiling of glow-in-the-dark solar systems and drifting off to sleep to the sound of their mother’s soft, gentle voice.

“You try.”

The end of the cigarette glowed red as Tom extended it to him. Davey’s reluctance to take it made for a clumsy exchange and he burned his finger and dropped ash on his boardies during the process. He could hear Tom clicking his tongue as he tried to hold the creased fag between his thumb and index finger the way he had seen their father do, before sucking hard on the end.

“Shit mate, you orright?”

Davey was keeled over, spitting, spluttering and coughing like he’d swallowed something down the wrong hole. His chest tightened, he felt his lungs cave inwards and his throat felt overcooked.

“Shh! Stop coughin’ up ya lungs for a sec. Think I heard summin’.”

They paused in unison, like rabbits listening for danger, ears pricked, wide-eyed and motionless. Their father’s distant voice carried up to them.

“Shit!”

“Jinx!”

Tom quickly pocketed the lighter throwing them back into darkness and within seconds Davey felt his brother’s sandy hands yanking him by his arm roughly to his feet. The sudden jolt made him dizzy. The moon had emerged in the sky as if from nowhere and was now spinning above his head; the stars danced and blurred together and his chest still hurt as they scurried over the dunes, dusting themselves off and racing one another back towards the distant glow of the lamp.

Their father’s rod jerked about as the fish on the end of his line gasped for sobs of air. It was white with a shiny black cape covered in yellow spots. The waves crashed at Davey’s ankles as he stood at the water’s edge and watched his father reel in his catch. Tom was doing cartwheels on the sand, throwing himself around in excitement.

“Good one Dad!”

Their father swung the line towards Davey and, as he did, the fish began to blow itself up like a balloon. A balloon covered in tons of sharp, pointed spikes.

“It’s jussa blowie ya morons, don’t get excited.”

He tilted his head towards the bobbing fish.

“Davey, grab the gloves and get this thing off my line would ya?”

“Me?”

“I’ll do it Dad!” Tom already had the oversized gloves on his hands.

“Nah, Davey can do it.”

“I can’t Dad.”

“Tom give Davey the gloves! Fucksake.”

Davey’s hands were swimming in the gloves and they shook uncontrollably as he neared the ballooned-up fish; their father had lowered it to the sand and it now flapped and jolted about, starving for air. Its every jump caused Davey’s heart to spasm but he felt the pressure of his father’s eyes on him. After three attempts he finally managed to catch the fish beneath his left glove, but as he felt for the hook the fish twisted in his hand, a spike piercing the glove, and he spilled backwards wailing. His palm began to throb. He could hear his uncles laughing and suddenly imagined picking up the dumb blowie fish and ditching it at their fat heads.

“Christ. Tom, show ya brother how to be a man would ya?”

Tom took the gloves from Davey and dislodged the hook from the blowies blood-specked mouth in a matter of moments, then handed the fish to their father.

“Watch this boys!”

He flung the fish into the air in front of him then dropkicked it like a footy out into the night sky where it slipped away silently. Davey found himself wishing he could follow the blowie; he imagined walking out across the water’s glistening surface, following its path to the moon, and slipping silently into the black water, never to return. He stropped back up the beach and watched moths butting themselves at the gas lamp instead. Tom was still down at the water’s edge, picking up shells and kicking them out to sea the way their father had booted the blowie. Even though he and Tom were so alike, there were times, like this one, when they were completely different and it made Davey feel so alone in the world, like an outcast or a superhero that nobody understood or appreciated; like Batman. But if he was Batman, then Tom was definitely his Robin. He sucked at his swollen palm, it tasted of metal and salt and fish, a bit like vegemite, and he cried quietly.

“Davey...” his father’s rod was jerking wildly again, “you’re up!”

Davey stood with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair and breathing in a gust of salty air that swept across his face and dried his tears. He sniffed, swallowed hard and headed towards the flash of silver on his father’s line.

Father

by Michelle Faye

Tom piled his wife and kids into the Ford Falcon and paused for a moment before starting the engine. He caught his reflection in the side mirror and suddenly saw his father's face scowling back at him; drawn, shabby, and bitter with deep lines about the eyes and a dark sagging beneath. He rubbed at his face, leaned across his wife, shoved her knees aside and clawed about in the glovebox for his Winnie Blues.

“Oh Tom, not today.”

He ignored her, put the lit cigarette to his pursed lips, then started the car and pulled out onto the road with the fag hanging loosely from the side of his mouth, ash dropping into his lap and spoiling his perfectly pressed, black pants. They drove with the windows down and the summer heat pounding their faces, and as he smoked and relaxed back into the seat, he almost forgot what they were on their way to.

“Think he'll make an appearance?”

He let out a snort. “Doubt it.”

His wife was casting him a sidelong glance without blinking. He could tell she wanted to push the matter, quiz him some more, could feel the weight of her eyes on him and his face began to feel tingly and hot.

“But don't you think...”

“No! He's not gonna come all the way from fucking Exmouth, is he? Why would he? S'if he gives a shit. Jesus Lynn, why even bring him up?”

He felt her sink back into her seat and turn away from him, then remembered the kids in the back and felt guilty for his outburst. From the corner of his eye he saw their faces in the rear-view mirror. All three of them splotchy and red-cheeked, their eyes averting his

as they sat silently, staring out the car windows, watching the streets go by. The sight of them all dressed alike, neatly in black, paved the way to a memory he didn't want. He pressed his fingers into his left eye and took a deep breath, trying to shake the memory. His right hand clutched the wheel so tightly the fag between his fingers began to bend between his white knuckles, but the memory crept in, just like the dreams always did, and it made him tired; so fucking tired, he felt like life was catching up with him, driving over and over him, backwards and forwards, getting heavier and grinding him down into the earth until he could no longer breathe. He drew hard on his cigarette, hoping the nicotine would calm him. Up until this point he had tried to ignore it—the gut-burning anxiety, the dreams, the sleeplessness—he had let himself believe it would all work itself out. He flicked the cigarette out of the window, along with his unwanted memories, as they rounded the old church.

Ignoring the *Slow Speed* sign, Tom over-revved the car into the car park and drove too fast over the gravel road, bouncing the kids in the back and spinning the tyres before abruptly breaking and switching the engine off all at once. Again he felt his wife's eyes on him, knew well the look she would be giving him.

“Let's just get this over with.”

He opened the door and got out. The gravel smelled of mineral and burnt rubber and he waited impatiently at the open door whilst his daughter and two sons clambered clumsily out, all elbows, knees and awkwardness. As they made their way up the steps of the church he felt again the neuralgia of memory.

Inside it smelled of pine and incense mixed with sweat. It was humid, so humid you could almost taste the air. The pews were pretty much empty, only a handful of guests were seated, and a man Tom recognised to be his Uncle Den stood bent at his father's coffin. No sign of Davey. Typical. He made his way down the aisle between the pews as Lynn hushed and organised their children.

“The kids don't want to look in the coffin. I'll go sit them over there,” she whispered, tilting her head to the right towards the closest pew.

“What? No.”

“They’re scared Tom.”

“They’re fine.”

She ignored him and began to lead them away.

“Lynn, no! They can pay their respects to their grandad, orright?”

He part-whispered, part-spat the words and the two of them tussled about, grabbing a child each, while the few guests that had assembled watched on. His daughter began to cry for her mother and with that Tom relented and let Lynn pick her up and move off, leaving him alone with his two boys. He looked down at them, the white of their eyes glistening, their pupils large, reflecting the candlelight. They were like two rabbits caught in headlight. Tom was aware of everyone’s eyes on him. His lips tightened into a forced smile as he knelt down in front of them so that his face was obscured from the remaining guests and family members that had gathered.

“Listen ‘ere, you’re gonna stop being soft and you’re gonna go up there and say goodbye to your grandad. It’s not a choice, d’ya hear me?”

The younger son looked to his older brother for guidance, who stared blankly over his father’s shoulder and nodded.

“I said, d’ya hear me?”

“Yes Dad.”

He took his sons by a hand each and guided them up the few steps to where the coffin lay. He didn’t feel guilty about forcing the boys to look death in the face, it would toughen them up and they needed it. But a part of him knew that it wasn’t for them. He was afraid to see his father on his own, afraid for what he might say into his father’s face now that he could no longer talk back, afraid he’d lose his shit, go soft himself and wither into a complete mess. As they approached the coffin he was surprised by what lay inside. The

make-up they had used seemed to have erased all of his father's hard lines and the peacefulness in his expression was false, as though it were not his father at all. He looked down into the stranger's face and waited for the tears to come but they didn't. He had thought he would feel more than this. Instead he felt a surprising emptiness, or numbness. As he turned he caught a blurry figure at the back of the church and his heart gave a start.

§

“Didn't think you'd come.”

“Yeah well...” Davey shrugged and stuck his hands into his pockets.

The sun was on their backs as they stood outside the entrance of the church and thanked the few guests. Tom noted how big his little brother had gotten. Not fat but built, all lean and muscled like a footy player. He had barely recognised him, the tailored suit, the outward confidence, the strong, stubbled jaw. Davey had grown to be a decent looking bloke. For some time neither brother said anything and they stood in awkward silence.

“That your lot then?” Davey spoke first, nodding towards Lynn and the kids who stood waiting under a tree by the car.

Tom nodded, avoiding his brother's eyes and shifting his weight from foot to foot. He could feel sweat starting to bead on his forehead and pool in his shirt and he desperately wanted a smoke. Searching his mind for something to say, too many words came to him at once and he swallowed them down. He knew his brother was part of the reason he didn't sleep properly, hadn't slept properly in nineteen years.

Davey broke the silence first again. “Righto, well I'll leave ya to it. Nice to see your missus and little ones.” He sniffed hard and turned to walk away.

“Wait! Uh, well...fuck, there's...a wake. At me house.”

Tom felt his face growing red at his loss of words. He watched Davey run his fingers through his perfectly groomed hair.

“Oh. Uh...” His hesitation hung in the air between them.

“Where’s—”

“The old man’s. We moved in...when he got sick.”

Tom saw the look of apprehension in Davey’s eyes, saw the slight tightening of his jaw, he knew Davey would be reluctant to return to their old house, he knew because he had felt the same way. But news of the old man’s lungs giving out on him had forced him to return, dragging Lynn and the kids along with him. He met his brother’s eyes. They were their father’s, sort of a bluey green, like the sea.

“Race ya there?” Davey joked, and Tom felt himself smile, despite himself.

§

Tom’s head was full on the drive back home. The roads became a blur, the kids were arguing in the back seat and Lynn was speaking to him but he could barely hear her words. *Must be surprised—coming back—all these years.*

He felt like he was under water, wading his way through a cluttered, murky sea full of debris. Seeing his brother had made him alive with memories. He remembered them doing everything together as kids and had always held on to a happy memory of them on Rocko beach at night, the big dunes about their ears, giggling and trying their first smoke together. But as they grew up Davey started to change, he got soft, too soft, went bent, and they grew apart. And after their mother died everything went to shit. Although he had missed Davey, Tom had never managed to get over his resentment. His emotions were like a two thousand piece jigsaw puzzle buried inside his chest and he could never get the pieces to sit right so he just left it undone, hadn’t bothered to find him in all these years, because what was the point? Nothing could change what had happened and at the core of himself, deep down, he knew Davey was probably better off without him.

“Tom, are you listening to me?”

His wife's voice tore him from his thoughts. He let the window down.

"I know you don't like talking about it but I think it's important. You can't avoid it forever, can't go on the way you have been. *I* can't go on Tom. The way you are...with the kids and me. And if you refuse to go speak to someone...a professional I mean."

She paused. He sensed her uneasiness and took his eyes from the road and looked at her. She was crying, dabbing at her eyes with the sleeves of her cotton blouse. He let out a long sigh and said nothing but affectionately covered her hand with his.

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Even fewer people had come back to the house for the wake. Tom wasn't surprised; he knew his father hadn't exactly touched the lives of many. He stood watching from the lounge room window as a burgundy Holden commodore pulled into the driveway. *Bloody hell*, he muttered into the netted curtain. He swung the flyscreen door open, stepped out onto the rickety verandah, pulled on his cap and lit a cigarette.

"Not surprised I beat you in that fuckin' thing!"

He pointed the cigarette towards Davey's car.

"Still a Ford man then?"

"It's the only kinda man there is mate."

"So the old boy dies of lung cancer and you're out here puffing away I see."

Tom chuckled insincerely. The verandah squeaked beneath his boots as he lowered the steps. He noticed Davey eyeing the overflowing ashtray at the foot of the verandah on the butt littered ground.

"Everyone's gotta die some day, don't they? You got AIDS yet?"

After a moment's pause, Davey opened his car door and turned to leave.

“Easy! Take a joke would ya?”

“Mate, I didn’t come here for this. I came to...I dunno, pay my respects or something. Get some closure. But I should have stuck with my gut. Have a good life Tom.”

He was halfway in the car when Tom lunged at him, yanking him back by the arm.

“You’re not goin’ anywhere yet. Not this time!”

He flung him away from the car and his brother stumbled backwards, tripping over a tree stump but catching himself somewhat gracefully.

“We’re gonna have a conversation. You can’t just fuckin’ run away all the time.”

After regaining himself Davey stood with his shoulders back and Tom suddenly felt small. He regretted getting physical, wondered now if he could actually take him.

Davey’s eyes were set as hard as stone at Tom. Still like the sea but dark and shadowy, like rolling grey clouds had suddenly come over them.

“You know it was your fault. You that upset her, *you* they always argued about, every bloody day, she wouldn’t have done it if...” the words were coming out of his mouth but this wasn’t the conversation Tom had wanted to have, these weren’t the words he wanted to say to his brother and yet he couldn’t stop them from coming.

“If...why couldn’t you just be normal?”

He saw Davey’s face drop the moment he said the words and automatically regretted them.

“Alright, you wanna get into this? Why should I have stayed? So you and Dad could blame me for the rest of my life? It’s not my fault Mum—she had depression, Tom. What don’t you get? *Nobody* could help her!”

Tom snorted. “Yeah well you bein’ a fuckin’ fag didn’t help.” He heard the

callousness in his own voice and it both shocked and spurred him. The truth was he was always jealous of Davey, of the way their mother had babied him, treated him so gingerly; he always felt she loved him more.

“You can’t keep blaming me! I tried, Tom. I tried to be what you and Dad wanted, I tried so hard and you saw me trying. Mum was the only one, the only one who loved me for *me*. And then she went and died on us...and I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That there would be no love left in the house. Not because of me, not even because of you, but because of *him*. Don’t you see? I always thought he was just hiding his feelings towards me, like I had to prove myself to be worthy of them. *Be a man, Dave, be a man*. You think it’s easy realising your father has no feelings for you at all?”

Tom felt a lump at the back of his throat.

“So don’t you give me this run away shit. I left because you and him made my life hell and you know it. You think I was gonna stick around for that?”

Tom looked away, guilt rising in his chest. He’d spent years trying to get over all of this family shit. Going over it in his head, waking up in sweat, haunted by the dreams of his brother’s bruised face and the countless times he had let Davey down. He stood by while their father acted out his drunken rages and he closed his bedroom door to it, too cowardly or angry himself to do anything. For a while the guilt had disappeared, he met Lynn and she changed things, made him better, but coming back here, taking care of the old man, being in this house, had brought it all back to him, messed him up all over again. He wanted a chance to put things right but he was resentful, a part of him wished *he* had been the one to run, to just leg it away and never come back. He felt a familiar anger rising inside him.

“You just left me here! You left me here with him!”

Tom lunged again, this time hitting Davey hard in the face. He caught him off guard

and watched him stumble and hit the ground. He turned to walk away but felt a blow to the side of his head then felt himself being winded as Davey's fist hit his stomach, once, twice. The two of them continued throwing punches and stumbling about on the sandy grass until Lynn appeared, screaming at the top of the verandah steps, the kids collected around her hips, the youngest girl wailing. Tom stumbled to his feet and collected himself against Davey's car.

"Lynn, take the kids inside!" He spat blood to the ground.

"It's orright Di, it's okay baby, Daddy's orright."

"Di?" Davey was leant against a tree, holding his bruised knuckles to his stomach, his shirt ripped beneath the right armpit.

"After mum?"

Tom didn't answer, he waited for Lynn to usher their children inside then made his way to the verandah where he dropped himself to sit on the bottom step, hunched over, elbows on knees. He attempted to light a smoke but his hand was shaking uncontrollably. Davey took the lighter from him, holding a steady flame and then slumped down next to him so that they were nearly touching. This time, Tom broke the silence.

"He was nothing without her ya know. I think we all were."

"I should go."

"I can't stop Dave. I just can't stop...smoking. Fighting. This...person I've become. 'Coz I had him in my ear, in my fuckin' head." He tapped hard at his temple.

"And now I can't stop, can't stop being *him*."

Tom hung his head and began to sob. His swollen eye and lip stung from the salt of his tears but he cried without holding anything back; for his mother, for his estranged brother, for his family, for all the years he had kept it in. He felt his brother's heavy arm land around his shoulders and let it stay, not caring what happened beyond that moment

and while everything turned orange in the afternoon light, they sat speechless, in a quiet that for the first time didn't require talk, breathing in the last warmth of the summer sun as it descended behind the trees.

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Eyre All Alone

a blackout of the Francis Webb poem of the same name

by Stuart Barnes

Edward John Eyre, the son of a Yorkshire clergyman, set out from Adelaide in June 1840 with a large party to attempt to reach the centre of the continent. He was blocked by bogs round about the dry Lake Torrens ... At Fowler's Bay in February 1841, having drastically reduced the original party because of the shortage of water and feed, he set out to cross the country from east to west with one white man, Baxter, and three young aborigines. On the night of 29th April Baxter was shot by two of the aborigines, who made off. Wylie, the other of the three, remained with Eyre (from Webb's introduction to the poem)

Prickly ethics [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] root and [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] quake in [redacted]
[redacted] vortices [redacted]
[redacted] of [redacted]
[redacted] thirst.

A white [redacted] will [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] bluff [redacted]
[redacted] the mercenary [redacted]
[redacted].
[redacted]
[redacted]

Fury*

by Stuart Barnes

Sing me a thrush
Sing me a pestle
Sing me a sweetbread

black as your eyelid,
ask the first star:
why is your kitchen

verboten? Let the flowers make a
journey without an umbrella.
They sit in a row

like breakfast.
Many a miner has gone
to bed with me,

droned up on the heat.
The day of fire is coming, the thrush
violent and religious.

Once more the day's
light comes
wanting to whip you and laugh.

* a found poem; source—Anne Sexton's 'The Furies'

Stuart Barnes lives in Queensland, Australia, where he writes and edits PASH capsule, an online journal of contemporary love poetry. He's currently working on Blackouts and other poems, a manuscript dedicated to the memory of Gwen Harwood. Poems are forthcoming in etchings, Southerly, sacred / profane, Mascara Literary Review, and Assaracus: A Journal of Gay Poetry. Stuart is the incoming Poetry Editor of Tincture Journal, beginning in Issue Three. Follow him on twitter [@StuartABarnes](https://twitter.com/StuartABarnes).

First Comic Falling

Non-fiction by Nick Sun

Back in February 2008 I participated in the NBC syndicated television series *Last Comic Standing*. The show concept was pretty much pop idol but with standup comedians instead of wannabe singers. It was season what the fuck and they had run out of ideas for the American show so this season they decided to go global and stretch the feelers out to England and Australia.

One bright Saturday I found myself lining up outside the Sydney Comedy Store for auditions with another 100 or so other comics from all over Australia. Three hours pass but the line doesn't move an inch. By the second hour I was feeling antsy. Everyone was antsy. And severely dehydrated. But we all had stars in their eyes and a thirst for something greater than water. This could be it. The legendary big break from nowhere. One minute you were just an open mic schlub doing his crappy schtick in some Newtown lesbian bar, the next, you were on national AMERICAN TV. So we put up with it. Nothing like dangling a golden carrot in front of our faces that let them treat us like shit. I looked around at all of us comics standing there. Us stupid, gullible comics, retarded from standing in direct sunlight for over two hours straight. We were nothing more than just another bunch of slaves to hope. We had all mistaken sunstroked delirium for dreams. Brought up to believe that one day we would all be stars. But if everyone was a celebrity who would watch us? Mirrors?

We were nothing but patsies in the American entertainment machine. More meat for the grinder. This became clear when finally i saw a comic friend W___ emerge from the comedy store building.

“What the fuck is taking so long man??” I asked him.

“They brought in a fucking wild kangaroo and a dingo and lost control of it in the comedy room and it's taken them three hours to get them under control!” he said in

disgust.

I laughed because I thought he was joking but five minutes later two wildlife handlers exited the building with two large cages with blankets over the top. What I assumed were dingo feet stuck out the bottom of one and kangaroo paws and tail out the other.

Oh god, I thought. What have we gotten ourselves into?

I decided I couldn't be fucked. This was a big warning sign. And I had shit to do. Okay I had nothing to do, but I was sick of standing in line like a pawn in some game I didn't even want to play. I went upstairs to check things out first hand. The comedy store was abuzz with AMERICAN TV crews. Everyone was carrying on like they were involved in some kind of important history defining moment. The air was so humid with self-importance that it congealed on my skin like celebrity cum. I tried to get some answers but the crew were dismissive. My place in the invisible ladder was made known to me. A sad irony is that the actual performers were often on the lowest rung of the entertainment machine. They were used, abused and taken advantage of. Because if you refused to be treated in such a way, there would always be another hundred scum sucking bottom feeders waiting behind you to take your spot for even less. And that was what made us comics deserve to be treated like the miserable opportunistic pathetic sub-humans that we were. We were all expendable until our commercial value rose to a high enough figure where we could buy our own freedom back off the system that had enslaved us. Make us pay for something we already had. And then hopefully... Power. A higher status. A higher rung. A supermodel wife made of cocaine. A yacht filled with beluga caviar. A private zoo of exotic orphans. Expensive depression. And finally sweet suicide death in the form of a golden bullet from a golden gun ripping through the mid brain and chipping the Italian marble behind your slumped headless body.

But for now I was at the bottom being ignored by everyone down to the key grips and the catering staff. I wanted to slit the throats of their children in front of them just to get their attention. Finally I found the casting director and bulldozed my way into her personal space during some trivial task she was treating with great importance. How much longer? I asked her. Maybe another two hours she said, not looking at me, irritated.

Okay fuck this, I thought. Fuck my shot at fame. I'm going to my friends place to smoke bongos and watch violent films. I stole some biscuits from the catering table and left. They were okay. I gave half a biscuit to a duck. I went to my friend's place to smoke bongos and watch violent films and that's just what we did. After the third cone I was gripped by a paranoid fear. Had I just fucked things up? Had I just missed out? Should I have just stood there in the searing heat while my brain cells melted into my scalp in order to appear on TV? That all-unseeing blinding eye that bound people to furniture? That eater of time and human potential? Did I want to be just another agent of samsaric unawareness...? Maybe. My mobile phone rings. It was my agent at the time. He was like a step dad who was never around, and when he was, he'd rape me for fifteen per cent.

Agents. Managers. Comedy industry people. Yech... What the fuck kind of existence did these parasites lead? What did they do all day? I always wondered. Phone calls. Wheeling and dealing. Sycophancy. Networking and backslapping and bitching and playing power games like the two-faced pieces of manipulative shit little bitches that they were. Leaning in a high backed leather swivel chair smoking a cigar and laughing and jerking off behind a mahogany desk the size of a Polynesian island. Probably.

The weird thing about people involved in the comedy industry is how humourless most of them were. I could never talk to most of them. Most of the time it wasn't like talking to a person, it was like talking to some kind of fucking cipher with gold coins for eyes, spewing shards of other conversations and rumours they had heard from somewhere else. Fakes and phonies. I wanted to drink their blood and throw it back up in their faces as they died. But hey, networking was never my forte. I found it difficult to pretend to like people I hated in order to get something I didn't even want from them. Call it integrity, call it a self destructive low tolerance threshold for cunts.

“Heeeeeeyyyyyyy...” he said.

“Hi,” I replied.

Why am I with this guy? I wondered. We had nothing in common. We didn't see eye to eye. He didn't get me and I didn't get him and what he thought was best for me violated

my basic belief system. I was being groomed to be some kind of token Asian guy they put on panel shows so the network could say they weren't racist. They were racist.

“How was the audition maaate?” he said, snake oil dripping through my mobile phone receiver and all over my cheek.

“Ah I pulled out. I had to wait for too long...”

“Why'd you do that? You had a good chance there!”

“They brought wild animals into the Comedy Store. Wild animals. Into a comedy club. I just got the feeling I wasn't what they were after.”

“You wasted a chance. It would have looked great on your CV, but it's your career mate.” He hung up.

Career. Yes. What the fuck was this thing called a career? I got into stand-up because I didn't want a career, I didn't want a boss, I didn't want to have to write up a CV or a résumé and now it had all backfired horribly on me. I was suspicious of this whole career business. I was sure it was some kind of conspiracy designed to keep us occupied between just after school and just before death so we wouldn't try and overthrow the government or some shit. Cavemen never needed to get a career. It was either hunter or gatherer and that was it. No IT specialist or HR assistant manager. We were all being sorted into boxes we didn't fully fit into for easy storage. The time to rebel was surely soon. All we needed was a leader, but I never looked good in camouflage gear so it wasn't going to be me.

Half an hour my manager called me back.

“Hey, listen, you got another chance. We just had a last minute drop-out from one of the guys picked to go. Do you want his spot? You get an all expenses paid flight to Miami for the second round auditions.”

Did I ever. Fuck yeah.

I was going to Miami. To become a superstar.

§

Two weeks later I found myself on a plane to Miami via San Francisco. It was a twenty hour, two-part long haul flight. Each way. I was going to be in transit for a total of fifty-six hours for a total of forty hours actually spent in Miami. We were spending eighteen hours more in transit than at the actual destination. But hey it's all about the journey and whoever made that horse shit saying up was obviously going somewhere shitty and he knew it.

The previous night, I was with the girl I was seeing at the time, A___. We were hanging out in an abandoned railway yard and making out against a chain fence. It was then that I spotted it. A white rabbit. A pure white rabbit, eating the tufts of grass growing between the rotting railway sleepers. I became convinced that this was a good omen. Alice in wonderland. Jefferson Airplane. It all made sense. This meant that I was going to get through the audition. I was going to become a superstar. I was going to jettison this mundane everyday existence that hindered me and my fellow common man. That dragged us down in the anonymous swamp of mediocrity. I was going to rise into the sky and burn bright, joining the rest of those pretty empty nobodies on that flashing box of unrealistic expectations. We would stand on top of the drowning bodies of the plebeian masses and crush their faces underfoot with our expensive shoes. They'd worship us as we murdered them and promised them a better land. A better land we had bought with their blood. But there was no better land. For them or for me. Just different angles on the same shit heap with intermittent reprieves.

But like everyone else in this world I was convinced I was special.

I was an idiot. I had been duped.

For the twenty-eight hours on the way there, fantasies ballooned out of proportion in my mind. I was going to win the competition. Then onwards and upwards to fame and fortune I'd go. Easy. In a few months time I would ditch all my old friends to party with

Beck and the ghost of River Phoenix. I would be a Scientologist eating blue-green algae fruit smoothies and shooting homeless people with a silver Uzi on my private beach in Malibu. I watched the in-flight movies in a half asleep daze and their narratives merged with mine. No longer would be I just another social security number in a machine too big for me to see. I would be a SOMEONE. I'd shit limousines and bathe in the blood of jaywalkers. I fell asleep and into the dream. In my dream, I was in my childhood bedroom, in bed looking at the stars out of the skylight above me when suddenly this incredibly attractive woman walked in. She was dressed in a tight figure hugging skimpy black dress. She looked like a whore at a funeral. Her flawlessness was breathtaking. I needed to fuck her. "I want to fuck you," she said. "Yes please," I replied. "Okay, in a minute but first, let's just let you look at me a bit more." She posed this way and that on my bed, just out of reach, pouting like a fetish model. "Can I fuck you now?" I asked again urgently. "Okay. In a minute, but first, let's just let you look at at me a bit more." Again, she posed this way and that, just out of reach. I could take it no longer. "I need to have you right now," I said. "Okay in a minute, but first let's just let you look at me for a bit more." And again she slunk and skimped and minxed her way around me and into my senses. I lost all self-control and tried to grab her. "THIS SICK FUCKER TRIED TO TOUCH ME!!" She screamed. Straight away the door opened and a pair of Siamese twins joined at the back ambled in. One of them pushed me up against the wall. "YOU LEAVE HER ALONE! YOU CAN'T TOUCH HER YOU FUCK SHE BELONGS TO US! YOU FUCK WITH HER, YOU FUCK WITH US!" he screamed at me. His face was twisted in permanent anger and dissatisfaction. He spun around and I faced the other one. "Look but you can't touch. You'll get used to not having what you want," he said, smiling sadly. Instead of eyes, I found myself staring into hollow sockets deep as a black hole. I looked down. He was caressing a gun in his hands in a semi-sexual manner.

"So just don't do anything stupid to our property," he finished. He put the gun up to my forehead and pulled the trigger. I woke up screaming with a hard on as we touched down in Miami.

People holding signs with our names on them meet us at the airport and we are driven to our hotel rooms in an envoy of sleek black vans. We gather in the lobby for briefing. There are around 100 other comedians from Australia and the UK milling about uselessly, not talking to each another. Autistic kids at a school camp dance. The level of insecurity, bitchiness and negativity in the room would have driven even the most optimistic motivational speaker to suicide within minutes.

“We were supposed to film you all coming in today, but we figured it was just easier if we did it tomorrow morning instead,” the executive producer lady tells us.

“So tomorrow around 6 am, we’ll drive you back to the airport to film your arrival. Bring your suitcases with you, they can be empty, but you must bring them.”

The briefing ends. I go to my hotel room. Its fucking amazing. It’s so amazing I take my clothes off as soon as I close the door and walk around. I sleep naked on a king size bed with satin sheets. I will buy this hotel when I make it, I think.

The next morning they drive us back to the airport with our empty suitcases to film us pretending to arrive. This means they have to film all twenty-five of us coming down the same escalator close to thirty times. The host is some blonde airhead TV presenter slut with a nice smile and zero personality in a safari suit, inexplicably holding a toy whip. Evidently that was the closest ‘Australian’ garb they could find to approximate our perceived national dress code or whatever. Each time we come down the escalator the director yells at us to “BE MORE AUSTRALIAN.” So we would go down the escalator the next time saying “MATE BLOODY HELL MATE STREWTH BLOODY MATE” and all the other stuff that real Australians never say and when we would get to the bottom she would be like “YOU WEREN’T AUSTRALIAN ENOUGH, YOU NEED TO BE MORE AUSTRALIAN.” And we would ride back up the escalator thinking of other ways to be more Australian, which in my opinion consisted of me telling her to fuck off and get fucked ya cunt but I knew that wasn’t appropriate so I just hid up the back, trying to obscure my precious face from direct view of the camera as we went down the escalator once again trying to be more Australian. My dreams were radically downsizing with each descending cycle. By the twentieth time down the escalator everyone was red in the face

from screaming at the top of their lungs “THATS NOT A KNIFETHROW
ANOTHERSHRIMPONTHE BARBIEMATE DINGO ATE MY BABY MATE
JIZZWALLERWALLERBINGBANG
BONGOWINGOWOZZAWOZZAWANGOCORROBOREEBAZZAWAZZACARPENTE
and all manner of weird gibberish that approximated the American conception of the
stereotypical Australian.

We could have done this for the rest of time with our suitcases full of rocks like a more futile version of the myth of Sissyface but after the twenty-sixth take, due to time constraints they had to stop and we were whisked to the local Miami comedy chain club for the second round auditions. There, we were all divided up according to some arcane system into groups and sub-groups and sub-sub-groups that stretched around the block in multiple directions. Livestock outside an abattoir. The host looked like a black ventriloquist doll. He had that weird polished doll look that so many TV people often have. Up close you could see he had had his eyebrows plucked and shaped too many times, and his skin looked like it had been buffed by a belt sander. Talking to him was like listening to a bank of pre-recorded messages punctuated by a fake laugh and a smile that he thought was charming, but in reality came across as creepy and robotic. Good luck to him though, he was just trying to get ahead like the rest of us. I line up behind the hundred other comedians from the UK and Australia. We all sit down for five minutes, then get up and shuffle forward a couple of feet and then sit down again. Shit prizes in a broken skill-tester machine. After an hour of this my turn comes up. I have two minutes to give them a good enough reason to put me on the show. That’s how long all of our sets had to be. Two minutes, no more no less. Two minutes? What the fuck kind of set is that? That’s like four short jokes. At the time I didn’t have four short jokes. I didn’t even have one joke, short or long. At that point in my creative development I just had long self-involved rants that invariably ended with some reference to fucking something, usually an animal or an inanimate object. Not much has changed. I don’t know why I thought that passed as comedy at the time but hey I was going through a transitional phase and now was not the time to go through a transitional phase. I am still waiting for this transitional phase to end. I decide to do my old shit that I no longer cared about and didn’t want to do in the hope of getting ahead. Play the game. Give them what they want. I wish I had known

then like I know now, tat what I thought they wanted was never what they actually wanted. And what they wanted wasn't what I had. Or that sometimes they just had no fucking clue what they actually wanted and were as confused as I was.

