GOING DOWN SWINGING

No. 29

the unguarded word

'One of the most engaging features is the refreshing variety of approaches to storytelling to be found therein ... which are arranged with a kind of curatorial parataxis.'

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Luis Gonzalez Serrano, Associate Director of Overload Poetry Festival

GOING DOWN SWINGING

No. 29

Published 2009 by Going Down Swinging Inc.
PO Box 24, Clifton Hill, 3068, Victoria, Australia.
Email: info@goingdownswinging.org.au
Web: goingdownswinging.org.au
Distributed by Tower Books: towerbooks.com.au

Editors: Lisa Greenaway & Klare Lanson
Proofreader: Jacqueline Blanchard
Interns: Sophie K. Horgan, Natalie Coish & Alecia Fiona Wonsack

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Cover Artwork: Mila Faranov
Cover & Book Design: Alan Perry, Morpheus Studios
Printed By: Arena Printing & Publishing
Printed on 100% recycled paper using vegetable-based inks.
CD Mastered By: Adam Dempsey, Deluxe Mastering
CD Manufactured By: MultipliCD
Website Designer & Sponsor: Rohan Latimer

Typeset in Century Schoolbook

ISBN 978-0-9804053-4-7
ISSN 0157 3950

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Going Down Swinging gratefully acknowledges the support of the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

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Overload Poetry Festival would like to acknowledge support for the recording project from its major sponsor City of Yarra.

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In the December edition of *Meanjin* (68:4), James Guida rides with the early skateboarders, Helen Barnes-Bulley takes a look at the meaning behind clothes in literature, Ian Syson gives us the lowdown on soccer and Stephen Downes serves it up to restaurant reviewers. Jane Gleeson-White ponders the power of storytelling, novelist Charlotte Wood considers the ethics of using real lives in fiction and Ben Eltham puts himself in the thick of the Australian Arts Festival scene. Mel Campbell examines Michael Jackson's unsayable paradoxes, Sarah Kanowski witnesses the prohibited art of shadow puppetry and Claire Scobie tells the story behind the repatriation of Aboriginal remains. In fiction, we have new writing by Patrick Allington, Morris Lurie, Maya Linden, Clinton Caward, Nicola Redhouse and N.K Mara. In poetry we will announce the winner of the 2009 Dorothy Porter Poetry Prize. Available in all good bookshops from November 24.

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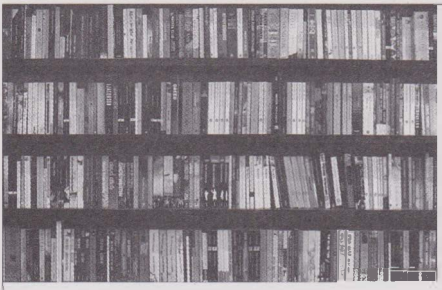

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$14.95 per issue in bookshops

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1. Interlude (2:15) *IQ, Ezra Bix & the Showcase audience* [1]

2. Alas (for Jas H Duke) (0:24) *π.o. (Melbourne AUS)* [4]

3. Haiku (0:13) *Ahmed Hashim with translation read by James Waller (Melbourne AUS)*
From 'Baghdad in Haiku's Eyes - Only the Donkey knew the truth' by Ahmed Hashim. Music from 'Words from Eden' by Ahmed Mukhtar. [3]

4. This is My Family (1:07) *Ali Cobby Eckermann (Koolunga AUS)* [5]

5. Haiku (0:10) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

6. Some Final Regard (1:59) *Nathan Curnow (Ballarat AUS)* [6]

7. Carrying the World (4:25) *Maxine Beneba Clarke (Melbourne AUS)* [5]

8. The Girl (2:07) *Ateif Khieri (Canberra ACT)*
Translated into English by Timur Hammond. [3]

9. The Sun Right Now (After Seeing Bonnard in Rome) (0:54) *Miles Allinson (Melbourne AUS)* [6]

10. Gig2 (3:28) *Jo Truman & Warren Burt (Sydney & Wollongong NSW)* [7]

11. Night Shift on the Dementia Floor (1:55) *Molly Case (London UK)* [8]

12. Haiku (0:24) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

13. Ambiguous Mirrors (extract) (6:13) *Andy Jackson, Rachael Wenona Guy & David Churchill (Melbourne AUS)* [9]

14. In the Vincent Price Room (3:06) *Richard Lemm (Charlottetown CAN)* [1]

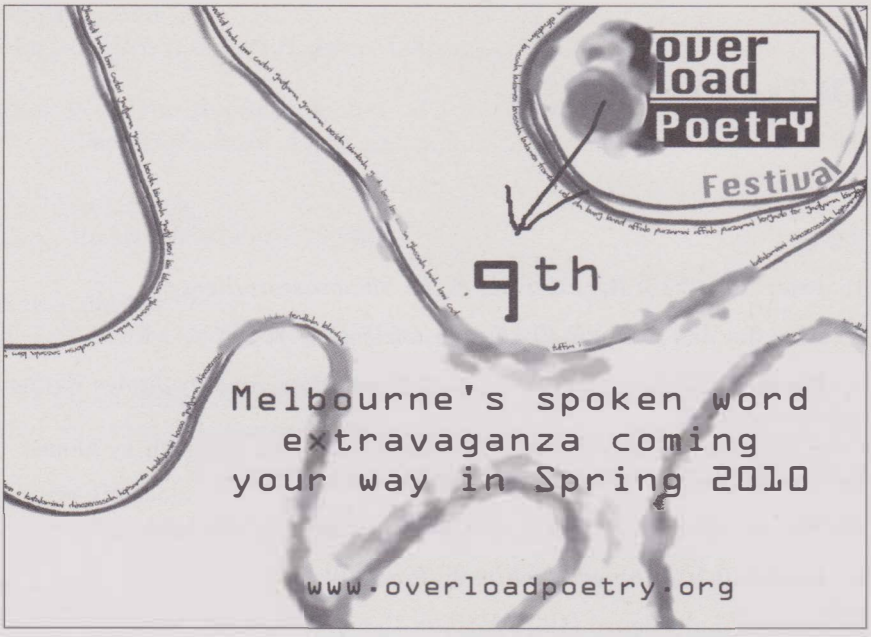
15. Haiku (0:12) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

16. 8x10 Colour Enlargement $16.50 (3:19) *Cate Kennedy (Benalla AUS)* [6]

17. Storm Coming (2:16) *Felix Nobis (Melbourne AUS)* [1]

18. Book of Screams (3:50) *Afeif Ismail Abdelrazig with translation read by Vivienne Glance (Perth AUS)*
Translated by Dr Aida Seif El-Dawla. [3]

19. Haiku (0:14) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]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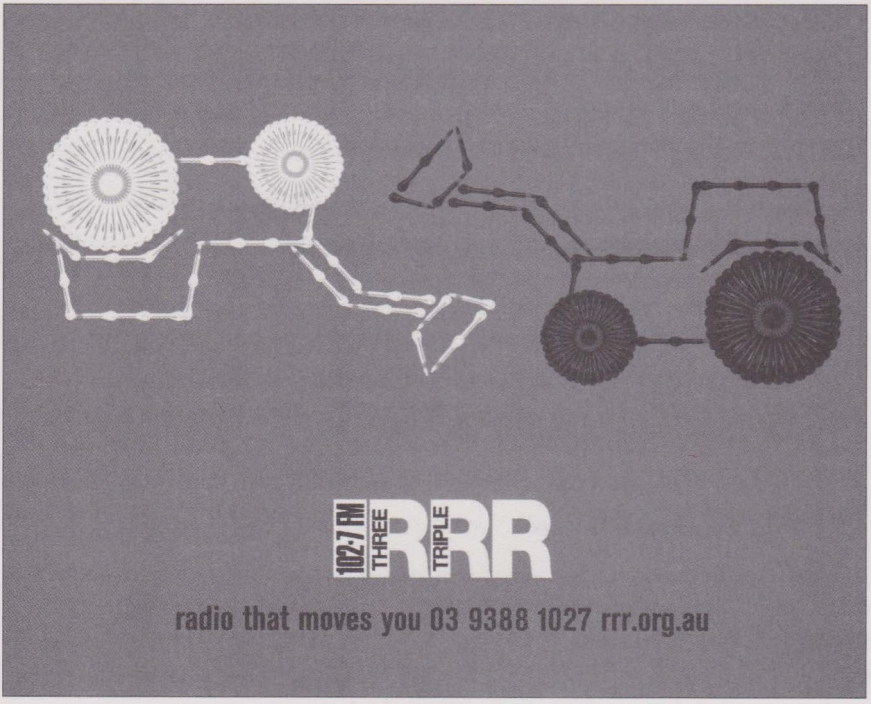
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20. In the Summertime (2:33) *Santo Cazzati (Melbourne AUS)* [7]

21. The Talk About Excellence (2:24) *Peter Murphy (Melbourne AUS)* [11]

22. Irish Girl (3:40) *The Bedroom Philosopher (Melbourne AUS)*
Words & music by Justin Heazlewood, from 'Songs From the 86 Tram'. [2]

23. Interlude (0:11) *IQ & the Showcase audience* [1]

24. Poem for the Anthem for a Generation (4:47) *Anthony WP O'Sullivan (Melbourne AUS)* [10]

25. Moments of This Sickness (2:27) *Carmen Main & Steve Smart (Melbourne AUS)* [7]

26. Waystations (4:59) *Warren Burt (Wollongong AUS)* [11]

27. Haiku (0:16) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

28. A Face to Touch (3:08) *Benjamin Theolonius Sanders (IQ) (Memphis USA & Melbourne AUS)* [8]

29. Haiku (0:15) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

30. Softly & Suddenly: Part One (3:43) *Sean M Whelan & The Interim Lovers (Melbourne AUS)*
Words by Sean M Whelan, music by Andrew Watson. Andrew Watson: Violin, Ruvith Abraham: Drums, Chris Lynch: Guitar. [12]

31. Interlude (0:21) *IQ & the Showcase audience* [1]

32. In the Boot of Someone's Car (2:09) *Josephine Rowe (Melbourne AUS)* [1]

33. Haiku (0:20) *Ahmed Hashim & James Waller* [3]

34. Collage (extract) (8:11) *L. E. Scott (Aotearoa/New Zealand & USA)* [1]

All tracks recorded at *Overload Poetry Festival: The (Un)common Tongue* Melbourne, 4 – 13 September 2009. Recorded by Nik Slowiaczek, Lisa Greenaway, Alecia Fiona Wonsack, Rose Paton, Mathew Thomas & Kendal Coombs, except for Track 11, recorded in Bristol by Ralph Juergen Colmar & sent to Melbourne audiences via Skype. Recorded at the following festival events:

1. 'Surprise Showcase' festival closing night, Dante's, Fitzroy, 14.9.09
2. 'Wordplay' The Dan O'Connell Hotel, 10.9.09
3. 'The Universal Tongue' Atherton Gardens, Fitzroy, 6.9.09
4. 'But Is It Poetry II: Amalgams' Glitch, North Fitzroy, 9.9.09
5. 'Overload All-Stars' Northcote Social Club, 9.9.09
6. 'Passionate Tongues' Brunswick Hotel, 7.9.09
7. 'But Is It Poetry I: Voiceprints' Glitch, North Fitzroy, 6.9.09
8. 'Skype Slam' ACMI Melbourne & Arnolfini Bristol, UK (at the Bristol Poetry Festival) 12.9.09
9. 'Words Are Diamonds' Dante's Fitzroy, 11.9.09
10. 'Takin' it to the Streets 2' festival opening night Southpaw, Fitzroy, 4.9.09
11. 'But Is It Poetry IV: Voiceprints' Glitch, North Fitzroy, 11.9.09
12. 'Poetic Riffs' Bella Union Bar, Carlton, 5.9.09

Editorial I ... Lisa Greenaway

IT WAS AN IDEA whose time had come so, on 4th September *Going Down Swinging* took a deep breath, pressed the 'record' button and dove head first into *Overload Poetry Festival* with, ten days later, over 20 hours of aural poetics clocked up.