I go in. Black ventriloquist doll man with the eyes blank as buttons sticks a microphone in my face as I walk down the corridor to the venue.

“What do you want to say to all the viewers out there watching this?” he yaps.

“Why are you watching this trash? Every waking moment on this planet is a gift. Death could strike you down at any time anywhere.” I wanted to say.

“Hi,” I said.

§

I go in. The club is the kind of place where wealthy germ freaks go to find a life partner to suffocate themselves in hermetically sealed polyurethane bags with. I thought there was going to be a studio crowd but there wasn't. Just two judges about 100 feet away from the stage, sitting in the darkness up the back of an empty room with a seating capacity of around 200. Directly in front of me circling the stage edge is a tracking camera chugging along a semi circular track.

“Hi,” one of the judges says.

“Hi,” I say into the blackness, shielding my eyes from the blinding spotlight. I'm a bug under a magnifying glass and all I can see are the illuminated dust particles that swirl in the tunnel of spotlight before me. At the end of the vortex I see my dead relatives asking me in a language I don't understand why I have to masturbate so much. I ask them why they have to keep watching me. They shrug and pretend not to understand what I'm saying.

“Which one are you?” the other judge says. I shield my eyes to try and get a look at them. I can't see their faces. Maybe they don't have faces.

“Uhh... Nick. Nick Sun.” I hear shuffling papers.

“Ahhh okay. Well... Do your stuff for us. At two minutes we will cut you off.”

“What, like start right now? Just to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh and don’t look at the tracking camera please, just look straight ahead,” the other one adds.

I’m by no means an expert, but I think stand-up comedy involves at least two things: 1) a comedian, and 2) an audience. But there was no audience here, just two shadowy authority figures up the back of an empty room.

This is it Nick. Just do it.

“Good evening,” I begin and immediately think how odd it is that I’m addressing a) two people amidst 200 empty chairs, b) two people I have already addressed, and c) It’s not the evening it’s the afternoon.

“You guys are a great crowd and it’s good to be here,” I lie.

“How are you guys doing?” I ask no one.

I start my routine but my timing is off because I’m trying to pause in the right places and the right places are where the audience is laughing and there is no audience, just a silent black void that absorbs my rapidly diminishing words. The camera moves back and forth along its track filming me die in front of no one.

I think of the old zen koan, “If a joke is told and no one is around—save for two industry people and a tracking camera—is it funny?”

No. No, it isn’t.

“That’s enough,” they say.

“So...uhhh... Nick, we just want to ask you some questions... Firstly, why do you

want to be on ‘Last Comic Standing’?”

“So I can rise to a position of power high enough where I can track down anyone who has ever wronged me in life and destroy them,” I wanted to say.

“My mother is really sick, and I need to win this to pay for an operation to save her,” I said.

“Oh my god! What’s wrong with her?” one of them asks.

“I think he’s joking,” says the other one bored.

“Oh... That’s not very funny. You shouldn’t joke about that. You can go now.”

I leave. All my delusions of grandeur have fallen down and I’m left sitting in the rubble. I get the feeling that maybe I wasn’t Australian enough for them. Or maybe I just suck and I’m a bad loser. Ventriloquist puppet man jumps up in front of me and sticks a microphone in my face. A cameraman trains his camera to get an ultra close-up shot of my shattered dreams, the money shot in this failure porn for the disgruntled masses.

“How did it go?” he asks. Camera man zooms.

“Terrible,” I say.

“Oh that’s a shame. How long you been going for?”

“Almost five years now.”

“Oh hey man, it takes a long time to get to the top. You will get another shot don’t worry about it!” he bleats.

I wasn’t so sure. I could tell by the way the foundation on his face was cracking to reveal wrinkles as deep as crevasses that he had been waiting a long time to get to the top and now this was about as close to the top as he could manage and it was only a matter of time before his limited reservoir of optimism ran out and his soul was eaten by despair.

But good luck to him. He's just another midnight cowboy looking for love like the rest of us.

I retire to the courtyard to commiserate with all the other losers. Fuckit everyone says. Fuckit. A bunch stay to watch the third round auditions but me and few others decide to get totalled on the daquiris from the nearby bar instead. They are like pint-sized 7/11 slushies but contain loads of tequila and come with an extra test tube shot of tequila sticking out of them. After about four of them I'm wasted drunk with a killer ice cream headache. Someone passes around a Cuban cigar. All I taste is sugar and ash. I don't remember much after that, only that at some point I ended up at Hooters staring drunkenly at the breasts of a waitress I couldn't tip. I would prefer shit service for cheaper prices, I tell her. I just want a beer, I don't need you to pretend to be my friend. But in this country, money is more vital than air. 'In God We Trust', it says on their bills. What they never specified was that the God they were referring to was the money that statement was printed on. Judging from her blank look this insight that I share is worthless to her but I've got no money left, because it turns out that it wasn't all expenses paid, it was more like, keep all your dockets, make sure you don't spend more than forty bucks a day and we will try and reimburse you for the stuff we feel is worth covering five months down the line. Fuck you NBC and your false promises, that 9/11 footage was fake and you know it. The twin towers never fell. They just got put in storage beneath the Pentagon, I yell at her. We are asked to leave.

§

I wake up with one of the worst hangovers in my life since high school and that other time in Sweden when I mixed undercooked shellfish with schnapps and red wine. Oh god I feel sick. I have to find out if my friend M_____ is okay because he isn't answering his door and we have to leave for the airport like right now. We are literally bashing the door in. No response. I have visions of him lying dead on the floor choked to death by his own tongue and vomit. Cool. We eventually have to get the security to break in but just before they break in, we hear a disoriented voice screaming "WHAT??? WHAT? FUCK OFF!" He is still smashed up drunk and we have to physically drag him out of bed. He resists,

violently flailing his limbs at us with the intent to harm. He has his shirt on but no pants or underwear. This is what dreams become: a semi-comatose drunk with red eyes that point in different directions and breath that could wilt cactus, wearing nothing but a puke-stained collared shirt with the buttons done up out of sequence with his dick flopping out, trying to attack the people attempting to help him.

We get into the taxi to the airport. My drunk friend winds down the window and starts yelling at anyone and everyone on the streets, “SHOW US YA FUCKIN’ TITS!”. He should have saved this for when they were filming us going down the escalator at the airport all those times. “Can you be less Australian?” I ask him. We get to the airport and I immediately run to the toilet and puke my guts up. It’s a deep puke. I don’t sound human. I get onto the plane and pass out immediately. I come to as we land in San Francisco where we are catching our connecting flight home. As I stand up to get my hand luggage, I catch a big waft of piss stink. There’s a baby in front of me. Stupid baby pissing itself, I think. Then to my horror, I realise my crotch is damp. The baby is innocent. I am not. Makes sense. I thought it was a bit odd that the baby’s piss smelt like daquiris.

“I can smell urine,” the African American woman in front of me says. But she pronounces it ‘yooo-riiine’.

“I can smell yoooo-riiine,” she says again.

“Can anyone else smell this yoooo-riiine?” she says.

“I can smell yoooo-riiine,” she says once more looking around.

I rush out of the plane as fast as I can. I don’t know what to do. My clothes are in my checked luggage. I had not factored pissing myself into my itinerary, so I’m ill prepared. I have no choice but to let the piss dry on me. I use the hand dryer in the bathroom to dry my pants. I’m on my tippy toes in a sustained pelvic thrust position to get a good blast on my groin area. My balls tingle. It’s not unpleasant. A man walks in and looks at me. I look at him. He looks away.

I get on the connecting flight destined for Sydney. By chance they have a couple of

Last Comic Standing final episodes from previous seasons on the in-flight entertainment. Most of the comics on the show aren't funny. And the few that are don't get far. In one episode, this Vietnamese guy wins because he sucks and he is being bullied by the other comedians and the American voting public feel sorry for him and sympathy vote for him to win. In the other, a guy with cerebral palsy wins. His jokes are okay, but not as good as his disability so I call foul play. Life is often unfair, I conclude. But at least I don't have cerebral palsy, so no complaints. I turn off the insipid TV world. I'm sick of that plastic flower. I just want to be in a forest. I fall asleep into dream.

§

In my dream I'm in my childhood bedroom staring at the stars through the skylight above me. The door opens and the incredibly attractive lady in the skimpy black dress walks in again. "I want to fuck you," she says. I take the silver Uzi from under my pillow and fill her full of holes. The wave of bullets shreds her to pieces. Where the blood hits the carpet, flowers grow. Real ones. I spit on her mangled corpse. As I'm picking the flowers, the Siamese twins burst in waving their gun at me. The angry one with the permanently dissatisfied face gets it first. I shoot him in the mouth, the stomach and the crotch. He crumples to the ground gurgling and screeching, dragging his brother down with him. I kick the gun out of his hand and with my foot flip the dead angry one over to reveal the one with the sad black hole eyes kicking his legs uselessly in the air like a beetle.

"Spare me!" he begs pathetically.

"Your whore is dead and so is your brother. You can't live without them," I say.

"The question is how long are you going to have to drag that corpse attached to you till you die as well." His eyeless eyes widen in horror.

"Kill me then! I beg you to end it now!"

"You have already killed me so many times I think it's only fair that I watch you die in the slowest possible way."

I sit in lotus position on the dead woman's body, spread the plucked flowers in a circle all around me and I begin to meditate, Rudraksha rosary in one hand, gun trained on the remaining twin in the other. It takes hours for him to die. Moaning in strangulated woe as rigor mortis slowly spreads from across his brother and into him. As his meat freezes into it's final shape and the light in his eyes dims, I wank myself off. I feel my Kundalini rise from the base of my spine. When it hits third eye chakra, everything bursts into flames.

I wake up laughing with a hard on. The plane shake and rolls. It's the heaviest turbulence I have ever encountered. Ten to fifteen minutes go by and it just gets heavier. All the babies in the plane are crying. My fingers are dug into the armrest until they're white. Several baggage compartments clatter open and bags fall. This is it, I'm going to die. I'm going to die in pants I pissed myself in. On the way back from failing to audition for a show I hate. And there's nothing I can do about it. I make my peace with death. I can't learn to fly a plane better than the pilot between now and the time we crash. I'm not going to discover innate, fully-developed aeronautical engineering skills before we plough into the dirt and explode into smithereens. We're all dead meat and there's nothing any of us can do about it. Nothing matters. All will be forgotten. I look out of the bouncing window frame. We are inside a cloud the size of a mountain. All around me is pure white. I smile.

I am in a cloud.

I am in a cloud.

In my piss.

I am in a cloud.

Nick Sun has been a professional comedian for over ten years, but is now focusing more heavily on his writing.

The Night Kitchen

by Kate Whitfield

With thanks to Maurice Sendak

In one of my favourite TV shows, the female lead character is smart and sassy, but she never does anything useful. She and her friends have been under siege in a factory, and while others barricade doors and make escape plans, she stands by having plans explained to her. She makes me tired.

I hope the writer lets her do something for herself before the end.

The writer of the TV show pops up in my dreams quite regularly. I often ask him what he has against strong, purposeful women. He usually ignores me.

Alice is screaming and I am out of bed. It's too cold to just sit on the bed while her nightmare subsides, so I climb in, stretching my legs down to the cold beyond her feet. I shiver and hug her tightly to warm myself up as much as comfort her. Eventually, she tells me her dream. We were all sitting around the kitchen table having dinner, and she was there, but she couldn't speak, and we couldn't see her.

She likes to sing herself to sleep, and I've just taught her to sing rounds with me. We do 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' until her voice breaks up and floats off.

Row, row, row your boat

(Row, row, row your boat)

Gently down the stream

(Gently down the stream)

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily

(Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily)

Life is but a dream.

I've become aware of a soothing sound.

Plash.

Plash.

I open my eyes and there are trees overhead. The sun is very bright behind them, but they lean over and meet above me, protecting me.

Plash.

I turn around and look at the water, trailing my fingers in it. It's cool but not cold, and little fish flit beneath the surface. The point of the bow, beneath me, slices easily through it. The river is dotted with spangles of sunlight, like sudden stars.

Plash.

I sit up again and look behind. There he is, rowing the boat with his back to me. That man, the writer.

Back in my own bed, Bill's snoring is soft, and regular as a metronome. I use it to rock myself to sleep.

Sam likes to have *In the Night Kitchen* before bed; it's his ritual. I read the narrative, and he does Mickey's dialogue bubbles: 'QUIET DOWN THERE!', 'oh', 'aah' and so on.

He doesn't understand, though, how the bakers can mistake Mickey for milk. I tell him that they are not really noticing him at all—they are thinking about their cake. Perhaps he is just standing in the place where they expected the milk to be.

A hand wakes me and I know instantly what it is. If it's been more than a week since we've had sex, Bill starts to dream about it, and his dreams overflow.

His hands are clumsy when he's asleep. He gropes from my waist up to my breast. It's not a gentle, pleasant touch, though he is never rough. I could shake him off and he would turn over and settle down, but I know it won't go on for long.

He makes forlorn-sounding grunts as he slides over and presses his erection against my back. He just thrusts there for a while. Sometimes it makes me giggle, but usually I just wait until I can go back to sleep.

It feels like hours since Bill stopped, but I'm not sure if I have slept. I feel wide awake, but my thoughts are broken and strange. They are on a cycle, going around and around in my brain. There's a gentle rocking sensation; I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, but it's making me feel both nauseous and calm.

Then I hear a noise from the kitchen: *thump*.

Dump clump lump.

Bump.

I get out of bed and pad down the hallway on naked feet, feeling my way. I find a light, but it's an odd dream-light, throwing unfamiliar shadows.

The instant the light goes on, a tiny brown mouse on the bench goes scurrying behind the utensils jar. I can still see it; it shelters there, under a strange tree.

The kitchen is in the centre of the house, like the yolk of an egg. There are no windows, just a skylight; I close two doors and am completely sealed off.

The mouse is still there, hunkered down until I go away. On the floor nearby is a pile of splayed recipe books that yesterday I had noticed teetering on the edge of the bench. I pick them up and flatten a creased page. A teacake.

I light the oven—it's cold in here, anyway, and I'm only wearing my pyjamas. I open the pantry door and the ingredients loom there. FLOUR. SUGAR. BAKING POWDER. VANILLA ESSENCE. The packets, the mixing bowl, the measuring cup and the wooden spoon have all grown, filling my field of vision. My fingers tingle, and in the odd yellow-orange light, with the moon in the skylight overhead, I am a single-minded baker.

I used to do this as a child—get up in the middle of the night and go to the kitchen. Sometimes I would just have a glass of milk, and other times I would make some potion—like orange juice, egg, chocolate syrup and sesame seeds—and leave it on the bench to surprise someone in the morning. I haven't thought of that for so many years.

I think of everyone getting up in the morning to find a freshly baked cake on the bench, perhaps still warm. I wonder if it will strike them as odd; it's possible they won't even notice it.

The cake is in and the oven timer ticks. The mouse made a dash for it when I took the whisk out of the utensils jar, and now I wish she would return. It is good to have company and be alone.

Everything is very different in the middle of the night. I suddenly feel awake.

I don't even remember taking the cake out of the oven. There is no evidence on my pyjamas or me in the morning, and not a speck of mess in the kitchen, yet there the cake is, as if it has been left by some fairy.

In this TV show, the woman has had a baby, and she and the baby have been kidnapped. She waits for her men to come and rescue her, never doubting that they will appear. And they do.

I wonder what she would do if they didn't come. All I can imagine her doing is lying down and going to sleep.

Sam hollers from bed when he needs to be taken to the toilet. He prefers me not to turn on any lights, which can be messy, but he gets upset otherwise. He is often bursting with dreams.

Tonight he tells me he was dreaming I was made of ice cream, and he, Bill and Alice were eating me with little wooden spoons.

“What did I taste like?”

“I can't remember. Nothing, I think.”

“Why were you eating me then?”

“Because otherwise you'd melt.”

I ask him if they finished me off, but he says no, there was lots of me left to go. I say that I am relieved.

I'm on the boat again, and I'm sick of the back of that man's head. Without thinking or planning, I grab him and lift him up, and he's surprisingly light. I toss him overboard and he disappears under the water, almost without breaking the surface. I am full of satisfaction.

I take the middle seat, where the writer had been sitting, but lie across it for a moment to rest, letting the oars trail in the water. The sun shining from behind the trees

occasionally blinds me. I have a horrible feeling that there's something I've forgotten.

Suddenly I am wide awake again. I head straight for the kitchen.

This time the mouse dashes across the floor and disappears under the dishwasher.

It's colder tonight, and I put the oven on again. But this time it's just for warmth—I'm not going to bake. I take the plate with the half-eaten cake and a knife and sit on the floor, slicing off pieces and eating them, one after the other. It is delicious.

I scatter some crumbs in front of the dishwasher and stay very still. After a while, the tiny brown mouse comes out and has a little party.

I am back in the kitchen as a child. It's the middle of the night, and I am working on some concoction. Then I look across to the edge of the room and I am startled, for a moment, because there sits my mum.

She is in her dressing gown, and she looks weary, impatient, and a little amused.

I assume she got up with me, or after me. But she might have already been there when I came out.

The old bed rocks when I climb into it. My side is cold, but it warms up fast. The gentle push and pull of Bill's snoring sets me drifting again, gently down to sleep.

Kate Whitfield is a fiction writer from Melbourne. Her short stories have appeared in many Australian literary journals, including Southerly, Westerly and Antithesis.

The Ironbark Branch

by *Eliza-Jane Henry-Jones*

“I don’t want to cut it down.” He has his jaw jutted out, his lips almost pouting. He is twenty-eight, though, so instead of the full pout he shakes his head and has a swig of ginger ale.

“Great. We’ll just sit and twiddle our thumbs and wait for it to fall through the fucking ceiling.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Cass.”

“I’m not being dramatic. Every lopper we’ve had over says it’s a liability waiting to happen.”

“It’s been here longer than we have.”

“Oh, Christ.”

He glares at her, cocking an eyebrow. “What? So we hack down this beautiful old tree because a handful of guys in too-high pants tell us to? I’m not saying we’re not going to cut it down, just not yet. There’re things you can do. Put putty into the trunk, I think. And you can use cabling to secure the limbs.”

She swigs from her own drink and stares out the window.

“What?” he says.

“I’m not talking to you.”

“Mature. Good. Great.”

She gets up and walks out of the room.

When she was small, she had watched her father leave her mother. That night had smelt like vinegar and had been filled with stillness.

And that same stillness follows her as she goes out to the base of the tree and drags a handful of bark from its trunk.

§

The next day Cass calls Craig. He rocks up in his fancy new ute and lights up a cigarette. She crosses her arms, tilts her head, and wonders if the smell will stick in her hair. Her clothes.

Whether Matt will wonder.

“How’s the missus?” Craig asks.

They stand side by side. Cass does not answer. On Craig’s arm there is a wobbly tattoo. She has the same one on her ankle. The first time they’d raided her mother’s wine rack. It was cheap stuff, all of it, but they were fifteen and drinking for giddiness rather than taste or texture.

“I wish you wouldn’t call him that,” she says.

“Sorry,” Craig says, nodding at the ironbark. “This the tree?”

“Yeah, it is.”

He lets out a low whistle. “That branch is dead.”

“I *know*.”

“And with the drought it could drop any...”

“Any time. I know. And that’s our kitchen underneath. Our newly DIYed kitchen. If anything happens to that bloody kitchen after the eight thousand hours I’ve spent sanding and...”

“The missus doesn’t want it taken down, hey?”

“He wants to look at options.”

“The only option I’d be looking at is whether it gets taken down today or tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“This why you got me out?”

“Well, I was hoping Matt’d be here and you could talk some sense into him.”

“Where is he?”

“Late. As usual. Late. Late. Late.”

§

Her anger, when it came, had surprised her. Made her sway. When Matt was late home, when he got drunk out with his mates. Her whole life she had been worried about loving someone too hard. Too fast. Loving more than she was loved.

It had taken years for her to unclench. To realise she was loved more than she herself loved in return.

Gentleness. The taste of it was bitter.

Texts sent when it reached five past six.

You said six! Dinner’s ready!

Leaving a room in a sulk. Crumbling bark from the trunk. Drinking a bottle of champagne in the half an hour between six and half past.

He will come out to her. Hold her. Push everything else aside.

It makes her chest shake.

Her breath, turn solid. The rest of her, turn soft.

§

Craig's mother and Cass's mother had grown up together. In the same year that Cass's father left the house, Natalie became pregnant to a man who refused to admit paternity.

“Like I fucked another Vietnamese man right after I left his place,” Natalie had said. Again and again. The words, Cass supposes, were a sort of incredulous puzzle. Sitting at the table while her mother and Natalie worked their way through bottles of wine, Cass wondered at them, at their pain.

Every word exchanged, every brush of a hand, every shared block of chocolate. The mothers, who had gone to birthing class together. Who had lived in one house or the other. Even when Cass's father came back, here and there, only for a screaming match to send him stumbling back out to his car. The mothers, their expectant faces. Their smiles, pulled tight. The whispering that followed the Night of The Tattoos.

Craig. Drunk, wandering along the banks of the river. “Couldn't fuck you even if I wanted to, Cass!” Arms splayed, kicking the river pebbles. “All I'd see is The Mothers and that bloody smug look.”

She did not learn the meaning of fuck until she was nineteen. It was under sweet-smelling blankets beneath a wall full of books.

She had not been drinking but felt a little drunk. That happy giddiness of a bottle of white and asphalt beneath her bare feet.

Matthew had run his fingers down the side of her and kissed the hair that lay in surprised ribbons across her forehead.

Eight years later, he still did not know that he had been her first.

Craig flicks along the metal frame of a wedding picture. Cass had set them up on the sideboard. She did not spend much time looking at them. A gloriously happy day, but also an uncomfortable one with stretched cheeks and a dress that dug in and caught around her legs.

Craig flicks the glass face of it. “White, eh?”

“Shut up.”

He grins, plonks down at the table.

“How’s your Mum?” Cass asks.

“Same old. The whole *When are you going to get with Cass?* thing has changed to *When are you going to settle down like Cass?*”

“Tiresome.”

“Very.”

“You seeing anyone?”

He half shrugs. “Yes and no. Kinda, I suppose.”

“So, you see her. But your mother never will.”

He raises his beer. “Precisely.”

“Do you think they would have been different?”

“If your dad didn’t piss bolt halfway through and mine before the start line, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I reckon. It’d have to change them. Maybe they wouldn’t even be friends, now.”

“You think?”

“C’mon. My mum reads Women’s Weekly and cries in *The Biggest Loser*. Your mum reads philosophy books and cries when the liberals get in.”

Craig and Cass. They had never even pressed their lips together. Shied away from holding hands. It was after Cass moved in with Matt that Natalie’s Christmas cards stopped coming.

Punishment. Like slender pieces of wood pressed up under fingernails.

“Craig says we should lop the tree.”

The sky is smudged, bruising towards night. No stars. She stars up at the gap she can see between the branches of the tree. Matthew doesn’t look up from the carrots he’s cutting.

Cass sips her champagne. It’s warm, a little flat. She leans forward in her chair. “Are you even listening?”

“Yes.”

“Craig says—”

“I know,” Matt snaps.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Which lopper should we get to do it?”

“Cass, don’t.”

She tilts her head. “Don’t what?”

He looks at her, raises his eyebrows and tips the carrots into the pot.

“Shoulda boiled them,” she says.

Matthew. The boy from the library who had asked her out as she finished reading *Cloudstreet*. Who had bought her dinner and answered her text messages straight away. He gave her shoulder rubs and kissed her when she hurt herself.

Sometimes she dug her nails into her palms.

Wondering, wondering.

Why she punished him for it.

She had loved the tree when they first saw the house. Had loved the shape and colour of the shadows cast onto the verandah. Had loved the dip of its leaves, the arc of its branches. It seemed to be exhaling. Always breathing out.

The softness of that. She tried to teach herself circular breathing but struggled to focus on blocking off her mouth at the right moment.

The timing of it all was tricky.

And on that first day, when Matt rushed forward to inspect the bark and the roots and wonder whether they could set a seat around its base, Cass found herself crossing her arms, turning back towards the garden path.

“It’ll drop bark everywhere,” she had heard herself say.

§

“Have you... have you and Craig ever...”

“What?”

“Have you ever slept together?”

Cass hides her grin at the thought of such a thing. Craig, who she did not even kiss on the cheek.

She sighs. “Why does it matter?”

“I was just wondering, that’s all.”

She is silent, listening to the sound of him listening. The listening is a sort of movement. Their bedroom in motion.

Still at the same time.

Her teeth, heavy on her tongue.

§

Neither wanted children. Matthew grew morose when he was tired and didn’t want to bring children into a world that he felt was spinning into pieces.

Cass. She was different. Her scope was smaller, lower, set closer to the ground. She had spent too many years running after her mother. She did not have the energy to run anymore.

And parenting. It was running. Sand, trickling. Everything: so much. All in motion and scattered sideways.

Yet she felt a creeping bitterness. That Matthew did not want children. Perhaps she had always hoped he would change her mind. Would coax her into it and that she would

love it, the world scattered sideways and in motion.

But he was unmoving and so was she.

Still. Quiet. Sharing the house and kisses and soft words.

§

A few months after moving in, Cass had climbed up into the branches of the ironbark and pressed fairy lights into its nooks, cuffed around the curve of its branches.

They were meant to be solar powered, but the sun never reached the panel.

The lights didn't even flicker.

She had just visited a friend with a newborn and the baby smell was on her hands and in her hair. Like smoke, but earthy. Sweet.

She left the lights up there. And when they began to droop and Matt found them, years later, she feigned surprise.

“Why anyone would bother to hang anything of those huge ugly branches, I'll never know,” she said.

And watched as he dragged them down.

§

“I've made some calls,” she tells Matthew. He had come home late, by twenty minutes. He smells like sweat and paper.

She had made soup, but it was cold and she did not offer to heat it up. He did not ask and they ate their cold soup in the quiet.

“Calls about what?”

She swallows a mouthful. “I didn't like the cheapest guy. Don't think he'd be

properly insured for that amount. I rang the guy from the valley. He'll need to come out again, work out whether he needs to hire some equipment."

"Why can't you just leave it alone?" he says and tips his cold soup down the sink.

§

When she was small she used to write her father letters. He never wrote back. His Christmas cards and birthday cards never made any reference to the pictures of the stories that she pressed away into envelopes she kept under her bed.

She wrote her mother letters. Letters to the next room. Her mother always wrote back. Little pieces of creased paper, pressed under the gap of her door.

More than anything Cass waited for the letters from her dad.

And when at last one came not for her birthday or for Christmas, the waiting had turned sour and she soaked it in the sink, so all the ink would bleed, then threw it out unopened.

§

She wakes to the sound of a chainsaw. And when she goes out into the kitchen and leans over the sink to peer up from the window, it's Matt's narrow, hairy ankle that she sees, straining on the top rung of the ladder.

She drags on boots and a long sleeved shirt.

"What are you doing?" she yells up at him.

He's poised, one leg on the ladder, one on the roof gutter.

"Getting the fucking tree down!" He has a rope tied around his waist. The garden is littered with narrow cuts of branch and thirsty grey leaves.

"What the hell?" she hears herself say. "We haven't decided anything yet! We're still

looking at options.”

He looks down at her. “We haven’t decided anything?”

“No! Now, get down. You’ll break your neck.”

He presses his lips tightly together over his teeth. And continues to saw.

Eliza-Jane has a BA in Psychology and English. She has been published in Southerly, Island, Award Winning Australian Writing, page seventeen, [untitled], Etchings, Verge, FourW and Voiceworks, among other places. She was a young Writer-in-Residence at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in 2012. Her novel manuscript, Long Breath, is represented by Calidris Literary Agency. She works with high-risk families and children at a drug rehabilitation centre in Melbourne and is passionate about using horses in counselling and therapy. Her website is ehenryjones.com.

Please! Put out your bin, or bring mine back in!

by *Darcy-Lee Tindale*

Curb my frustration, but what is the etiquette regarding a neighbour's bin? Mines always left on the

Kerb to bake; for heaven sake, "Could you just bring it in?" I see you

Bury your waste in mine when you think I'm not at home. Yeah, those blue

Berry stains, they're not mine, they're your own. And with all

Due respect, Are you afraid to grab the handle and touch my garbage scent

Dew? Number 44 can, so why can't you? And all through the

Morning your bin's gizzards stew while the temperature's soaring; our plants and animals are in

Mourning! Are you blind? Can't you see those neat little

Rows of red council bins, lined up in front of the lavender and

Rose so meticulously trimmed? Just remember, while you munch down on your

Cereal you prophesy my fate; by letting thieves and

Serial killers know that I'm out until late. Yes, everybody

Boos the bin that stinks of Christmas day prawns, and your New Year's Day

Booze that wafts when your lid yawns. How many

Days must it sit there in the sun? My dog's in a

Daze, its only relief is sniffing its own bum. You're selfish and ignorant, where's your

Guilt or respect for our street? Your ability to hide your false

Gilt is an impressive feat. Don't you realise you're committing the ultimate neighbourly sin? For heaven's sake!

"Please! Put out your bin, or bring mine back in!"

Darcy is a dramatic arts teacher, director of stage productions, actor, author, theatresports player, puppeteer, and has appeared in TVC, film and on stage. Her plays, poems, articles, short stories, radio satire and comedy skits have been published, performed and received numerous awards. Darcy has her ATCL and FTCL Performance and Directing diploma. Her first love is story, the author's voice and the scope of a novel which

inspired her to begin studying a BA in Creative Writing.

The Road to Mirpur Khas

by *Shobha Rao*

My wife comes into the room, shutting out the sun as she closes the door, and lays the wad of bills on the table in front of me. I can't look at her. I want to feel shame, but I only feel a thin pleasure, like a fine layer of skin, puckered and white and soulless, floating on cooling milk. On another shore, perhaps, the desert has an ashen end; forests grow without fuss. On that shore poverty doesn't have an animal stink. And when we touch the face of another, we draw onto their skin a moonlit path, and not the metallic rust of our weakness and our fear. But on *this* shore, on this morning, there is only money.

If someone had told me the story of my life, when I was a child, I wouldn't have believed them.

She walks to the other end of the hut and lies down on the reed pallet, turned to the wall and silent, not even bothering with the blanket, as if she means to die like a wild animal. But at the sight of her hips desire floods me—not love, not any longer; that is simply a feeling that we walk off and forget at the side of the road, remembering it only hours later, and wondering—because we have come too far—at the lightness of our load.

§

The first of our money was stolen just after we left Jaisalmer. We were barely two days out, but I could already see row after row of mango trees waiting for us in Mirpur Khas, heavy and sagging with fruit. "It's harvest time," Ram had said. "They'll need workers bad, no telling how much they'll pay per bushel." But even as he'd said it he'd looked sidelong at Arya, bent low over the cooking fire, and I knew he was no longer thinking of the kind of mangoes that grow on trees. Still, he was kind enough: he gave me a month's wages for the journey, along with the name of a friend of his who owned an orchard. I'd tucked the money into a rusted Bournvita tin, forty rupees in all, along with the name of the orchard owner, and then wrapped it tightly in Arya's red woolen shawl. The first night I slept with the bundle under my head; the jasmine-scented coconut oil Arya used in

her hair was a lullaby, and I dreamt the most beautiful dreams. In one I was standing under a waterfall, laughing, my eyes narrowed, trying to distinguish between the water and the tiny sparrows that fluttered everywhere. It was almost as if the water, as soon as it hit my body, was turning into birds, their wings warm and quivering and soundless.

Then I woke and the money was gone. We'd gotten off the main road at nightfall and had found a sheltered spot under a grove of sangri trees. I'd lain awake most of the night listening to the desert sounds—the slither of lizards and snakes and the scurry of a few roaming gazelles—but I must've fallen into a deep sleep in the early morning hours. When I woke at daybreak, the entire bundle was gone along with the chapals I'd placed in the hollow of a nearby tree. We had nothing left except the eighteen rupees I'd folded into the tail of my dhoti. And we had at least two or three weeks' journey remaining to get to Mirpur Khas; now we'd have to do it barefoot.

§

She's stopped speaking to me. At times the silence is so deep that I can hear the howl of distant jackals, and I'm reminded of the mangoes hanging in faraway orchards, their tough unscarred skins so unlike—so unlike what? —I don't know, I suppose my own.

I'd searched for the bundle: I'd left Arya crying as I climbed and slipped across the endless sand dunes. I knew the forty rupees would be gone, certainly, but maybe they'd thrown off the shawl or the chapals, cracked as they were, the soles full of holes. I walked for a kilometre or two in either direction, scanning the dunes. I even looked inside foxholes and in the branches of scrubs. Nothing.

It was when I returned later that morning that Arya had pointed at the ground. "Look," she'd said, indicating a scatter of footprints near the area where we'd slept. "We know they're not ours. *These* people had shoes."

I looked at her. It was the first time since we'd married—barely six months ago—that she'd spoken to me with such distaste. We'd not once quarrelled in all that time. Nor had she ever looked at me like she looked at me then: her eyes shadowed, disappointed, full

of fire and sadness, and something I cannot describe, maybe the ache of being without shoes, in the desert, her husband poor and useless, drawn by the jasmine-scented dream she did not have.

She turned and walked away from me. Towards what, I wondered. Yet I didn't call out. The wind pushed the lilac fabric of her shalwar tight against her body. The round of her hips, the gentle curve of her back made me shudder. I watched as she scrambled up a particularly steep sand dune, her chunni fluttering behind her like a torn sail, her arms outstretched to keep balance. And it was these arms; I seemed to be seeing them for the first time. Thin, almost twigs, balancing so bravely against the force of wind and sand and steepness. Angling to right themselves, pushing forward. The sleeve of her shalwar reaching just past her elbows and the brown of her forearm emerging as smooth as a new branch. Flowers have sprouted from less.

But then she fell. Arms first. She rolled down a ways, stopped, gathered her chunni around her shoulders, pulled her knees to her chest in the trampled sand and simply sat there. No expression on her face. I watched her for a moment but she didn't move, as if she was determined to be as indelible and as piercing as the line of ridge above her.

I thought then of our wedding night and how, when she'd entered the hut, she'd stood shyly in the shadows until I'd coaxed her into the candlelight. She hadn't looked up until I took her chin in my hand and only then had she raised her eyes to me. She'd seemed a wisp of a girl, no more than a fledging bird, and I'd been overcome with the thought that she was mine—this golden, candlelit face, these firm, ample breasts, and this dizzying fragility, so sweet and untouched.

§

She's lying on the reed pallet. The hut is dark, though the sun must've crept higher, is no doubt slithering past the thatched roof. We'd found it abandoned a few days ago—one of so many huts abandoned during the riots, left for fear of being trapped inside, the smell of burning flesh always in the air, a reminder to keep moving—all the pots and pans and mats and even some clothes were left behind. But we have decided to stay. The location

is ideal: the lorries stop just a few yards away. It is a way station for the drivers. They sleep in the cabs of their lorries and eat and wash at the collapsing shack nearby called Arun's Restaurant and Bar; a clearing of littered and drifting dirt with a few orange plastic tables scattered here and there. When we reached Arun's we could barely walk. We hadn't eaten for three days. Hadn't drunk a drop of water in two. I had none left for sweat, my feet dragged along the dirt. I begged the owner for some water, food. A morsel. Anything. He'd looked at Arya—his eyes indifferent, his teeth rotting and green near the gum line, the hairs on his ears thick as wiring—and said, “Anything?”

It was then that I heard it. A sound I will never forget: the quacking of ducks. We were in the desert—Arya beside me, the owner chewing on a gob of betel nut—and yet the sound was as clear as if I were standing on the edge of a lake. I'd heard of inland seas, and pools that spring silently in secret, forgotten ways. And even in my weakness I imagined standing on its shore. The ducks rising, the flap of their wings. I imagined them gliding along on the unruffled waters. And yet it was the sound—their quacking—that gave me hope. That stilled my sorrow. And I knew then that this suffering—this dumb and gleaming suffering—wouldn't be the only language with which we'd speak.

Arya had moved quickly in front of me, her face defiant with hunger, and said, “Anything.”

They'd disappeared behind the screen, to the back of the restaurant. It was strange, how intently I watched that screen. I don't know why; it was so ordinary. Just woven jute that was quite battered and faded from the sun. And yet it held my attention with such force that I nearly knelt in front of it with a keen and baffled reverence. A small hole, punched into the top right hand corner and no larger than a mango, was particularly captivating. How did it get there? Maybe rats had chewed through it but how could they have climbed so high? And to what end? The streaks of light that passed through it: was it the sun or an interior lamp? And how focused, that light, almost as if it were trying to indicate some truth, some error. But then I blinked, or something essential calmly passed before me, and the effect was gone. I couldn't understand it. It was a plain old jute screen again, as it had always been, but I was so bereft I could've wept.

I stood there, unable to move, staring at that awful hole in the jute screen—the light now sickly and quailed—when Arya returned. She held out four roti and some day-old cactus curry to me. Her hands were steady but mine, when I reached for the food, were trembling.

§

We lost the rest of the money soon after the bundle. We'd kept moving. We heard from others on the road to Mirpur Khas that riots had destroyed most of Jaisalmer, and very likely our hut on the outskirts of town had been burned to the ground. I cried when I heard this; Arya didn't even wince. At a crossing I suggested buying chapals but she said no. "What will we eat if we waste money on chapals?" she'd asked, picking out the tiny grains of sand and pebbles lodged in the cracks of her heels. So we kept walking.

On the morning of the third day a lorry pulled over on the side of the road in front of us. The driver, thin, wiry, eyes bloodshot from driving through the night, face and hair gritty and browned by the sun, slid his eyes over Arya and offered us a ride to the border, still a week's walk away. His name was Mohammed. "No, no, no," he protested when we declined, his mouth red and seeping with betel nut. "How can I allow my sister to walk all that way. She is too delicate, nah?" He nudged me, smiling, and I smiled back though I knew he was mocking me. Arya glanced at me nervously. When we had a moment alone she whispered, "But we don't even know him. What if he leaves us at the side of the road?"

"We won't be any worse off than we are now. Besides," I said, "I'll protect you." She bent her head and I knew she was thinking of the forty rupees. We could've taken a bus with that money—neither one of us had ever been on one—or maybe even a train. I squeezed her hand as Mohammed urged us onto the seat beside him, smacking my shoulder jovially and chattering about the hordes of other refugees he'd seen crossing into Pakistan. "But none as unblemished as your fruit," he said, winking.

I helped Arya into the cab of the lorry even as my stomach tightened with a strange and gnawing hunger. I ignored it and for the first few hours we bumped along, the desert

scrubs and sangri trees whizzing by. I'd never seen the desert in this way—seated high up in a lorry, the glass windshield between us. How different it looked. When we walked, the desert seemed to unfold endlessly and devouringly, like a bolt of cloth unfurling in all directions that the slightest wind raised and flapped like the sides of a tent. And though it was overwhelming it was also oddly intimate. As if—even as we walked—we were a set of pins holding down the sides of this tent. But in the lorry it was merely a painting. It passed before us, and along us, and though the speed was exhilarating, I hardly recognised it. I tried to focus on something specific—a jojoba or khejri tree, a distant camel—but we were going so fast that it was instantly lost.

Once, when we slowed, I saw a red fox with a hare hanging limp in its mouth, drops of blood like a necklace on the sand. I pointed to it, but Arya's eyes were closed. Occasionally we passed clumps of people on the road, bundles and small children balanced atop their heads or tucked under their arms. I was watching a crowd of a dozen or so villagers, heading deeper into the Indian side, when Mohammed pulled over. It was nearing twilight. A blue and steady darkness crept behind us, blanketing the dunes and the sprinkle of shrubs and a distant clump of trees in shadow. I felt envy for that shadowed stillness, rooted as it was, and always would be, unaware of our passing.

The lorry came to a complete stop. Arya blinked her eyes open. We got out to stretch our legs. Mohammed took me aside. "Listen, bhai," he said, looking over his shoulder at Arya, "We're running low on petrol. Maybe you could help out, seeing as I'm driving you all that way for free." He seemed to be studying the horizon as he spoke, as if he were reading something that was written there. I watched him, felt the eighteen rupees hidden in my dhoti; the gnawing in my stomach returned. Arya had gone off into the bushes, the top of her head darker than the darkening shrub. The desert stretched in every direction, shivering and forlorn under the deepening sky.

We both looked down the length of road, barely visible now except a thin white mist that crept silently along its edges. He shuffled his feet. "Fifteen will do," he said finally.

"Where will we get petrol this time of night?"

“There’s a station not far from here.” He climbed into the lorry and pulled out a bag of stunted potatoes pocked and nibbled through by rats. “Here,” he said, holding them out to me, “have her make these. I’ll be back with roti.”

I handed him the fifteen rupees, thinking if we could just get to the border I’d be certain to find work; we were Muslim, and we’d be in Pakistan, after all. He stuffed the notes into his shirt pocket, started up the lorry, and kicked up a cloud of dust in his wake. As soon as Mohammed started the engine, Arya ran over to me from where she’d been waiting, in the dark beyond the headlights, too far for her to hear. “Where’s he going?” she cried.

“To get petrol. Look what he gave us,” I said, holding out the bag of rotting potatoes.

Her mouth twisted then in an ugly way. “You fool,” she said coldly, turning her back to me. “He’s never coming back.”

She didn’t talk to me for the rest of the night. And though I laughed at her poutiness, in the end she was right: he never did.

§

We’ve been in the hut by Arun’s Restaurant and Bar for five weeks now. I’ve grown almost fond of the low shack, hung with faded film posters and braided ropes of drying chilies. Sometimes I sit outside and order chai. I drink it slowly, under a khejri tree barely taller than me, watching the lorries come and go on the highway. The spattering of plastic orange chairs and tables in the courtyard—dusty and yellowed with sand—along with the withered grasses lining the road, are somehow comforting. They are familiar to me in a way that nothing else is; even the desert, though I’ve spent my whole life in its midst, has become a strange place. Its immensity aggravates everything, even the milk in my tea, and the khejri tree, the thin distant line of the horizon, convulse with each passing lorry.

Still I wait, the afternoons drifting through my fingers like sand.

“Let’s stay here,” Arya had said. “Just until we have enough money to hire a bullock cart.” We’ve had enough money to do that for some time now. Then we decided to stay just long enough to have money to take the bus. Safer and quicker than the bullock cart, Arya had reasoned. They wouldn’t torch a bus full of people, she’d said. But now we’ve decided to stay until we have just enough money for a few nights lodging in Mirpur Khas. Just enough money, she keeps saying, just enough. I sometimes wonder—during the long hours alone in this hut or in the courtyard of Arun’s—how much, exactly, that is. And how much it’s already been.

She has a routine. She’ll go out towards twilight, when the lorry drivers begin to pull into Arun’s for the night. From the hut I can hear the rumble of their engines, the squeal of their brakes. I hear the slam of their carriage doors and I get that same gnawing in my stomach. It is a tightening so severe that my eyes water. I vomit bile. On some nights the pain is so bad that I sit near the latrines, out behind Arun’s—the stench of urine combats the pain—and listen for the quacking of the ducks. That’s the direction the sound had come from that first night. I’ve never heard it again but I’ve grown used to the scent of urine, so thick I can practically chew it like cud.

She comes back at daybreak and sleeps. She sleeps so long sometimes I think she’ll never wake up.

That’s when I watch her. Her breath steams the air between us. And her hips rise and fall, rise and fall. This morning I leave the wad of bills on the table and go towards her. But before I even reach her I smell the stink of other men. It’s in her hair, under her fingernails. It is a wall, an ocean; it is a country I cannot cross. I want her more in that moment than I ever have before.

§

A week or so ago a car came along with two women and a driver. It was late in the evening, the desert around us lost in darkness. I was in the latrine behind Arun’s. They stopped for tea and one of the women—short, with a slight limp, I could only see her silhouette in the dim starlight—began talking to someone wedged deeper in the darkness.

It was Arya.

They talked in muffled tones for a few minutes until the limping woman coaxed Arya towards their table. “How long?” she asked.

“A few weeks.”

The two women looked at each other. “You know he’s not coming back.”

Arya shrugged.

“We have a camp,” the other woman said slowly, taller, her voice more tender. “It’s for women like you, refugees, whose husbands have left them. They’ll help you find your people.”

“Besides, how long can you do *this*,” the stout woman said, waving her hands vaguely towards the desert.

Arya turned her face. I saw it then in the half-light, angled towards a lorry that was pulling in. She looked at that lorry with such longing that even I thought she might be waiting for her husband to step down from it—hers, the one who’d once been brave, who’d once have stormed out from behind the latrines and called those women and their camp *bukwaas*.

There was a long silence. The khejri tree under which they sat swayed as if to speak.

“No, I’m staying here,” she finally said.

“But, *beti*,” the taller one began, “what’s left for you here? How long will you wait?”

Arya shrugged again. “As long as it takes,” she said. Then she rose and trailed off after the lorry that had just pulled in. The women watched her go, clucking their disapproval. The tall one said, with a sigh, “These girls. They think their men will save them.”

The short one laughed and the laugh rang through the desert quiet. “*Pagals*. They won’t even come back for them.”

§

“Why didn’t you go to the camp?” I asked her the next morning.

I’d woken her up. I’d slammed pots and pans on the table. Pushed open the door of the hut. Sunlight streamed in and she blinked her eyes open, the irritation rising to her face after a moment of confusion.

“Close the door.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“The door, you animal.” She threw her pillow towards it, trying to catch its side and swing it shut. She missed.

“Why didn’t you?”

“*What?*”

“Go. With those women.”

She tossed away the blanket and gathered her hair in her hands. Then she pulled it into a knot at the top of her head. She stood up, shook out her clothes. I could see the rain of sand in the sunlight. She looked at the empty pots. “Didn’t you make tea?”

“You could’ve gotten away.”

She scoffed. She lifted a cup of water out of the vessel and drank it. “The least you could do is make tea,” she said.

“Maybe even make a new life for yourself.”

She threw the cup across the room. It struck the mud wall with a dull thud. Water

streaked across the dirt floor; the steel cup gouged the opposite wall before clanging to the ground. Then it rolled towards me. I moved to pick it up. Arya turned and slumped into a chair. She bent her head and I thought maybe she'd fallen asleep again but after a long while she said, "Why bother? This one's lonely enough."

§

She'd cooked the rotting bag of potatoes and we'd eaten them. Then we'd slept together, huddled against the cold night air. When we woke, all those weeks ago, she'd looked at me sorrowfully and said, "Let's go back home."

"We can't."

"But *why*?" she'd asked, as if the answer would change.

I'd reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. I smiled; at least she was talking to me. "How much do we have left?"

I untied the end of my dhoti. I held the coins out to show her. "Three rupees."

"Let me have them."

"Why?" I said, looking at the empty dunes around us, "There's nothing to buy."

"You'll see," she said, and walked off in the direction we'd come.

I waited for a few minutes. When she emerged again on the crest of a near sand dune she had a milkweed flower in her braid. "Where's the money?" I asked.

"I buried it," she laughed. "We'll dig it up on our way back."

Our way back: how beautiful, that simple string of words. I looked past her; the honeyed scent of the milkweed drifting between us. I thought then that perhaps life would never again be as exquisite as it was in that moment. With that cool early morning breeze. Sunlight, shy and tremulous, reaching for the curved body before it. And my Arya, my

nymph, her eyes so hopeful and alive, raised to my own. And not a paisa between us. As if—in the burying—she'd said, What need do we have for it? As if—in the burying—she'd said, When we have each other?

§

I make rice and dhal. I set out a plate. I am quiet so as not to wake her. These days I have trouble sleeping, even during the hottest part of the afternoon. My thoughts wander through mango orchards, under the shade of their wide leathery leaves, and I think of the red woollen shawl. I think of how when I find it I will spread it under them. And how I will lie down in its jasmine-scented softness and close my eyes and fall into a deep and restful sleep. The deepest and most restful I have ever known. How I will dream again of waterfalls. And how I will wake, and Arya will smile. And no mango—in all of that orchard or in all the orchards of the world—will rival the sweetness of that smile.

For now I wander out towards Arun's. It's midday. The previous night's lorries have gone. New ones will stop here tonight. Everyone is asleep. There's no wind. I can almost hear the desert breathe. The rise and fall of its bosom. I can only walk in the shade and even then—even with the new chapals Arya bought for me—my feet burn from the heat of the sand. I settle against the side of the latrines, in an alcove protected from the sun.

I haven't eaten in two days. I haven't had a drop of water in over one. The sky above me twirls and spins. It is red and green and lilac and splinters like sparrows. I shut my eyes against its beauty.

I know the road to Mirpur Khas goes on for another 200 kilometres, and beyond that is Karachi, and beyond even that is the Arabian Sea. In Jaisalmer, they'd said, Go, they've made a new country for you. But all I can see is sand. And the only borders I know are the ones between our hearts.

I want to be hungry again. I want to arrive again at Arun's, like we did all those weeks ago. I want to be just as hungry, just as thirsty. I want to look into his indifferent face and I want him to ask again, "Anything?"

And this time I will step forward. Me. Not Arya. And this time, I will say, “Anything, except her.”

The alcove too is now filled with light. My eyes blur with heat and tears. I see Arya, though how could it be? She’s asleep. And yet she’s bending over me and asking, over and over again, “Why? Why are you sitting here?” And then she draws her hand towards me and cries, “You’re burning up, you fool. You’re raging with fever. Come inside.”

But I catch her arm. It’s smooth and cool like alabaster. I want to cry into it, I want it to carry me, but instead I say, “Don’t you hear them?”

She tugs. “Come inside.”

“Don’t you?”

“Hear what?”

I tilt my head towards the sky. “The ducks, of course.”

She listens for a moment. Her eyes brim with tears, or maybe mine do. She lifts my chin as I’d once lifted hers. “Yes,” she says finally, almost in a whisper. “Yes. I hear them.”

Shobha Rao is currently a student of fiction in the Master of Fine Arts program at San Francisco State University. She has previously been published by Gorilla Press, The Missing Slate, and in lulu.com, and in the anthology “Building Bridges”. In 2013, she was awarded the Gita Specker First Place Award for Best Dramatic Monologue by the San Francisco Browning Society.

Strawberry Picking

by Sarah Martin

The underside of my inside
Is stuck between the release
Of breath that carries me forward
To whispers of my running feet
Echoed in steps of the lyrebird

I fell in love with the current
Caught in the beat
And my heart fumbles
With your northerly wind
Bottled in glass on the golden ledge

The crack opens oozing light from your pores
And the sunflowers kiss the morning
As ghosts burst in my eyes
Scattering fear of broken dreams
Across your blue that calls for me

At the age of sixteen, Sarah Martin was diagnosed with the degenerative eye condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa. After this diagnosis she realised that she needed to begin “seeing” the world she lived in with more than just her eyes and it is because of this that she discovered a beautiful relationship with poetry. Eighteen years on she now views herself as a visually impaired poet who lives with, through, around, beside and because of her visual impairment. You can find her blog at sarahjmartin.blogspot.com.au.

City Fish

by Ben Walter

Is that redhead there the cancer-stricken girl who dies alone in Seoul while her bastard boyfriend climbs mountains in the Himalayas? I want to call out in shock, “Anthea, you’re okay, you’re actually okay?” to see if she turns, breaking into a smile, but she steps into a taxi and my opportunity pulls out into the traffic, indicator flashing.

The characters in this book are so well drawn that I’ve been looking at jeans and curly brown hair to see if they’re the people I’ve been reading about. A shaved head with a daypack waits on the corner for the lights to change, and his flesh fills out the word-bones stuck through my mind.

I move to flick the book open again but the café slams it shut. The chef moulds noise and fat into colour and height, but this table is a ditch and I’m wallowing. In fact, there’s a full-blown wallowing epidemic in this café, spreading atmospherically. The Dell laptop guy across from me would be playing solitaire if I didn’t have such a good view of his screen. Tomorrow he’ll sit with his back to the wall like some guy in a spy movie. A few metrostudents who had started talking about Hegel have moved on to football and I can tell they’re just about to start on the Kardashians. The coffee machine jackhammers their conversation, but fragments carry like FM radio when you’re driving in the bush.

I prise the book apart, making a stand, and just manage to get through a paragraph. A waitress brings some kind of tea to the metrostudents, who ignore her just long enough, then turn and thank her as the pot settles on their table. The waitress hurries skinnily away, apron dragging listlessly from her waist. The menu on the table flaps suggestively, like a dress. Magazines about culture jamming paper the counter and water glasses are stacked reluctantly on a tray. I notice my book is closed again, a docket from the fruit market bookmarking my progress.

I stare back down at my table. Number 16. The sun shines off the steel. I lean back in

my chair and kiss the top of a short black that I ordered solely because last night I had watched a documentary about the evils of the beef industry. When I woke up this morning, guilty feelings were dissolved in all milk, everywhere. Having a flat white felt like buying chocolate from a company that you know flogs AK-47s or the latest glamour gun to African nations. I tried soy milk, but it tasted like a cardboard drink coaster that had been soaked in coffee. Each sip of this short black scrapes across my tongue and down my throat. Sammy is late so I'm tempted to order another one.

Pedestrians powerwalk past. I try to identify them from the book again, but the text has faded in the sun. It's supposed to be fun to people watch, but these people aren't stories, they're memoranda. I guess it's hard to construct a fully satisfying drama for some guy in a café when you're running to get lunch and pay the phone bill in a half-hour break. One friendly guy notes my rod and grins. "Waiting for them to cook it?" he asks, and I can't think of anything to say so I smile back.

The waitress serves a milky latte to the Dell man. I feel a brief surge of superiority. The group has moved on from Kim, but one of them is trying to think of a way to return to her, arms open, eyes hopeful.

Sammy walks up carrying his rod. "You right to go?"

I stand, glad to have something to do. "I'm good, unless you want something."

Sammy shakes his head. "Ate at Mum's. Want to get down to the docks before the sea breeze comes in."

I slide the book into one of my tackle box segments and walk through the bead-chained door to pay. The same waitress is working the counter. I try smiling at her. She burrows for my docket. I tell her it was just a coffee, but she tracks the docket down in a pile stuck together with hot chocolate. I hand her three dollars and meet Sammy, who has been waiting outside scratching his shin with the tip of his rod.

We walk down Elizabeth Street towards the docks. Sammy is younger than me, shirt green, hair tufted and oily, but we're going fishing so it doesn't matter. He carries his rod

and tackle box balanced like shopping bags. I think about bringing up the documentary, but Sammy wouldn't have seen it. I bring it up anyway.

“Saw this doco last night about the beef industry in America. Pretty rotten.”

“Yeah? Why?” Sammy swings his rod slightly, in time to the warmth of the day.

I think for a moment. “Can't really remember. But I've given up milk.”

“Dairy industry is different to beef. My uncle has a dairy place up the north-west. Don't think he beats up his cows.”

“Yeah, course not.” I didn't explain it very well. Sammy looks left and right, we cross the road between the lights. In the book, there's a character a little bit like Sammy. His name is Matt. I know Sammy too well, so Matt doesn't stick to him, but I can imagine them sitting together on a small boat on a river, fishing for an evening meal. The short black coffee jangles my blood. I try to slow my metabolism by pure, internal, focused meditation. One...one...one...two...two...two...a speckled cat with long chest fur runs across to our side of the street. I find myself wondering what it's doing here. It doesn't feel right that people in the corporate units above the restaurants have a cat. I stop to wait for the cat to decide to rub my legs, but Sammy walks on. I telepathically explain to the cat that fish scraps could be in the offing. The cat follows us for a little while, then rubs itself against a parking meter.

We angle across the last stretch of road, past the greasy chips and marine supplies. Our fishing pier sticks out into the water, a wandering causeway. It feels fresher than anywhere else, like you're actually getting out into the river, away from the city and the oil-slick cigarette butt starfish water.

“What do we have for bait?” I dump my tackle box at the end of the pier, flick back the basic catch and pull out my knife.

“I brought some whiting. Can use that, unless you picked up some goats cheese at your cafe?” In one movement, Sammy pulls the whiting tail from a clear plastic bag and

tosses it to me. It slips through my hands like soap, and I just manage to get a firm hold before it dives into the sea. I line the tail up against the grain of the concrete and fillet it into tiny portions. We bait our hooks and hold our lines over the water like puppets. The sinkers hold their breath. We stare into the first gusts of a sea breeze rippling the water.

“Feel kind of guilty catching fish down here.” I lean back, the rod leaning with me. “You figure, they’ve done enough to survive the Derwent, then I go and catch the poor bastards. Sort of like beating up a Chernobyl survivor.”

Sammy stares up at the tip of his rod, waiting calmly for the sign. A seagull circles and lands on the pier, trying to reason with us. Clouds glide towards the mountain, looking for some action. Traffic in the background forms a blurry growl. I pick at dirt settled into the pylon I’m draped around as though it’s under my toenails. A seed is trapped further into the wood and I try to reach it but my nails can’t get the leverage. It could be just far enough from the city to sprout out here.

The rod jerks, almost out of my hand. I gather myself together and wind quickly at the reel, then stop abruptly to feel for weight on the line.

Sammy looks down at the water, trying to make out the catch. “Anything?”

“Don’t think so.” I wind the rod on. It isn’t that deep, and a few more turns bring the sinker into view. The bait is gone. “Something took the bait.”

“You just giving it away?” Sammy shakes his head, and a tiny rumour of a smile crosses his face. I wind the line fully in and fiddle with a watery piece of bait, trying to get enough purchase on the hook to keep it in place. There. Looks solid enough. Over goes the line, and straight away the bait escapes from the hook.

Sammy grins briefly, but doesn’t speak. I wind the line in again and stake the next piece of whiting viciously on the hook, stabbing my finger in the process. Blood inflates like a balloon. I look across at Sammy then wipe it into my trousers. The line hurtles back towards the water. Not even Matt would catch something in this water with this bait. He’d pick up his pack and walk south, down to Conningham where the water isn’t

magnetic. I grab the book from the tackle box. Before I can open it to my page, Sammy looks across and coughs.

“Good to see you’re paying attention. Learnt your lesson from before?”

I shrug, theatrically, and settle back with my book. The boyfriend has just found out that Anthea has died. Matt’s sister tells him in an email which he accesses after getting off the bus in Kathmandu. He deletes the email, then another email, then all of his emails. He signs out of his hotmail account and googles his name, then Anthea’s name. They’re mentioned individually a few times, mostly to do with high school athletic results. I look up and notice that the breeze is gusting, and Sammy is shifting position. He’s probably annoyed at the wind. Trust him to blame me even though he was late. He angles his rod in strange directions, and I turn to see frustration masking his face.

“You’ve got a snag?”

Sammy nods briefly. We never get snags out here; there’s nothing to snag. He gets up and tries walking the line down the pier, first one way and then another. The line doesn’t budge. He frowns, waving his rod around like a nervy swordsman.

“It’s all mud and starfish out here. Must be a bloody strong starfish.” I wind in my own line, emphasising how smoothly it runs. “Or really sticky mud.” Sammy turns his eyes towards me for a moment, then goes back to working at his rod. I wait a moment longer. “Why don’t you jump in? Never know, might catch something on the way.”

Sammy reaches down, picks up my knife. He flicks his wrist and the line falls back into the water. Then he opens his tackle box and hunts for new gear. He shuffles for a few seconds before slamming the lid shut and staring towards me, just below my eye line and a little out to sea.

“Have you got a sinker I can borrow? Left mine at home.”

“What were you doing with them out of your tackle box?” I let my line drop back easily into the water.

“Was just checking to see what I had and what I needed to pick up for summer.”

“Guess you needed to pick up some sinkers.” I make a show of clicking the reel into the ready position as the rig hits bottom.

“Guess I did. Guess I might go and get some. Enjoy your book.” He stands, grabs his tackle box and starts walking back down the pier.

“Here you go, Sam,” I pick a sinker and move to throw it, but he keeps walking. “C’mon mate, just messing with you.”

“Yep.” He continues down the pier. At first I think he’s heading to the chandlery, but he keeps walking and I realise that he’s making for the bus mall. I wait for a moment, looking back at the water, then reel in my line, faster even than if I’d actually caught a fish. I grab my tackle box and run back down the pier. Sammy continues walking, and it’s only as we reach Franklin Square that I reach him, panting.

“C’mon mate, I was only joking.” I try to draw my lungs together and imagine huge tanks of oxygen pumping directly into my bloodstream. Sammy doesn’t reply. He stares straight ahead, towards the ground. We cross Davey Street against the lights and walk through the bus mall. Crowds of uniforms boast and smoke. Sammy reaches his stop and leans against the shelter. I stand with him. We’re still for a moment, then he speaks. “Why don’t you just go and read your book?”

I start to say that the book doesn’t matter, but then I realise I’d forgotten to put it in my tackle box when I’d left to chase him. It’s down at the end of the pier, watching the sea breeze come in. For a moment I want to turn and run back, but I breathe, carefully, and force a smile.

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Chingu

by Todd Sullivan

The grey smoke from Kim Jung Hyun's cigarette drifted up from the burning ashes to curl around her neck. She sat opposite her *seonsaengnim*, Song Ji Hun, in the Café Bene in Nohyeong Rotary. The days had grown longer as March fell to April, the snowy winter giving way to a rainy spring. Already, it was almost eight o'clock, and Jung Hyun checked a sigh of impatience as she waited for her superior to tell her why he'd called the meeting today.

"The *Gwanlyo* has given you a new assignment." Ji Hun took a slow pull from his cigarette, and turned to look at Jung Hyun as he blew a long funnel cloud of smoke from his nose. "We need a human."

"Ah." She thought about it for a moment, but nothing she'd been told in the last year and a half of her undead life could explain away the comment. Laughter suddenly burst out from a group of high school students behind her. Jung Hyun had noticed them when they'd come in earlier to sit out on the patio in the smoking section. When she'd started smoking in her teens, she would have never been so bold, and she had grown up in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. On the small rural island of Jeju, she'd been slightly surprised that the kids had decided to flaunt their nicotine habit so.

Most of the tables in the Café Bene were filled, and she and Ji Hun also sat on the wide patio, though in the corner by themselves. It had been drizzling moments ago, but that'd stopped, and the air had been left with a sharp chill. Jung Hyun wore a vest and short skirt with stockings, and with her long black hair falling down her shoulders, she looked like a university student out on a date with the impeccably dressed Ji Hun.

Except she wasn't a university student, and Song Ji Hun wasn't her boyfriend. Taking a deep drag of her cigarette, she asked him, "So what kind of human do we need?"

"The *Gwanlyo* will fill in the details later." Ji Hun took off his fedora, placed it on

the table, and leaned in closer as he lowered his voice. “This is tricky business, acquiring a human. You’ve been given a high level, high risk assignment.” He patted her hand as he gave her a bright smile. “You should be proud. The *Gwanlyo* must feel you’ve excelled in your last tests. Your star is rising, Kim Jung Hyun.”

Jung Hyun returned his bright smile with one of her own as she bowed her head to him. What’s the angle, she wondered. She glanced at her superior through the strands of her hair, but he wasn’t giving anything away. Reaching for a fresh cigarette to have an excuse to withdraw her hand away from his, Jung Hyun lit it as her smart phone jingled. She checked the text message, and when she looked back up at Ji Hun, he reached into his pocket and produced a colourful business card.

“You’ve never met him, but it’s time you did. Set up an appointment with him as soon as possible.”

Jung Hyun took the card. A digital image of a tidy little shop appeared on one side; on the other, the address, telephone number, and man’s name in blocked yellow letters: Moon Jae Young – Electrician.

“The *Gwanlyo* has a local mart in Hallim, and the freezers have been disabled,” Ji Hun said. “Tell Mr Moon that it’s an emergency job, that the drinks and produce will spoil in days. He’ll want to charge more, but don’t let him up the price too easily. Ultimately, though, money’s inconsequential. Tomorrow evening, you’re to open the shop. A key will be left in a slot by the door.”

Jung Hyun slid the card into the top of one of her boots, and then waited until Ji Hun finished his Americano. She stood when he stood, and he said, “I’ll call you later.”

They parted after leaving the Café Bene. Wisps of grey clouds hung in the dark sky promising more rain. Jung Hyun went to the corner and hailed a taxi. Telling the driver, “City Hall,” she called her best friend, Ha Seung Yeong, who’d texted her earlier, and they set up to meet at the bar, Factory, in twenty minutes.

She got out of the taxi in front of *Shi Cheong*’s bus terminal. The city hall area

bustled with people and scooters and buses. Uniformed middle and high school students walked the streets in flocks of striped skirts and grey pants, and young adults filled drinking *hofs*. Jung Hyun crossed the major intersection and went down the block and around a corner into a narrow alley. Small *galbi* restaurants ran along the alley, and voices poured out from open doors as the patrons fried pork over grills and downed soju from tiny glass cups. The Factory was on the second floor of a two story building. Jung Hyun climbed narrow wooden steps to throw open a heavy door, and entered a dim lit smoky bar. The Factory had a handful of tables, and a small stage.

Jung Hyun took a seat at a small square table against the wall, and ten minutes later, Ha Seung Yeong walked in.

“Oh! You’re already here.” Seung Yeon sat down beside her and clasped Jung Hyun’s hands. “Have you been waiting long?”

Jung Hyun shook her head. “I just got here. So, who’s this boy I’m sharing you with this evening?”