It could easily be the kind of experience that numbs, listening to so many voices. But the mechanics of the mind in listening is something else. There is the voice resonating in your ears — a sound as old as the taste of water. Even in a language not understood, the voice gives you signifiers and meaning. From the first unpredictable invitation of the story, lights switch on or off inside. You hear what you want to hear and, through the course of a story, you may be present or wandering according to the individual alchemy of mind meeting matter. Attention swings away on its personal detours: then sometimes, a storyteller will just pick up your mind and carry it away, guiding you through their own terrain.

What will grab you is as unique as your thumbprint. Storytellers simply press their own onto the paper or the airwaves. Then, like minds meet, and the imprint is passed along. How these imprints progress through our collective evolution is of particular interest to me and I like to think that as one of the many editors and producers in the world I am helping evolution along here, making the connections possible.

Festivals are concentrations of possibility, putting crowds of storytellers together with crowds of listeners. The likelihood of connection increases exponentially because the energy of all that exchange must create its own momentum. To distil that energy into 78 minutes — it's a potent brew. You may lose your head, but sometimes, that's what it's all about.

After the festival I was asked what inspires and drives me and I answered:

Poetry, being the freeway from the heart to the head. Stories, being the long way 'round. Music, being the scenic route. Voices, being the road. With a mind for the destination but the time for the detour. The senses being the vehicle and love, the fuel.

Here at GDS, we're as interested in the vehicle as we are in the destination. The act of listening is itself an act of faith. I want to give special thanks to Alecia Fiona Wonsack and Nik Slowiaczek for their commitment to the expedition; Bruce Berryman and Archie Cuthbertson at RMIT, without whom we wouldn't have had a record button to press. I'd also like to thank the poets I met at this festival who restored my faith in the power of the voice. It's the people you meet along the road that make the trip a journey.

And of course my co-Editor Klare for the beautiful job curating the book, and who shared this intensive experience of listening. We hope you find your own connections in this issue, perhaps even get carried completely away.

Editorial II ... Klare Lanson

I SOMETIMES WONDER whether Guy Debord had any idea just how much of an impact his *Guide Psychogeographique De Paris'* would have on the world after creating it in the middle of last century. A map of Paris cut up to re-imagine a city, interpreting a social network and the ambience of place. Did he realise he coined the phrase for a concept that writers have been struggling with since plant-fibre paper became the primary medium for writing? The Bauhaus Imaginiste were the ones to publish Debords hyper-graphic and I'm sure those cats knew.

Here we are then, with the 29th issue of *Going Down Swinging* and whilst putting the book together and listening to the *Overload Poetry Festival* via Lisa's extensive live recordings and magnificently produced CD, I cannot get Guy Debord out of my mind.

This book and CD collection has a micro-chip of psycho geography securely implanted in its body of work and my dark grey felt skinny brim pork pie hat is off to the writers, poets and artists who created them. These contributors are unguarded — carving through genre and style with ease and fearless exposure, like a thoughtfully composed photograph taken at high speed.

Mila Faranov's intriguing female landscape was found slinking around the skirting board of the Linden Galleries and is now firmly transplanted on the cover. Ivy Alvarez's *Jane's To Do List* is a stunning projection of internal thought processes onto domestic surroundings. The suburban wanderings of Sean M Whelan's *Suicide is Never Funny Unless You're Dead,* and *Where the Wild Things Aren't* (this issue's commissioned graphic novella by Oslo Davis) both beautifully capture the influence of a particular aspect of a city or landscape on the psyche. The facial panorama of Ashley Cape's *Stubble* is a poignant snapshot and Chris Flynn's hilarious story *Sunburns I Have Known and Loved* jolts us into a fresh awareness of the interior topography.

The remarkable performances on this special live CD are testament to the influence of mark making using the voice, charting our emotional terrain and getting down to business.

Just like those post-war players in the '50s, we are still looking to find a justified place for artists and writers in the machine age, these technological times of ours; a place that's not rewarded for its success or failure but rather for its ability to document, understand, entertain, map and to voice the relationship between the outer environment and the human mind.

These are not wild times. These are hard times. Pretty soon, the community is coming up to bat. It's time.

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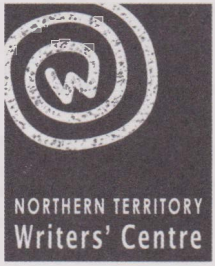
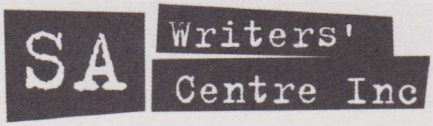
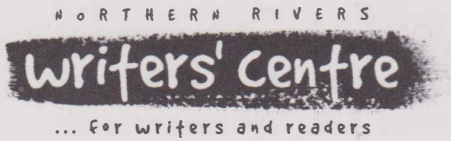






Thanks to ...

Christabel Harvey, Kath Freeth and everyone at Arts Victoria; Barbara Creed and the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne; Dave Houchin, Olivia Simon and all at 3RRRFM; our Management Committee Stephen Grimwade, Adam Ford, Kevin Brophy, Eve Merton and Genevieve Wearne; John Hinkson and Scott Norton at Arena Printing and Publishing; Adam Dempsey at Deluxe Mastering, and Jack the Bear's most excellent mastering studio; Renee Rhodes and the good people at MultipliCD; Chris Makin and Michael Rakusin from Tower Books; our literary friends at *Overland, Voiceworks, Australian Book Review* and *Meanjin*; all the spunks at SPUNC; Alan Perry for going beyond the call of design duty; our meticulous proof reader Jacqueline Blanchard; our web man Rohan Latimer; our fabulous new interns Sophie K. Horgan and Natalie Coish in the GDS office and Alecia Fiona Wonsack for helping lead the volunteer army on our recording mission — and those fantastic volunteers, Nik Slowiaczek, Rose Paton, Matthew Thomas and Kendal Coomes; James Waller, Luis Gonzalez Serrano and all who sailed in the *Overload Poetry Festival* this year, and Bruce Berryman, Archie Cuthbertson and RMIT for supporting the project with their equipment and expertise; the Northcote Social Club, MC Michael Nolan and bP for launching us in Melbourne and Brooke Olsen, 2FBi, Tiani Chillemi and the *Anode Festival* for launching us in Sydney; Mongo and the *IndieFeed Performance Poetry Channel* for sharing the airtime; our commissioned performers Fraser Mackay and Josephine Rowe; Mila Faranov for her enticing cover artwork; Oslo Davis for a timely and poignant graphic novella; the talented and inspiring writers and artists from around the world who fill these pages; our supportive community across the country and beyond who keep us engaged; and YOU — reader of this book, listener to these gathered sounds — thank you for supporting the independent press.

Whereabouts

Derek Motion

the horde of kids circled the cul-de-sac endlessly
on bikes, roller skates, anything with wheels, but
on the afternoon of sudden departure (when all things
were sudden in our minds) they attempted a shower of
bric-a-brac. tiny plastic figurines & comic books
were the first expressions of a devotion based on locale,
moulding so shadowed as to now appear a generic
yellow & orange blob — nothing as concrete as a smurf,
or a superman in flight.

but then the gifting became the game
& obscene objects were held up zealously.
a guiness world book of records, circa 1983,
one signal things had got out of hand; the bmx
ludicrous for it's dimensions (a removal truck
so obviously cramming itself within metres).

the final moment of farce was the nameless boy
holding a pair of underpants up from his window. but
living in a circle like that, wheeling perpetual tight curves,
it gave credence to this 'not saying things as they are meant'.
feeling is always implied and laughed off.

like paling fences built to disregard your best adulthood advance.
like a giant peppercorn that stubbornly ignores your posting,
your departure. everything is offered but nothing taken.
except the desperate expression circling
the eyes of the boy, of the underpants.

Language and Sediment — North

Matthew Hall

dustwet ridges
eddying. subsidiary. barely felt
helical swatches of light
adhere to an illusionary place
latticed memory as landscape at once
streaming grasses. meadow creased pigments
a palate of inky substrates
and dull traceries
a silent boundary upon
marrow coloured eyes

Suicide is Never Funny Unless You're Dead

Sean M Whelan

I WROTE THIS. I wrote this in chalk on the pavement outside the church at the end of my street. I started at the front door and worked my way around the block. I didn't know how much chalk I would need so I took a whole bucket with me. I'm not stupid.

This is the first lie I have told in this tale.

I'm writing this. I'm in present tense now. I'm intensely present now. My script is cursive and considerate across the sidewalk down Ruckers Hill towards Merri Creek.

I'm writing a letter asking the author to respond. There is so much to be explained. My flow is slow but steady. The air is cold and as sharp as a box.

I like this weather. It reminds me of red lampshades, warm kitchens and the comfort in being sad.

I'm writing all this from the front door of the church at the end of my street and I'll go as long as I have to. I have many questions but I have never enjoyed the closing credits of answers.

While writing this letter on the footpath I pass many mailboxes. At each mailbox I pause to feel if the heat of a love letter is burning inside. I hold out my hands at a safe distance and feel ... nothing.

Nobody writes love letters anymore.

In my charm filled lifetime I have written two significant letters to which I have received no response. The first was to a high school crush, her name was Blank Blank. It was the last day of high school and it was a now or never situation. I cut my heart out and squeezed it all over the page like a red lemon. Email would have been easier but we didn't have it in those days. I gave the letter to a friend and asked him to place it in her hand because I knew if I attempted such a thing, I would surely catch fire. She has never responded. But I remain hopeful.

The second letter I wrote was many years later to the New York film director, Woody Allen. I had just seen one of his movies at the Nova Cinema. The movie was *Match Point*. I was left completely unsatisfied, my disappointment as sharp as a box. 'Stay out of Europe, Woody' was my quick

capsule review, and still stands today. I returned to my car to find a parking ticket on the windscreen for overstaying my welcome. I found his management's address on IMDb and wrote a long and considerate letter to Woody explaining that since I had paid good money to see his movie and had done so many times in the past perhaps he would be good enough to spot me the cash to pay for the parking fine. I did not mention my poor opinion of *Match Point.*

I wasn't stupid. He has never responded. Of this, I am not so hopeful.

Sometimes I think these two incidents are somehow related. Sadly these letters are not included amongst the lies in this story. When Nick Cave sings 'Bukowski was a jerk! Berryman was best!' he's referring to the two American poets, Charles Bukowski and John Berryman. In 1972 Berryman jumped off a Minneapolis bridge to look at life from a completely different angle. He missed the water, landed in the mud and died from slow suffocation. Take note of this and always check your flight path in advance. The mud sucked the life out of him through underground tunnels and drew it all back into the core of the earth.

Suicide is never funny unless you're dead.

The core of the earth is a wonderful place to laugh, sit on a box and warm your hands in front of the eternal pile of burning love letters.

I'm writing all this on the pavement from the front door of the church around my block and now it's taken me to the Westgarth Bridge under which I stand. I've written several more lies in this story now but they're all wearing tuxedos and have the best intentions.

I come across Berryman and Bukowski, two serial liars like myself, standing under the bridge. I think they live there. I think they're friends now. I think maybe they haven't been accepted at the campfire circle surrounding the burning love letters in the core of the earth. That's why they're hanging out in my neighborhood. I call upon the authors to explain.

Bukowski just waltzes over and pisses on my chalk written letter on the pavement. This somewhat dilutes the intensity of my presence. Berryman looks at me and says 'I feel like getting confessional. I'm scared, but I'm willing. I'm sure this is a preposterous attitude, but I'm not ashamed of it.' By the time I finish writing his quote I'm a block away from them. I look up, I've gone full circle. I'm outside my door. I stand beside my letterbox.

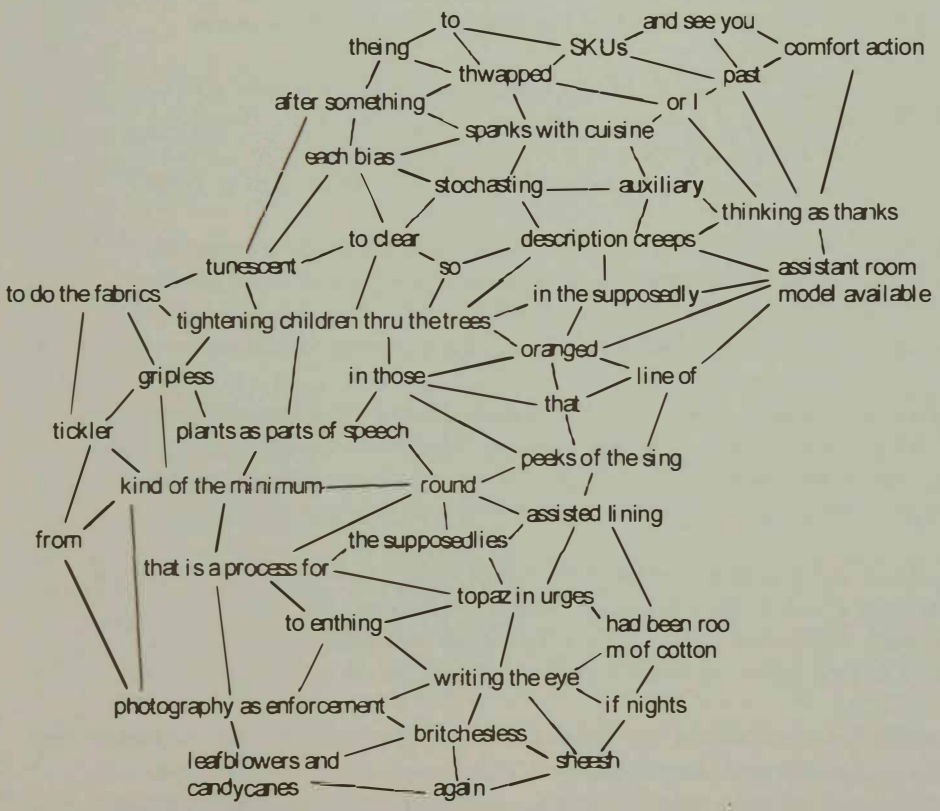
I'm intensely present.

I hold out my hands, in search of the heat. There's something coming off the letterbox, like a tiny slow-burning star. I reach for the envelope and I'm dizzy with the possibilities of it all.

Is it Woody? Or is it her?

Days (0:56)

James Sanders



Redemption

Eric Paul Shaffer

Someone convinced me that to praise Jesus, I should visit someone
languishing in jail, so I slunk my way downtown to Oh-Triple-See.
For all anybody knows, those letters could mean Oklahoma City
Community College or even Orange County Conservation Corps,

but they don't. They mean O'ahu Community Correctional Center.
The barbed wire and concrete walls are on a boulevard in Honolulu,
catty-corner from a recycling and redemption place: a nickel, a can.
I guess redemption is a good thing. It keeps the streets fairly clean.

So there I was. The clanging and slamming of steel was as musical
as it was peaceful. At random, a cheerful guard picked me a prisoner,
one with no visitors since intake. Frisked and X-rayed to invisibility,
I stared through lipstick-smudged, bullet-proof glass at one mean guy.

What could I say? I picked up the phone. So did he, a weird mirror
of reflections, shifting, and bent elbows. Warned to avoid the personal,
my tongue was tied to details of his incarceration, and they weren't
pretty. Grand larceny, drugs, domestic abuse: this guy was no friend

to Jesus, and not to me either. He asked what the hell I was doing here.
I wanted to know, too, so I asked him what he thought. He thought
I was an asshole or a fag. All his sentences included the word 'fuck'
three or four times as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, or interjection,

and I'm not used to that sort of language. Few words actually function
fully as five parts of speech. He just didn't care. To kill some time,
I asked him what he wanted, and he asked me what the hell I thought
he wanted. I was justifiably piqued by then, so I guessed he wanted

a li-hing-mui-sprinkled cherry slush from Byron's because I was sure
that's what I wanted. He was surprised, but then ardently advised me
to encounter myself sexually. By then, I'd had enough bad humour,
so I hung up and stood up. He banged his erect middle finger loudly

on the glass, and I wondered if the print on that very tip was the one
to clinch his conviction. How ironic. He ordered me to stay. I left,
and he hated me because I could. Jesus or not, I had done my time.
In my trunk, I'd crammed three reeking garbage bags of empty cans.

Sunburns I Have Known and Loved

Chris Flynn

1. France

The Catalonian with cracked teeth looked at me askance.

'Do you really have paracetamol in your room?'

He did not believe me. I had to take him up there and show him, which got me out of the sun for ten minutes. In hindsight, if I had dragged it out, I would have been better off. Unfortunately I suffered from a severe (and astoundingly foolish) misconception.

No one had ever told me your legs could get sunburned. Since I had never had the opportunity to expose them to the elements before (in Ireland you know it's summer when the rain is warm), I assumed because they were covered in a spattering of man-hair the harmful rays of the sun would not penetrate to the skin, or at least couldn't be bothered with all the trouble.

Consequently, I lay by the pool with my international companions (that's people, not my legs) for several hours, safe in the knowledge that I had applied liberal amounts of factor thirty lotion to my face, shoulders, arms, chest, back and stomach. In short, all the parts of my pale, wizened body that pesky bright star up there could touch. 'Do your worst Sol,' I wheezed. 'I've got your number this time. I can frolic by the pool with the best of them.' I left my legs untouched, naturally. Whilst I am no Pan, hairy-legged and cloven-hooved God of the forest, I do possess a thick thatch of ginger (don't laugh, we're a very sensitive minority group you know) running from waist down to ankle. It's like wearing a pair of orange slacks. How could the sun possibly harm me? Out of sheer pity, you would think he'd cut me a break.

But no. That merciless bastard. I should have picked up on the skin-tingling warnings when I was doling out the medication to my delighted Catalan friend.

'You can buy this in the supermarket?' He asked incredulously.

'Of course. I take it for hangover headaches after too many drinks.'

'Puta madre! In Catalonia, we take it before drinking, eh? It really fucks you up.'

'Does it? If you say so. Take them if you want.'

His crazed expression turned to one of awe. He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet.

'I will pay you, my friend.'

'Don't be silly,' I told him, a little puzzled. 'They only cost fifty pee.'

His jaw dropped as he translated into pesetas.

'Puta fucking madre! They do not sell these in Catalonia. Prescription only.'

I laughed, unaware in my naivety of the damage paracetamol could do to a person. It seemed highly bizarre to me that the headache pills my mother ate like Skittles should be unavailable over the counter.

'Well, Doctor Chris says you can have them for free.'

I had made a new friend. I could have just signed his death warrant of course, but how was I to know that, Your Honour?

In my first few days on the language course, glamorously located in the French alpine city of Grenoble, I had been introduced to more nationalities than I knew existed and had curried particular favour with the Catalonians, who presumably identified with the Northern Ireland struggle. Little did they know the only struggling I ever did in Belfast was trying to prevent my umbrella from being blown inside out.

Upon seeing me make an appearance by the pool, the Catalonians affectionately christened me, 'El Blanco'. I could not be sure if they were squinting at the sun glaring off the water, or off me. When I showed Jorge my legs that same evening, he insisted on parading me in front of the others. My name was duly changed to 'El Rojo'.

It was a nasty burn, but not bad enough to merit a visit to the emergency room. The most irritating aspect of it was that the sun had been on my left the whole time, so there was a long red streak down the outside of my left leg and another down the inside of my right leg. Wearing long pants was now out of the question. I discovered that after attempting to walk to the supermarket in a pair of jeans. On the return journey, I came close to taking them off altogether and walking back clad only in underpants, but modesty overcame the pain barrier. Thankfully it was only a short trip.

Shorts and sniggers faced me the following day at the University. I was enrolled in a one month crash course in French, along with a variety of Swedish, Italian, Spanish and British students, all fortunately as ignorant in the language as I. The classes were uniformly bizarre. Accents fought for domination, words from native languages were thrown in the mix, frustrations were aired and there was much rolling of French eyes from the teachers. I could not blame them. For the most part I had no idea what was going on, speaking when I had to in what must have more closely resembled Esperanto than French. The problem when learning a new language is that you know exactly what you want to say in your head, but once you open your mouth all you can say is 'I' or 'The', then you realise you have no clue how to complete the sentence.

'What did you do yesterday, Chris?' The teacher asked me. Everyone understood at least one word in her question, as I had a big piece of cardboard with my name on it on my desk. I understood 'what', 'you', 'yesterday' and 'Chris', so I was off to a good start. I could get this one.

'I ... '

Shit. I racked my brains for the vocabulary. How did you say, 'I lay by the pool and had the piss taken out of me by a bunch of paracetamol-munching Catalonians, then I got my legs sunburned to shit and walked back from the supermarket in my underpants'?

I knew the verb 'to lie down', or thought I did, plus I knew the noun for 'swimming pool' and the words for 'sun' and 'hot'. That would have to do. I cleared my throat and began afresh, acutely aware of the silence in the room as others frantically tried to work out what they were going to say when she asked them. They were all stoked that I was struggling. The stupider I was the better as far as everyone else was concerned.

'I sleep with swimming pool and sun hot on my legs.'

I was pretty pleased with that. The teacher hesitated, wondering if she should bother attempting to explain the subtle difference between the verb 'to lie down' and the polite version of the verb 'to fuck'. She wisely decided against it, concentrating instead on the latter half of my statement.

'Sunburn?' she inquired. Since I had never heard the French expression before, I had no idea what she was saying to me. The poor girl had to resort to mime, a language we were all rapidly becoming expert in. I finally understood what she was blathering on about and repeated it back.

'Yes, sunburn on my legs.'

She clapped her hands together in delight, indicating I should rise to demonstrate what I meant to the class, who looked baffled to a man. Bugger it, I thought. If I'm going to make a fool of myself, I might as well go for it.

I climbed up on the desk and lifted my shorts, alternately displaying the red and white sides of my spindly legs whilst repeating the phrase, 'Sunburn, no sunburn.'

The sight was met with equal amounts of grimaces and hoots of derision. As a comic force, I was on fire that day, more or less literally. I resumed my seat, satisfied in the knowledge that it would be someone else's turn to make an idiot of themselves now. My quota for the day had been amply filled.

In the corridor after class I lit up a cigarette, having learned to smoke earlier that week. It seemed to be the law in France. I was worried that if I was spotted by the Gendarmes without a ciggy in my gob, they would baton me to death. At that time, there had been an alarming amount of North African men falling down stairs whilst in the presence of white French cops, somehow sustaining thirty baton blows on the way and occasionally a broken neck. I had been assured that my pale skin would ensure my safety, but I was taking no chances.

The breathtakingly beautiful Italian blonde in my class approached with a smile. I looked behind me to see which lucky so-and-so she was directing it at, assuming that Swedish hunk Lars would be chatting to a flock of women in his irritating American-English accent. He was not there. I was

alone, apart from the brick wall I was leaning against and surely I had a little more going for me than that, although one could never be sure.

Our faltering conversation was held entirely in pidgin French. She spoke no English and the only Italian phrases I knew were probably best reserved for the third or fourth date.

If you think it's difficult talking to a beautiful exotic girl who is standing so close to you that the smell of the skin on her neck fills your giddy nostrils, try doing it in a language you've only been learning for a week.

Upon reflection, perhaps it was best that I could not say any of the thousand words that popped into my head. Instead of my usual stream of not-terribly-amusing-I-fancy-you-but-know-I'm-out-of-my-league garbage, I merely inhaled on my Marlboro Light, spoke slowly, softly and within minutes had agreed to go on a date to a French movie that evening.

As I watched her sashay down the corridor like a catwalk model, my heart was thumping in my chest. I felt like Alain Delon. I had not expected this. In Ireland I was a pasty, skinny, badly-dressed, loud-mouthed spiv whose idea of sex was watching *The Three Amigos* on video before trying to undo a girl's bra in a sticky fumble on the couch of the family she was babysitting for. This was a different scenario entirely. I looked down at my sunburned legs and laughed.

France made you cool.

2. Spain

Certain novelty items in tourist gift shops are designed not to be used, but only to be presented as 'amusing' souvenirs to clueless relatives and annoying work colleagues. Included in this extensive list are: Crockery, T-shirts, postcards with tits on that say, 'The Breast — Insert Name of Town — has to offer', shakable snow domes, mysterious foul-smelling candy, local crafts and funny hats. Ugh. Writing the list makes me feel nauseous.