Seung Yeon lowered her head so that her long hair obscured half of her pale face. She had small, sharp features and a very slim build. She could pass for one of the high school students outside if she ever wore her old uniform again. But Seung Yeon had finished high school several years ago, had already completed university, and worked full time at an elementary school as she attended graduate school in the evening.

“Stop being so pretty,” Jung Hyun scolded her, playfully punching her in the shoulder, “and just say who he is.”

Seung Hyun slapped Jung Hyun’s arm back. “You will be so surprised, that is all. I won’t tell you anything about him; I just want you to meet him.”

“Uh oh.”

“What *uh oh!*” Seung Yeon slapped her again. “He is a very interesting guy!”

“I worry about your taste. Your last boyfriend, he was a little possessive.”

“Possessive?” Seung Yeon shook her head. “I don’t remember him being possessive. What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” Jung Hyun smiled even as she kicked herself for saying that. They sat so close that their legs touched, and Seung Yeon’s body heat warmed Jung Hyun’s cool flesh. Seung Yeon’s smell, the berry scent of her hair, the flowery aroma of her facial makeup, made Jung Hyun nestle closer. Beneath the artificial scents were Seung Yeon’s more natural ones, the faint musky smell, and of course, the heavy perfume of her blood. Jung Hyun’s incisor teeth tingled as she lightly massaged Seung Yeon’s wrist, as she gazed at her friend from behind the mask that she wore, the façade all vampires wore when out amongst humans. Jung Hyun’s pulse did not quicken because her heart no longer beat in her chest, but something deeper inside of her became inflamed by her lust for her friend’s body, by her desire for her friend’s blood.

“Oh, there he is!” Seung Yeon said. “You will be nice to him, won’t you?”

“Of course,” Jung Hyun lied easily.

A dark skinned *waiguk* had entered the bar, and sitting at the table, said to Seung Yeon with a heavy Dutch accent, “You’re so early! Aren’t we meeting at nine?”

“Oh, David, not nine o’clock,” Seung Yeon replied in English. “Don’t you remember, eight-thirty o’clock, not nine-thirty o’clock.”

“I’m sure we decided on nine. Ah well, we’re all here now. And who is this beautiful lady?” He reached out and took Jung Hyun’s hand in a gentle, yet firm grip. “I’m your Romeo.”

“Kim Jung Hyun.” Jung Hyun noted his solid build and great physical shape for what she guessed was his mid-forties—quite older than her friend’s twenty-three years. David wore an old cap perched on a bald head, and had thin, black rimmed glasses and a nice sports coat that fit his muscular frame well.

“I humbly apologise, I didn’t bring a friend,” David said, “so it looks like it’s just going to be the three of us.” He still hadn’t released Jung Hyun’s hand, and when she attempted to finally break their initial handshake, he held on tighter. With a grin, he asked, “You running away from me so soon, darling?”

“Oh David, no one would run from you,” Seung Yeon replied, at which David immediately released Jung Hyun’s hand to take hold of Seung Yeon’s. His eyes, though, were a bit slower to move from Jung Hyun to Seung Yeon, and when he said, “Why, you’re looking lovely tonight,” Jung Hyun couldn’t tell if he was talking to her or her friend.

“Oh, thank you! Why are you late, are you coming from gym?”

“I’m not late, beautiful, I’m early,” and he winked at Jung Hyun. “I was just with a couple of mates at the Indian restaurant around the way. But as a gesture of my sincerest of apologies, first round on me!” And with that, he got up, hustled over to the bar, and came back a moment later holding three foreign beers between the fingers of one hand, and three tall shots cupped in the palm of his other. He placed them all on the table.

Seung Yeon giggled. “Oh, I love Budweiser!”

“Excellent. I love a lady who’s easy to please.”

Again, Jung Hyun was confused as to whom he was referring, as David’s eyes had lingered a beat too long on her as he’d spoken. He put a shot in front of each of them, and Seung Yeon, picking hers up and sniffing, asked, “But what is this?” She wrinkled her nose at the smell.

David put his finger to his temple, a puzzled look on his face. “Tea?” He lifted it up to his nose. “Honey for my sweet ladies?”

“It’s tequila,” Jung Hyun said.

“Give the Misses a prize!” David held his up, and motioned for the two girls to

follow. “Cheers to spending a beautiful night with beautiful ladies!”

They clinked glasses, and David knocked his shot back, with Seung Yeon following suit. Jung Hyun took hers last, and she kept the grimace off her face as the familiar nausea swept through her when consuming anything except blood.

David brought the next round also, three more beers and three fresh shots of tequila. Seung Yeon excused herself to the bathroom, and since the Factory didn't have one inside, she had to go outside and around the corner to the public restroom. After she'd left, David pulled his chair closer to Jung Hyun and took her hands under the table.

“You're quite the mystery.” He stared intently at her from behind his black glasses.

Jung Hyun gave a coy smile. “More a mystery than my friend?”

“Seung Yeon is a lovely, lovely girl,” David replied. “And extremely bright. She was the top of my class in Comparative English.”

“Ah. You were her professor?”

“Visiting this year from Daegu. But Seung Yeon's not like the rest of the kids. She didn't need me at all!” David gave Jung Hyun's hand a squeeze. “She's a genius at languages, you know. English, Japanese, Chinese, Russian. I think the girl's even on French and Spanish now!” He freed one of his hands to lay it on her knee. “And what are you brilliant at, Kim Jung Hyun?” He gazed deep into her eyes, gazed long and deep, perhaps too deep, and his face went slack as his hand crawled up her thigh.

“My brilliance?” Jung Hyun leaned in closer to David. “Loyalty.” And she laughed at the perplexed look David gave her. “It's just a joke. So you're an English professor? Do you tutor privately?”

“Of course, and my hourly fees are reasonable.” David sat up straighter, focus returning to his features. “Just give me your number, and we can set something up.”

“Of course.”

David fished for his phone, and when she'd given him her number, the door to the Factory opened again, and Seung Yeon came back in. "It's drizzling again," she announced, frowning. "So much rain! Why must it always be raining?"

"It'll be clear skies soon enough," Jung Hyun replied as her friend sat back down next to her. "Just wait and see."

§

Early the next evening, Jung Hyun showered and changed into a hoodie, black tights, and jean shorts, the white pockets peeking out from the cut off. She took a taxi down into the Namwon neighborhood, and waited in a Paris Baguette bakery on the next block from a bright yellow apartment building, Mideum Hanaro. Without any proper description of Mr Moon, she would have to probe deeper for him. Clearing her thoughts, Jung Hyun slipped into the minds of those around her. She skirted through the scattered fragments of broken images of classrooms, teachers, *hogwons*; offices, deadlines, endless reams of paperwork; tangerine farms, narrow streets, wandering strays. She tensed under the effort of maintaining a normal outward appearance as she surfed through the mental data streamed from the people moving around her going about their daily lives.

A small flatbed truck pierced her thoughts, and she blocked out everything else to focus upon it. In the driver's seat, she saw a man wearing a sports cap. Unusual for Korean men, the man sported a several day growth of bristly grey hairs over gaunt cheeks and an angular chin. The man fell into a fit of coughing, and taking a tissue from a box on the passenger seat, he cleared his throat long and harsh before spitting into it. Tiny clots of blood mixed with the phlegm, and balling the tissue, the man tossed it on his dashboard amongst a collection of waded tissues. As he reached for a pack of cigarettes in the nook of the passenger seat, he abruptly stopped. Perking up, he looked to his left and right, then peered out the truck window, and Jung Hyun gasped because, across the telepathic link, he seemed to be staring directly at her.

She broke the connection and stood. What was that? She'd never heard of anything

like this happening before, and considered calling her *seonsaengnim*. Why wouldn't Song Ji Hun warn her of what this man was capable of? Jung Hyun frowned. Ji Hun always hid surprises up his sleeve, and she'd walked into yet another one unprepared. Her hands curled into tight fists, her frustration made greater because of the futility of her anger.

Ji Hun wanted her to fail, she knew. But she'd outmaneuver him, figure out this mystery on her own. She watched with normal eyes as Moon Jae Young's blue flatbed truck rolled to the intersection, and after he parked, he got out and entered his shop on the first floor of Mideum Hanaro.

Jung Hyun left the bakery a moment later, and crossing the street to the apartments, stepped up to the door. She steadied herself, preparing for whatever she'd encounter on the other side. When she realised she was grinding her teeth, she forced herself to relax, pulled open the door, and entered the small shop.

Moon Jae Young sat behind a brown desk directly opposite the entrance, and only three short steps placed her right before him. Sparse grey hairs covered his gaunt cheeks, his breathing laboured. Heater, printer, air conditioner, and other machinery parts littered the shelves. A collection of wires and knobs, small and big screwdrivers and wrenches, cable cutters and a black solder gun, cluttered Jae Young's desk. A trash bin at the foot of the desk overflowed with wadded tissues, several of which had fallen onto the stained tiled floor.

Jae Young had his cell phone to his ear while he spun a black switchblade on his desk with the other. He nodded at her in acknowledgement, and mouthed to her, "*Jaka mayeon*," as he raised a finger. Jung Hyun gave a brief smile as she waited. He ended his call, but immediately fell into a coughing fit, and spit a clot of phlegm dotted with blood into a tissue.

"*Ashi*," he muttered, tossing the wadded tissue onto the pile filling the trashcan. Then he stood and looked at her, his breathing a wheeze in his lungs. "Most people just call for an appointment," he began, his eyes roving around the closet-sized shop. With an apologetic wave, he added, "I don't get many visitors."

“I was seeing my friend upstairs,” Jung Hyun lied. “She lives right here in Mideum Hanaro, and she said management recommends you. I am in big trouble. My father’s store in Hallim.” She shook her head. “The freezers. They are dying.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.” He fished around his desk, the veins in his hands a blue spider web beneath his pale flesh. Finding an old account book, he grabbed a pen and came around to her. “Tell me where your store’s located and when you want me to come out.”

Jung Hyun bit back a flinch as he stood right before her, so close they almost touched in the cramped space. As she recited the address Ji Hun had given her, she noticed a framed photo on a shelf behind the chair. She hadn’t seen it with Jae Young sitting. The photo showed a soccer team posing on a game field at a nearby high school. The sun shined brightly on the green grass and the players in their clean white and yellow shirts with black shorts. Studying the picture closer, she realised one of the players to the left resembled Jae Young. He looked younger there, though, healthier, his face clean shaven, his body strong. How long ago was this? At the top right hand of the picture, she saw the digital date embedded in the image. Only a little more than two months ago?

“You smell nice.”

Jae Young’s sudden comment startled her. He hadn’t looked up from his worn notebook, hadn’t stopped writing down her information.

“My good friend always told me I have a nose like a hound. You smell like him.” Jae Young inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh. “Ahh. I haven’t seen him around lately.”

Colour seeped back into Jae Young’s face, and the grey at his temples seemed to darken as his greasy hair filled and became thicker.

“The girl you were visiting upstairs was smart to recommend me,” he continued. “Most people here on the island don’t realise that I went to Kaist University in Daejeon. One of the best technology institutes in the country. I always tested in the top five per cent of my class.” Pride filled Jae Young’s voice, and though he’d stopped writing, he still didn’t look away from the notebook. Jung Hyun stared, amazed, as he stood straighter, his

body filling out, the wheeze falling from his breathing.

“I was going to go into nuclear energy. Had it all planned out.” Jae Young tapped the notebook with the tip of his pen. The blue spider web of veins had disappeared, and his hands no longer trembled. “But then, it just seemed like the best idea to move to Jeju. Fresh air and beautiful scenery. Never really thought too much about the decision before, but I guess I followed my friend here.” He shook his head. “Why hadn’t that ever occurred to me before?”

Jung Hyun had had enough, and she took a step back away. Yet as she moved from Jae Young, it seemed she took some light away with her, for Jae Young seemed to dim, the blue blushing into his hands, his hair greying, his breathing laboured again. He stooped over more, the stronger visage dissipating with her distance.

“Now that I haven’t seen my friend in a while,” he wheezed out, “I’ve had so many weird thoughts. So many strange dreams. Bad dreams.” His eyes had remained in the pages of the notebook as if glued there. Jung Hyun took another step from him, and at the door, she put her fingers on the handle and pushed it slightly ajar.

“For almost twenty years, he’s been a constant in my life.” The burden of standing seemed too much, and Jae Young stumbled, catching himself on his desk. “Haven’t I been a good friend?” Tears moistened his eyes, slipped down unchecked into his scraggly beard. Jung Hyun took a step outside, her confidence shattered.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

But she wasn’t sure he heard her, and as the door closed behind her, she caught the unmistakable sound of Moon Jae Young sobbing.

§

Minutes after Jung Hyun awoke the next evening, the sun having just fallen behind the wide blue ocean surrounding Jeju Island, someone rang her door intercom. The buzzer brayed, and she checked the video link to see Song Ji Hun standing outside. She let him in

and offered him sweet instant coffee. He carried a black leather messenger bag, which he placed on the floor at his feet when he sat down at her table. After fixing two cups of coffee, she joined him, and they sipped the scalding liquid in silence until her superior asked, “When are you meeting with Mr Moon at the mart?”

Jung Hyun had been waiting for this question. She’d never heard of anything like what occurred yesterday happening before. Ji Hun hadn’t warned her, yet she knew he knew the danger. He had to, he knew everything.

Jung Hyun made a pretence of looking at her watch. “In a little more than an hour.”

Ji Hun nodded and took a loud slurp from his coffee. Jung Hyun counted the seconds in her head until she felt the pitch of her voice would be perfectly casual, and then she asked, “So is he a vampire?”

“He’s human.” Ji Hun spoke simply as if answering a most typical question.

“I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing with him.” Jung Hyun took another sip of coffee.

After a moment, her superior responded, “You’re supposed to have him fix the mart’s freezers.”

Jung Hyun’s hands tightened on the cup. When Ji Hun finished his coffee, she asked him if he’d like another, and he shook his head. She would have thrown him through the window of her five story apartment if she could, but instead she sat silent until he finally unclasped his messenger bag and withdrew a silver thermos. Several runes emitting a faint protective power had been carved into its surface. Ji Hun spoke soft words as he placed the thermos on the table, and the runes slightly glowed to fade away.

“And now this,” Ji Hun said. “The *Gwanlyo* has decided to acquire your human, Ha Seung Yeon. They have been watching her for a while and believe she has the right temperament to serve us in our daytime needs.”

Jung Hyun gazed ahead, her false breathing even, her poise controlled. Her superior stared directly at her, his eyes seeming to peel away layers of her façade as he sought out her reaction. Because of this, she gave him nothing, and pushed her thoughts deeper down into herself, so deep that they fell into a hole where she hoped even Song Ji Hun wouldn't be able to follow.

“What's in the thermos?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

When she did not respond, he said, “It's blood from the forty-six resident vampires on the island. You're to add yours now, and give it to Ha Seung Yeon to drink. It's already been mixed with several other liquids, and she'll find it quite delicious.”

Jung Hyun remembered to blink her eyes, and so did. Outside her apartment, the sounds of humans going about their evening drifted up to her: doors opening and closing on the other nine floors of the building; a truck rumbling by on the street; voices of kids and teens and adults on the sidewalk below, all living their lives without knowledge of the monsters making monstrous plans right above their heads.

“What will the potion do to her?”

“Bind her to us. She'll never learn of our existence, but when we need her, she'll obey.” Ji Hun tapped the side of the thermos. “You'll have to give her a fresh dose monthly to keep the effects going. Don't worry...”

“I'm not worried.” Jung Hyun's interruption came smoothly, and she realised she meant it as she smiled at her superior again.

“Don't worry,” Ji Hun repeated, “she won't notice the difference.” He unscrewed the cap and slid the thermos over to Jung Hyun. With a swift motion, she sliced into her own wrist, and let a stream of blood flow into the mixture until her fast healing closed the wound.

The small town of Hallim stood about twenty minutes from the central city, Jeju-si. The main road to Hallim went through farms and fields, and *olleums*, tall hills common throughout Korea, dotted the landscape. Jung Hyun found the mart easily, as there were few other buildings around for kilometres. She opened the door with the key stashed in the window, and entered a small store with four aisles filled with candy and chips, ramen noodles, and household items. She went to the back and placed her hand on the soda, beer, and ice cream freezers. The glass compartment doors were room temperature, and she nodded. She had been briefly worried. She'd left her apartment later than she'd expected, and she'd fearing Moon Jae Young would arrive at the mart first and manage to get inside the store to start working. Keys left in easy to find hiding places was a common practice on the island, and someone with his job would have had no trouble discovering where this one had been.

Jae Young pulled up in his blue flatbed truck several minutes later. Jung Hyun stood behind the counter, and when he entered, toolbox in hand, she started to greet him, "*Annyeonghasepnika*," but the word caught in her throat. Jae Young looked worse than before. He laboured to breathe, and moved clumsily, as if he might keel over with each slow step he took. He had made an effort to shave, but obviously it'd been half-hearted, and uneven patches of grey fuzz covered his chin and cheeks. He shuffled over to the freezer, and placing his hand on the glass compartment door, grunted.

"I don't even hear the motor running," he muttered, then fell into a fit of coughing that forced him to place his hand flat on the door to hold himself up so that he wouldn't collapse.

"Do you need something?" Jung Hyun still stood behind the counter watching him, her feet rooted to the spot. Clearing his throat long and loud, Jae Young spit a glob of phlegm and blood onto the floor, then rubbed it away with the heel of his shoe. Jung Hyun grimaced, her stomach twisting.

"Pardon me," Jae Young muttered, and knelt down to the belt fans at the foot of the

freezer to pry loose the panel with his black switchblade. Peering at the machines with a thin flashlight, he asked, “Do you mind if I smoke?” He sat back up to look at Jung Hyun, who nodded. Fishing a pack out of his pocket, he shocked her by offering her one.

“No, thank you,” she started to say, but Jae Young motioned for her to join him, his bloodshot eyes locked on her face.

“I can smell it on you. I know you smoke.” He offered her a reassuring smile with crooked brown teeth. Biting the bottom of her lip, Jung Hyun nodded politely and went around the counter to take a cigarette. She kept as much distance as possible between them as he lit it. Then she crouched down several paces from Jae Young while he lit his.

He took a raspy inhale from his cigarette, and asked, “You been smoking a long time?”

“Since high school, I guess.”

Jae Young barked out a laugh, and bloodstained spittle flecked his ashen lips. “I guess we all start in high school. I didn’t really get going until compulsory service in the army, though. Great time to pick up lifelong habits.”

“Well, no army for me,” Jung Hyun said with a smile, which Jae Young returned. “My best friend in high school smoked. She’s the one that got me going. Whole groups of us would sneak off into the bathrooms between classes for cigarette breaks.”

Jae Young barked out another laugh. “The teachers never caught you all!”

Jung Hyun shrugged. “They knew. If they found us with cigarettes or lighters, they’d confiscate them and give us a solid beating with the rod. My friend had a knack for never getting caught, but me.” Jung Hyun shook her head at the memory and rubbed her backside. “I guess I wasn’t so clever.”

“Friends,” Jae Young said. “They’ll lead you to Hell if you let them.”

The comment caught Jung Hyun off guard, and she came out of the past to glance back

at Jae Young. He'd inched closer as they'd talked, and now she almost leapt away in shock, but her training to maintain the façade of being human instinctively kicked in. The years had melted from Jae Young, and he gazed at her with clear eyes, his hair full and black, his body strong and muscular. He looked at his hands, opening and closing them in amazement.

“Why?” He whispered, and caught Jung Hyun's eyes, but she couldn't offer him an answer that'd make sense. Ultimately, it seemed he didn't need one. Face contorting with desire, Jae Young scooped up the switchblade and lashed out at Jung Hyun with the quickness of a vampire. Jung Hyun barely managed to twist from his attack so that instead of her throat being ripped from ear to ear, Jae Young only caught her on her left side of her neck. The blade sliced through a major artery, and blood sprouted from the gash. Jung Hyun issued a pained gurgle as Jae Young flung himself on top of her. He fastened his lips on the gaping wound. Jung Hyun struggled under him, but with each gulp he took, she felt him become stronger as she weakened. She beat on his back and sides, but her blows were futile. Jae Young moaned long and low with pleasure, his body grinding against hers, his legs intertwined with hers. He shivered uncontrollably, and Jung Hyun felt the multiple orgasms course through his body like a heartbeat, one after another after another.

Almost like a lover, Jung Hyun reached her hands up to Jae Young's face as her sight dimmed. She touched his chin, ran her fingers up his cheeks to his closed eyes. With one last desperate act, she shoved her thumbs under his lids and gouged out his eyes. A howl erupted from Jae Young as he fell back from her, his palms pressed tight against his face. He crashed into the freezer, shattering the glass. Still he screamed as he threw his body back and forth, and Jung Hyun dimly feared that someone might hear him though their closest neighbour was at least a kilometre away. Jung Hyun struggled to sit up, but the grey world spun round and round her, and for a moment all she could do was flop around in the pool of her blood.

Finally, she just dragged herself across the tiled floor towards Jae Young, who still screamed, his tongue extended from his wide open mouth. Picking up the switchblade, Jung Hyun focused her strength, then plunged the knife right below Jae Young's ear and

ripped it down to his collar bone. His cries abruptly cut short into a strangled gurgle, and Jung Hyun immediately slashed the other side of his throat, from ear to collar bone, leaving him almost decapitated.

With a fatigued sigh, Jung Hyun bent down to drink from the now silent Moon Jae Young.

§

Two days later, Kim Jung Hyun stood at her window looking down at the city streets spread out below her. She wore a grey miniskirt, her legs bare, and a black and red long sleeved shirt. K-pop played from her laptop speakers. On her table sat two crystal glasses and a bottle of wine that she'd filled with the potion from the thermos. She waited, counting down the seconds in her head.

She'd called Song Ji Hun after she killed Moon Jae Young, and told her superior that she needed assistance in cleaning up the mart. Another vampire would come by to help, he'd said, and though he'd seemed like he wanted to get off the line, she had abruptly asked him, "The *Gwanlyo* had stopped giving Mr Moon the potion, hadn't they? That's why he was dying."

"He wasn't dying." On the other side of the line, Ji Hun took a drag of his cigarette. "Not yet, anyway. He was going through withdrawal. But he needed to die, which is what your assignment was."

Jung Hyun had kept her voice emotionless, refusing to allow her superior to know how furious she was. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Jae Young had become too proficient at picking up thoughts. Especially from us. Perhaps the binding had become too close over the decades. We don't know for sure. But if you had known why we sent you to him, there's a good chance he would have picked it up and ran. And if he ran..." Ji Hun took another drag of his cigarette. "It would have been very difficult to locate him. He would have been loose in the mortal world with power unchecked by us. We couldn't allow that to happen."

Jung Hyun could almost see Ji Hun shrug wherever he was that night. “So we didn’t.”

Staring out the window today, Jung Hyun swore to herself as she had after getting off the line with Ji Hun. *Bastards!*

The intercom buzzer in her apartment rang, and she jumped, startled, even though she’d been expecting it. Composing herself, she looked in the mirror one last time before going to the door and opening it to a widely grinning David.

“Wow,” he gushed, his eyes going up and down her body. “You look marvellous! Absolutely stunning!”

Jung Hyun smiled, but before she could step out of the way, David entered, brushing his body against hers. Jung Hyun bit back a scowl, and simply bowed to him. “Thank you,” she replied in English. “Please, sit down.”

“Well, what do we have here?” David motioned to the wine and glasses set up on the table. Turning to Jung Hyun, he gave her a sly wink. “We are here just to study, right?”

“Of course.” She flashed a coy smile, and sat down in one of the chairs. David briefly checked out her legs as her skirt rode up when she crossed her legs, and with a grin, he sat down opposite her. Jung Hyun uncorked the wine and poured two glasses.

“So what do we toast to?” David lifted his glass, and she followed suit.

Jung Hyun thought for a moment before saying, “Friends?”

“Friends.” David brought the wine to his nose and sniffed. “Friends,” he repeated. “They’ll lead you to Hell if you aren’t careful.”

Her grip tightened slightly on the crystal stem at those last words spoken out loud. “*What?*” She hissed.

“Kim Jung Hyun.” David put down his glass and leaned in towards her. All pretence fell from him as he stared directly at her from behind his black rimmed glasses. “We’ve

been proud of you so far. The *Gwanlyo* gave you this high level assignment because we thought you could handle it, and you were doing so well. But to do this...” He waved at the wine bottle containing the potion in disgust. “If I had been human and you’d given this to me, you would have not only infused me with power, but you would have also driven me insane. Only exceptional humans are ever offered the gift of either becoming a vampire, or being bound to vampires.”

Jung Hyun couldn’t stand his hardened gaze, couldn’t deal with the way he looked at her, all false lust expelled from his expression. She turned away to keep her tears from showing, and looked out her window at the dark city.

“I can’t do this to Ha Seung Yeon,” she whispered. “I can’t condemn her to Moon Jae Young’s fate.”

“You don’t have a choice.” David shook his head. “Like you, we started watching her not long after she was born. In time, we determined her to be too weak to become a vampire, but she could still be bound.” David paused. “She *will* still be bound.”

David leaned back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and slid the pack across the table to Jung Hyun. “This violation of a *Gwanlyo* directive muddies your, up to now, stellar record. You will rectify this. You must.”

Kim Jung Hyun hadn’t cried in a year and a half, not since they made her into the beast she was today. Yet now, as she thought of her *chingu*, of her friend, tears slipped down her face to stain her pale flesh red.

Todd currently lives in South Korea, teaching English. He is working on a speculative fiction / urban horror novel, which takes place in Korea on the small island of Jeju, which is at the southernmost tip of the country. He has a simple little website at www.acrowsflying.com.

Atheist Thought

by Phillip A. Ellis

Haunted
by the thought
there is
nothing more
than this,
I look
inside,
to find
I am unafraid.

Apollo

by *Phillip A. Ellis*

The light of the setting sun is pale,
is, well, so poignant it burns my heart
so that the dross is lessened,
my heart is free from burdens.

The evening birds are gathering near,
where I can hear them call forth the stars,
singing songs whose worth's unknown
beneath the blown glass of stars.

And the hands that weigh the heart and glass
and find the heart lacking, vain of voice,
are like to gods never were,
a god of poetry, fire.

And I am made as a bird that sings
of flames in words, and of everything:
of ghosts and gods never were,
a god of poetry, fire.

*Phillip A. Ellis is a freelance critic, poet and scholar. His chapbooks, *The Flayed Man* and *Symptoms Positive and Negative*, are available. He is working on a collection for *Diminuendo Press*. Another has been accepted by *Hippocampus Press*. He is the editor of *Melaleuca*. His website is at <http://www.phillipaellis.com/>.*

In a Small Town

by Christian Fennell

The wind rattles the thin tin walls of the drive shed as Jake Burleson closes the metal door behind him and walks across the grease-stained concrete floor to the grease-smearred white fridge and removes a Red Stripe. He twists the top off and tosses it towards a plastic garbage can surrounded by empty auto part boxes, rags, discarded bottles and cans, and assorted other trash. The cap bounces off the wall and lands on the floor. “What’s that then?”

“It’s Murray’s.”

“Oh?” Jack tilts his head to the right to get a better sight-line on Murray's four-wheeler engine. “Wha’d he do?”

“Rings are broke.” Tommy picks a rag up from his work bench, turns and leans against the bench and begins to wipe the grease from his hands. “You hear anythin’?”

“Yup.” Jake takes a drink, lowers the beer and runs the torn sleeve of his tan canvas coat across his mouth. “Heard somethin’ today.”

“Oh?” Tommy says. “Wha’d they say?”

“Said I’m shootin’ blanks.”

“Shit, Jake. You tell Alice?”

“Nope.”

“I guess you’ll have to.”

“I guess.” Jake finishes his beer. “Not tonight I ain’t.” He tosses the empty beer at the garbage can. “Right now, I’m goin’ to bed.” He walks towards the door and slaps his

younger brother on the shoulder as he goes. “See ya,” he says.

“Yeah, see ya.”

§

A swirl of snow follows Jake inside the drive shed and he quickly closes the door. He walks across the cold, cluttered room towards a black and rusted airtight stove where he selects a chunk of maple from a small stack of firewood and places it on the dying fire. He sits on an aged block of red oak. “It’s a little fresh.”

“Seems like it.”

“Grab me one of them beers, would ya. I’m too damn cold to move.”

Tommy steps out from under a black ’69 Firebird jacked up on a surface mounted lift. He grabs Jake a beer from the fridge and tosses it to him.

“What’s the problem?”

“I dunno, could be air in the lines.” Tommy ducks back under the car.

Jake opens his beer. “Need any help?”

“Naw, I got it.”

“Good, I wasn’t about to anyways.” He tips back his beer. “I talked to Alice.”

Tommy bends down and looks at Jake. “Oh, how’d that go?”

“’Bout as good as you’d think. By the way, you didn’t say nothin’ to Cindy, did ya?”

“Nope.”

“Good. I wouldn’t think you would.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“I dunno. I gotta think about it some more. Maybe nothin’.”

Tommy goes back to work. After awhile he leans down again and says to Jake, “So when ya think you’ll know?”

“Know what?”

“What it is you’re thinkin’ about.”

“Oh, I dunno, maybe after the hunt.”

§

Rain slashes in the open door and darkens the concrete floor. Jake closes the door, walks to the fridge and removes a Red Stripe. He twists the lid off and tosses it towards the garbage can. “I don’t know about you,” he says, “but I don’t think much of this thaw.”

“I guess not.”

“That Dale’s truck?”

“Yup. Driveshaft’s broke.”

“I was at Randy’s.”

“Oh?”

“Yup. He’s got the head of that 10-pointer mounted on the wall in his garage.”

“I guess he does.”

Jake sits on the block of red oak. “Tommy, I need to talk ya.”

Tommy grabs a rag and wipes the grease from his hands. “What’s up?”

“Member when I said I had to figure out what to do? You know, about what the doc said about me.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Course this might sound a little crazy, maybe at first anyways, but when you really think about it, it ain’t that crazy.”

“What’s that then?”

Jake drains his beer. “You know how much Alice wants kids.”

“Yup.”

“Not that I don’t, ‘cause I do. I mean ya got your two and they’re doin’ okay, right?”

“Right.”

“Thing is, I don’t wanna adopt some stranger’s baby and say it’s mine. Alice don’t neither. We could get her artificially knocked up, but we can’t afford it. Anyways, we wouldn’t want to.”

“So, whaddya thinkin’?”

“I want you to do it.”

“You what?”

“You heard me.”

“You’ve lost your goddamn mind.”

Jake leans his large frame against the tin wall, lifts his John Deere ball cap, and then puts it back again.

“You’re askin’ me ta fuck Alice? Is that what you’re sayin’?”

“Yup, that’s what I’m sayin’.”

“Does Alice know about it?”

“Yup, we talked about it.”

“You talked about it?”

“Yup, we talked about it.”

Tommy leans against the work bench and crosses his arms. “And ya think Cindy's gonna be okay with me walking next door and havin’ a fuck with Alice? ‘Cause I got news for ya, she ain’t.”

“She don't gotta know.”

“Whaddaya mean she don’t gotta know? How the hell is she not gonna know?”

“‘Cause we ain’t gonna tell her. That’s how.”

“For Christ’s sake, this is nuts. I can’t fuck Alice.”

“Whaddaya mean you can’t fuck Alice? She looks good. Hell, she’s a lot better lookin’ than that Poulson girl ya was fuckin’ back in high school.”

“She wasn’t that bad.”

“The hell she wasn’t.”

“C'mon Jake, ya gotta get serious. You don’t mean this shit, do ya?”

“I’m as serious as the day is long, little brother. Hell, it won’t take more than a time or two—didn’t ya always tell me all’s you had to do to knock up Cindy was ta hang your pants on the bed post? Think about it. At least the kid’ll be a Burleson. It’s the only way.”

Jake walks to the fridge and grabs another beer. “Anyways, you don’t gotta worry about it, I got it all worked out. We’ll just get up a little extra early, you walk to my place and I’ll come here. I’ll do up your mornin’ chores while you do Alice. After you’re done, you come back here like nothin’ ever happened and I’ll head back to my place and get my

chores done.” He tips back his beer. “Don’t say nothin’ now, just think about it.” He finishes the beer and walks to the door. Before he leaves he looks back at Tommy. “Oh, by the way, Alice says she’ll be droppin’ eggs in the next day or two.” He tosses the empty beer bottle to Tommy.

Tommy catches the bottle. “Oh?”

“Yup. See ya,” he says and walks out the door.

“Yup,” Tommy says. “See ya.”

§

A swirl of snow follows Jake inside and he quickly closes the door. He walks to the fridge and grabs a beer. “’Bout time things froze up. I was done with all that goddamn mud.”

“Grab me one too.”

Jake grabs another beer and joins Tommy sitting by the stove. He passes Tommy the beer and nods towards a red wood splitter sitting in the middle of the workshop floor. “How come you ain’t workin’ on Jessie’s splitter?”

“I dunno. I guess I don’t feel like it.”

They crack open their beers and toss the lids at the garbage can.

Tommy takes a sip of beer then looks at Jake. “I never told ya, but I went and saw the doc.”

“Why? You sick or somethin’?”

“Naw, I ain’t sick. I got tested.”

“Tested? Why would you get tested? You got Noel and Lea.”

“I know I got Noel and Lea. But don’t it seem a little strange to ya that it’s comin’ on a year and nothin’s happened.”

Jake finishes his beer and tosses it at the garbage can. “Yeah, I guess. I checked with Alice to see if youse was doin’ it right.”

“And?”

“She said ya was. Wha’d the doc say?”

“Said I’m just like you.”

“What?”

Tommy finishes his beer. “Yup. All spark and no fire.”

“Shit.”

“You got that right.”

Jake looks at Tommy. “That means Noel and Lea...”

Tommy doesn’t reply and Jake’s words hang and linger in the warm, fire-stoked air.

“Whaddaya gonna do?” Jake asks Tommy.

“I dunno. I ain’t got it figured out yet. I’ll tell you one thing, I ain’t gonna be doin’ Alice no more. Less you think she might miss it too much?”

“I dunno. I could check.”

“You do that.”

“Fuck it, we need another one.” Jake stands and brings back two more beers. He opens one and passes it to Tommy then opens the other one and takes a drink.

“I’ll tell ya what,” says Tommy.

Jake sits back down next to his brother. “What’s that then?”

“I’m gonna miss you doin’ up my morning chores.”

Jake smiles and tips back his beer. “This is one hell-of-a-deal, ain’t it?”

“Seems like it, don’t it.”

They sit and drink.

“Fuck,” says Jake. He looks at Tommy. “You don’t suppose dad was... you know?”

“Dad? Nah. Why, you think he was?”

“I dunno know. I’m six-two and you’re what, five-eight?”

“Yup.”

They sit and drink some more.

“I ain’t goin’ bald,” says Tommy.

“Nope.”

“I got blue eyes.”

“I got green.”

“I’m thin.”

“Easy now.”

They drain their beers and throw the empties at the garbage can.

“Fuck,” says Tommy.

Jake turns and looks at Tommy. “Yup,” he says. “Fuck.”

Christian Fennell is married with five children living in a cottage on a lake in rural Ontario, Canada. He worked for many in the film and television industries as screenwriter, commercial director and producer. He is now exploring the full-time world of fiction. 'In a Small Town' is his first short story.

Ducklings

by *Deborah Sheldon*

Jimmy sat cross-legged on the lawn with one of the ducklings in his lap. At six weeks of age, most of her adult feathers had already come through.

“Don’t worry, Fluffy,” Jimmy whispered, patting the bird in long strokes. “It’s just a car ride, that’s all.”

On the other side of the backyard, Dad, using a screwdriver held in his fist like a dagger, punched a range of holes across a cardboard box. Then he placed the box on the ground and opened the flaps.

“Come on, mate,” Dad said. “You’ve had your goodbyes.”

Reluctantly, Jimmy got up and went over. He put Fluffy inside the box, and stared down at her, hands on hips. She was quacking and knocking her bill against the walls.

Jimmy said, “She doesn’t like it in there.”

“It won’t be for long,” Dad said. “Help me get the others.”

The ducklings’ parents, Mr and Mrs Drake, were sitting together by the clothesline. Dad pulled two wet ducklings from the inflatable wading pool and dropped them into the box. As he grabbed another duckling from beside the shed, Dad called, “You see how Fluffy’s quit his squawking now he’s got family with him?”

“Fluffy’s a girl.”

Dad didn’t seem to hear. Jimmy took the last duckling from the vegetable patch where the bird was fossicking for snails. Four sleek heads were already bobbing within the confines of the cardboard box, their bodies jostling and crowding each other.

Jimmy set his mouth. “They don’t have enough room.”

“Mate, we gotta get going.”

The boy slipped the fifth duckling into the squeeze. Dad closed the flaps and picked up the box. On the way through the carport, Dad tipped his head at the kitchen window, and said, “Wave to your mum.”

Jimmy stopped. The rectangle of glass set high in the bricks reflected the bottlebrushes and fence planks that lined the driveway. He thought he saw a shadow move behind the gauzy curves of net curtain, so he lifted his hand and wagged his fingers. The shadow may have been a trick of the light or it could have been his mother, quiet and sombre these days with faraway eyes, her piano unplayed, her sewing basket shut.

The car boot slammed. Dad was walking around to the driver’s door. Jimmy regarded the mirror of kitchen window, smiled uncertainly, and hopped into the front passenger seat next to Dad.

They drove for a while. Jimmy listened for the ducklings in the boot, and said, “Maybe there aren’t enough holes in the box.”

“If there’s peace, it means there’s nothing wrong,” Dad said. “Well, that’s what I thought it meant. Hey, do you remember when we camped on the Murray and caught yabbies? Bit of ham on a hook and line? We hauled them by the dozen. Mum fried them in butter, and we ate yabbies for two days straight, remember?”

Jimmy shrugged.

Dad said at last, “If I lived by the river, we could eat yabbies all the time.”

“Oh geez, we’re not moving house again, are we?”

“No, course not.” Dad started tapping at the steering wheel. “You’d stay with Mum. Whenever you felt like it, you and me could fish for yabbies. How would that be?”

“I’m glad we’re not moving; I like my room.”

Dad looked over. “But you get what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“Because Mum wanted me to square things with you before...you know. Beforehand.”

Dad switched on the radio. Jimmy stared out the window. Over the course of a dozen songs, the suburban road dwindled into a single lane, lost its kerbing, grew dark with overhanging trees and giant ferns, and turned into a stretch of gravel.

“Not long now,” Dad said. “Our ducklings are gonna love being on a farm. You’ll see.”

Jimmy’s eyes felt hot and prickly. “I bet Mrs Drake is tearing up the backyard, saying, where’s my family gone? Where could they be?”

“Let’s not start on that. You know how many ducklings a breeding pair can have in a year?”

“I know, Dad, I know.”

“I told you from the start we’d sell every duckling we got.”

Eventually, there appeared a chain-link fence that blocked a driveway off the gravel road. A broken letterbox hung from a gatepost. Dad stopped the car, opened the gate, drove the car onto the property and shut the gate again. Meanwhile, Jimmy listened; there were no sounds from the boot.

Dad drove the winding, rutted driveway to the foot of a tin-roofed bungalow and cut the engine. Chickens pecked at the dirt. Nearby, a couple of goats stood at a tussock of weeds that grew from the remains of a forty-four gallon drum. Dad and Jimmy got out of the car.

Dad opened the boot and said, “Aw, shit.”

Jimmy stumbled closer. Dad put up his hand to warn him off. A lanky man came out the front door of the farmhouse. Dad shook his head at the man and started to walk over.

“It’s no good,” Dad said. “I’ve stuffed up.”

Jimmy approached the boot. Inside the open box was a motionless heap of feathers, a beautiful still life of milk-coffee brown. Wailing noises fell from Jimmy’s mouth. Then Dad suddenly had him by the arm, shaking him. The man at the farmhouse door was watching with his hands in his pockets.

“Cut it out,” Dad hissed. “Look, Jimmy, things just happen sometimes, things you don’t plan for.”

Jimmy’s breath hitched. “What are we going to tell Mum?”

Dad let him go. “We’ll tell her the ducklings are happy and we saw them swimming in the dam. Okay, mate? Okay?”

After a moment, Dad swept Jimmy into a bear hug, whispering *I’m sorry* over and over, but it was too late. Jimmy was already crying so hard that he couldn’t stop, and the silence from the cardboard box kept stretching on and on.

Deborah Sheldon's short fiction has appeared in many literary journals such as Quadrant, Island, Cottonmouth, Page Seventeen, Crime Factory, and [untitled]. Her crime novella, 'Ronnie & Rita', was published by Dark Prints Press in April 2013. Other writing credits include television scripts (such as 'Neighbours', 'Australia's Most Wanted', 'State Coroner'), feature articles for national magazines, non-fiction books (Reed Books, Random House), stage and radio plays, and award-winning medical writing. Deb lives in Melbourne, Australia. Visit her at deborahsheldon.wordpress.com.

Springfield Summer

by Amanda Hamilton

It was 7.43 am when my ex-husband busted into my house and pointed a gun at my chest. I only know the time because I'd just checked the microwave to see how long I had before I needed to drop Pauline off at the daycare and haul my ass to Walmart for my shift at nine thirty.

Pauline had woken up feeling particularly spry and it was already a warm morning, so I let her play out back. Now I was going through the help wanted listing with a cup of black coffee and a Sharpie at my kitchen table. Walmart pays well enough, but I'm plain worn out by the job. I'm not picky; all I want is a job I'm able to work the same hours every day.

I know I heard the front door handle rattle and then turn, but somehow it didn't occur to me to be scared. I don't believe I even looked up from the table.

But almost the same time that the front door slammed shut, Daryl barreled into my kitchen like a crazy person, aiming a Smith and Wesson revolver at me. He was drunk, that much I could tell, because he had that fuzzy look about him. I'd been holding my "He is Risen!" coffee mug and when I saw him it slipped out of my hand. The mug dropped onto the linoleum and got my socks wet.

The coffee caught Daryl off guard for a second, but then he squeezed his hand tighter around the gun and shook it at me. Under the bare kitchen light bulb (I still haven't replaced that damn glass light cover that broke a couple months ago), the gun flashed silver and yellow, wild as a lightning storm as he waved the barrel around. "Don't you move, Millie. I swear to Jesus, I ain't jokin' here."

Now, here, I distinctly remember worrying over whether or not I'd broken my mug. It's not like I weren't scared, but that mug used to be my mama's and I have so few of her old things left as it is. I found out later the mug did break, but just the handle. I can still

use it, so long as I'm careful to let the coffee cool first.

“What're you doing here, Daryl?” I asked, somehow keeping my voice calm and low.

Instead of answering, Daryl stepped forward slowly, the linoleum-covered wood planks creaking under his boots. I showed Daryl my palms because it felt like the thing to do.

Even in as small a town as Springfield, I had only seen Daryl once since our divorce. It was at the Dillons, and I'd turned and walked down another aisle. Now that I was looking at him head on, it was clear the three years since our brief marriage had not been kind to him. He was fatter and looked like he hadn't shaved in probably a week. It's a little hard to remember, but it seemed he had a lot more hair on his head back then too.

Daryl pointed his free hand back towards my front door. “You're the last one, Millie. The last one. Y'all ruined my life.” This last word, he roared at me. His face turned an extra shade of red and little flecks of spit flung from his mouth.

“What're you on about, Daryl?”

Now he turned and started stepping back the other way. His dark eyes hovered around, sometimes returning my gaze, sometimes trailing off to other parts of my face and body. I wanted to pull my robe tighter, but I wasn't about to move. “You know what I'm talkin' about,” he slurred, “You ruined my life, you and all them other little tramps. Y'all ruined my life and now you gotta pay. Hear?”

If not for the gun in his hand, I might have told him that, the last I checked, the situation was the other way around. But I was at least smart enough to hold my tongue, if nothing else.

Instead, I said, “Daryl, this ain't you. You're stinkin' drunk. Just think for a second.”

He made a sound like a laugh but his mouth kept snarling. “You don't know me no more, woman. Who're you to say how I am and how I ain't?”

“Daryl, let’s talk about this.”

He snorted, then placed his other hand around the one holding the gun.

“Oh, Jesus,” I whispered, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Then, in what otherwise might have been my last moment on this earth, my cell phone rang. Looking back, I figure it was lucky that Daryl was so drunk because it made him less nervous. If he’d been cold sober, the phone ring could have made him jump right out of his skin, and he might have shot me anyway.

But instead, he blinked and looked at the cell phone lighting up and whirring from the vibration on the counter behind me. He watched, perfectly still, as the phone played its jazzy little melody once, then twice. It got halfway through its third run-through and then cut off, going silently to voicemail.

When the phone was still, it was like the air had been let out of a balloon. My ex-husband was pointing a gun at me. It was overblown, out of place, especially for Daryl and me. Our relationship had been bad, understand, but it had not been dramatic. It had never quite gotten out of first gear. Then I got knocked up and Daryl was out of the picture. No note, no call, no nothing. I moped around for a while, but then I bucked up and carried on. To me, that’s nothing to get all riled up over. Certainly not worth killing over.

It looked like Daryl could now see the situation for what it was, too. He still had both of his hands on the gun, but his face wasn’t angry anymore. He looked shaken, maybe even scared, like the phone’s ring had woken him out of a nightmare. He looked at me with his deep-set, basset hound eyes like he was pleading with me.

The swing outside creaked in the silence. Pauline. I’d nearly forgotten. Daryl heard her too and now he looked to the window. The yellow wool valance still hung there from when Daryl was around.

After a long while of him looking out the window, he finally croaked, “That our baby girl?”

“Yeah, Daryl.”

Even from the table, I could see that his bleary, drunken eyes were getting melty behind a glaze of tears. His lips were puckered like a baby about to throw a tantrum.

“Y’know, I ain’t got any other little ones,” he said, his voice swollen and muddy, “You’re the only one ever had a baby of mine.”

I kept quiet.

He snuffled noisily, wiped his mouth with the hand that still gripped the gun. “What’s her name again?”

“Pauline.”

Though it wasn’t as pronounced as it used to be, I could see his Adam’s Apple hiccup as he swallowed hard. The stubble on his neck glistened as he scratched at it with one of his pink hands. When he set the gun down on the table I felt my whole body go heavy.

For a while, Daryl leaned on one of my kitchen chairs with both hands, his eyes and mouth wide like a fish, just breathing and staring at the table. After a long wait, I was getting ready to suggest he leave my house, but then he moved to cover his face with one of his hands. For a second, he stayed there, completely still, looking like one of those pictures from the Great Depression meant to show dignified suffering.

His shoulders began to shake with silent sobs until I thought maybe he was laughing, then when his lungs were all given out, he made a huge, wet slurping of air. He wiped his face clumsily and when he said, “Oh God,” he held out the “God” in a long wail like a howling dog.

He collapsed in slow motion into the chair across from me. I realised we were sitting the way we’d always eaten meals and clipped coupons together. His face sank into his hands.

“Oh my God, Millie,” he moaned, his voice sounding soggy through his palms, “I

don't know what the hell I'm doing."

I watched him without a word. I wasn't about to comfort the man, though I suspect that's what he was somehow hoping for. I was thinking about my toes, which were wet and freezing cold by now from the spilled coffee.

Daryl wiped at his nose with his meaty hand, which came away covered in thick snot. I handed him a napkin and he bellowed into it without thanks. He tidied himself, then crumpled it under the table.

He looked up sheepishly. "I'm real sorry, Millie," he said, then catching himself, he gestured at the gun, "I mean, for that, but..." He sighed and flopped his head back on his shoulders to look at the ceiling. "For everything. God. I mean it, leaving you was about the dumbest thing I ever did." He looked up at me like I was his jury. "I swear, last night, I..." He blinked, and a few tears shook loose to fall into his lap. "I don't know what I was doin'. It was like, I started going, and it got easier and easier as I went along. I don't even know how many... I was outta my head. I just..." He rubbed his fluffy brown hair with one hand. "I messed it all up."

I kept my silence.

He looked at the window, toward my baby girl. "Could I meet her, Millie? Kills me I ain't ever met her before."

"Don't think that'd be a great idea, Daryl."

He didn't react to that hardly at all. It was like he knew what I was going to say, and maybe even agreed.

"I'm gonna have to call the cops."

He nodded, still gazing at the window with that same calm look on his face.

But just as I was going to my phone, there was a knock at the door. Well, less a knock and more a series of thumps.

“Millie? This is the police. Daryl in there?”

I looked at Daryl but he just looked at the window.

“Yeah,” I called.

“Daryl,” the voice yelled, “don’t you move, hear?” I recognised the voice as Whitey Cunning’s, one of Springfield’s younger officers. “We got the place surrounded. Tryin’ to run anywhere’d just be foolish.”

They began slamming against the door in rhythm and I realised they were trying to bust the front door down.

“Hey!” I hollered, “Hey! Hey!” They stopped. “Door’s open, y’all don’t have to go and break my house up!”

There was a pause, then a click when the knob turned and Whitey, along with five other officers, came in through my front and back doors. They were all carrying their handguns like the police on TV, all straight arms and stiff backs, something I’d never seen any of them do. I guess it stands to reason they’d be trained to do that, but seeing it actually happen, and in my own home, was something else.

Daryl was about the quietest I’d ever seen him as they cuffed him and read him his rights. The procession then headed towards my front door. As they went, my Pauline came in through the back door with Bobby Wright, another officer. Bobby was the son of my friend Georgina Wright and he had even babysat Pauline once or twice. He was a nice boy.

He led her to me by the hand with an embarrassed smile. I picked her up and kissed her, and she hid her face in my neck. “You okay, Ms. Fischer?” he asked as we started toward the front porch.

“I’m fine, Bobby, thanks for askin’.”

He watched me with careful eyes. “You don’t know what happened yet, do you?”

I shook my head. I felt dizzy and hollow, and just wanted to sit for a while. We stepped out onto the porch. Daryl was getting loaded into one of the three cruisers stalled behind Daryl’s rusty pickup. Behind the other automobiles, an ambulance blinked its lights patiently.

Bobby was frowning at Pauline. “Maybe she shouldn’t hear...”

So I sent Pauline back out to play. I sat with Bobby on my padded wicker chairs and he told me what all Daryl had been up to that morning.

“I’m glad you’re okay... You’re lucky, you know. He was hell bent on killin’ every last one of his past girls. We got the first 911 call at about 4 am, from Trudy Baker’s neighbour, but by then he’d already been gone for a while.” He waited for my reaction but I was watching Daryl. Behind the caged window, he stared solemnly at the seat ahead of him.

“Well,” Bobby continued, taking off his hat and running his fingers over his carrot-cake hair, “I won’t know the exact count ‘til tomorrow at the earliest, but I know he got at least two girls.”

I looked at him and he did a thing with his mouth that I guess was meant to seem mournful. The cruiser was pulling away and I couldn’t see Daryl anymore.

“Got them,” I said. “You mean he killed them.”

Bobby nodded slowly. “I know he shot at least one other girl, too, but she’s in the hospital and she’ll be alright. Everyone is out checking on his exes right now. We tried to call and warn you we was headed over as soon as we knew it was Daryl, but...”

I realised that must have been who made that earlier call, the one that may well have saved my life. I thanked Bobby and told him to say hi to his mama and he said that his mama would no doubt be over to check on me before long. I agreed with as much of a

smile as I could manage.

After several hours of questioning down at the station I was finally allowed to go home. I took Pauline out for ice cream when I picked her up from daycare.

That night, I sat back on my wicker chair, sipping iced tea and watching bats diving and dipping under the streetlights. Though it was a warm, dry night, I was the only person on her porch—I'll admit I appreciated the privacy. Pauline scampered around the front yard chasing moths because it wasn't dark enough yet for fireflies. It was the kind of evening sky that makes you understand how ancient people might've come up with blood sacrifice.

My mind flipped through old memories about Daryl that I thought I'd forgotten. Like the time that poor bird smacked itself into our picture window. I'd run outside and Daryl had followed and we'd stood over it in stupid silence as the little thing gaped up at us. Its chest heaved in jolting, uneven bursts, like its clockwork was broken.

It was one of the few times Daryl went along with something I had gotten riled up over. I'd started fussing over the bird, worrying that if we left her there, she'd surely get eaten up. So I gathered her in my hands and Daryl and I tramped through the forest behind the house, down to the old tree house we'd found the first time we went exploring through those trees. Of course that slice of forest is now a fancy new neighborhood. All the streets are named after different types of flowers.

I climbed up there and was about to set the bird down on the old plank floor, but thought that since she was still alive, she might want one last view over the treetops.

I held her body up to the open-air window. She lay still as a stone. Then she shifted some. Then nothing. I thought maybe she'd passed away, but right when I was about to leave her among the snapped twigs littering the floor, her round head perked up and she looked out the window.

She stared out over the treetops and cocked her head, making a million microscopic feathers stand out from her neck. Then she took off with a soft flutter.

I whooped and hollered for a while, with Daryl all the time yelling at me, “What’re you goin’ on about, girl?” When I ambled down and told him what happened, he grinned, and hugged me back when I threw my arms around his neck and spun me around in a circle so the tips of my shoes brushed the dried leaves.

I remember the event convinced me I should stick things out a while longer with Daryl. We were seven months married and I’d just started to hear the gossip of him sleeping around on me. But when I saw that little bird sit back up and fly off after nearly dying, it made me think maybe Daryl and I could do the same.

There were a hundred moments over the course of our marriage just like that where I knew for sure that the two of us could really make it together. Guess that’s what happens when you try to find meaning where there’s just none to be found.

Pauline clambered onto the porch to show me the squashed remains of a moth in her wrinkled hands. I laughed and called her a cretin. Smiling, she wiped her hands on her dress.

She sat next to me on the floorboards and was quiet for a spell. Then she looked up at me with her daddy’s deep-set eyes. “Mama, who was that man today?”

“That was your daddy,” I said, because I believe in being honest with my child.

“Is he a bad man?”

I looked down at her and thought about it for a second. “Yes, I guess he is.”

She didn’t say anything more.

I sat back in my chair and looked out over my quiet little neighborhood. Tomorrow I’d be swarmed with questions and gossip over the day’s events. But tonight everyone had enough respect and good sense to let me alone. Guess they figured I’d gone through plenty for one day.

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Eating

by Roxanne Groebel

“I’m a freak. You know, I’m odd in this glamorous, umm brash way. It doesn’t always, like, make me happy, but I have to hang on to it. It’s like all I’ve got. It doesn’t make me happy everyday but it makes me feel like me. And that’s how I want to feel all the time. It’s better to be...ahh...sad sometimes than to be a liar.”

She stared at him over her fishbowl sized wine glass and took a big gulp of whatever Sav Blanc he’d ordered for her. She couldn’t really tell if it was cheap piss or a mid-priced wine—the kind her parents had at family dinners, when they felt like splurging. By this time—four glasses in—she didn’t care.

He took a sip of his imported beer and looked at her, smiled politely and chuckled, not knowing how to respond to her wild disregard for insincerity. Her complete honesty always shocked him. She would pour her guts out and he could never become accustomed to it. However, it was better than talking about himself; that’s why he liked being around her. He hated talking about himself because everything in his life seemed like a sham, a tawdry little suburban existence that he had gotten himself into and couldn’t escape from.

They probably shouldn’t have taken this long for lunch, and he could tell she was well on her way to being drunk. Luckily, it was a Friday and the possibility of anyone else noticing was slight. Magazine offices on Friday afternoons were usually deserted or filled with employees who were too busy attempting to hide their blatant alcoholism to notice an inappropriately long lunch between a young woman and an older male colleague.

“So, do you like the wine? Food was ok?”

“Oh...yeah, great. The food here is so ummm fresh and really...they present...the presentation is so cool. Thank you, by the way.”

“No problem. I wanted to take you for like a treat since I know you’ve been having a bad week.”

“Yeah, I mean it’s just this week. Work is so busy and then the whole crying thing. They think I’m unstable. I think I’d be more suited to one of the fashion publications or that shitty gossip rag...you know, the one on level six? I think I’d...like I think they would know how to deal with me.”

“Yeah, I get that, I get where you’re coming from. I never thought my ‘career’ would mostly involve photo-shopping fucking plastic surgery before and afters...”

She laughed and recrossed her legs. She tried to imagine what he was like in bed, how his cock would feel grinding up against her thigh in the night. She lightly trailed a fingernail across her bottom lip, a nervous habit.

He looked at her as she looked down into her wine. She had just touched her lip. He loved it when she did that. His eyes focused on the small mole that sat on her right cheek. He thought about licking it.

“Fuck, I need a cigarette.”

She reached into her tote bag and rustled around until she pulled out a crumpled Pall Mall pack. He put on his sunglasses even though they were seated inside.

Roxanne Groebel is a writer from Sydney. After studying journalism at University, she decided to get herself some copywriting work—a girl has to pay her bills somehow. She has written for Samesame, Channel V, MasterMousePatrol, and lipmag and has held internships at everywhere from lad’s magazines to foodie blogs; although, she’s her most creative when writing autofiction for her erotic blog smartandfilthy.blogspot.com.au. Roxanne believes no matter how messy, sweaty or complex human beings are, there is always an unexpected beauty to found among us.

Survivor

by Karen Vegar

The bomb detonated in downtown Manhattan, two blocks from the New York Stock Exchange.

David switched on ABC radio for the 10 pm news and heard the American correspondent struggling to speak, as if he were standing in a hurricane. *It was delivered in a car that rammed into the glass frontage of the building. The financial district has been shut down in scenes of panic and chaos. Unofficially they are calling it a radiological dispersion bomb, otherwise known as a dirty bomb.*

“When did this happen?”

“I heard the first reports at the airport waiting for you,” Sam said, as his four-wheel drive juddered over a crater in the dirt road. A sharp bend shifted the radio frequency; urgent east coast American tones disappeared in a hiss. Orange stars shone through the black intensity of rainforest.

David jangled the dial trying to retrieve ABC radio. “What’s wrong with your reception?”

“It’s the start of world war three,” his brother said, stopping the car. Mango and umbrella trees camouflaged the house. Electricity lines were slung to the roof like vines and a ghostly satellite dish crowned the roof.

“Fuck,” David said, giving up on the radio. The high hum of crickets, reek-reek of frogs and pulse of insects drowned the world. The heat was like a sodden blanket and it fogged his glasses. There was no reception on his smartphone. “Can I use your internet?”

“It comes and goes like the radio reception around here.”

Sam’s house smelt dry like the inside of a cave. An old cathode television dominated

one corner of the living room atop an altar of DVD and VCR players.

“Incoming!” Sam shouted and David just managed to catch the XXXX beer missile.

The beer tasted of motor oil coated bitterness; Christ he didn’t miss this shit south of the border.

David chugged the salty beer as he struggled with an ancient, silver Martian aerial. The screen’s snowstorm resolved into a grim-faced reporter rugged up outside the White House.

“CCTV footage shows one of the suspects emerging from the Wall Street subway station, waiting his fatal ride. He was carrying a sports bag that authorities also believe contained a smaller bomb—”

There is footage of a man, wearing a dark pullover and jeans, climbing into the Chrysler. His bearded face beneath the baseball cap is an almond blur.

“A towel-head. Camel fuckers.” Sam was tanned a dark nut shade, his stubble flecked red. “I bet he’s an Afghan.”

“How would you know?” David crouched closer to the television. Cameras were focused on the presidential rostrum, flanked by stars and stripes flags. Maybe it was not in the White House; maybe the president was in his bunker already and they were waiting for an actor to appear. The image suddenly collapsed into a fuzz of pixels. “For fuck’s sake! Do you live in a telecommunications black hole? Anna is in Washington on a business trip and I know plenty of people who work and live in downtown Manhattan. This is not some joke.”

Sam shed his cap, and curly hair spilled to the base of his neck. “It’s the end of days, except a Hebrew God won’t appear in the final act. Say goodbye to all this.” He snapped his fingers.

“This is not the end of days. Where’s your toilet?”

The toilet shared the bathroom with fishing rods and equipment. David was tugging down his boxers when the toilet bowl croaked. He flinched. It croaked again—a gurgling, animal eruption—and he spotted the green tree frog under the toilet seat rim.

“You’ll have to move, mate.” David tried to peel the green tree frog from its position. The ice-block sized frog dripped grease. It was a long time since he had seen one, so common around their parents’ house. He moved it to the windowsill as its white belly melted onto his fingers. “You’ve got to go!”

The frog stretched an elongated front leg, than another, and levered its body onto wood.

His piss stank of beer. Anxiety was pounding his body’s pathways with adrenalin. When he wiped his face using his shirt, he saw that his chest was rash red from heat. Fat bulged over his hips.

David stumbled back to the living room.

His brother stood in the kitchen, pushing marbled slabs across a frying pan. The air smelt of meat, frying onion, spuds and garlic. An unseen music player pumped country rock of frenetic guitar.

“I got to eat lots of steak for the end of the world,” Sam said.

“I’m calling Anna. Will it get through?”

Sam shrugged.

“How do you put up with this?”

“I don’t have the same reliance as you on the satellites.”

Bullshit. Tiny brown insects battered the light bulb above the verandah. David waded into the night humidity. A pair of black rhinoceros beetles clattered at his feet. He stepped over them as he called her, almost groggy from the heat.

“Hello?” she said, as if she didn’t know who was calling.

“It’s me. Where are you?”

“I’m in my hotel room watching television with a colleague. I’m flicking between ABC, CNN, even Fox, I wish I could get BBC—it’s beyond horrible.” She drew a deep breath as if she were about to plunge into the ocean. “I remember watching TV on September 11 when they started beaming pictures of the first tower in flames, with no idea what was happening, but this is worse.”

“Who are you with?”

“Just an American colleague.” Her tone was clipped. “Another lawyer.”

Right. “You’re definitely not flying up to New York tomorrow, are you?”

“Of course not! Everything is shutting down, like it’s—the start of a war.”

A burst of country rock sent him off the verandah and into the shadow kingdom. He muffled the hearing of one ear with his hand. Even the edge of the rainforest was so loud. “I keep thinking of Damien and his family,” David said, imagining the radiation sweeping northward through Tribeca, Soho, Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Unpicking the chains of DNA, mutating strands, distending them. Turning cells inside out.

When the cells incinerated, would people just fold or slump where they stood or sat? More than a million and a half people lived in Manhattan. He had lived there for five years.

“I’m at Sam’s place, it’s a telecommunications black hole. I’m glad I got you—are you there?”

“I can barely hear you.” She was talking from the bottom of a hole. “Sam—”

“Sorry I can’t hear you.” Leaf litter crunched beneath his sneakers. His toes felt glued to the top of his shoes through sweat. “What did you say?”

“David?” she said, her voice thinner.

“Who do they say is responsible?”

“Middle Eastern terrorists, some successor to Al-Qaeda. They would say that, wouldn’t they? Fox is talking about a projected death toll in the thousands but that may be conservative, they say the dirty bomb was a big one. It was nearly truck sized.” She fell silent and he smelt the cinders of their argument in her silence.

“Anna, are you there?”

“David, ” she began, as the connection wavered again. “They talk about a war.”

“You’re starting to sound like...” He stopped himself. She didn’t like Sam. The silence between her and his brother would grow thick, then Sam usually pricked it with a sarcastic and inappropriate remark. You’re very different from your brother, she said. Thank God. “Sam thinks this is a cross between the start of world war three and an end of the world barbecue, Mayan-style. When can you fly out?”

Fractured laughter. “Planes are grounded in the capital. It’s bedlam! I think—”

“Anna? Anna?” He had lost precious reception again. “Shit!” Soft black smudges settled on his bare arm, raising white striped masts. Sam slapped the mosquitoes and ran towards the shining windows of the house as if he were being chased.

His brother was still in the kitchen.

“Do you have any beer to drink other than XXXX?”

“You mean foreign shit like Asahi or German wheat beer?” Sam turned over more frying spuds.

“XXXX is crap. What do you have?”

“Only XXXX, mate.” Sam rolled a beer can.

The beer seemed to burn in his mouth, but David forced it down.

The kitchen divider was strewn with gun and hunting magazines. Young men wearing camouflage paint, khaki and body armor cradled or brandished semi-automatic weapons in scrub. As Sam scraped onion from the pan, David noticed a photograph of a young woman with creamy brown skin, the slanted eyes of eastern Asia and black hair curling around her throat.

“Who’s this?” He lifted the picture as he lifted the XXXX beer to his lips.

“Lily, my girlfriend.”

“She’s very pretty.” There was light dappled forest behind her. Shiny green leaves of jungle. “Is she Thai?”

“Bang,” Sam said.

“Is she Thai-Thai?”

“She lives in Thailand if that’s what you mean. Bangkok.”

“Where did you meet her?” David asked, remembering that Sam flew regularly to Thailand.

“In a sex den in Pattaya beach. I’m kidding, except I’m serious.”

“So Lily can’t be her real name.” She probably had one of those ten syllable Thai names he couldn’t hope to pronounce correctly. “Sounds like a courtesan’s name.”

“Careful. She’s no mail order girlfriend or prostitute.” There was a knife glint to Sam’s grin.

“Why is she in Thailand if tonight is the end of the world and you foresaw this happening?”

“You love to mock me, don’t you?” Sam said, face clouding. “Lily is with her family

because her mother is very unwell.” Sam tipped the last of the spuds onto a plate. “Do you want a tour of the new house?”

“You built all of this with your own hands?”

“And some help.” Sam opened a pantry in the hallway revealing rows of neatly stacked cans: baked beans, tinned corn, corned meat and beetroot. Packets of flour, sugar and rice were squeezed among the cans. “Food supplies for the coming months.”

“You’ll need more than a pantry.”