The sombrero is a fine hat. Perfect for the Mexican Revolutionary about town and no doubt still worn by many rural farm workers and villagers today. The sombreros one finds in tourist gift shops in Spain however, are not very fine. In fact, they are truly awful. They exist merely to parody the idea of being Spanish and as such, are enormous. The top of these hats rest almost thirty centimeters above the pate of the average man and the brim stretches out to almost twice that length in every direction, ensuring the wearer is permanently cast in shadow irrespective of the hour. A length of red string usually holds the monstrosity in place around the neck. Why anyone would find this amusing is beyond my powers of comprehension.

Why anyone would purchase such an item is a question that penetrates to the very darkest corner of the heart of our civilisation, worthy only for discussion by philosophical giants such as Hume, Socrates and Kierkegaard. I fear such a debate on novelty sombreros would expose a black stain of guilt

on the human soul, present due to our unwavering failure to fully understand the complexities of cultures that are not our own, oppressing them in a deep-rooted need to feel superior. Homus Sombreros Supernus. Sombrerovorgesetztmann.

I bought one. I had to, man.

There is only one thing worse than being sunburned on the head, and that is being sunburned on the head twice in as many days. The only object on the entire east coast of Spain that could protect me from certain death by spontaneous combustion was a huge novelty sombrero. The existentialist in me was so ashamed.

There was a remote chance I could have gotten away with it, had I been staying in one of those late twentieth century cemeteries of taste and decency the British call, 'a resort', but I was far from the maddening crowds of Ibiza or Magaluf. My little sister (a misnomer if ever there was one) frequented such pits of despair; her suitcase full of Irish food she believed did not exist in Spain, such as Cornflakes and butter. Brains were thin on the ground in my family.

Instead, I was installed in the mainland Spanish coastal town of Gandia, having driven down from Grenoble with my French companions. This was a place the pasty-faced British yobbos were unaware of, serving as a prime holiday destination for the Spanish themselves. Even before I was forced to wear the Mother of all Sombreros, I stood out a mile. Everyone else on the beach was deeply tanned and had black hair. I was snow white, with spatterings of red where I had not been conscientious enough with the sunscreen. I walked by the water's edge in shorts and long-sleeved shirt, sombrero blocking out the light, limping like a hunchback (I had fractured my big toe on a sandbar on day three), delirious from sunstroke. It was impossible for me to be a worse advertisement for the Irish abroad. Every single golden-skinned Spaniard sat up to stare at me as I passed, muttering to myself about the worms that kept following me.

The second sunburn on the head sent me doo-lally. I lay on the bed in my friend's apartment for several hours, talking gibberish and making strange whistling noises. An hour after everyone had gone out dancing, I decided to go for a walk, or a hobble at any rate, ensuring that I strapped on my flamethrower before I left. Those worms I kept seeing were annoying me, but I held them at bay by stopping every ten paces in the street and immolating them with my trusty weapon, making whooshing noises as I spewed the flames of death across the pavement. Naturally I warned any bystanders to get out of the way, although some may have received imaginary first-degree burns from the worm platoons shrieking in terror as they attempted to escape, their little uniforms ablaze.

Eventually I tired of trying to fend them off and started running back in the direction of the apartment. Long black spines began to sprout from my forearms, which I pulled out in distress, droplets of scarlet blood

remaining as they came out by the roots. The lift of the apartment block had thousands of human teeth lined along the edge of the doors, so there was no way I was getting in there. I took the stairs, even though we were on the eighth floor. I had to hurry. The worm army was right behind me and they looked angry. They wanted revenge for the deaths of their fallen comrades. I stopped on the fifth floor, howling as I used the last of the fuel in my flamethrower to fill the staircase with an inferno of fire. Out of gas, I slipped the heavy weapon off my sweating back. As the flames subsided, the worms emerged, the front row of soldiers bearing grim, determined expressions. They had me. One option remained.

I swung the window open and looked out. Five floors up. If I jumped I could make those trees, maybe. I tried to hoist myself up on the ledge, but I slipped, falling hard on the stairs, the worms only a metre away. By this stage my entire body was covered in the black spines and I realised what they were for. Curling up into myself, my body formed a ball, the spines protecting me from attack. I chuckled, rolling into the corner of the stairwell, impervious to the worm army. I breathed easy in the knowledge that I was safe. Sleep, human hedgehog, sleep ...

The sound of a vacuum cleaner awoke me, many hours later. Daylight streamed through the open window above the stairs. The worms were gone, as were my spines. I was thirsty and confused, but at least I had not pancaked myself in the alleyway behind the hotel. Shakily, I closed the window and tentatively climbed the remaining flights to my room, where I found Serge smoking a joint on the balcony. I sat next to him, accepting it gratefully. We watched the sun come up and I made an important clothing decision that I have held to ever since.

I am never more than two metres away from a hat.

Stubble

Ashley Capes

in *a fistful of dollars* clint eastwood's stubble
is thick enough to hide deer
or slow-witted
prospectors

an entire town could crop up
in the hollow of a cheek
with a village square
and a well
in the nick from a razor

and in the unlikely event of a smile

panic as the forest
sways.

Mimic

Jen Marie Davis

SHE'S AMERICAN AND SHE PULLS the costume, beaded and stitched in Istanbul, from her bag. Spreads it on the restroom counter, untangles strands of glass from sequin. Removes her jeans and T-shirt and unfolds the velvet skirt. Pulls it and the beaded belt over her hips. Slides bra straps over shoulders. Reaches behind; clasps, snaps. Feels the weight, all those beads, green and glinting under the bathroom's fluorescent light.

1998: scientists discover the Indonesian mimic octopus, *Thaumoctopus mimicus*. Living in the muddy, barren oceanscape off Sulawesi's coast, the animal is sixty centimetres long, brown and white in colour.

Elvis Aron had a still-born twin brother Jesse Garon. The thirteen year-old and parents Gladys and Vernon Presley move from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1948. In Memphis, Elvis frequents Beale Street bars in search of Mississippi Delta bluesmen.

A toilet flushes and a girl stumbles out of the stall, drink in hand. 'You look so pretty! Are you the belly dancer?' The dancer does not respond and the girl does not wait. She pushes her weight into the bathroom door, slides between the wood and the jamb, into the club's blue light.

Two years of scientific filming illustrate the impersonating abilities of the mimic octopus. To foil its predators, the octopus camouflages and contorts its eight arms and body into shapes that resemble sea snakes, lionfish, and flatfish. Its predators' predators. It is the only known animal that can imitate multiple organisms.

In 1954, Sam Phillips signs Elvis to his Sun Records label. Most of Elvis' first hit songs such as *That's All Right, I Got a Woman,* and *Baby, Let's Play House* are originally 'race' records — records by black artists.

Hands and the doumbek begin a beledi rhythm, *dun dun tek, dun tek tek.* Dancer eyes the crowd, the tables, hookah smoke. Steps through doorway, spins. Shine beads hips.

The sea is dark, muddy and wide open. An estuary. There are no coral reefs here, nowhere for the octopus to hide from approaching damselfish. As its

whites yellow and its browns black, it sucks six tentacles within itself. As the damselfish swim near, the remaining tentacles curl, wave. Two sea snakes conjoined. Noticing these poisonous predators, the damselfish swim away.

In 1968, Elvis stars as a half-Mexican, half-Native American in *Stay Away, Joe*. Only one of the film's actors really is Mexican and none are Native American. 1960's *Flaming Star* portrays Elvis as Pacer Burton, a half-white, half-Native American who must choose between his lineages. Fitted for brown contact lenses in order to look more authentic, Elvis never wears them in the film. In 1965's *Harem Scarem*, Elvis plays an American singer who falls in love with an Arabian princess. None of the 'harem' is played by a Middle Eastern girl.

The Lebanese man stands with a foot on the chair and one on the floor next to his hookah. Eyes slits, the pipe suspended from lips. Three others sit. There are no women. Another Lebanese man steps beside the dancer. Her arms undulate parallel to the floor, two pale snakes radiating from her shoulders. The Lebanese man holds a stack of bills and begins to toss them one at a time over the dancer's head. They fall, deflect from her body, her arms, to her feet.

The mollusc's cognition impresses scientists most. How does this invertebrate know which predator approaches and which predator to imitate?

Fourteen Grammy nominations, three wins, thirty one feature films, more than one billion records sold; one hundred and fifty gold, platinum, or multi-platinum records and singles, ninety Billboard charting albums, ten number one albums, one hundred and fourteen top forty songs, forty top ten songs, eighteen number one songs, nine co-written song credits, zero solo writing credits.

Torso undulates and she moves closer to the group, ball caps, jeans, college T-shirts, two hookahs. The dancer swells her chest to ceiling, movement ripples down her abdomen disappears beneath her hips. One of the kids at the table, cocked ball cap, fingers a dollar he's pulled from his jeans.

Some of Elvis' success is due in part from his stage antics — gyrating, hip-swiveling. When he appears on The Ed Sullivan Show, the cameras shoot him from the waist up. 'The first time that I appeared on stage, it scared me to death. I really didn't know what all the yelling was about. I didn't realise that my body was moving. It's a natural thing to me. So to the manager backstage I said 'What'd I do? What'd I do?' And he said 'Whatever it is, go back and do it again'.'

Freud was dead before the surface of the mimic octopus, but he may have argued on its intellectual behalf: when imitating the behaviour of another, one must understand the behaviour or movement they observe in order to properly mimic it.

'A lot of people seem to think I started this business, but rock 'n' roll was here a long time before I came along. Nobody can sing that kind of music like coloured people. Let's face it, I can't sing like Fats Domino can. I know that.'

The kid looks at torso, looks at dollar. Leans, prepares to push it into the dancer's bra. Before the stroke, the thrust, the dancer: quick upper abdominal contraction — the chest drops. Whirls to another table. The dollar hangs limp between finger and thumb.

Disappearing

Alicia Sometimes

now the mind & you play games together. what
happens when you get between your view of the world &
the world itself? do you learn to get the upper hand
by spanking the misfired thoughts like bawdy kids
beating the sand? the point of disappearing. where your
breath turns into a stretch. reading Mallarmé.
the moment you collapse into yourself

it's the lip gloss of time. looking through the wrong
end of the kaleidoscope. becoming a barbiturate
of the morning. the moment you sense passion numb &
freeze into numbers. with that hang-cat look. smoothed
out against the walls. your conversation as torn
as shavings from old shirts. the twist of disappearing.
shovelling out of the work week & into twill sheets
with a glass of juice & that bikini half-speak.
brain wants out

paragraphs (end up attired in capes) figuring out
parables in crosswords. the novel you never finished.
you know there's other ways of thinking. looks become
looping lines. flipped layers of sense. groping a sunset
in time for TV. graduating from the inspiration to page &
then back again. crumbled outcomes. whipped curses to
yourself. the things you should have done. noticing
the way we all move through the trees. feeling
mouthproof. the scattering. that nostalgia.
the point (of disappearing)

Counterpoint

Terry McArthur

Pamela intended no more than the briefest of reunions
It had been sixteen years
Years when even birthday and Christmas cards
Trickled into the abyss of separation
Years when Pamela in Paris
Translated to Pamela in self-appointed exile
And Pamela for her part grew weary of the need
To keep up appearances

On the third day of the Sister's reunion
Pamela tripped and fell down the back stairs
Onto a cluster of terracotta pot plants
Breaking her hip and spearing her arm
On a pair of oversized gardening shears

Tonight Pamela is sheathed in the red dust of a river town
Falling bit by bit into nostalgia
She sits on the front porch breaking into
French folk songs
Frightening the neighbours
Who openly wonder how a voice like that
A voice so ravenous and wild
A voice so young and full of desire
Can issue from the mouth of this crinkled old woman

Pamela is not sinking into forgetfulness
Pamela is remembering
Tonight she sees a young boy pushing into the twilight
'Nice evening for a walk'
She calls softly from her rocking chair
'Yes' he shyly replies
Avoiding her eyes

Their words resonate against the stars
A dog barks
Pamela wants to tell him

You bear the mark of Cain
This is why you are drawn to the river
This is why you will go on wandering the streets
Night after night
She repeats
'Nice evening for a walk'
The boy darts off
Leaving her to watch the curve of his body
Sniff out the river wind