“I have a shelter-safe room in the backyard stacked with water bottles, dry and tinned food. I have boxes of seeds, pesticides and herbicides. At any one time there’s two days of food only on the supermarket shelves. When disaster strikes people clean the shelves like locusts. Think of Fukushima and Hurricane Katrina—and those were small.”

Sam unlocked another door and flicked a light over boxes and chests of drawers. “I have spare batteries, torches, parts for the car, petrol, two electricity generators. There’s more out the backyard in my safe room.”

“You’re a survivalist.” David hesitated, as if repelled by an energy field. This room was evidence of Sam’s madness.

“Of course you insult me.” Sam blinked. “You always pour shit on me.”

“I’m not trying to insult you. If this is the start of the apocalypse, do you really think having supplies for extra weeks or even months is going to protect you?”

“It’s better than nothing, which is the position of ninety-eight percent of the population. It’s the position of people like you.”

“You’re just over an hour from Cairns by car. This might be rainforest but it’s not the Iron Ranges up in the middle of the Cape. There’s a sealed road not far from your house. You think you’ll be left alone if the world implodes?”

“Yeah it will be like a hominid version of a zombie film, but I’ve got plenty of weaponry in ammunition and I know how to handle them.” Sam smiled.

“You’re going to be shooting people?”

“I’ve been trained to do that. I believe in bad guys.”

They had argued when Sam joined the Army. He thought it was patriotic crap and a big con job.

I’m going to learn new skills! Sam had insisted.

The whole point of the job is to kill people and risk being killed. I wouldn’t want to be cannon fodder, no thanks. You’ll just be carrying out the aims of the powers that be, men and women who would never put themselves in harm’s way.

I have no interest in riding a train to work with people unhappy as prisoners, sitting in an office box like you do twelve hours a day and on the weekend, Sam retorted. *No thanks.*

You’ll be a useful idiot.

Sam watched him with a tilted head like a wary animal.

“How is this going to protect you if there really is a nuclear war?”

“No-one’s going to nuke far north Queensland, not like Sydney. When the electro magnetic pulse fries the world’s cyber infrastructure, I’ll be in a much better position than you in your waterfront Sydney suburb.”

“Fuck you,” David said. The heaviness in his blood was becoming thick, liquid anger. His brother was still smiling like an assassin. “You’re a paranoid survivalist. Next you’ll be ranting about one world government and lizards.”

“You sound terrified.”

“You’ve been like this ever since we watched that Nostradamus documentary when we were kids. Then you believed the world would end in 1988.”

“I never watched any Nostradamus documentary with you,” Sam said. “I didn’t believe the world would end in 1988.”

“I remember staying up for it with you, pretending to go to sleep so we could fool the parents and watch it.”

“Didn’t happen.”

“I remember clearly.” David dunked the last of the beer.

“You think you did, but human memory isn’t accurate. We rip out pages of our memory book and burn those pages as fuel for foresight. We cannibalise our memories to plan for the future and in doing so, alter and delete them. That’s why eyewitness evidence at trials is so unreliable; you should know that as a lawyer.”

“That’s not the scientific consensus,” David said, although he had read that the mind re-knitted its memories. But he remembered sitting in the living room mesmerised by the horror of Nostradamus’ predictions unfolding upon the small television of their childhood. Oncoming war: cities in flames, famine and starvation. Cannibalisation. The lurid medieval paintings of a creature part man, part devil, belly pressed against the red earth and gnawing on bones. He could not cleanse the images from his head for weeks while his younger brother had nightmares. “You were convinced for years that the end of civilization was imminent.”

Sam was shaking his head.

“You’ve always believed this. You’ve been looking forward to it, which is sick.” The words burbled from his mouth.

“The deadly future is right now,” Sam said, calm and confident as an Old Testament prophet. “The edge of the Tablelands isn’t like living in the middle of Cape York, I’ll

have to defend myself. The zombie films got it almost right.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Disease isn’t going to transform men and women into lumbering, drooling corpses, fear and deprivation and starvation will accomplish that. That will turn the population into zombies.”

“Sorry, I can’t listen to this anymore. I’m going outside to call Anna or someone else so I can find out whether lower Manhattan is irradiated and whether the Americans have nuked Iran.” He stomped away from his brother through humidity like water. “You should install some overhead fans.”

Darkness was deafeningly loud. Twenty years ago he lived an hour and a half drive down the mountains on hot tropical coast. Once he was used to the humidity, but now he had adjusted to cooler climes.

Mozzies billowed around his face as he called Anna’s number. No reception. He tried the number of a friend in Sydney, then another friend. Signals were not reaching the destination.

“Fucking hell.”

Behind him the fly screen door clanged and the door clicked. When the light switched off he was saturated by darkness.

“Hey!” David shouted. He could open the fly screen but when he wrenched the front doorknob, it wouldn’t budge. The music blared louder. Beer seized his face in its hot palms and jingled his head.

“Sam!” He hammered the door. “You’ve locked me out! Sam!” Curtains were drawn across windows bordering the verandah. David noticed crude bars on the windows for the first time. It was crazy on a house surrounded by rainforest in far north Queensland, not an inner city suburb. Whom was he seeking protection from? Kuranda ferals?

Marijuana growers?

Keep out the human zombies.

There would be at least one back door.

David skirted the house, keeping it at bay with one hand. He had to be careful about redback spiders and snakes in the darkness. The back door was a pale rectangle barred by a security door. This was insane, he thought, and of course the security door was locked. He rattled it as loud as he could.

“Sam!” he shouted.

Reception on his smartphone, which emitted an unearthly blue light, was stillborn.

Light glowed through the barred kitchen window. He couldn't see Sam. David tapped. “I'm stuck out here! Hello!” He rapped harder.

Sam has locked you out.

David stepped to his left and his foot plunged through leaves and space. He wrenched his foot out, hissing, and his legs crumpled so that he pitched forward, dropping his phone. The night swarmed, manic, the sky blazed just above the roof and canopy. He tried to rise. A force stronger than gravity pulled him back to the earth.

Where was the phone?

He couldn't see its light.

It's the beer and the heat, he thought, succumbing. The ground was surprisingly cool under his body except it was so loud, all the crickets, frogs and toads singing and creaking.

A white light scratched a path through the incandescence of stars; a comet.

No, it was a satellite tumbling through the stratosphere. It was falling so quickly.

Sam is right.

David was struggling to comprehend it when all the lights went out.

Karen Vegar grew up in Cairns and has lived along the Australian east coast, as well as in New York City. She has published articles about martial arts and fitness, the law and travel. When not writing, she enjoys drinking vodka, reading Russian literature and eating pickles.

All That Glitters

Non-fiction by Marnie Hirst

She was grubby and dishevelled, sitting there on the ground, dirty blonde hair roughly pulled back in a ponytail, face all grimy with sweat. We were all grimy with sweat. Air conditioning at Denpasar airport is an intermittent thing at the best of times; at 12.30 am, a mere fantasy. There were two reasons I eventually sat down. Firstly, she was clutching a Garuda ticket the same as mine—the red-eye special from Tokyo to Sydney. Economy, lax on legroom, light on refreshments, only purchased by those unable or unwilling to afford the more salubrious delights of Qantas. The second thing was the ring she was wearing. I noticed it immediately, because it sparkled on her dirty hand, flashing as she pushed an errant piece of hair from her face. It was a little fish, oriental and intricate, with a beautiful curving tail that wrapped around her finger. The eyes held the sparkle, and I thought they were perhaps rubies, deeply red and gorgeous. It was an amazing ring; I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was incongruous, flashing there on the hand of this girl, cross-legged on the littered floor of a stinking-hot airport in Bali. I sat down next to her.

I noticed a sticker on her hand luggage: 'Everything's Better In Dubbo'. I hid a smile and looked at her more closely. Dubbo is the quintessential NSW country town, home to a great zoo, a gaol, and not a hell of a lot else. It's a lovely place, uncomplicated and honest, and a long way out west from the big smoke of Sydney—further still from the teeming masses of Tokyo. The sticker was tatty; I asked its owner if she came from there. She pushed back her hair again and turned her head slowly, not meeting my eyes as she replied yes, she did. "Originally...I mean...yes; not now...I'm in Tokyo now, been living, working, there for a while—but it's not my home...Dubbo is my...is where I...I'm from there." I watched her closely as she stuttered out this sentence; I couldn't help it. It was the strangest delivery, accompanied by little intakes of breath, as if she was holding something back, yet needed to ground herself with her words, this declaration of Dubbo as her home town. She twisted the ring a little as her words fell between us. I wasn't sure what to say; she was obviously uncomfortable. There was a tangible despondency drifting

around her, and I felt it descend on me a little. I wondered what her story was. Airports do that. We both had two hours to wait for our rescue flight out of that rank humidity, so I introduced myself, offered her a mint, and asked what a Dubbo girl was doing in Tokyo. She accepted the mint and, still not quite meeting my eyes, began talking. I was unprepared for what followed. It was the most revelatory and serendipitous two hours I'd spent in the company of a stranger.

She'd answered an ad in her local paper, she told me, in her fervent desire to leave the confines of her simple country town. I could tell from her vocabulary that her appearance belied a sharp mind. She talked slowly and deliberately—something not uncommon in those of us living in Japan who had been speaking the native language for a while. As she spoke, she was increasingly articulate; I suspected she was revelling in speaking English again. She was an intelligent girl. She'd finished uni, was now a qualified teacher, but ached to “get out” and travel. I told her I'd done the same, only my journey started before a degree. I understood the desperation—not borne of a bad home life, but an intense belief that life was out there waiting to be *lived*. I bolted through those departure gates that first time, waving to my teary parents and friends, dry-eyed and excited as hell. Travel calls some of us, a siren song that we can't dispel. Her siren song sang her to Tokyo.

The usual assumption would be that she applied for work as an English teacher. I looked at her, slumped, soaking in despair, watching her twist her ring again as she chewed on the mint and knew that wasn't it. It was 90s Japan. She'd answered an ad for a hostess. “At a big bar in Tokyo, working with a team of ten girls who shared accommodation; it sounded so exciting”—furtive glance up—“I couldn't wait”. I sighed. Tokyo: that Oriental oxymoron of steel and flesh, fresh and tainted, adorable and deplorable. I loved the city passionately, but hated certain aspects with equal fervour. What was good was so very good; what was bad stunk like rotting sushi. I was a singer by profession; I'd started in Hokkaido on a six month contract and then moved to Tokyo on my own. I was in my fifth year and still as wide-eyed about that amazing city as the day I'd first laid eyes on her. However, I'd seen some dubious things too and come to know a little of that famous Japanese underbelly so carefully hidden away from wide

gaijin eyes by then...I shuddered for her.

I asked if she'd known about hostess work when she answered the ad. Such a common thing in Japan; women could typically make over eighty dollars an hour in a standard Tokyo bar as a hostess. The work involved waiting on the male clientele hand and foot, escorting them into the bar, sitting with them while they drank, pouring their drinks, getting their food, handing them serviettes, laughing at their jokes, dodging their drunken swipes. It could be social and fun apparently; the fun was in the female camaraderie. I'd known many hostesses who made a killing doing this type of work. Many had worked for a year, survived, and gone home with a more-than-healthy deposit for a house, and a less-than-healthy respect for drunken Japanese men. The typical customer is the married salary man, who, having put in a robotic and stressful day at the office, unwinds by stopping in at his favourite bar on the way home, to have one or six whiskies with his colleagues, in the company of beautiful—usually foreign—women, get pleasantly and fairly innocuously drunk before rolling home to his dutiful wife who is waiting with the evening meal. The wife knows about the hostess bars; it is as intrinsic to Japanese society as a steaming bowl of *ramen* before the final train home. Whether she likes them or not is seemingly inconsequential to both the presence of these bars and her husband's preference for them.

So, my companion had left the suburban streets of Dubbo and hit the hostess highs of Tokyo. I was intrigued. She told me her parents were initially wary, but she'd reassured them with the fact that she was part of a team which included other Australian and British girls, had accommodation, the money was very good, and she was going to start off as a 'waitress' while looking for work as an English teacher. They, bless them, were either reassured enough by the euphemism to let her go, or unable to prevent it. Knowing my own wanderlust, I assumed the latter. They had no idea. And how could they? There are many people who have no clue that this type of life exists, until it confronts them and they are either seduced, or repulsed. Or confused. Therein lies the danger. Watching this downcast young woman twist that glittering ring, I suspected her seduction was intense and short-lived.

“I loved it at first. It was so...glamorous for a girl like me. I didn’t have enough dressy clothes, so our Mama-san took me shopping with some of the girls, and we bought some gorgeous things. She said I would pay them off before I knew it. I was earning more money than I knew what to do with. They paid us weekly, and because we ate nightly at the club, and slept most of the day, our expenses were pretty low. Our apartments were very nice too, next to a typical Japanese park, with carp in the pond, families on Sundays riding their bikes, I’d go there to read and write letters back home. It was amazing. At first...” She paused and twisted her ring as watched her. For the first time she turned her head and looked fully into my eyes. Oh, those eyes. Big, blue-grey, fringed with dark lashes, stunning even in that harsh airport light. They would have knocked those Japanese men off their feet. “Have you been in a hostess bar?” I had. I’d been with Japanese friends, on nights out. I had avoided working in any though, turning down many gigs in exclusive hostess bars, as my impression was I wouldn’t end up with much respect if I’d taken them. My respect for drunken men was already minimal. I saw what they were like with a few too many whiskies in them. Innocuous for the most part, but also ridiculous—they irritated me. I wouldn’t put up with drunken behaviour as a singer; I certainly wouldn’t condone it socially in a bar either. But having to watch other women doing this type of work, well, that was something I chose not to witness very often. Yes, I’d seen camaraderie amongst the girls, and knew girls who got through it with laughter and strong friendships—the money helps a lot—but I’d also seen glimpses of shame. As I was about to hear, this girl had seen more than a glimpse.

“The whole point was to get a client to like you so much that they requested you whenever they came in. They’d come in, get their reserved bottle of whisky over to the table, and you’d spend the whole night with them as they ate, drank, and spent more. If they liked you, they would spend up big and tip a huge amount, and Mama-san always let us keep our tips.” She looked at me and said frankly, “That was the incentive, of course. Money. For a girl like me, well, for all of us really, it was intoxicating. There was soooo much money.” I knew it; I regularly received tips from audience members at bars and clubs who, appreciative of my voice or songs, would come up and hand me a ¥10 000 note, bowing politely until I took it. I can only imagine the largesse that an attractive foreign hostess would inspire. Japanese are very generous people; the cultural aspect of

their generosity would undoubtedly blur the boundaries a little in these bars. Pretty hostess? Lots of money. Giggling, flirting, attentive pretty hostess? A rhetorical question. I wondered how *any* resisted the tidal pull of those rivers of flowing cash.

“Well, you don’t, not really. It is part of the job—it’s fantastic too, because it’s expensive living there. I was good at hostess work, and they tipped me a lot. I had quite a few regular clients, they’d come in on different nights; we were expected to organise it that way. We were told to suggest the next time they came in, and we had little diaries for it”. She shifted position a little and stopped speaking. Customers. *Clients*. It was strange, her shift to ‘client’. She worked her ring as I asked how business-like it was. Not simply men drinking in a club anymore, but scheduled appointments, clientele, directives from Mama-san on how to leverage this business of social drinking into a more lucrative affair. She frowned a little and agreed with me. “Yes, it is...a business. A very serious business...and I didn’t...I had no idea...” The halting sentences were back. She got a little fidgety and abruptly stood up. “I need a drink. Want one?” and without waiting for my answer, she took off.

I sat there, anticipating and dreading the resumption of her story. I knew where we were heading now. The beast was rolling over a little, and I could see it’s underbelly. I sighed at the absurdity of this story coming from *this* particular girl, a primary school teacher from *Dubbo*. The thought of her dressed up, glittering, laughing, pouring drinks for her regular clients in her bar was as incongruous as that ring on her finger. I wondered which man had given it to her. And how much it cost her to wear it.

She returned with two tepid San Miguels and handed me one as she settled back down on the floor. “I need this, if I’m going to tell you what happened next.” Long sip. I needed it too. Her story was undoubtedly a common one, but rendered no less poignant by that fact.

“Mama-san told me one night that one of my regulars, Tanaka-san, wanted to take me out for dinner before his usual drinking session at the bar. I quite liked him; he was a little older and not as gropey as some of the others. He seemed kind to me. I knew some of the girls already did the dinner thing regularly and kind of wondered why I hadn’t been asked

to do that yet. So I didn't mind, you know? Mama-san said we'd go to a nice restaurant, then we'd come back to the bar to drink. Tanaka-san would take me to dinner every Wednesday night, at first. He was fine, and I usually had a good time. Then it became Friday nights as well. Always nice places, and by then, my tips had tripled. I mean, I was making big money." She shook her head and looked at me. "The club was so happy. Popular girls mean big business, you know how it goes." I knew, and wished I didn't. "Gifts started arriving at our apartment: televisions, walkmans, expensive clothes, some jewellery. I was embarrassed, but the other girls all showed me their gifts too and said it was the Japanese way. Tanaka-san would shyly ask me if I liked them, and I'd thank him and tell him he must stop. It became a joke between us. He didn't stop, though."

She looked down at her ring. I told her it was beautiful. She said, "I admired this one night as we returned to the bar. It was in a store window in Ginza. Next day, a courier arrived with it for me. I was thrilled—but a man giving me a ring...well, it meant something. I didn't know so much then..." She laughed a little, swigged her beer. "Then! Ha. It seems like years ago, you know? Which is crazy...it was only six months ago." Wow. Fresh. I waited, giving her some space, because this confession was taking a visible toll. She was perspiring a little more, and fidgeting.

"Mama-san saw the ring the next night and took me aside for a little talk. She told me I had to show my appreciation, as it was a big gesture from Tanaka-san. He was an extremely important client and I should feel honoured. She said *they* were honoured that one of their hostesses had made such an impression on a man like him." Oh, well played, Mama-san. I asked about the "appreciation". I told her she didn't have to tell me anymore, if it made her uncomfortable. I could guess the next part. There were many different levels of hostess work; the euphemism inadequate to convey the seedier side of the business.

"You live there," she answered, sounding suddenly older, "you've seen these places. None of the other girls ever let on that our hostess bar offered more...services," and she laughed again, coldly, "than some of the others. I was so...stupid...about all that. There's this whole other level." She looked a little defiantly into my eyes and continued, "I am very good at it. I have an apartment full of gifts, I go to the most expensive clubs and

restaurants—I even get taken to *sumo* matches as his guest. He has never been unkind...” Here, her voice faltered. Her switch into present tense was unnerving. This was still happening; her discomfit was palpable. I wanted to grab her grubby hand for the next part, but held back. “All those...things...the money...mean nothing to me now.” Big gulp of beer. “But my...appreciation...was shown by letting him sleep with me, of course”. Of course.

We sat in silence, her eyes moist as I asked if Mama-san coerced her into this with emotional blackmail about honour and business? “Yes—and no.” This was spoken so quietly. She said she knew exactly what was being asked of her. The other girls were already sleeping with their regular clients, and they gathered around her emotionally, as did Mama-san, ironically protective of their newest “little prostitute”. *Her* sardonic words. She said she was made to feel lucky that Tanaka-san was such a gentleman, a distinguished man, and the fact that she liked him somewhat as a human being helped her make the transition more readily. The first night was awkward, but his attitude was one of complete understanding that this beautiful Australian hostess was simply providing the next level of service. It was a business arrangement, bought with an expensive and beautiful ring, and the even more precious and fragile self-esteem of a young country girl.

I felt so angry for her. I wanted to strangle Mama-san. *She was too green*. Her refusal to blame anyone but herself impressed me. I asked some questions. “I sleep with him usually once a week, on the same night. It’s arranged by the bar. It’s safe...it’s not... too awful.” She fiddled with the ring again as she struggled with her story. Very quietly: “I just don’t know how I’ve let it get this far, or what I’m still doing there. I’m not like the other girls. They seem so...happy.” This girl was not in the least bit happy. “They send a lot of money home and joke around about it all. Some have two or three regulars and play them off to see who can get the most outrageous gift. We only have to work on the nights our regulars want to see us, because we are reserved for them, you know? They wouldn’t like to have other men competing for us too.” She looked up at me. “The other girls *like* being hostesses”. But not you, hon? Her beautiful, sad eyes never left mine as she slowly shook her head. A big tear spilled over; she didn’t move to brush it away, my own mute anguish reflected as it tracked down her lovely face. I couldn’t help it. I grabbed one of

her hot hands.

I said she could stop. Simply stop, quit, find teaching work, move back home. Anything. She smiled sadly. “The thing is, there’s a new client who has arranged to start seeing me too. They told me last week. He’s loaded. I thought he was interested in another girl, but it seems he wants me to be his regular. I’m a popular girl, huh? Anyway I had this week back home already booked, so Mama-san has organised for me to spend my first night with him when I get back to Tokyo.” I looked away from her, stunned. *Oh god...*they can’t inveigle her like this. No matter what she claimed, she was way too young and inexperienced to be able to make fully-informed decisions about such a surreal situation, surely? What could I say?? What the hell could I do to help her? She was quietly crying now. We were out of beer, so I told her to wait and went to buy more. I needed to clear my head. I stood waiting for change and could see her, slumped on the dirty floor, looking lost and homesick. The antithesis of the high class callgirl they were transitioning her into. *Shit...*

While we sipped our beers, she admitted to feeling total confusion. She said in a small voice that she even felt a little guilty about Tanaka-san; even though she conceded he’d “bought” her, he had given her so much, and been quite sweet, and it made her feel lousy that she was going to “two-time him” with another client. I asked would he know? She said it seemed to be an accepted thing, that the popular hostesses had more than one client. She also elucidated her confusion about Mama-san’s generosity. “Look.” She pulled out an envelope that held two tickets, first class, Qantas. One return, Sydney to Tokyo, for the following week. The second ticket was from Tokyo to Sydney, for this same day. She could have flown home first class?!? She nodded, then slowly shook her head. “I couldn’t face my parents...like that. Flying back with a ticket I’d done...that...for.” So she’d bought her own Garuda bloodshot-eye special...that revealed so *much* about her.

So I talked. And talked. I held her hand, feeding her tissues as her tears kept flowing, and talked some more. I don’t know what makes a girl like her intrinsically different to a girl like me; we were only a few years apart in age. But I filled that space between us

with every reason I could think of to change her mind and glimpse a different future for herself. She didn't say much, but held tightly on, that ring of hers watching us with its little ruby eyes. I knew it meant a lot to her. It symbolised a transition in her life, a fork in a personal path that initially promised excitement, but in reality was fraught with potholes and bought with her innocence. That the giver was nice was even more confounding for her. I wanted to stuff her in my bag and lead her to safer ground.

They called our flight, and we got up, brushing ourselves off. It was a full flight, and we were in opposite ends of the plane. Just before we went on, she hugged me. "Please don't think I'm an awful person. You can't know how much it has helped telling you about all this. I'm sorry I dumped it all on you." I hugged her back and told her I would be thinking about her constantly and hoping she was ok. I gave her my number in Tokyo and asked that she call me, anytime, that we stay in contact and that I could even visit her bar sometimes. She started crying again in my arms, and I have never quite felt that same level of futility, holding this sobbing young woman, knowing that in a week's time she would resume her new life of prostitution in Tokyo. I pushed that greasy hair back from her face and told her to get some sleep. We boarded. I didn't look for her on the plane. I had nothing left in me that would help her now. I couldn't sleep. I sat there, digesting all she'd told me, and her story swamped me in its stunning sincerity. What an amazing night. My heart ached for Miss Dubbo. I was determined to find her upon our return to Tokyo. I wanted to lay eyes on Mama-san and her band of 'happy' hookers.

I was one of the last to leave the plane, my seat being right up the back. It had been a gruelling six hours of Garuda hell, and she could have avoided it all with her first class ticket. I was thanking the flight attendants at the front exit when one of them stopped me, handed me an envelope, and said that a passenger had requested she give it to me. I recognised it. I got into the terminal and opened it. There were two things inside. The first, a torn-up first class Qantas ticket back to Tokyo. A little tear-stained, but shredded. On one torn piece, in small writing, "thank you".

The second item I cherish like no other. Its intricate tail curls around my finger even now as I write, its little ruby eyes gleaming up at me, reminding me of a very special girl,

who told me her poignant story in a stinking hot Denpasar airport one night, cross-legged together on a dirty floor. I think of her often, teaching wide-eyed country kids as green as she once was herself.

I went to her bar once, when I got back to Tokyo. I knew she wouldn't be there; I was told she was back in Australia when I asked one of the girls. Mama-san was there of course, coldly beautiful, imperiously watching over her happy hostesses, the fresh and the tainted, the adorable and deplorable. Laughter rang out loudly; business was booming in that age-old Tokyo trade. She ironically cast a professional eye over me when she heard my Australian accent. I smiled, and with a slight shake of my head, finished my drink, my ring winking up at me cheekily, and walked out.

Another little fish that got away...

A professional singer who has sung for her supper in locales both exotic (Tahiti) and chaotic (Tokyo), Marnie is also a not-so-secret Lit Nerd in the middle of a Literature and Composition degree. Passionate about prose, wild about wine and unashamedly attached to The Cat, she is determined that writing will one day be Plan B, when she is too old and too wrinkly to be seen on stage anymore...

Winter Nocturne

by *Michael J. Abolafia*

It's 4:37 am: you see the
Softsilvered moonset over
Distant treetops, skyscrapers,

Wintered fields in easy decay:
This is universal.

You are
Made acutely aware of
Your mortality. The moon is not a mirror
But it is. Ice blooms on the
Dulled razoredge of your daydead brain.

Your eyes open twice. They remain closed.

You play Judas in old gardens,
dream vainly of withering away
and dissolving into eternal halls of mirrors.

Somewhere in the beyond:
 They film a movie, grainy & grey,
 They photograph funeral flowers,
 They paint a portrait of lost children,

but here, now, in this vast expanse of loneliness,
You fall away into the silences between distant trains.

Michael J. Abolafia, a resident of New Jersey, has been scribbling strange sonnets and sestets since he discovered the transcendental pleasures of reading and writing as a child. Now eighteen, he whiles away the long and indolent hours daydreaming and praying for rain or snow. He will be studying English Literature and Anthropology at Columbia University in the Fall of 2013. His fiction and poetry have appeared in Eschatology,

The Edison Literary Review, eFiction Magazine, Supernatural Tales, Nameless Magazine, I Know What I Saw: Poems of the Unexplained, and scores of local newspapers and school literary magazines.

Sham

by Matt Denniss

“Why here?” I ask.

“Why not?”

I look around the room. The decor of the restaurant is a series of matches; the light burgundy walls and tablecloths, the stark white plates and crisp waiters’ shirts, the silver cutlery and the chandelier.

“It’s too good for us,” I say. “Too fancy.”

Sal looks nervous tonight. His shoulders slump and he shakes his head. “Yeah,” he sighs, “you’re right.” He glances at the people around us. “These people are assholes. These candles are dumb. The waitstaff are way too serious for a Saturday night. The wine here is overpriced.”

He’s right. The wine menu has names I wouldn’t know how to pronounce and prices that I couldn’t sell my car for. But I don’t feel like drinking, which is lucky for Sal because he said tonight was on him. I vowed off drinking three weeks ago after I got drunk and called Andrew. What was I thinking? I haven’t told anyone about that yet, not even Sal, who I usually tell everything.

“I wanted tonight to be special,” Sal says and puts his hand on mine.

“You haven’t told me why yet.”

“Fuck it,” he mumbles and rises from his chair. It always surprises me how daggy he dresses, all things considered. He kneels next to my chair, takes my hand in his, looks me in the eyes and asks “Elle, will you marry me?”

“What?”

People around us quieten, and I notice that one of the waiters has stopped mid stride.

“Well...” I say, “You are kind of cute. And nice. And I like hanging out with you. But...”

Sal shakes his head, melodramatic “Don’t say but, Elle.”

“*But,*” I emphasise and smirk, “you have no money, you have no fashion sense,” at this a woman on the table next to us actually gasps, “and you like penis more than me.”

I laugh and Sal starts to laugh and everyone else must be more confused than Sal when he was eleven and got an erection when he saw David Hasslehoff in those red Baywatch shorts. I guess Pam just doesn’t do it for some guys. A man with a double chin and a moustache on a table nearby grumbles something about ‘that generation’ and looks downright furious. We eat the free bread, blow out the candle and leave.

“You know, I wasn’t joking in there,” he says outside the restaurant as we wait for a taxi. “And if you said yes we would have gotten free champagne.”

“Not only have you forgotten that you are gay, you have forgotten about Billy, who I love with all of my sad little heart.”

“Of course you do,” he says sarcastically and I ignore it. Sal doesn’t look gay, and most people wouldn’t guess that he is, but he does have a bitchy streak.

“Why do you want to marry me, anyway?”

“I need to wed sooner or later and you’re about as perfect a match as I’ll get.”

“Minus the penis, of course.”

“Well, yes. And the muscles.” He grips my arm and gives it a squeeze. “I’ll never tell my family, Elle. I swore it to myself when my dad stood at the edge of the football oval when I was fifteen. He was shouting things like ‘that’s my boy’, and all that lame but nice cliché stuff, and he was so proud when I kicked a goal in the grand final. We lost the

match but I swear he nearly cried at the post-game presentation ceremony where I won player of the match. He was so proud that I never wanted to do anything to disappoint him, and I promised that I would never, ever burst that bubble of his. He has dedicated his life to bringing up my sisters and I, and you know Elle, he comes from a different place and time. He just wouldn't get it."

"So it's best to lie to him?"

A taxi pulls up and Sal opens the door for me. The driver, a gruff but friendly looking man with an enormous bushy beard, cheerfully says "Hop in lovebirds." He reminds me of Santa Claus.

"Let me explain," Sal says, as Santa Claus merges back into the traffic. "If I marry you my father will be happy and I'll get the money that my mother left. When she died, the money went into an account to be saved for a wedding and a head start on a house."

"Okay, so it's about money."

"At least we could have afforded dinner," he says defensively and nestles his head against the window. The lights of the city outside illuminate his face and he looks like a sad little boy who has just been caught stealing from his mother's handbag.

"You two have a nice meal in the fancy restaurant?" Santa Claus asks like he is deaf or too innocent to understand what we've been talking about. He shifts in his seat to get a better view of us in the mirror and for a moment I think he is going to counsel us on love. But he just looks at me.

"Well, the bread was nice," I say. Sal stares off into the night, probably wondering where he is going to find a girl to marry now, and how he'll get that money and not let his father down.

Sal and I have been friends since before we had pubic hair. Best friends. Only friends, really. I've only seen him look this uneasy once before, when I told him that a guy he'd had a crush on for months, Timothy Cummings, was a slut who had an STI. It was a

lie of course. I said it so he would spend weekends with me because I was lonely and it was summer. Sal and I both had great beach bodies back then. But it hurt him. I mean, imagine being told your prince charming had anal warts.

“Sal, I don’t understand what you’re going through, with family, money whatever. But remember when we used to talk about love? When we were bored and lonely in high school. When we would listen to albums at my parents place on Friday nights and believe all the songs. Don’t you still want that?”

He doesn’t answer me.

“Sounds like you two will be together forever,” Santa Claus says and I beginning to think this guy is either mentally handicapped or in serious denial. “You know, if you two want to be intimate in the back there, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Excuse me?” I say.

“I know what you kids are like,” he says and turns in his seat to face us, and he doesn’t look like Santa so much anymore. “Just go crazy back there. Why wait? Enjoy each other.”

“Hey, that’s fucked up, man,” Sal says.

“People do it all the time,” the driver says.

“We are not going to have sex in the back of a filthy cab that smells like cigarettes and vomit, while some pervert who looks like a homeless Santa Claus jerks off in the driver seat,” Sal says, “so pull the fuck over.”

The taxi pulls over in front of a video shop and Sal pays with coins.

“You know I fought in the Vietnam war, kid,” the driver says to Sal.

“What?”

“And when I was your age I was fucking fifty year olds.”

“What the fuck?”

He flicks us off and drives away.

We stand at the curb for a moment hoping another free taxi will come our way but none do. A middle aged couple exit the video store and they are bickering. Firstly, they argue over the movies they hired. And then they argue about what order to watch them, and then as they are walking away I hear the woman say “And you just had to get the caramel popcorn didn’t you?” Her husband tells her to shut the fuck up.

Sal begins to walk. It’s too far back to his place but I think he wants to walk for a little while so I follow behind.

“If I had money I would own a car and we wouldn’t have to take shitty cab rides with war vet perverts.”

“Since when do you care for money so much? Look at me. I’ve got no money but I’m happy, right?”

“Elle, you’re not happy. Don’t kid yourself.”

Sal is like a brother, but a brother who knows when I’m having sex. He sees me more clearly than I do. And he always says thing to me a brother would say, like to always be myself. But I’ve found that to be much harder than it sounds.