Tonight Sandra calls for Pamela to come inside
'You'll catch cold'
Pamela pretends not to hear
Sandra cannot tolerate Pamela's solitude
She begins with the neighbours
'What will they think'
She moves to the weather
'I insist you stop that stupid singing
And come inside before you freeze to death'
Pamela sings even louder
She threatens with the doctors
'I'll phone Doctor Howard and tell him what you're up to'
Pamela hits B above middle C
Sandra plays her trump card
'Bernie won't stand for this
You know how he gets
I don't care whose sister she is
One more time and she's out
Broken hip or no broken hip'

Pamela's voice soars above this symphony of insistence
Her heart is sailing with the moon
She has no ears for Sandra's talk
Tonight the two sisters' songs weave in and out
As they have always done
Not as Pamela once described in different keys
But in perfect counterpoint

This is how the two sisters Pamela and Sandra White
Born four years apart in different cities to different fathers
To the same pristine mother had always been
They fought over everything

From who took first turn licking out the chocolate icing
From the sea-green mixing bowl
To who most deserved to love Hugh Cornwall
The aspiring young mathematician

Tonight as her heart sails with the moon
Pamela remembers
The last time they had spoken by not speaking
At Hugh's funeral they had stood back to back
Centimetres apart
Ignoring each other's grieving
As the burial rites swirled about them
As mourners pressed hands into their sorrow
As sponge cake and tea were served in the pale light
Of a musty church hall
Tonight Sandra's voice is clotted by the bile of her anguish
Pamela stops mid-song and announces

'I'll be leaving in the morning on the Daylight Express
Doctor Howard says I'm well enough to travel'
Sandra thinks about protesting the departure
But instead nods mutely
Suddenly ashamed
The two sisters stare awkwardly across the verandah
The strain between them stretches
And then in one shuddering motion of arms and legs
Snaps
As Pamela and Sandra embrace under the ancient starlight
Of the river town night

Sentinel

Graham Nunn

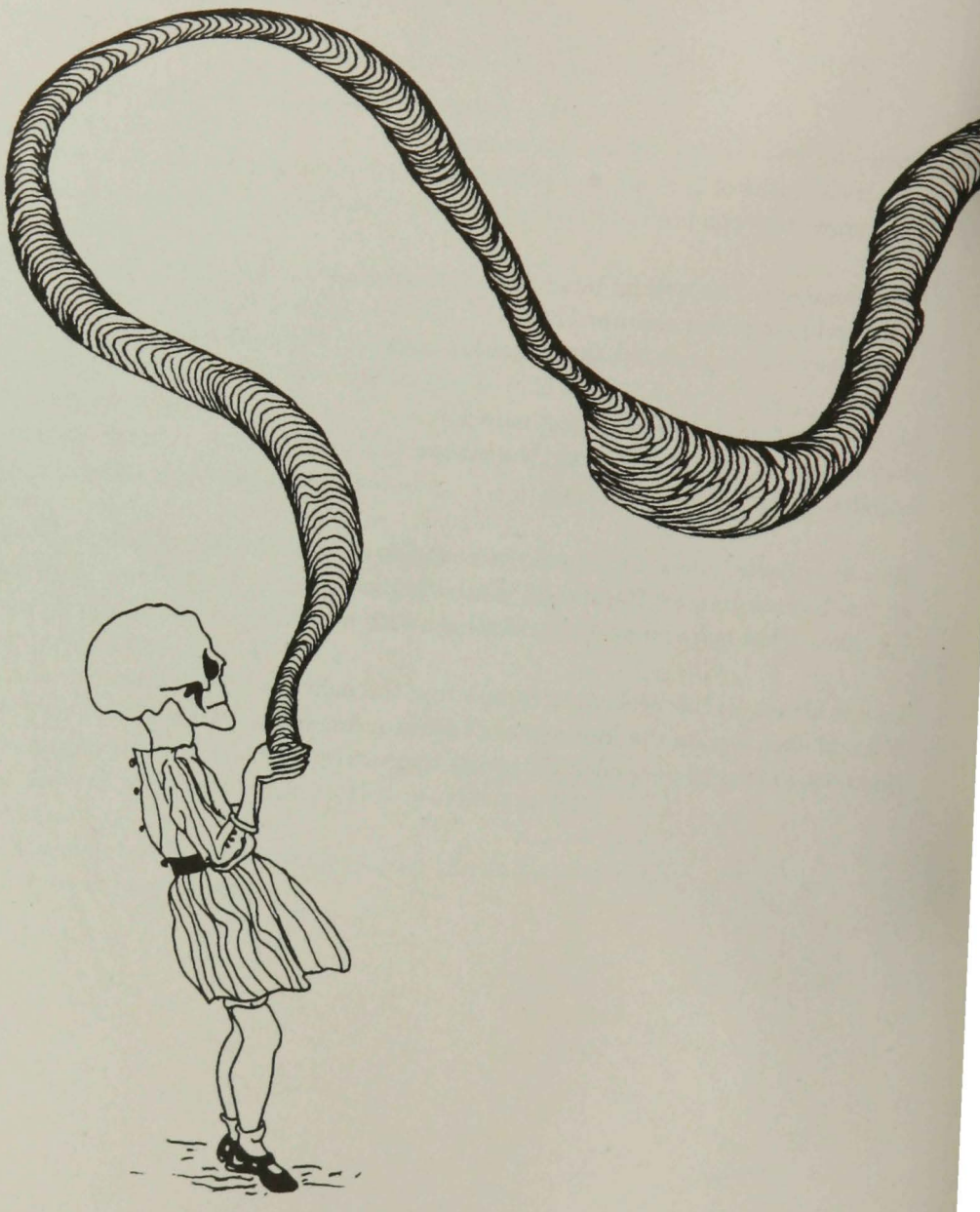
Always he was the one taking the wounded
from the mouths of the hungry. Wet feathers
of sparrow from the jaws of a cat.

Or the one with the willing heart. The tomahawk
that would sever the possum's head
after every passing car left the animal to suffer.

My protector, mourning the nest mown over,
the lobsters in the market tank, the mouse
crippled in our neighbour's trap.

Now he collects bones. Stands at the roadside
and calls their names: Bandicoot, Wallaby, Dingo.
He takes what lasts longest, the skull set with jewels.

Lets it bleach in the heat, ants completing the delicate work.
Mounts each one on the laundry wall. Runs a fingertip
lined with identity over each glittering tooth.



Unknown Horses

Marisa Allen

Even though
he only dreamed them
he knew them as himself
He could train
unknown horses

Now

Ali Alizadeh

Our legions have goosestepped
across their last Rubicon. Mother

Nature awaits their assault. Why
'mother'? Being born militant

consumerists, this 'final combat'
pits her body against our men. Hear

the drip of melting glaciers,
see water molecules flying off

vanishing lakes: all too obvious
even in a post-twilight of the gods

we squabble over piteous reserves
with drab pretexts (Islam, Israel,

terrorism, blah blah) as the Mother
tests the teeth of her ruinous traps

in the Black Forests. Will we brand
her unfair? Cruel? As of now: nothing

has been more just, more considerate
than the violence of her imminent

resistance. Recall, for instance,
our animal's zest in sucking her

breasts to a bone's dryness? We know
we've irreversibly crossed

the river, but too conceited to brace
ourselves for our annihilation

we think us Caesars are winning
but only inch toward the dark centre:

the terror of a loveless mother.

Muddied Water

Kyle Lang

ABEL SQUINTED AT THE LIGHT reflecting off the muddy pond, a stone's throw away. With his head cocked to one side, he listened to the bullfrogs croak. Waves rumpled the surface's oily veneer and frog heads emerged to set the light to dancing across the thick water. The boy was supposed to be gathering split wood, loading pieces into the wheelbarrow, but it was the best days of summer, and although he'd rather be at his friend Lily's house, his father was home. There was work to be done.

His dad swung the maul above his head, brought it down, and the wood split under the blow. A scattershot splinter found Abel's bare arm — a sudden sting — and the pain called him back to the task at hand. His father had worked all morning, wood hammering like a drumbeat. He was perpetual motion, tidal — lifting the maul, hitching his shoulder, arms reaching up overhead and down, feet planted in the dusty earth — the sound of a firecracker tossed into a barrel.

'Come on, Abel, get moving,' his dad said.

Abel leapt to his feet. 'OK, Dad.' He brushed his T-shirt, trying to remove bits of moss and dirt, but it was already stained. His sun-bleached hair fell into his eyes and he swiped at it before gripping the handles of the wheelbarrow. Straining to turn it around, the boy felt the grit of dirt in his palms and it reminded him of the cornmeal he and his mother molded into hush puppies. Those were the days Abel preferred: flour and cornmeal making its way into his hair and onto the floor, a purposeful mess, batter to bread.

His mother smiled during chores, let him play — balancing batter on a spoon before slipping it into hot oil. The kitchen generally smelled of sweets and breads and it was a rare sourness that penetrated there — spoiled milk, or lettuce forgotten in the fridge. This, the boy believed, was a wondrous playground compared to the dusty copse of cedars where he laboured with his father in the smell of the pond's dark water.

His dad warned him when he almost overturned the wheelbarrow, 'Don't let it tip.'

Abel lowered his shoulders and tightened his grip, picking up speed before the long, gradual up-slope of the lawn. He was strong for his age, and of all the boys in his third-grade class, only he could climb the gym rope to the top and ring the bell. But rolling a wheelbarrow uphill required a different kind of strength, a balance he hadn't mastered, and he struggled under the weight. One could tell by his tongue peeking between his lips that

the task was almost too much for him but he was determined to obey his father.

For he believed his father was testing him, pushing his limits with each load — the wheelbarrow heavier and the logs rising higher — each time getting closer to capacity. The wheelbarrow was capable of holding more, it was the boy who couldn't manage, and he supposed his father was irritated that he couldn't. But it always seemed his father knew the capacity of each of his tools. The boy imagined his father's mind to be full of tools: maul, splitter, awl, each shape defined like pencil outlines on peg board, the difference between axe and hatchet precisely drawn.

It wasn't only the tools that distanced the boy, he saw pain in his father's work, tasks done over and again until the body seized. The man would stretch, palms flat against his back, limbering the muscles with his fingers, vertebrae popping back into place. In everything, his father moved with purpose, with an inexhaustible strength, though his face — the slackness of his jaw, the darkness in the hollows of his eyes — betrayed the day's work and the inevitability of the next day's arrival.

Then there was the filth and dirt involved. Daily, the man came home from the nursery, unaware of the cloud that followed him into the house. His clothes exuded the tang of potting soil, and in the autumn, the smell of wet compost and slug bait forced Abel to breathe through his mouth. The man's musty arrival marked the end of another day in the even progression that seemed to consume him like water over stone. Even the weekends, a time of leisure for other families, forced the man out of bed in the early morning hours to tend their six acres of grass fields and cedar stands, no matter the season.

In these weekend chores, Abel sludged through leaves raked after a rain, or the garden's boggy mud, and many days played out to the tune of a whining lawnmower. That morning, he'd been wiping his hands against his thighs, until the dirt was a brand burned into his clothes. He flushed mid-wipe when his dad spotted him, but the man turned away, lifted another log onto the tree stump and raised his maul without a word.

Like his mother, the boy could read meaning in a gesture and he hated his father's embarrassment. He piled his arms with wood, disregarded the muddy mucous against his forearms, and paraded to the wheelbarrow, rattling the metal belly as he dropped the logs. His father didn't appear to notice.

It reminded him of the previous summer when his father had spoken to him about the joy of digging out the septic system. They wore knee-high rubber boots and stood in rusty mud that smelled of shit and waste. The man said, 'After doing something like this, everything else looks easy.' Abel nodded, his stomach dipping and flailing at the stench, and although he tried his hardest, he failed to hold back the wet mass that spilled over his lips. 'Shit,' the man said, jumping back from the force of the splash. Abel's sick

mixed into the fetid water and washed against his boots. Waving his hand, the man banished Abel to the grass ten yards away, shaking his head as he turned his shovel back to the hole.

Abel's mother came to check on them and found him sitting on the lawn, hugging his knees and watching his father work. She sat on the ground next to him and put her arm around him, pressing his head to her cheek.

'Your dad giving you a break?'

'I threw up.'

'You're okay. You want soup for lunch?'

Abel nodded.

She squeezed him tighter and kissed the top of his head. 'I don't blame you. I couldn't hold my stomach in that mess.' Then she shouted over to her husband, 'Looking good there, Slappy.' She held Abel for a while before disappearing inside to see about lunch.

As Abel crested the hill with the wheelbarrow, he saw his mother weeding the beds in front of the house. She wore cut-off jeans, an old T-shirt, and leather gloves. She brushed at the loose strands of a ponytail with the back of her hand and sat up to look at him. 'Your father clear that tree yet?'

'Almost.'

'Take a bottle of water down to him and tell him I'll make lunch as soon as I'm finished.'

Abel parked the wheelbarrow and went to fetch the water. He envied his mother's ability to move between her kitchen and the dirt beds that bordered the concrete patio. She worked methodically, much in the same way as his father, but without the contention. There was a civility in the way she worked, a small towel spread beneath her so that her knees were not muddied in the dark soil and Abel wished he could remain there with her, maybe lie in the grass and read a book, talk to her about the kids at school.

'Mum, can I go over to Lily's later?'

'Your dad's got some things he wanted to get done today and it'd be nice if you could help him. We'll see about tomorrow.'

Abel nodded and returned to his father to collect the scattered wood his dad had split in the interim. 'Mum thought you might want this,' Abel said and passed the bottle.

The man looked out over his property, as though surveying the house, above it, the sun crept toward noon. He shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted in the direction of Abel's mother. 'We should have started earlier. It's getting hot.' He drank half the water in a single tip of his head. 'Next time.' And by this 'next time', Abel understood that his dad never believed the work would be done.

Summer was in full swing and Abel felt trapped on their property. Lily could liven up any afternoon. Whether sequestered in her room playing Playstation or dressing up in old clothes from boxes in the attic crawlspace, Lily made Abel feel wanted. She never called him names, even when they argued, and there were even times that Abel thought she was pretty. He

hadn't seen her in days. Even though her house lay just beyond the tree farm bordering their land, it might as well have been an ocean, a dusty abyss of saplings, because it was Saturday and Abel's father was home.

He needed a reason. Some reason to go over to Lily's beyond wanting to see her. Even though that was at the heart of it — he missed her.

'Dad?'

'Yeah?'

'Mum told me to ask you if it's ok to go over to Lily's house later. She got a new game for her Playstation,' he said, making up the part about the game.

'When we're done, we can talk,' his father said, and turned away. Abel saw him mouth the word, 'Lily', like something sour.

Abel cast a wary gaze at his dad. A delayed decision was never a good omen and the boy knew he was stuck hauling wood. The man dumped the remaining water over his head, and it dripped down into his collar and spread like an inky stain on his T-shirt. He licked his upper lip, and in the short break, Abel wandered down into the basin that held their drying pond, more a swampy mudhole. He hoped his dad would never fill in the muddy recess because he loved the sound of the frogs and his dad used it as a ramp for jumping his dirt bike at cookouts. Still, it wasn't often that he found himself near the pond. It was best enjoyed at a distance.

He picked his way down to the water's edge, careful not to get his shoes wet, oily mud edging the stagnant water. There were leaves, twigs, green algae and rotting clumps of indiscernible plant life. Abel imagined the breathless creatures that could thrive there: bacteria and parasites.

His dad coughed and Abel turned, half expecting to get rebuked for being idle, but his dad stepped into the gravel recess and crossed to him. Crouching, the father leveled his gaze on his boy. 'What are you doing?' He seemed sincere, curious even.

'Just looking.' Abel felt like he'd been caught in the barn, flipping through his dad's *Playboy*, the silky pages cold and damp in winter. He dropped his gaze back to the murky water.

'I wonder if there are any tadpoles in here,' the man said, and the toe of his boot sank into black muck, the displaced water rising past the sole. Abel backed a half step away. His father, surprised, reached out and grabbed for his elbow, as if Abel had been about to fall. 'You all right?'

'I don't want to get dirty,' Abel said. The glossy mud shimmered in the afternoon light.

'Oh, come on, dirt never hurt anybody.' His dad gave a gentle tug on his elbow and, again, Abel pulled back. 'I get dirty all the time.'

'I know. Mum says you get the whole house dirty.'

'I suppose she does, Abel, but boys get dirty. It's just ... it's what we do.'

Abel planted his feet. His dad tilted his head and narrowed his eyes as if thinking hard. It was a look Abel didn't trust. He had seen it once before when his dad had thrown him into the hotel pool when they went to Disneyland.

'Abel? You want to play a game?'

'Sure.'

'Ok, what do you want to play?'

'I don't know.'

'Let's pretend something.'

Abel rubbed his chin, trying to think. 'How about Astronauts?' One of his favourite games, a thing he imagined at odd hours during the school day, or through the lingering hours of summer afternoons while wandering their property. Abel loved space — the stainless steel surfaces gleaming with antiseptic light, the perfect seals preserving clarified air and, outside the windows, deep space with its tonic emptiness.

'Yeah?' his father said as if unsure, then, 'Sure, let's play Astronauts. We could pretend we're walking on the moon! Do you know how they walk on the moon?'

'Yeah, like this.' Abel lifted one leg high into the air and hopped forward. His arms lifted from his sides and he rocked his head back and forth moving in rhythm to his giant moon steps.

His dad laughed and walked around mimicking Abel. He gave orders as Mission Control, making the sound of a walkie talkie. 'Krshh, Astronaut Abel, this is Mission Control, do you read? Over, krshh.' Abel laughed and answered him the same way. They discovered moon rocks, signs of alien life, and, with the help of his dad's shirt and a long stick, they planted a flag on the surface. Abel thought it strange, playing with his father like this, something they almost never did, but the man seemed a child again himself, and after a while Abel smiled and laughed alongside him.

'Krshh, Astronaut Abel, it's time to return to your ship and decontaminate yourself of radioactive moon dust, over, krshh.'

'Krshh, roger Mission Control, returning to the ship, krshh.'

Abel sidled up next to his dad at the edge of the pond. He played with the handful of moon rocks they had discovered, sorting them in his palm by colour and size.

'Time to decontaminate.' He reached his hand down into the cold, black mud and pulled out a handful. 'With the special, de-radioactive space walker scrub.' Limp decaying leaves, rhododendron stems and black earth all congealed in his hand. He held it. A glob of mud fell back to the ground with a wet splat and, with that sound, Abel quivered.

After a moment, the man must have tired of holding out his hand because he slapped it against his own bare chest and rubbed it around, streaking his body with the black goo, coating his chest hair, rubbing his shoulders and neck. He smiled like a head case, his eyes bright. Abel looked down at his father's naked chest, smeared with bacteria and algae. He balled up his hands, his fingernails biting into his palms, to keep from shuddering again. His father was watching and Abel knew, right then, what it would take to appease him. Crazy. This is crazy even for my dad.

His dad grabbed a second handful of mud. 'Hey, Astronaut Abel, you have to decontaminate or you'll glow in the dark.'

Abel looked into the cavity where his dad had drawn his fresh handful of mud. It refilled with green pond water, bubbling up from the bottom as if from a dark reserve below the surface. The muck fell off of his dad in chunks. His smile never wavered. Abel felt trapped. He would call him a pansy, a world he had heard his father use toward men who shied away from dirty jobs or family obligations.

Abel's stomach clenched as he knelt and poked the mud with his index finger, eventually submerging his hand, the mud sliding on like a satin glove, cool against his flesh. He closed his eyes. He cringed, gripped a handful then pulled it from the pond. He could feel the heat of his father's gaze and the world around him grew silent, both of them holding their breath. He opened his eyes and stood.

Abel stared at his dad, still on his knees and covered in black leafy marl. His dad gave a quick nod, a tip of his head, and Abel brought his hand up to his neck and squished the mud into his skin. It was as cold and wet as leftover oatmeal. His dad let out a hoot as Abel rubbed the mud into his neck, coated the hair at the nape. Black mud fell to his shoulders, and a wetness crept down his back so that Abel shivered, but his dad beamed. 'That a boy.'

He saw his father's smile, registered it, but, as the cool mud slid down his spine, cresting each vertebrae on its steady march, he felt a squirming across his skin. Abel ignored the mass creeping under his shirt, all eyes were on him, something he had yearned for with each good grade and blue ribbon, even in gym, when he climbed the rope, it was always his father's voice he heard yelling for him, not Coach Gearheart. The mud's snail trail march to the waistband of his workpants halted at his beltline. His dad picked up another glistening batch and rubbed it into his hair, smiling and laughing and signaling for Abel to follow suit.

Soon, they were both picking up handfuls of mud, wading out into the pond to get the wet stuff and smearing it all over their clothes, hair, faces. Abel's shoe sank when they waded in and his dad had to pull him free. When his shoe wouldn't rise out of the mud, Abel lifted his heel to shuck it off, desperate to wriggle free from the mud's clammy grip. He worried that he would get in trouble for losing it but his dad shrugged it off, and kicked his own boots onto the shore. He flopped back into the water, his butt making a squelching sound as it sank in.

Abel heaped mud on top of his father's head — his eyes pressed tight, his lips pursed together against the torrent of black rain — and, with his father's eyes closed to him, his gaze shut behind a screen of falling muck, Abel found it in himself to laugh. He dropped handful after dripping handful onto his dad's head.

And then, from the farthest edge of the pond came his mother's voice, 'What, in the name of God, are you two doing down there?' She stood with her back to the sun, casting a long shadow over the rim of the pond.

'Uh-oh.' Abel whispered.

His dad ran his hands together under the surface of the dark water, trying to rinse off the excess mud. He spat into the pond and wiped his mouth with his forearm and it streaked his face white as a clown's smile.

The woman stood, arms crossed, one hip flared. She shook her head as his father lifted himself off the bottom of the pond like a swamp creature. She stripped off her gloves and stuffed them into her back pocket.

'Well?'

'We were just, uh ... '

'Playing Astronauts,' Abel said.

'Really?' she asked, her tone softening when she addressed her son.

'Well, we were on a mission to space and we had to clean up after the radioactive moon dust,' his dad said. It sounded weak, bordering on apologetic.

Abel shook mud from his hands. 'So you don't glow in the dark.'

'Yeah, you wouldn't want the kid to glow in the dark, would you?' His dad smiled, white teeth and white clown grin. 'It's a clean dirty.'

The woman shook her head again and turned back to the house, but before she got three steps, she turned back to them. 'Don't even think about coming up on the porch until you two hose off behind the house. I just power-washed the patio last weekend. David, do you hear me? Clean him up good. In fact, just strip down and throw those things in the trash.'

The father winked at his son. Abel tried to wink back, but his dad reached down for a handful of mud and slung it underhand at Abel, who turned away, the mud squishing against the back of the boy's shirt. They both laughed at the sound.

'All right, let's grab the tools and clean up.'

Abel collected the tools as his dad finished loading the last of the wood, stacking his work boots on top. Taking hold of the handles, Abel pushed his way up the long stretch of lawn leading to the house. It was difficult — the weight of the wood, the tools, his lopsided gait, and shoe forever lost to the pond's impenetrable depths — but he was determined to stay side-by-side with his dad's long stride. The man instructed Abel to lean the tools against the barn door and to meet him around the back of the house.

Abel placed the wheelbarrow next to the woodpile and stacked the few remaining logs. Pulling a blue tarp over the wood, he hooked it with a bungee cord that wrapped under the pallets, and then tipped the wheelbarrow against it so it wouldn't fill with rain water.

His dad shouted for him to hurry as Abel appeared around the corner carrying his father's boots. 'Strip out of those clothes,' he said, and Abel shifted his feet but didn't move to disrobe. 'It's all right, son, I'm just going to hose you off. After that, you spray me and then we can each go and take a nice, long shower.'

Abel fidgeted with the hem of his shirt but his dad, impatient, grabbed for it at the shoulders and pulled it up over his head. Abel crossed his arms as

though against a cold wind. 'Fine, I'll go first,' his dad said. He pulled off his socks and stripped out of his work pants.