“You don’t love Billy,” he says, “I know that you called Andrew and I know you still love him.”

“Andrew has a girlfriend,” I say.

“Yeah, and when you found that out you went running back to Billy, didn’t you?”

“Because he’s my boyfriend.”

“No, Elle, he’s your safety net.”

I’ve never told Sal how I feel about Andrew, about how I dream about him and then wake up to Billy and it startles me like seeing a green light suddenly flick to red.

And then I remember.

“Oh, shit. I lied to you tonight,” I say and Sal looks bewildered. After the anal warts incident we pinkie promised not to lie to each other ever again.

“I told you I couldn’t marry you because I have a boyfriend.” I look to my hand and wonder where my engagement ring is. I told Billy I couldn’t wear it because it was too small. I haven’t seen it for days. How could I forget I was engaged? “I don’t have a boyfriend, Sal. I have a fiancé.”

Sal looks like I’ve just slapped him—like the time he said he couldn’t spend the weekend with me over my sixteenth birthday, so I hit him. But then I found out he was planning a surprise party for me.

“Billy is a good guy,” I say, “He is ambitious and driven and has a good career. We’re just different, and maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Elle, when I say you should just be yourself you tell me that it’s hard because you don’t know who you are. How can you be sure about another person if you can’t be sure about yourself?”

I just shrug. It’s a good question.

“And if you and I got married it would be a sham. But at least both of us would know it.” He turns and walks away. “Don’t follow me home, Elle. Call Billy.”

I watch as Sal disappears into the darkness and I wonder how he’ll get home. I wonder if people are having sex in taxis. I wonder if the married couple eating the caramel popcorn are arguing over which movie to watch next. I wonder what Andrew is doing.

I don't think about Billy until I realise that I have to get home somehow.

Matt is an environmental scientist who balances the cold scientific methodology of his professional life with the colour and warmth of words and music. He is hungry and angry but not fat or mean. He likes storms at the end of a hot day and writes short stories while listening to 90s rock. Matt's work has appeared in Regime Magazine, Word Riot, Vibewire, Surreal Grotesque, Flash Fiction Offensive, Zinewest and Hypallage.

Diving Into Oblivion

by Tamara Pratt

Falling Into My Oblivion blared out of Sean's car speakers the day Cally dove from Cedar Creek Falls' highest ledge. *The Sedentary* sang something about a lonesome figure climbing, slipping, losing grip and tumbling into a deep crevice.

If I stare hard enough at the bare cliff face now, I can see Cally, her hands pressed towards the sun in a steeple shape, laughing, delirious, spinning in her white bikini as she tiptoes across the hot granite rocks. I can hear Sean and Eddie behind me daring her to dive because that day they knew something about her that I was only just discovering, even though I thought I knew her better. They knew how much she liked dares. Win or lose. Live or die. Cally was good for them.

§

“Want one?”

Cally pushed a wine cooler into my hands just as we sat down in the park, the hot November sun beating across our bodies. The bottle sweated with condensation. I lifted it to my forehead before squeezing the lid open and hearing the hiss.

“Well, don't just look at it, Beck. Drink it.” She fixed me with those blue eyes, framed by mascara and neon blue eyeliner before swigging from her own carafe of fun.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to jump from that thing?” She nodded at the wall-sized mural, a mesh of graffiti and still photographs tacked onto the brick surface. Incoherent ‘art’ on the toilet block.

“What? The Story Bridge?”

“Yeah, if that's what it is.”

I squinted at the black lines painted across a dusk blue background of night sky and stars, something that may or may not have depicted a suspended feat of architecture. “It could be the Brooklyn Bridge too. I don’t know. So, have you? Thought about jumping?”

Could she hear what I was trying to ask?

“Yes, I have,” she said. “And I’d give the Story a go, for sure.” She lifted her cooler to her mouth, her sunglasses falling further back on her head.

“Really? I hear when you hit the water it’s like breaking through concrete.”

Cally wriggled around on her towel, smoothing out the lumps, before stretching her long legs in my direction. Her bright red toenails danced in my face.

“Well, I’d bend when I hit the water,” she said. “I’d survive. If I wanted to, that is.”

“Bend? That’s good then. Must be all those classes you’ve taken for ballet and jazz.” I scraped at the bottle’s label. The first sip had stung with a sweet aftertaste.

“Hmm.” She lay on her back.

I rolled over onto my stomach. “So, what else would you do?”

“Huh?” She sounded sleepy.

“I mean, if you’d jump off a bridge, what else would you...do?”

“Do? Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I’d sleep with Eddie. Again.”

I couldn’t see her face for the cloth hat she’d pulled over her nose. Then she snorted. “God, he never stopped banging on with his guitar the first time. Sang to me for hours after the deed.”

“Ah, a love duet? Nice.”

I felt something hit my shoulder. Cally’s sandal landed next to me on the grass. “Don’t

be rude,” she said. “Besides, you learn a lot about people when you’ve slept with them. Surprising how much they’d do for you.”

“What they’d do for you?” I repeated.

“Uh-huh.”

“As in?” I’d known Cally since our first day at film school, nearly a year now. Today she was on a high.

“As in keep a secret.” She took a long swill of her wine. I liked it when she was on a high, even if buoyed by the booze. It meant I didn’t have to give her the space she so adamantly demanded on the low days.

“Maybe you and Eddie could perform in The Blue Room together.” I used any chance to appeal to Cally’s most intimate interest—her acting classes. I know she loved her drama studies; it was where she channelled her moods. “You could be Irene, he’d be...” I paused, picking at the grass. Who would Eddie be? “Eddie would be Fred, the cab driver.”

“Maybe I’d like to do Sean,” she said, masking a snigger. “I mean I know him, but I could get to know him better. I think he’d like to know *me* better.”

I dropped my head onto my hands. I didn’t want to think about who Sean would play in a production like that alongside someone like Cally. In my head, Sean would be the student, Anton. Lush and gorgeous and intelligent—and all mine. Never Cally’s, because Cally could have whoever she wanted.

“Sean could be the politician,” I finally said.

“Yuk,” she muttered. “I hate politicians.” Then she lifted her leg and waved her foot in my face. “But I love you.”

“That’s what you say.”

“I mean it,” she pressed. “Even if I don’t tell you everything.”

I let it slide. Cally could be full of taunts and today I didn’t want to nip at them, acting starved for attention, even if it was just playful rivalry.

“It’s okay,” I said with an over exaggerated smile. “I wouldn’t believe everything you told me anyway.”

§

Sitting on the ledge makes me feel closer to her. I flick through my iPod and find the song that she called her jam. *When the world below is shaking, the heart inside is breaking, how long this icy fall is taking, let me, leave me, falling into my oblivion.* I fumble for a cigarette, light it and push the smoke down into my lungs. I stretch out a hand and admire my cherry-coloured nail polish. I need this to remember Cally and all the things she taught me, because she dared to do what she wanted to do.

She dared to take that icy fall.

The morning Cally asked us to join her at Cedar Creek Falls, none of us hesitated. Sean had his Corolla revved up ready to go seconds after she summoned him, and Eddie’s guitar and lifetime supply of scoobs appeared with ease from under the pile of dirty clothes in his bedroom. She could make the boys jump. She made all of us jump.

§

“It’s going to be fun.”

Cally stroked Eddie’s knee in a strange, reassuring way. We weren’t far from the Falls. He glanced across at her, a nervous twitch in his eyes, and she held his gaze a moment longer than legal. The car hit a pothole in the road, jerking violently and Eddie nearly lost control of the wheel, dodging the embankment. Sean swore and yelled something about Eddie treating his car better. Eddie overcorrected and swerved towards the white line. Two oncoming cars passed and blasted their horns.

Cally clapped her hands and flung her head back, golden strands of hair splaying out over the headrest. “Whoa boy,” she said. “Go easy on us. I don’t want *all* of us to die.” She drew hard on her joint before winking at him.

Tease, I thought, as I stole a peek at Sean’s reaction. He’d calmed down and his eyes were on Cally’s legs, her skirt riding high. I reached over and pinched his thigh. He glared back at me.

“What?” he mouthed.

“Dare you,” I mouthed back.

His hazel eyes narrowed, and under the black fringe that crossed his eyebrows, his pupils turned another shade of dark. “To do *what*?”

“Kiss her.” I helped his lip reading with an action. I smacked my lips against the back of my hand.

“What for?”

“Because she wants it,” I whispered. I felt the pit of envy deep in my stomach. What would Sean do? Would he take up my dare?

Shaking his head, he turned into the window.

I didn’t push. I didn’t really want to know if they were that close.

§

Rob calls me from his car and waves at me to get going. We’ve been at the falls for half an hour, and while he’s been a dedicated boyfriend for all of one week, he’s had enough. I hold up a hand. *Give me two minutes*. He cranks the stereo another notch, but I don’t hear it as much as I do the waterfall. Clear blue energy trickling down the rocks, sweeping through every unturned inch of stone, falling into the pool below.

And I smell the rain before it hits my back. The raindrops dent the vision below me, creating concentric circles where Cally's face should be. I think of that day and wonder if she looked up at us from the bottom of the lake the way we peered down at her. I wonder if she was satisfied with what she had done; what she had pulled off. They say people like Cally leave notes for their loved ones. Eddie said she didn't need to write down what she intended to do because the three of them knew long ago what she desired, although they didn't believe she'd ever go through with it.

I knew her the best. I loved her the most.

So why didn't she tell me what she dared to think?

§

“Turn in here.”

Cally pointed to an isolated spot, overgrown scrubland that extended beyond the gate into the falls, with a welcoming sign: *Trespassers will be prosecuted.*

This is just like Cally, I thought. She liked to trespass all over what wasn't hers, particularly on her good days, when she felt in control. Even if it meant being out of control with the drugs and the drink.

Eddie parked the car, leaving the keys in the ignition and the stereo on, and we spilled out into the abandoned paddock.

“Beck, grab the esky. Eddie, come here.” Cally pulled him in for a long, slow hug while I wrestled with the two-tonne cooler. Sean threw two backpacks on, one for each shoulder, and cradled the picnic rug in his arms.

“Thanks for getting us here safe,” she said. Eddie smiled, but I heard the derision in her voice. Cally would sooner have her eyes picked out by crows than be safe. Safe equalled lonely. Safe would find her in bed, unable to answer her mobile, missing her classes.

“Hey, Cally.” I dropped the esky on the ground, wrenched off the lid, and threw her a beer.

She caught it effortlessly. “Thanks babe.”

We followed silently as Cally led us up along a series of large boulders, crested by the freezing cold water.

“Don’t slip!” she called, giggling.

I hung back for a few seconds, slipped off my shoes and stuck my toes in the water. Sean stalled too.

“So, how’s the internship?” I asked.

He peeled off his socks. “Didn’t Cally tell you?”

“No.”

“I told her all about it. It’s not that flash.”

“What’s not to like about accounting?”

“Commerce,” he corrected. He stuffed his sneakers into one of the backpacks.

His eyes followed Cally and Eddie as they negotiated a steady climb. Cally’s feet struggled to find traction on the rocks, although all I could think was that her legs seemed so much longer at this angle.

“She’s getting tipsy,” I said. “We should go keep an eye on her.”

“Nah, she doesn’t need anyone to look out for her.” Sean words felt quick off the mark. “That’s not what she wants.”

I turned to him, my glare coated in surprise. “Really? And how would you know what she wants?” I didn’t know myself of course, but my defences drew taut with the way Sean

suggested he knew more.

“She tells me,” was all he said. “She thinks about it all the time.”

§

I wish I had seen Cally as Sean did that day. Maybe if I had, this moment, on these rocks, waiting for her to come back, would be easier. I can't help but hope he was probably just thinking about those damn gorgeous legs of hers, and it was those that got him all emotionally stirred when her step-father beared down on him and quizzed him for hours afterwards.

“Maybe Cally didn't want to come home,” he'd told her parents. “If she did, she'd be here now.”

Mrs White had almost slapped him. I would have probably done the same if I didn't think back to his earlier words—*that's not what she wants*.

§

“I bet you'd be good as Susan,” I said to Cally minutes after we'd found a flat rock, the watery falls beating down around us. Her back was to me, but I knew those elegant fingers were hastily rolling a joint. She'd left her cigarette perched on top of the esky, burning away to ash.

“For what?”

“For Educating Rita,” I said. “Maybe you'll get to do that play this year.”

Her tanned shoulders twitched. “Maybe.”

“You know, sort of like real life.”

“What?” I could hear the slur in her voice.

“Well, Frank the tutor, he introduces Rita to this bohemian lifestyle and she gets all

this self-confidence back again..." *Maybe it could be you*, I thought. I'd heard her say once that growing up in her house had been shit, and she'd hated high school.

Cally turned around with the joint between her lips. Eddie reached over and lit it for her, and Sean lifted her cigarette carefully off the lid of the esky to hand her another beer.

"Thanks." She winked at Sean. I swear he turned pink.

"So, who's going for a swim now?" Eddie asked.

"Cally," Sean said.

"You can't just volunteer people." I looked across at Cally. "Can he?"

She toked away, blowing smoke circles around our heads.

"I don't mind the suggestion," she said. "I suppose it's about time I see how close I can get."

How close I can get? To what? I didn't question her though, just brushed away her comment. Then she stood and stripped off her yellow cotton dress. I caught a nervous look between Eddie and Sean. I had thoughts of swimming too, but how could I compete with Cally looking like she did? I dragged a towel up around my knees.

"I hear when you hit the water it's like breaking through concrete," I muttered.

She laughed. "Oh, I'm not going to jump today," she said. "I'm going to *dive*."

§

Was there a difference? I wonder now.

Jumping, diving—would it have changed the outcome? Would Cally have surfaced that day if instead of gently dropping from the edge like some graceful bird, she hit the water feet first?

I can still see Eddie and Sean—not just their pale faces, but the way they stopped groping and fumbling over the rocks seconds later. They didn’t scream out her name the way I did. I couldn’t understand why they were so quick to toss those wild hibiscus flowers into the rock pool after my panic, after she skulked under the water.

And the little mourning party gathers, calls for forgiveness from above, as I sing for my deliberation, lead me not into temptation, but give me some kind of explanation, as I fall, falling into my oblivion.

Rob has closed the car windows. The rain is falling harder, faster now, on my back like tiny silver bullets. *You didn’t bend, I think. You didn’t bend when you hit the water.*

You were supposed to bend. The Cally I knew was supposed to bend.

§

“I’m on top of the world!”

Cally’s voice echoed and bounced around the cliff face as she pranced around. To her left, a sign read, all too simply, “*Do not jump off the rocks.*” A tiny white plaque with black writing buried behind the jagged edges of granite, barely visible to the naked eye.

“Be careful!” I called back.

Sean sat beside me. “There you go again,” he said. “Leave her be. Maybe she doesn’t want to be careful.”

“Are you serious? She’s drunk,” I reminded him.

Eddie made a megaphone with his hands “Hey!” he yelled. “I dare you to jump!”

She put one hand on her hip and blew him a kiss with the other. “Wouldn’t you rather I dived in?”

They nodded simultaneously—a pair of bobby-heads. *Ridiculous*, I thought, *that*

they're encouraging her. Cally toyed for a while longer on the flats, two storeys above us on the other side. She'd scrambled around the back, made her way up by clutching onto shrubs stuffed deep into the rock slits. *She really would find an audience in the crevice of the smallest rock if it meant all eyes on her,* I thought.

Eddie turned to Sean. "Reckon she's going to do it?"

"Yeah, I reckon she's good for it. But that would be crazy. She won't go through with it."

"God, I hope not."

I pressed into Sean's elbow which was propped on his knees. "What're you two whispering about?"

Cally let out a whistle. "Are you watching me or what?"

Sean waved. "We're watching." He pulled out his mobile phone and pointed it in her direction.

"Tell me you're not filming this," I said.

"The girl's having a good time, you heard it yourself." There was an edge to Sean's voice.

"What? Because she said she's on top of the world? She's on top of a cliff, that's all."

Sean ignored me while Cally spun around, her feet almost hovering off the flat. She was stoned senseless. My heart lurched watching her act.

I nodded at the esky. "I hope you were counting, Eddie. Sean said she didn't need anyone looking out for her, but I'm guessing she does."

Eddie smiled. It felt smug. "Do it girl!" he called back at Cally. "Fly like a bird!"

“Don’t encourage her,” I said again, observing how high the fall was, how no one else was around.

“She’ll do it. If she wants to,” Sean said, his eyes pinned to his mobile camera lens.

“If she wants to do what?” I asked.

“If she wants to break,” he said. “But she probably won’t.”

§

I can’t take my eyes off the water where the rain hits. Cally has to surface any minute, she just has to. Any moment now, she’ll lift herself out of that rock pool, a mermaid with breath back in her lungs. And she’ll tiptoe over the rocks and we’ll all be back here again, scrambling around to get her another drink, a cigarette. Anything she wants. Anything to keep her happy.

I wanted to smash Eddie’s head in with a loose stone that day, punch Sean in the face. It’s what she wanted, they kept saying over and over again. It’s what she wanted. That’s the only way you can reconcile this. We didn’t expect this to really happen.

Who wants to die? I demanded.

Maybe she did, they said.

In my head, I reach for Sean’s mobile phone, wrench it out of his grip and toss it over the ledge before he tells me it’s the only way now she’ll be remembered now. Because when she dared to dive from those rocks, she broke after all.

You didn’t know her, I screamed.

We knew what she wanted, they countered. *And she probably wanted this.*

Was that their way of seeing this? That an accident, a moment of stoned, drunken stupor when Cally was at her highest, had become a deliberate act on her part? That she

wanted to die?

I might fall from the east cliff, I might jump from the west side, I may be covered over in the dark blur of my mind, but when I fall, let me fall, yes.

I sit on this ledge and I lose her all over again. I see her dive, she hits the water, and her body crumples with the impact of the rock below. She's broken. The beautiful, sexy girl, with untempered moods and cavernous secrets—the girl I thought I knew, is broken.

And they say she might have wanted it that way.

§

The Importance of Being Earnest, I tell her. That's the play you should be in. You're a good actress, the best ever. You could play Gwendolyn or Cecily. No, it would have to be Gwendolyn. She was brilliant, clever, experienced.

This is a memory that replays for me, something I'd lost, maybe even buried.

Cally folds into a ball on her bed, pulls the sheets around her back. I hand her a cigarette and light it for her, and she tells me the deepest, darkest secret she has. She's thinking of dying.

I can't see it, I say. I can't see that you would ever want that. You're happy. There are days you smile, more days than the ones when you cry.

That's why I act, she replies. I'm good at it. Inside, I'm dying, I'm that miserable. My thoughts are black, and I lose grip. Every day I feel as if I fall all over again.

Then she turns to me, her blue eyes wide. *Have you ever thought about oblivion, and what that would be like?*

I shake my head, but I don't reply. She says such crazy things.

She hums her jam where she lies on the bed. I sing the words while I stroke her hair.

There's a home deep in a valley, for travelling outcasts in distress, it's set among the ghosts of the falls, under the shadow of a cliff, and it's where I rest.

I loved you, I tell her, as she closes her eyes.

Even if I didn't know you.

Tamara's short stories have been published in Australian and USA anthologies and have placed in several short story competitions, including the Glass Woman Prize. In 2011, Tamara was awarded a Fellowship by Eleanor Dark Foundation and stayed at the Varuna Writers' House where she was mentored by Australian crime author Marele Day. Tamara has authored crime fiction and young adult novels. By profession, Tamara is an Information Technology Project Manager and resides in Brisbane with her husband and three children. Tamara is active in a number of writing groups and is serving as Vice President of the Fellowship of Australian Writers Queensland (FAWQ), and Senior Editor of Compose Online Journal. Currently, Tamara is represented by literary agent, Rick Raftos Management. Tamara's website is www.tamarapratt.com and you can follow her on twitter [@TamaraPratt](https://twitter.com/TamaraPratt).

An Education

by *Giovanni Zuniga*

Carl looked like the kind of man that enjoyed drinking himself to death and Katie looked liked the kind of woman that enjoyed watching.

It was just how they liked it.

Carl looked down between Katie's tits. He wasn't a rich man, nor good looking, but he was smart. He liked books and Katie liked to run away to different places and times. Places and times that didn't know she liked drinking more than a young waitress should after work.

Carl looked up, after he'd felt Katie look into his eyes. She was the romantic. Carl was the realist.

He smiled. She did the same. Carl looked back at his empty beer; he could see the wooden bar underneath. He liked empty glasses. Meant he was able to accomplish some things in life.

Katie slid over her wine glass. He didn't look up. He took the rim of the glass and threw his head back to let the wine go down in a gulp. He didn't like the bitter taste. Katie was always watching calories. She'd said once:

“Being a drunk doesn't mean that I can't be pretty in my own way.”

To which Carl had responded, “In hell even remnants of an angel are beautiful.”

Katie had taken it as a compliment knowing that Carl didn't know which way he had meant it.

They liked it that way.

Carl had had enough to drink, but Katie bought another round.

“Why?” Carl said.

“Because you’ll drink it.”

Katie took a sip from her vodka shot glass. She liked sips. She had always tried to make everything last. Carl finished the whiskey. He didn’t like sips. He liked being drunk.

“Angel,” Carl said.

Katie liked her nickname. It meant Carl had had enough to drink. It meant he would tell a great bedtime story.

“What did you mean were in hell?” she said.

“Because even the preacher drinks. He’s right down there at the end of the bar.” Carl pointed to a tall, sharp-jawed man. He was young and attractive. He held his lined white collar in his hand as sipped on a shot.

Katie didn’t like the preacher’s pretty look.

She turned to face Carl. She slid her middle finger over his ear-to-mouth scar. She brushed Carl’s curly hair. Her fingers fit in between the curls and looked like rings on her hand.

He looked into Katie’s eyes. She didn’t move them. She licked her lips. Carl was satisfied. It had been a long time since he’d been satisfied.

“Okay baby.” She nodded. She popped her lips. Katie had a sweet voice. She had never yelled. Never. He had been used to hearing yells and didn’t want any more.

“Let’s go home.” Carl took Katie’s hand and walked out onto Mission Street.

§

Carl liked San Francisco. The hell-hole bars where the rich rubbed shoulders with the dazed, and crazed. They walked to the bus stop. Katie sat on his lap as they waited with her ass cheeks against his crotch. They watched a man with a blank expression stare into the street. The passing cars lit his face momentarily until they drove by. He began to walk. Cars screamed horns at him. He continued. He made it to the other side of the street.

“In San Francisco everyone is on something.” Katie said.

The man threw up. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and lit a cigarette. The night engulfed him.

A Mercedes passed by.

“Even the rich. They think they could have the entire city for themselves. Even money is a drug when you’re given too much.” Carl said.

Carl and Katie waited for the bus. The wait was long, but necessary. Carl liked waiting. It gave him time to think.

“The bus is coming.” Katie stood up. She brushed her black skirt.

Carl liked Katie’s ass. She was still young enough that it hadn’t learnt to age yet, or even know that it was supposed to. She wore a black skirt on workdays, which were most days. It was too tiring to go home. Katie didn’t like home, it was too far from Carl’s.

Carl walked behind Katie. Katie paid the fare. She liked the sound the metal made against the rounded coin machine. The coins always made a whirlwind motion. The bus driver handed them two transfer tickets that read ‘Late Night’ at the bottom. They always had tickets that read ‘Late Night’.

They were alone on the bus. The driver didn’t look at them as they huddled in the back. Carl sat first. Katie sat on his lap, and cuddled. Carl wrapped his hands around her; he liked the feeling that he could protect her, even if he couldn’t. Katie began to cry. She liked crying. Carl brushed her hair, his hands crossed the golden waves, his knuckles

appeared for glimpses and then they dove back into the golden water. He knew that she'd had enough to drink too.

It was the way they liked it.

Carl's one bedroom apartment was just off Market, in a nice area. It cost too much, but it had enough room for his books and a bed. The kitchen was in the same room as the living room. He liked it that way. Meant Katie didn't leave his sight too much. Katie liked it because the books were always everywhere, lying next to empty beer cans. She liked it because it gave her something to do during the day, to clean. It made her feel grown up.

Carl unlocked the door. He turned on the light and walked to the fridge. Katie went to the bathroom. She washed her face and turned on the bath. Katie heard a beer being opened. She walked out and hugged Carl. He wiped her face. She had missed some mascara that spilled with her tears. They laughed.

"What are you going to read me tonight?" she said.

"In class we're reading Milton. So, love poems."

"Okay. I need it." They kissed. She always needed kisses. Carl needed to read.

Katie undressed on the way to bath. Carl leaned on his counter top and drank the beer. He finished it. He heard the faucet turned off and Katie slipping into the bath. He walked to his wooden living room table. He had always made sure to leave paperback sized books on it—he hated large books, he hated people with coffee table-sized-books.

He picked up his old worn copy of *Paradise Lost*. He undressed. He left his clothes on the couch.

Katie stayed huddled on the right side of the bathtub, by the faucet. She clenched her legs together to leave room for Carl. He had never liked baths before, but then again, he had never had a woman love him. But because she loved him, she always wanted to hear it.

Carl stepped in one foot at a time, holding the book over his head and faced his back to Katie. He wanted to know that she could read if she wanted to, knowing she wouldn't though. She put her arms around Carl. He held the book over the water and opened to the first page.

“‘Of Man’s first disobedience and the fruit...’,” Carl said.

Katie kissed his neck. It takes a special kind of man to read Milton right.

Carl continued. He had always wished that he could write, but he was a born reader. But it didn't matter to Katie. She knew that when he read 'love' he was thinking about her. He read because he knew life was too hard to interpret. Katie liked that about him. She read into life, and always too much.

Katie washed Carl's hair as he lay between her tits.

“Angel.”

“Yeah?”

“I was just reading the book.”

“Oh. I thought you called me.”

He had always liked her for washing him.

“Do you think I would ever leave you?”

“I expect you to.” Carl felt a rustle between her tits. She hadn't expected such an answer.

“Why?” She stayed calm.

“Because.” Carl closed the book and put it next to the bathtub. “Like Dante said, you have to go through hell to find Paradise. And I think God sent you, Angel.”

Carl stopped. Katie brushed his wet hair. The hair seemed to stick to her fingers. There was no way to make rings of his hair.

“You’re going to show me to heaven in your own way. Just by being. Simply.”

They got up, dried off and went to bed. They couldn’t have sex. Carl was too drunk.

And they liked it that way.

Meant they were beyond lust. At least Katie saw it that way. Carl didn’t want to read into it. He’d had enough of that being a teacher. And they slept like that.

Carl woke up hung over. He always did. Katie kept on sleeping. He went into his living room/kitchen and ate a slice of bread as the coffee brewed. He had a cup and left the rest for Katie. He always was thinking about Katie.

He read on the metro. He was stuck between suited men. He felt empty without his uniform to compare himself to them.

§

He walked down through the college campus. All the students looked alive. He remembered having had that same look. Katie had that look too.

He was late to his class. The students were quiet. He put down his book and sat in the back.

“Class. Now please pull out your books. So. Hell and Angels. What should we start with?”

The class talked. They all argued, but never raised their voice. To Carl it had been a discussion. It was nice. Hours passed in discussion. All theory and no practice. Carl didn’t talk. He simply listened.

Carl was done for the day. He stayed in class after everyone had left. Someone had

left five dollars on the ground. Carl stared at it. The bold eagle under the term 'The United States of America' and next to the outlined stars stared back at him. All that work to have money, and symbols left behind. He picked it up and turned it over. He had to trust God. He tucked it away in his pocket.

Carl left and went to the Mission. He drank, and read. He went into a small fast food restaurant and ordered. The servers didn't care that he was drunk. At least he paid for his food. While he waited he stood by a kid's toy machine. He saw liberty stare at him from the ground. He picked up the forgotten coin and put it into the machine and turned. A small red ball came out. It contained a fake plastic ring. He tried to put it on his index finger, but it was too small. He held out and thought:

"How beautiful this would look on Katie." He didn't think about it anymore after that. He ate his food on the way to the bar.

§

Katie came later in the evening. She wore a black skirt and sat next to Carl.

"How was it?" she said.

"When you're not next to me I wonder if you still love me," Carl said. He'd had a lot to drink. And being that Katie was young, she wanted to make sure he was happy, and took shots. Katie became drunk. The sun was starting to set over Katie's shoulder as Carl kissed it. He reached into his pocket and held the ring in his hand.

"How did we start?" Carl said.

"You told me that you angels don't usually stop by in Hell, especially during lunch," she said. Katie turned and put her leg in between Carl's.

"I must've been drunk."

"We always are. I like it."

“Why?”

“Because every day I have to ask if you love me. Do you?” Katie stuck her fingers into the rings of his curly hair.

“Always. Are you proud of me?” He moved his head. Her fingers slipped out of the rings of his hair.

“Always, baby. You did well.” Katie kissed Carl. She turned back to face the bar. Carl did the same. He could feel the outline of the plastic ring.

Carl took his hand and put the ring on the bar. Katie saw it. She smiled.

“Will you marry me?” Carl said. He held his drink at her. Katie smiled. She always smiled. He liked it.

“Of course.” Katie took the ring and put it on her wedding finger. It fit perfectly. “Just why?”

“Because I think it’s time I try to grow up. Or maybe because I love you. I can’t tell the difference right now.”

“Okay.”

They didn’t talk about it after that.

They went home. Katie didn’t cry and Carl could have sex. In the morning Carl was hung over. Katie slept.

Carl went to college again. He read on the metro and arrived late. He read while he drank out of a flask on a curb and smoked in his single break. A figure dressed in blue overshadowed the sun. Carl looked up.

“Sir, is there alcohol in that flask?”

“Why, you want some?”

“Sir, I’m going to ask you again is there alcohol in that flask?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course. This is a college campus. One of the top in the U.S. and we cannot have a student drinking on campus.”

“Listen to yourself. Asking college students not to drink in college. I’m just trying to get what is duly owed to me. I put my life on the line and I get this for free. An education all for free.”

“Well pack your things. You have to get off campus or I will be forced to arrest you, sir.” Carl nodded and drank from his flask. The shadow left. He lay in the sun and read more while he called Katie.

“Angel.”

“Yeah baby.”

“Meet me at city hall.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

“Okay.”

He smelled of liquor. He liked the bus ride and waited on the steps of city hall. He closed his eyes and the sun still penetrated through his eyelids. Katie straddled him by surprise. The sun created a halo on her golden hair. They each stuck their hands through each other’s hair. They kissed.

“What’s wrong baby?”

“I’ve been asked to stop drinking.”

“It’s going to work out.”

“Do you still want to marry me?”

“For you, always.” He could taste the wine on her lips. It was her single free day and she had spent most of it drunk. They always spent their free days drunk. They walked into city hall holding hands. They asked to be married. Katie played with her plastic ring, turning it around and around.

“Come back in seven days for your marriage license.” They nodded, kissed and walked off happily.

The next day Carl woke up hung over. He didn’t get up though. He instead turned over and kissed Katie. He went back to sleep. That evening Katie didn’t go to work, she was too drunk to have remembered. Carl became hungry and they ran out of beer. School seemed too far.

“Let’s go get dinner and a twelve pack.” Carl said.

They did the same thing for seven days. They talked, drank, read and stayed out in the bars until last call. And on the seventh day he dressed in his only suit. Katie kissed the cloth as she hugged him from behind.

Katie went back to the room. She looked around. She didn’t have a nice dress.

“Baby, I’ll meet you at City Hall. I need to get dressed.” She gave a light kiss and walked out.

Carl drank more beer. He liked his suit, he felt like he was growing up. Carl walked down to City Hall. He waited outside, drinking from his flask. Nothing changed, except that he was getting more drunk. He was always drunk.

Katie had a torn white dress.

“Thrift shop,” she said as she twirled around and sat on his lap. She played with her

ring.

“People like us always get hand-me-downs. Even life. We are the remnants of the others that passed us by.” They sat. Katie brushed through his hair, the curls always seemed to fit and then slip out of her hand.

Carl held her left hand and played with the ring. It reflected the sun above and shined. He spun it around. He covered it and spun it. It broke. It took a second. Katie was still rustling through Carl’s hair, but saw it crack and fall off her finger. He looked up at her. She tried to smile holding the remnants of the broken ring in her hand.

“Angel?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t afford anything else.”

“It’s—” she tried to hide her disappointment by crying instead of talking. Carl held her.

“We need a drink. I’m sorry. It’s a *one day I will* kind of cliché I’m going to say. But I will. One day.” he said.

“Baby. Did you really want to grow up?” she said.

“Yeah. I do,” he said.

“Then we have to stop drinking,” she said.

“If you love me, the white picket fence, and the two-and-a-half-half kids are a long way out,” he said.

“I love you because you know we need to drink. I just want that because I think it’s what we deserve. I just think you tried to jump the gun. It’s college first and then a wife.”

“I just wanted to know that you wouldn’t leave me first. I’ll finish, get the job and

work. I'll work until we live in the pretty house with the pretty kids. With a ring. For some reason I thought it was going to fix us. Fix me. I have a wife. I'm late for it."