Abel shied away, trying not to stare at his dad's grown body but his eyes were drawn back to it and he studied the lines of his chest, the letter 'T' spelled out in wiry hair that receded down toward his waist, growing thick again just above his penis. A rush of heat kindled in Abel's cheeks and a trembling shame threatened to take his breath away. He stood frozen in the bright afternoon sun and waited for the moment to pass, the electric nausea to recede.

'Well, I'm not going to stand here all day. Turn the hose on me.' His father faced him, his arms held out like a boy waiting for a fight.

Abel opened the faucet, grabbed the garden sprayer, and turned it on his dad. The man screamed, 'Damn, that's cold,' as he scrubbed at his neck and shoulders, then he turned so Abel could spray his back, still cursing and dancing under the cold water. Mud streaked off him, dark mud on white skin, and red where flesh turned bright under the cold water. He shouted directions: 'Get my head. Not the eyes,' and 'Do my back.' Abel complied and, afterwards, reaching for the hose, the man told him to 'lose the rest.'

Abel peeled off his clothes, feeling his own slightness, his gangly arms and legs, the flatness of his chest. His dad turned the hose on him and as the cold shock of water hit him, his breath hitched. He stood shivering as the water ran from chest to toes and the cold demanded his attention. Icy spikes of water belted him, peeling the drying gunk from his skin. His innards seemed to be revolting, pressing heat out from his core, reddening his skin. He burned with it.

'It's gonna take longer if you don't scrub.'

'It's cold!' Abel screamed.

'Well, then, hurry up!'

Abel scrubbed his body, using his fingernails to scratch away the more persistent remnants. He watched the darkness slide down his trunk and legs, turned his exposed back and his dad stepped closer, increasing the bite of the water. The mud peeled off his neck in chunks, and globbed up around him on the grass. 'Now your hair,' his dad said.

Water cascaded down the boy's head, over his eyes and face. He gasped for air, pulling at twigs, clumps of mud, and bugs. He rubbed his face until it burned. Submerged on solid ground, the water transformed into a swaddling of icy silk robes and, when the water finally relented, the young boy emerged renewed.

Abel whisked the water off his skin and turned to his dad, naked as an oyster. His father was smiling, eyes closed, head tilted back with the sun full on his face. He shook his head and a corona of droplets wavered around him, falling onto Abel. Mirroring his father, he shook his head and felt his hair lift and release the water out into the air about them. When he opened his eyes, the last drops fell onto the mud-spotted grass.

At the back door, his mother stood with arms full of towels. She laughed at the sight of her two men, naked in the sunshine, and tossed a towel to her husband, who winked and wrapped it around his waist. 'You set there, Champ?' he asked, and Abel nodded. 'Why don't you go ahead and take the first shower.'

Abel nodded again and stepped toward the door. His mother stopped him with a hand and bent to wipe the mud from his feet. She took his foot and wrapped it in terry cloth, swaddled it tenderly, pressing the fabric between each of his toes. She was persistent but delicate and there was something unnerving about the attention. Abel tried to pull his foot free, to flee his mother's ministrations, but she held tight. When instructed, he set his foot on the threshold and lifted the second for her to scrub. He didn't fight this time, knowing it wouldn't be of any use. As his mother cleaned his feet, gently wiping him to the shin, the boy turned to his father, looking for some pinched expression of disapproval.

Instead, when their gaze met, his father said, 'Good work today, son,' and touched him on the shoulder. Abel blushed, the heat burning away the chill of the hose.

His mother slapped him on the calf and he was free to go. She straightened and stepped up to her husband, put her hands to the back of his neck, the dirty towel draping down his back. He bent and, half-naked, kissed her in the sunshine. Rinsed clean, he stood in the afternoon sun, an imposing figure, his fingerprint on everything — fences, barn, cars, mother and son. Abel slipped from the room.

In the shower, Abel lingered. He wrote his name on the glass door, streaking his finger across the glass, but the letters vanished in the pillowing steam. Under the flow, the words rolled over him again, 'Good work today, son', and his heart lifted. When he returned to his room, the day bright outside his bedroom window, he looked out over their land — the copse of cedars at the bottom of the hill guarding the pond's dark recess, the smooth plain of lawn marked by his tracks — and, for a moment, even from this distance, he thought he could hear the croak of a bullfrog calling him back.

Open Fields

Desh Balasubramaniam

last day of school falls
a ripe cherimoya
mudfish soon to our dry streets
jasmine floats
line of young tresses
seasonal rest for the cane
the lotus,
we gleam

run through open fields
as freedom leaps beyond the blazing dust
kicking goals between palm tree posts
yesterdays left at the iron gate
carrying the smiles on rising shoulders
charcoal thoughts on boundary walls
village vulgar,
the veiled war
scribe a girl's name
we laugh

cloud of murk falls
and joy here has a short life
shells blow, hum of killing birds
run, run, the screams
panic fills the boyish heads
some to teachers college,
others across the train tracks
scattered footwear
nameless books on the grass
lying in fear — a half peeled orange
lonely scouts cap
we run

talk of monsoon dies, December's leave
past the bread shop we run
hiding in junction ditch,
the dead rats
one beats, the other silent
a bleeding man across the tracks
soldiers scream with guns
no dialogue,
we run

to dry creek we crawl
two legged dogs
missing lay with the rodents,
while telescopes of triggers
search for the last names
as the sun turns to his village
in echoes of death,
we run home through
open fields
never free

The Fathers

Matthew Salesses

MY ADOPTION FILE TOLD ME three things about myself I didn't know: my birth name, the note my mother left me with, and her name, Kim Yoo-Jin. The information seemed to open a door I didn't yet know the location of. I hired a translator and a private investigator who tracked my mother down in a room salon in Seoul — my inheritance from my adopted parents' death was just enough to find her.

My birth mother, it turned out, was a prostitute. These room salons would trap a girl in debt by charging her for items she used or broke, whatever room or board she received, and penalties for invented crimes, then insist she pay it back or suffer the consequences. The option they offered was sex. I watched my mother enter and exit this place each day with grim reliability, as if she set aside her soul at the door and then picked it back up again with relief that no one else had claimed it. Her face, at that door, turned pale — I guess she never got used to it. She carried a toddler back and forth with her, a girl of about three who must have been her daughter.

It surprised me that she would have another baby, since she had left me under a bridge when I was two, and the dreams I was having then only made the jealousy worse. Each night, my adopted mother flew through the windshield and my adopted father died of internal bleeding just before I could get to the hospital. I had lost everyone who had ever loved me, and the existence of a daughter seemed to say I was somehow to blame. I took it out on the world by beating the men who paid my mother to fuck them.

My adopted parents had enrolled me in taekwondo classes as a boy, to recover part of my heritage, and I used that part now. I followed the men to their cars, or to the alley from the room salon to the subway, and broke their noses. Sometimes the blood ran out of their nostrils and down their lips, and sometimes it ran back into their throats and out of their mouths, and I reached the point where I liked to guess who would bleed in which way before I hurt them. I got good at following people and good at feeling nothing.

Then one morning, my mother's clientele having dwindled to no one, she came down the stairs of her apartment building and turned right instead of left. She headed for the train station, carrying her daughter in a sling she had made of old bedsheets and tied over her shoulder. I could see the stains still on them. I realised that my actions over the past month must have seemed those of either a guardian angel or a violent stalker, and I wondered whether she was hopeful or scared. I wondered how she had hidden enough

money from the room salon owner for a train ticket. At the station, she paid and quickly disappeared into the crowd — and my breath caught in my throat at the possibility that she could be gone. I was startled by my own emotion, the rush of panic I had waited to feel at the funeral but hadn't. At the funeral, I had imagined my adopted parents taking me out to Cape Cod like when I was younger, picking up glinting sea glass. After they were in the earth and going nowhere, I had decided to come to Korea.

I pushed people aside now and went after my birth mother, watchful for the stained sheets that identified her, and, finally, I saw her get on a train that said Pusan in electronic letters. Pusan, I thought, the city I had been born in. She was returning to the city she had left me in twenty years ago. I didn't have a ticket, but I got on the same train. As I walked down the aisle, I felt the engine move the ground beneath my feet.

She walked to her carriage and sat the toddler down in the seat across from her, and I continued to the door, not wanting to be seen. I pressed the open button and then turned to look back through the window. I decided to stand in that area between carriages, to stare at my mother and the toddler from a safe distance — I didn't know what I would do when it came time to tell my mother who I was whether I would want to hold her, or hurt her, or whether I would want her to hold me, or let her hurt me.

After a while, a man came up to her, and as I watched them play out their roles, invisible screws tightened behind my eyes. I hated knowing what was going to happen. The man left his seat and walked into one of the carriages further down, and minutes later, came back and entered the bathroom opposite to where I was standing. My mother followed.

Feeling the familiar violence rise within me, I punched the open button and went down the aisle, past my mother's daughter, to the bathroom. I stopped in front of the blue door. I had every intention of hurting him before I imagined opening the door while they were in the middle of it — the same transaction, perhaps, that had made me. I clenched my eager fists and promised myself a later revenge. When I turned back, I saw the toddler sitting alone, my half-sister, and I took my mother's seat while she was in the bathroom fucking a stranger.

I looked at the girl now, really looked at her, and saw for the first time not only how close she was to death, but also that her father had been white. Epicanthic folds stood out on her eyelids and she had a strong Roman nose and brown hair and eyebrows. I wondered if this was why my mother hadn't given her up. I had seen her feed the child what should have been hers, trying to keep it alive, putting its health before hers. Yet her gaunt, skeletal head, and limbs absent of baby fat, made clear that such sacrifices were not successful.

I opened one of the toddler's eyes between my thumb and forefinger and saw her light brown irises. Red lines crept over her white globes. Death was in there, behind her eyes. She would last maybe another couple of months, a few more weeks, and in that time, my mother would starve herself and

prostitute herself and slowly kill herself. She should have been able to live her own life — hadn't she given me up to do this? The girl's pupils danced beneath her eyelids, and I realised she was having a happy dream, my half-sister, while our mother had sex in the bathroom, for money that likely wasn't enough for both of them to survive.

I wondered what she was dreaming of, what happiness lay in knowing that your mother would do anything to keep you alive, that she would come back from wherever she had gone to find you, and I wondered whether it would not be best for the girl to die with that happiness than to die from the ravaging pains of hunger. Best if she did not die a long death that also killed our mother. I looked into the long veins reaching into her eyes, and I realised it would not be too hard for me, or too hard on me, to do this — to kill her. It would be something I couldn't take back, something that would always haunt me, yet I imagined stuffing the yellowing sheet inside her mouth and pinching her nose until she suffocated — and when I looked at my hands, I was doing this. I was stuffing the sheet inside her mouth. I was pinching her nose. She didn't struggle and I didn't stop. The minutes didn't seem to go in slow motion and didn't seem that terrible, and then I was my mother's only child.

The toddler had the same smile dead as in her dreams; she didn't look any different. I was a murderer, but she was the same. I didn't want to be there when my mother came back, so I went into a different car and sat down in an empty seat and stared out of the window. I imagined my mother coming back with her clothes out of sorts and sitting down to talk to the toddler as usual, then noticing that it was dead. The money she had made would burn in her hand. She would scream, and I wouldn't go to her because she wouldn't know me and I was the reason her daughter was dead. She would stare at the money and cry and the train would continue on to Pusan. She would want to throw the money away and would come close to tearing it up and destroying it, but finally, she would understand she needed to survive. She would keep moving and she would understand she could now survive.

After a long time, I left my seat and walked back toward the car where I had become a murderer, but before I could get there, I saw the man my mother had fucked in an aisle seat reading a newspaper as if nothing extraordinary had happened and the world was exactly the same. I sat across from him. A man like him could have been my father.

'Listen,' I said. 'You don't know me, but I've just killed my half-sister, and you should go before I kill you too. I'm dangerous. I don't feel anything, and I'm dangerous.'

I waited for him to speak. He didn't understand me.

'You had sex with my mother in the bathroom and now I'm going to kill you.'

He shook his head as if these things were not true.

'I did kill my half-sister,' I said. 'I promised myself I'd hurt you.' But my heart was no longer in it.