Carl and Katie went to the bar. He drank. And drank. And he thought. He drank. And drank. Katie had never seen him at it so hard. Taking punches of whiskey down his throat. Over and over.

"Why?" she said.

"Because I can't buy you a ring. I can't buy you the life you want. I can buy happiness at least. One drink at a time."

"I love you. Always."

He didn't want to interpret what that meant. He just wanted to drink.

And he did drink. What if Katie found a place and time that didn't know she liked to drink?

He watched as the world slipped out of his sight and the wooden floor caught him. He laughed and Katie stood over him.

Carl closed his eyes and let his Angel take care of him.

He awoke to a thousand different suns. One by one they passed overhead, flashes. Everyone wore white, was clean, and had masks. He couldn't turn his head. He couldn't hear what they were saying. Heaven, he thought.

What a joke. Hell is a place on earth, and everyone just has to pass through. His Angel stood over him smiling, her tears poured down onto his face. The other white-dressed angels pushed him down the thousand different suns, calling out. He trusted in God that his Angel would be all right when he got to heaven. He would wait. He had always waited.

Giovanni Zuniga currently lives in San Francisco and is a junior at San Francisco State University studying

Cinema with an emphasis in screenwriting. He will be featured in Burningword Literary Journal and Oulipo Ponobongo 2: Anthology of Erotic Wordplay for poetry and will have two short stories in Sweet Dream and Night Terrors Anthology published by Static Movement Press. When he graduates he plans to embark on a wanderlust adventure starting with Prague to teach English, drink beer, and write in his free time.

Modern Time Travel

Non-fiction by Zoe Barron

2 am awake, 3 am give up and get out of bed. Fragile and disoriented, and the feeling of napping too long, waking up after dark. In the Australian time zone, this is what has happened. It's early evening at home right now, about dinner time, and I'm hungry because my body-clock says I should be.

The place is a cheap hostel found on the internet, with noisy floorboards and lighting that closes in the hallways, and I don't know the implications of a cheap hostel in Vancouver yet. I'll learn that in the morning. For now it's just a place to sleep for the night, a bottom bunk in a dark dorm, and I'll find something better tomorrow.

The night clerk, a friendly, bear-shaped man, looks up from his position behind the front desk when he hears the stairs creak. It's 3 am and he's end-of-shift bored, so he tells me about his Philippino wife and how he's having trouble with her. She's gone back to the Philippines because it's too cold in Canada and she missed her family. "That's not a marriage, y'know. You can't have a marriage like that," he tells me. He spends his night shifts writing fan fiction, and I get the impression that all of his friends are on the internet.

He was the one who had checked me in when I arrived at around 7 pm. Vancouver was newly dark and, walking to the hostel, I wasn't sure if I should be nervous on my own at night. He assured me I shouldn't be. So I followed his advice and took the Skytrain to Granville Street for a meal. Not that I was hungry, still adhering as I was to the meal and time routines of the opposite hemisphere, but I was going to eat anyway. I was going to adjust.

Conversation with strangers happened easily, especially with the beggars, who have learnt that conversation wins coin. Along Granville Street especially, I found the beggars to be numerous and the competition fierce. It's comparatively warm in Vancouver, warm enough for homeless people not to freeze to death in the winter, and once they arrive, they

usually can't afford to go back. Back in the mid-90s in Alberta, under Kein's Tory premiership, large cuts were made to welfare.

One of the tactics used to get rid of homeless and welfare-dependent Albertans, was to offer them one-way tickets out of the province. Balmy BC and its capital Vancouver was the destination of choice for many.

Outside the pizza place, where I sat staring down two slices too big for me to eat and a can of Dr Pepper, a homeless man struck up conversation with me. He noticed that my accent was not Canadian and asked me about it. When I told him I had been born here, but had grown up in Australia, he welcomed me home.

"Welcome home," he told me. "We've missed you." And then he said it a few more times.

At 3 am in the lobby, my conversation with the night clerk dies down. He goes back to his fan fiction. I open my little travel laptop and load up Skype. I call Tim.

He tells me that for such a sinner, I've certainly spent a lot of time with God.

"What are you talking about?"

"Your thirty-nine hour Sunday," he says, referring to all the time I gained traversing timezones.

"I may be a sinner but I'm good, really," I insist. "Everything I do is well-intentioned."

"Whatever," he says.

He asks me if I'm OK and I tell him I don't know yet. I tell him everything feels funny, I feel funny about all of this. He says we use that word, don't we? What does that word even mean, anyway, and I say that it's when there's too many adjectives and none of them really fit and most of them are contradictory anyway.

Outside, the night is still and warmer than it should be. Tomorrow I will wake up, after not really sleeping, to the sound of seagulls and the hard Vancouver light. There will be a rash of bedbug bites across my back that I won't be able to figure out at first, and then I'll remember—or at least retrospectively imagine—the feeling of small insects crawling over me in my half-sleep. The bites will be madly itchy for nearly a week and all of my stuff will need to be fumigated. I will check out and walk down the road, which will turn out to be the section of Hastings Street where the junkies hang out, and my first impression of daytime Vancouver will be white, zombie-like figures staggering across crosswalks and in and out of churches. I will walk across the city and back again and by the time I check into the next hostel I will be so delirious with jetlag, I'll be hallucinating.

But for now, I sit on the sidewalk with my back to the building and watch the cars sweep past, feeling funny, and wondering where those people could be driving at such an hour, where it is they could be going.

Zoe Barron is a freelance writer, editor and bicycle enthusiast. She is highly prone to travel, but Fremantle, WA is home now, and probably will be for a while. She writes regularly for Artshub, Drum Media and Six Thousand, and has been published in The Lifted Brow, Voiceworks, and Going Down Swinging, among others. Her blog is here at zoebarron.wordpress.com.

A Perfect Storm

by Matt Smith

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Arkantos, the last hero of Atlantis and the island’s greatest hope, let the sword drop loosely from his hand and land with a clang on the deck of his ship. He stood and witnessed the chaos and destruction unfolding on the island before him. Everything that he’d fought for was now over. He’d failed his people.

Atlantis was dying.

Standing behind him, he faintly became aware of the eight feet tall cycloptic demon from the fourth layer of hell fidgeting nervously, rocking the ship slightly in the process.

“What is it?” Arkantos finally asked him.

The demon pointed. “That death and destruction out there,” he said, pointing to the chaos that was happening to Atlantis. “Did I do that?”

Arkantos leant against the railing of the ship, wishing he could somehow will things to be different. “Do you have the power to make the oceans rise and the lands bleed?”

The demon blushed slightly. “Well, no, I’d have to say that I haven’t. Not yet anyway. I’m taking an advanced course in black magic, but I’m nowhere near up to that level.”

The waves battered the coast of Atlantis again, the volcano rumbled, spewing out hot molten lava onto the main city. All they had achieved, all they had accomplished... it was lost.

And he had been away from his people at the time, single-handedly taking on a demon who threatened their lands. Now he was powerless to prevent this.

“I told the elders,” Arkantos insisted, if only to himself. “I told them. They need more than one hero, I said. Eggs in one basket, I pointed out. But would they listen? They said no, we have faith in you Arkantos, why do we need any more heroes in Atlantis when we have you to protect us?”

The demon stood nervously and, after a moment, he gently patted Arkantos with his giant claw. “It will be okay. Sure, your home and all your people are dying in a tremendous fireball and a... a... that sure is one heck of a nice tidal wave. I mean would you look at that? Look at the workmanship on the crest, I tell you what, whoever’s throwing that at Atlantis either really hates the place, or takes pride in his work!” The demon laughed in an impressed way for a moment, before noticing the look on Arkantos’ face and looking down in shame. “Sorry.”

The two of them watched from the edge of the ship, as a group of Atlanteans tried desperately to get to the boats before they were swatted down by the tidal wave. They couldn’t. The demon made a good effort at suppressing a wide grin. Arkantos glared at him.

“Oh come on, give me a break!” the demon said. “How long have I been trying to destroy your island?”

“Since the time of my ancestors,” Arkantos spat.

“You see? The time of your ancestors,” the demon repeated. “Now that’s a bit of a long term goal, don’t you think? Let’s see what my ‘to do’ list consists of at the moment...” the demon pulled out a notepad and licked his finger, skimming through the pages. “Let me see... oh that’s right, number one: destroy Atlantis. Big surprise there! So let me take some pleasure in the fact that it’s actually happening, okay?”

They stood together in silence, Arkantos depressed, the demon embarrassed by his outburst.

“It’s not like it was a particularly nice island. Or a particularly nice bunch of people,” the demon attempted.

“It was nice enough for you to spend millennia trying to destroy it,” Arkantos pointed out.

The demon smiled, his tusks gleaming. “That’s only because I’ve been assigned to this place. The higher evils tell me to destroy Atlantis, I destroy Atlantis.”

Arkantos turned and confronted the demon. “Well how would you like it if I said that the circle of hell you came from isn’t a particularly nice one?”

The demon reacted with shock. “Don’t even joke about that! How could you? The first circle of hell, maybe. The third circle, that’s understandable... but the fourth circle?” The demon practically roared. “You are so lucky my mother wasn’t here to hear you say that!”

“I think we’re all glad that your mother isn’t here!” Arkantos yelled back. “Because I’m sure she’d be disappointed to see that the island her son has spent the last few millennia trying to destroy has been conquered by... by... a perfect storm!”

The demon looked genuinely hurt, he stepped back and covered his mouth in surprise, not sure how to retaliate.

“I can just imagine her right now!” Arkantos said, pressing his case. “Looking down on you in disgust. ‘You’re a failure, Rocky; you’re a joke and a disgrace to your family. Your brother had absolutely no problem wiping out entire civilisations, yet we give you this one tiny little island to deal with and you still can’t handle it!’ Is that the kind of thing she’d say?”

“Yes,” the demon said softly. “Mother always did like Stanley best.”

The demon now looked terribly depressed. He turned sadly towards the smoking sinking island and sighed. “You know, everyone used to make fun of me at demon school. Because I was only eight feet tall. Because I had one eye. My guidance counsellor says that’s why I’m no good at sports, because I lack depth perception. My fighting probably

shows it, doesn't it?"

Arkantos nodded in silent agreement, suddenly ashamed. He patted the sobbing demon on the back.

"So now this island that I've been trying to annihilate for so long has been destroyed by another demon... or to make matters worse, a stupid storm! I mean, have a look at that volcano going! I could never manage those kind of lava plumes! You've read the legends, right? Back in the days when I fought your father, Tantus, I made it right onto the island. Now there was a good fight! But still, I was driven back. And now this... I've been fighting for so long. All for nothing."

The demon started howling with grief, as the ship was thrown up again on the crest of a wave.

"You'll find other places to destroy," Arkantos said, trying to console him. "Sure, Atlantis is gone, and in years hence people will doubt that it even existed... but you will live on in legend. And there are plenty of other islands around here. Have you ever given a thought to reigning mayhem and destruction down on Sicily?"

The demon sniffled. "Sicily?"

"Sure," Arkantos said, "There are nice people there, just waiting for a bit of mayhem. Or then again, there's the island of Minos. They've got the Minotaur there in the labyrinth already, but I'm sure there's always room for an extra demon."

"That's true. Larry always said that he's got a futon handy if I needed a place to crash. That there's plenty of room in the labyrinth," the demon thought out loud.

"There you go," Arkantos said. "Back on your feet in no time."

The demon smiled bravely. "Well, it's been a pleasure fighting you. If I ever needed an arch nemesis, I'm glad it was you. Sorry about your home, incidentally."

The perfect storm swelled, as the last crest washed over the island of Atlantis,

forever banishing it to legend.

Matt Smith is a Melbourne based writer, and has had work published in newspapers and on radio around the country. He's hard at work on his first novel. He can be found on Twitter [@nightlightguy](#), or at <http://www.endofthespectrum.net>.

The Snake Who Watched Over

by Mel Hall

When I started school I had difficulty making friends. There was one, Robert, who had an ‘intellectual disability’. At recess and lunch breaks we put on our backpacks and ran around the playground, imagining we were the Ninja turtles.

We were turtles, our backpacks were our homes. We were nomads, roaming about the territory of popular kids. We were constantly moved on from place to place. Chubby girls with skipping ropes and arms folded across chests declared, “No you can’t play with us.”

§

When Robert left the school, I drifted about on my own. The gap between me and the other kids widened. I began to spy on everyone, telling the teachers who didn’t eat their lunches.

“Nicole threw her jam sandwiches in the bin.”

When people found I’d dobbed, I needed a place to hide. So I spent lunchtimes in the library, with all the kids who forgot their hats. I’d sit on the beanbag, a shark’s jaw sitting above me on the bookshelves. The shark’s jaw was my protector, my crucifix in a holy place. I sat beneath and read Whodunnit stories.

§

Eventually, Mrs Watt (my teacher who lived behind me, who had once offered to keep a camel for my Dad in her back paddock, whose fence I would sometimes climb and pretend I’d travelled through time, imagining I was wandering around in a nineteenth century paddock), found a solution for me. There were two Noongar kids in my year at School, Angus and Willie. I remember them sitting a lot, walking around a lot, and not talking a lot.

Mrs Watt always wore light pastel trousers, big tropical coloured shirts tucked in and slip-on shoes. I remember her bending down and asking the boys, “Can she play with you?”

They nodded.

§

So Angus, Willie and I drifted around school together. We stopped and watched people together. We stopped and chatted. We got a basketball and walked around bouncing it casually, shooting hoops casually.

All around was a mania of kids screaming, playing with plastic cricket bats, chasing each other, chasing each other with plastic cricket bats, climbing trees, destroying cat’s eye marbles with pearl marbles. But we were moving slowly.

§

One day we sat on the long wooden bench down from the canteen, where all the kids lined up for cheesies and frozen oranges, and all the other kids swung on metal bars, chatting to kids lining up for cheesies and frozen oranges. We sat on that long wooden bench, which looked onto a thoroughfare; other kids forming throngs, with the buzzing excitement of a crowded train platform.

That day, Angus said, “There’s a snake inside my Grandfather that keeps him alive.”

I imagined this very old man, laying on his back in bed. Perhaps listening to country music on the radio. The snake coiled a little inside the rib cage, then its neck slid up into the throat. The snake’s face was smiling in that warm tunnel, smiling next to the heart.

§

When I was a teenager Angus’s grandfather died. My Dad asked me to go the funeral, but I felt scared. By that stage, some other gap had widened—I didn’t so easily talk to Angus and Willie anymore.

I imagined the old man laying back again, his chest rising and falling, his eyes closed.

And then the snake inside the rib cage slowly began to uncoil. The little smiling face slid upwards through the throat, then exited through the mouth.

The chest no longer rose, and some gentle laughter floated up into the sky.

Mel Hall is a writer and musician based in Fremantle, Western Australia. She is originally from the Wheatbelt town of Northam. You can find her stories in the Sleeper's Almanac No. 8, And Swamp Writing Journal No. 7. You can find her on twitter [@dearhella](#).

The Diseased Heart

Non-fiction by Jonathon Kane

When I was awake again, the sun in the mountains was getting ready to sleep and there were pictures of women swimming around inside my head that brought back once more their sweet scent and touch. But I knew that would all have to wait a while longer yet, for downstairs was dry as a desert. And amongst the women there were also words, lengthy swirling snakes of words, within and around the various arms and limbs, the delectable bodies and faces. I could make out partial phrases here and there, but one eventually tended to blur into another, making anything resembling a passage all that more difficult to unravel.

Pulling in to fill up the tank after taking the old white car a thousand steps higher than the sea, I caught sight of the last of the day's light on my hand still holding the steering wheel, shining on the sunless ring curling around my finger, where an engraved band of silver used to be. We called the car Gloria, my wife and I, on account of the song, which had helped fill in the background as our bodies were first starting to get to know each other. But no legs could now be seen catching the last of the light on the sedan's front seat. Instead, there was a bag full of clothes, a couple of books, and on the floor an extra pair of boots in place of her feet.

In a nearby bar there was plenty of post-work quenching going on. Beer in hand, I watched the early evening unfold, before it was suddenly some drinks later and I found myself yapping with a kind-eyed landscaper called Sol, who offered me a job lugging rock the next morning at a property near the town of Katoomba, though the owners preferred to say it was in Leura when it's really somewhere in between. Finishing the job earlier than expected, he paid me in cash and mentioned a gardener's job he knew was going at a nearby old people's home. After jotting down the details, I drove to the edge of the bush again and promptly fell back to sleep.

Sol had called ahead to get my foot in the manager's door. The manager, a Mrs

Doreen Shearer, hastily explained the relevant duties in between calling out the bingo numbers for the gathered residents in the common room. The duties largely consisted of mowing the lawns and the weeding, feeding and pruning of the various garden beds. Since it was Friday, she said it would be best if I came back Monday and showed her what I could do. So I spent some of Saturday scanning the local library shelves for volumes on basic gardening techniques, which at the very least immediately added to my vocabulary, with words like mulch and secateurs.

Duck and dive

On Monday morning, Shearer showed me around the grounds, which took at least an hour, for she had a lot to say, and some of it even had to do with the job at hand. Remembering Sol's tip, I stopped at random places and picked weeds from different garden beds as if I couldn't help myself, whipping out the recently acquired secateurs and snipping off the heads from dead or dying flowers, and occasionally rubbing earth between my fingers so as to show that I was determining the condition of the soil. I'd also taken Sol's advice on firstly concentrating on the state of the garden bed directly outside the manager's office, weeding and feeding and mulching it before the break for lunch, making note of Mrs Shearer's nods of appreciation, just as Sol had predicted. Later she showed me into her office and stressed the absolute importance of regularly maintaining every lawn on the property, for inattention in that department, she said, was something the residents would never fail to notice, or even possibly forgive.

Tweak of the thumb

In the warmer months the lawns are required to be cut at least once every ten days, maybe even more during the peak season, depending on the amount of rain. The rules of employment stipulate that any stray grass cuttings not caught by the catcher are to be raked and dispersed atop the compost heap, which needs turning through at least once a week with the provided pitchfork. It's also important not to forget to go back and trim the lawn

edges, and afterwards use a leaf-blower to clear the paths again.

Until seeing for myself in the shed, I never knew a leaf-blower was an actual machine, nor a lawn-edger for that matter either. As for what Shearer called a whipper-snipper, a process of elimination helped identify that particular contraption from the rest of its caged companions. Fortunately the manuals for each device were neatly piled in an oil-stained wooden box, beside a large enough collection of chemicals that looked as if they could do serious damage to a herd of elephants, or my wife's sickeningly sanctimonious, interfering friends.

Staying alive

Any doubts about the importance of the lawns to the residents were quickly removed once I started meeting some of the folk on my rounds. Some spoke about the abilities of my predecessors as if they were comparing the technique of their favourite tennis players. But it soon became clear that the qualities of my immediate predecessor would not be too difficult to surpass. Rather than regularly attending to the grounds, he apparently preferred weightlifting alone in the garden shed. No doubt this explained the presence of a full length mirror leaning up against one of the walls, as well as an abandoned dumbbell bar and a small tube of oil featuring the imprint of an overly developed headless torso. Maybe the proximity to so many nearing the end of their lives had reminded my unknown gardening brother of his own mortality. Or maybe he was merely vain.

Clean the floor

The ladies in unit numbers 27 and 28 could often be found arguing over the feeding of the cockatoos, who came most afternoons to perch on a nearby railing. Number 27, with a penchant for psychic predictions, one of which included the premature passing of Mrs Shearer (*I give her two years at best*) took the position of vehemently opposing the feeding of any bird, and would repeatedly cite the appropriate passage in the handbook of

rules and regulations, whereas number 28, with a fondness for Finnish vodka and the piano sonatas *of one Mr Ludvig van Beethoven, darling* was strongly in favour of the free distribution of birdseed in any amount she deemed appropriate, and would feign retching at the mere mention of the rules.

Trombones

From what I could tell, the majority of the residents were women, and of the men there seemed to be only a few who were present with wives, the rest either being divorced, widowers, or bachelors from the very beginning.

One morning I met one of the few couples there when I was sent to return a recently repaired kitchen drawer to their flat, number 15. A white-haired woman with glasses half the size of her head answered the door and invited me in. Instantly I was struck by a wave of heat and eucalyptus oil, mixed with the unmistakable aroma of bacon and eggs. At first my eyes could only see with a degree of ease while squinting. Across the room, in front of the sliding glass doors, a giant of a man was sitting in an armchair with a blanket covering his lap and a ventilator on the ground beside him, where you might have expected to find a faithful dog. He waved me over with a hand the size of a bear paw and told me that he used to run a winery, almost single-handedly, before suddenly making me swear, *swear you'll look after your knees. Closer, I want to see the whites of your eyes when you say it.* After the aromatic onslaught, I doubted there was any white left, but all the same I leant in closer and looked him straight in the eye and swore that I would look after my knees, no matter what.

Often the sentences of the couple overlapped, or each simply spoke as if the other were no longer speaking. When he asked me to help him up, I grabbed a hold of his forearms and gradually pulled him to his feet. He was stooped and yet still a good head and a half taller than me. The woman smiled and spoke as if he were no longer even in the room with us anymore. *He was the strongest man I've ever known, the absolute strongest, and the kindest you'd ever likely come across. There's a photograph of him*

somewhere holding our four children up in the air, one in each arm, one on each shoulder. The strongest, without a doubt the strongest.

Stuck in the tree

Before the handyman left for the better paying position of working in a state prison, I helped him build a railing above an embankment near the main entrance, in case car passengers got confused and took a tumble down to the road below. The insurance company insisted.

Then he was off to be retrained and I was left to plant out a flower bed to help soften the sight left behind by our construction efforts. I made enquiries at a local nursery to see what plants might be suitable, and later, beginning to turn the soil, I could hear a voice coming from somewhere and looked up to see a short woman looking down at me from her balcony, the number 17 stencilled on the concrete base beneath her. *I said now at least I'll get to see some colour from behind these dreadful iron grills. I'll give you a thousand dollars if you help me break out of here.* The offer was tempting but I decided not to act on it right away, in case it was more urgently needed further down the line. *At least you're trying to make something beautiful. That's the very least we can do. But unfortunately your flower bed will only be a small section on an otherwise enormous canvas irreparably damaged by the onslaught of manmade grey.*

She said it wouldn't be so bad were the house she'd lived in for the past thirty years not sitting a six minute drive away, currently uninhabited. Once her husband had died, her sons decided that she was no longer in a fit state to be living alone, and so arranged for her to be moved *into this old people's home, that's what it is, why don't they just say it? You look like you could use a whiskey.* I said maybe later and meant it. *Alone. My sons wouldn't know what it is to be alone, truly alone.*

In the final years of his life, her husband had retreated more and more into the machinations of his increasingly muddled mind. She first began to notice the change in him when he would suddenly burst out laughing for no particular reason. Soon thereafter

he was dancing around in the middle of the street—*dressed or otherwise*—and she ended up having to lock the front gate and hide the key. But it never stopped him from trying to climb over. Often she'd find him passed out from exhaustion under a nearby tree, impossible to wake, and far too large for her to move on her own. So she would sit there with him, whatever the weather, and look at the tree stump that they had oiled together all those years ago so as to help preserve the rings, for the rings, they knew, would outlast them all.

Gateway to heaven

Boris had been living at the home longer than anyone. Securing a place soon after the initial round of construction was completed, he moved in almost twenty years ago, to unit number 2, having been beaten to number 1 by a whisker. A cat's whisker, as it turned out, for pets were forbidden in the new establishment and it took Boris longer than expected to find a home for his cat, since each of his four children were reluctant to receive a fluffy ginger addition to their household, a daughter finally obliging on condition of a sufficient monthly financial incentive. *She'll still ask for it now one way or another, a cheque here and there. That first day just got the ball rolling. And that cat's been dead for donkey's. Though at least I get photos of the kids, and one of them could pass for my wife, she really could.*

Unless the weather was particularly foul, Boris could usually be found somewhere on the grounds working on one of his dry stone walls. Modesty prevented him from detailing his achievements, but apparently he had built every wall you came across within the boundaries of the village. He was a chemical engineer before retiring, with no building experience whatsoever, it was just something he picked up *bit by bit* as he found all kinds of rock left behind following the construction, and a lot of it he moved *bit by bit* to the unused cavity beneath his building, and then *bit by bit* he would start making little walls here and there, something to accentuate a garden bed perhaps, add a little texture to the surrounding environment, or counterbalance the boring mere utility of the tasteless 1980s architecture. Usually he'd settle on a starting point and then start shifting rocks about.

He'd pick a piece, roll it around in his hand, get a good feel for it, and then see where it would lead. He'd familiarise himself with the edges, and in the end he said it was kind of like putting a giant jigsaw puzzle together, except that there was always more than one place for any particular piece to go. It soon became a part of his day as important as washing his face with cold water first thing on waking. Besides, he didn't want to agitate himself anymore with the superficialities of the newspapers or the nightly news. *The world is always ending. I may as well build a decent wall in the meantime.*

Often he let the screeching cockatoos late in the afternoon signal the end of his working day. They made him think of the sky tearing open in two, and he would half imagine the sound of brass horns and bells soon to follow, as if announcing the final meeting of the world above with the world below. Afterwards, if anyone was left behind, they could come and see how his walls had held up under the strain.

All the feathers

Unlike Boris and his cockatoos, for me the lawnmower was starting to sound like the end of the world. Apart from the scent of freshly mown grass, the only upside was how I would notice the slightest utterance once the machine had been shut off, such as a tiny bird foraging under foliage in a nearby garden bed, or at the end of autumn some of the last fallen leaves getting caught in a slight breeze and emitting crunchy dry whispers as they hit up against the corner of a wall and swirled about.

Through a mist that had gathered, I could make out Boris seated on a plastic milk crate, rolling a piece of rock around in his hand about the size of a tennis ball, only flatter. I was about to head over to say hello but stopped on seeing him drop the rock, reach into his shirt pocket and take out a pen and a piece of paper, which he slowly unfolded as if it were a delicate treasure map. Jotting something down, he then repeated the process in reverse, until the rock was once again rolling around in his hand. I decided to leave him alone for a while and went off to finish an herb garden that I'd earlier started mulching. When I returned he told me that he had been thinking of his brother again, specifically

remembering the day when they had met up in London after some years apart, and how his brother had brought with him a book as a gift, the name of which Boris *for the life of me* could not remember, and yet he could easily picture his brother walking towards him that day and picture exactly what he was wearing, *brown jacket, white shirt, red scarf, oxblood boots*, and even the kind of bags that he had brought with him, *one beige and leather, the other a dark canvas* but nothing about the book except for a random line that would come every now and then and knock upon his consciousness, as if his brother himself were reading aloud to him, softly, from a simultaneously near and far distance.

Key of the door

He looked like he was sleeping when I found him, but he wasn't sleeping of course, he was dead. We'd only been speaking a short while earlier as he went about working on another stone wall. It was the bingo time of the month again, and I had said to him: *Come on, we don't have to play, we can just sit and have a drink together and listen to the numbers as they're called. They might remind us of old telephone numbers from our glory days, and then who knows what memories might come up?* He guffawed, harder than I would have expected, cupped my shoulder, nodded, and said he would see me later. Now I can't help but wonder what he might have read behind my eyes.

As bingo was starting, I'd been stealthily sinking plastic cups of sauvignon blanc before exiting out the back entrance between the calling out of numbers. There was no answer when I knocked on the door. I knew Boris wouldn't have been outside as it was getting too late, the sun was setting, a wind was growing, and history showed that he would've by now been sitting feet up with a popped open bottle of stout in hand, watching his favourite early evening comedy shows. *Come on, Boris, open up.* So I knocked again and turned the knob and saw him there in his armchair, his hands upturned in his lap as if they were offering themselves to be manacled, and between them sat a heavily creased sheet of paper, which I folded and put away in my pocket, without hesitation.

Shearer was in between calling out numbers again, and so I went up and whispered

the news in her ear. She nodded, called out the next number, and a woman down the back I'd not seen before yelled out: *Bingo!*

Man alive

In her office Mrs Shearer wanted to know if I was sure. *Are you sure? You have to be sure.* Her cheeks turned red and the building water in her eyes started to overflow. My hands were about to try and comfort her but it only reminded me all the more of my wife, and so I put them to my side and insisted that they accompany the rest of my body out the door.

The bingo crowd were beginning to slowly disperse. Boris much preferred the more peaceful climes of the open air or the simple cushioning comforts of his flat at the end of the day, rather than ceaselessly chatting with his fellow tenants. But every second Monday, he would have to make his way into the manager's office to pay his upkeep fees. It took six weeks after she'd started before he realised that the less he saw of Mrs Shearer the better. According to Boris, she had the unnerving ability of always referring to herself regardless of what you had said to her. For instance, you had a close friend die in the war? *Last night she was watching a movie and the bad guys were the Germans on the North African coast.* Your hip's been playing up and you're due to have some tests done on it soon? *Her son hurt his knee playing football and is considering surgery.* Your car won't start and you're waiting for a taxi to take you to the supermarket? *She's thinking of trading in her hatchback for something sleeker.* You're getting together with some old friends in New Zealand next month? *She was glad she attended her high school reunion last year.* Some intense personal memories have arisen upon a recent rereading of Henry IV, Part One? *Her roommate in college once had a cat named Ophelia.* You just completed a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle depicting Custer's Last Stand? *She's having curry for dinner tonight.*

Now the last of the light was leaving. Leaning against a wall, still warm from the afternoon sun, I unfolded the piece of paper and looked through what Boris had left

behind. It read:

He knew immediately that I was watching him, loneliness had sharpened his instincts.

Orange trees and jasmine were growing in the courtyard and the arches were covered with vines.

If life has no intention of doing you any favours, I'd rather go where I can't be expecting any.

Self-sufficient and indifferent to the suffering of the rest of the world, with the unquestioning straightforward glance of an animal.

She led me along on littered slopes, past shattered china and bits of wire and broken springs and rusty pipes, all glimmering grotesquely in the moonlight.

In a way you look older, and in another way you look younger, first one and then the other.

It was here that I learned how memory can keep the diseased heart beating.

None of it felt real, and for one paralytic moment I was sure I was gliding away into another sphere of sensations.

I feel a small electric flash of love go out toward anyone I am in contact with, no matter who it is or where.

The real remembrance lies in a momentary fragrance.

It's the thing hiding inside us that gives us shivers.

I knew he was awake, staring ahead as if he were gazing into a mirror, searching for something neither on the earth nor in the sky.

Physical uneasiness can instil odd thoughts into the mind, thoughts frilled all up in

their elaborateness, in all the bizarre intuitive fullness of a dream.

But of course the truth is that intimacy and closeness were all an intricate hoax, an ingenious dream, a subtle but half-hearted mirage.

Be fragile, be tender, humiliate yourself and let the discolouration of the dream close in on you.

The reality becomes a cruel dream while the dream fades into a tender manmade reality.

But all attempts at verbal communication he had surely dismissed as vanity years and years ago.

A penetrating yet unseeing gaze, as if he were looking through me as through glass down corridors scarcely human.

You remain alone, you can't get inside the rest, they can't get inside you.

A million little spirits each with their own peculiar tastes, hopelessly far away from one another.

But as I was beginning to doze off I heard a sound, a low buzz, steady and quite inexplicably frightening, the sound of time rolling past, and the world turning on its tiny axis.

In my dream it appeared, among other things, that the oranges had dried out, had turned hollow and metallic, had changed into little bells.

§

It didn't take me long to pack. In fact I left as light as ever. The couple of books I'd brought with me I dropped on the steps of the local library.

Driving back down the mountains, heading east towards the city, my fingers wouldn't

let the dial settle on any particular station, until eventually the stirrings of a familiar song led the hand back to join the other on the steering wheel. I rolled up my sleeves as pictures of my wife started coming through again, her shiny legs in a pretty red dress, her dark hair, her dark mouth, the way the car would warmly smell of her on cold winter mornings, the way she would say Saskatchewan. So at the next set of lights I turned around and headed back west again, and this time kept going.

The bush in this place is blessed. Black cockatoos bicker in the air above the edge of the escarpment.

At the retirement village, the man in number 12 saw fit to trim the lawn edges outside his front door with a pair of craft scissors and a purple plastic ruler, when he thought I wasn't looking. Any attempt to meet his exacting standards I knew would inevitably end in failure. Once, after necking a bottle in front of the muscleman mirror, I went and asked him whether he had ever been married, and he said: *A bachelor knows a woman better than anyone. That's why he's a bachelor.*

I've thought about searching for the book, of course, which led Boris to write down his randomly collected lines, but at the moment I doubt I would handle all the different kinds of noises that could come along with it.

You mightn't think all zeros and ones could make such a racket, but they can.

So here's a paper plane instead. Watch it leave its fingertip landing strip, glide out over the edge.

That's why he's a bachelor.

That's why.

Jonathon Kane currently resides in the Blue Mountains of Australia, and is currently reading Francis Picabia.