He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and offered me one.

'That may be the last thing you ever do.'

He held the pack out in the space between us and smiled. In the end, I took one, and he lit it for me, and we smoked. I didn't say anything else. There was no anger anymore, no desire to hurt him, no guess at which way the blood would flow. Whenever I started to say something, I remembered he didn't understand English, and either way, I knew that what I was going to say was impossible. 'Maybe she's not really dead,' I was going to say, or, 'Maybe I'd just imagined it.'

The smoke filled the car and the sun set outside the window. When the train stopped, he said, 'Pu-san,' and left his seat. I followed. Out on the platform, my mother was already hurrying away. I didn't believe it at first, but I saw the sling and the toddler still around her back. The girl must have been so cold and dead already that my mother hadn't noticed the difference.

I followed her through the streets past new cement buildings with neon signs and into a residential district full of traditional houses with bluetile roofs, and I wondered if she had someone to turn to. I wanted to stop her and say I was sorry, so sorry. I wanted her to go on walking forever and never find out her child was dead. I wanted to curl up in those dirty sheets and replace the little body with my own.

She stopped at a house with a single light on, and I waited to see where we had been going. A woman came out and turned her away. After a few more houses, I realised she knew no one and was only looking for a warm place to spend the night. The sky darkened and I followed the glimmer of white on her back, hoping for a kind person who would take her in.

At last, we came to a group of houses sharing a single iron gate where, when she called out, a man exited the nearest house and approached her. He wore tan pyjamas and his hair was dirty and didn't seem attached to his head. She said something to him, and he stepped back and looked at her; then he opened the gate and let her in. I almost walked out of the shadows and asked, 'What about me?' before I caught myself. I watched their movement through the house by the lights they switched on, one by one, and found a crack in the rock wall beside the gate through which to see them. They stood behind the window closest to me.

The room was empty except for a bamboo mat and a low tea table holding a single cup. My mother laid the toddler in its sheets on the mat. The man put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around to him and she said something quickly and looked away. He went into another room and then came back with something in his hand. He gave this to her, and I realised it was money as she stripped off her clothes. The same old story, I thought. I took my eye from the wall and rested my back on the cool stones, facing away from her. But then I heard the scream — the same one I had imagined on the train — like a meteor ripping through the atmosphere of my mother's heart. I turned back to the crack in the wall and saw her

pointing at the dead toddler, her finger hanging out in the air. She went to it and took it in her arms, shaking. The man stood behind her and pointed as well. She held the dead child, in its dirty sheets, against her naked chest, and the man shook out his arms and shook out his arms as if he could shake off death like water. He pressed his palms against his eye sockets. He said something. Then, after hesitation, he moved a little closer to her. I was afraid he was going to rape her in front of her dead daughter. I knew I had ruined my mother's life. He took short steps and came up behind her and touched her on the back. At his touch, she slipped to the floor, covering the toddler as if she could still protect it. I tried to move the rocks to create a larger hole. My mother trembled over the little body. The man stood behind her. Then, to my surprise he picked up her shirt and draped it over her shoulders. I watched him rub her back in gentle circles. They stayed that way for a long time. Finally, I realised he could do for her something that I could never do — he could be a blank stranger, offering nothing, taking nothing, beyond this night. If she recovered from her child's death, she could remember his comfort without reminding herself of all she had lost. She could remember only his kindness.

I left them there, then, and walked down the hill away from the rock wall. As I smelled the salt of the ocean, I wanted to see the water. I wanted to watch the path of moonlight, as I remembered it from summer nights on the Cape, shimmer across the sea to its end at the edge of the world.

I walked down past a yard full of abandoned shipping containers, metal boxes hollowed out of their cargo, where I heard the sounds of bums gathered for the night. As their voices echoed in the boxes, reaching out to me across the yard, I realised I had made my way to this point from the day I first set foot in Seoul so easily. No one had ever put me in any danger. I had broken noses, murdered a girl whose time had not yet come, and followed a woman who hadn't been my mother for decades — and no one had even checked my train ticket. A cold wind blew in from the water and I had nothing to cover me, no fabric, no one's arms, not even camaraderie, nothing but my shame. I spotted a line of cars parked beside the dock, and I hoped one of them would offer shelter. I pulled at the handles, going down the line, until at last, I found an open door. I got into the passenger seat and looked out the windshield. I reached automatically for my seat belt, as if waiting for someone to drive me across the ocean of my life.

Language and Sediment — East

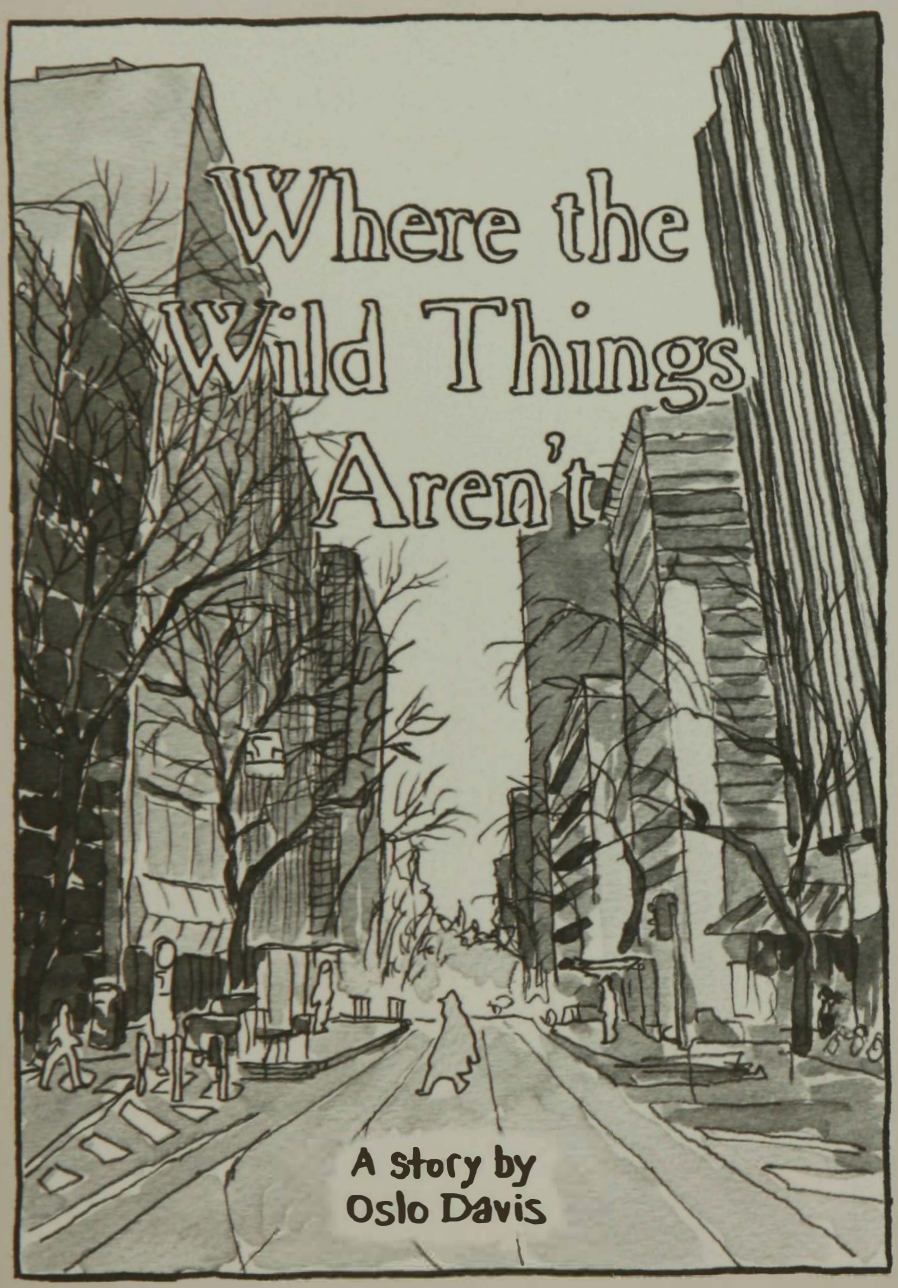
Matthew Hall

ancient siphon remnant claim
filter of dispersed blood, a colonist of shadow's admittance
stale bruising quiet to relict woodlands
miles of felled trees havening
a remnant spate of growth. insertions of fixity
scarcity of clear-cut knowledge
stases interval across the grain of cycle
permeability decides the pierce of new growth
stomae leading through penitent habitat
urban sacrifice of bough's manifold arch

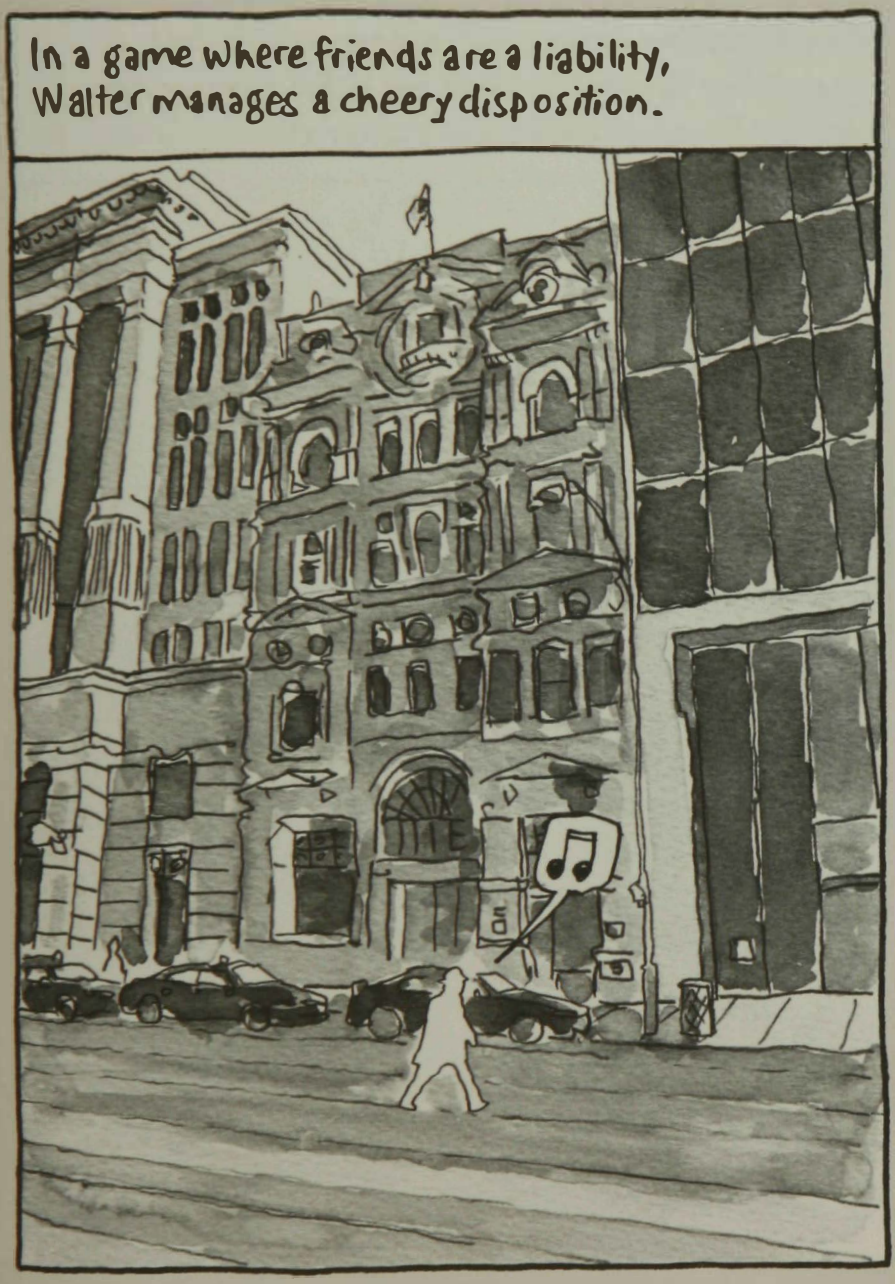
Happiness

Andy Jackson

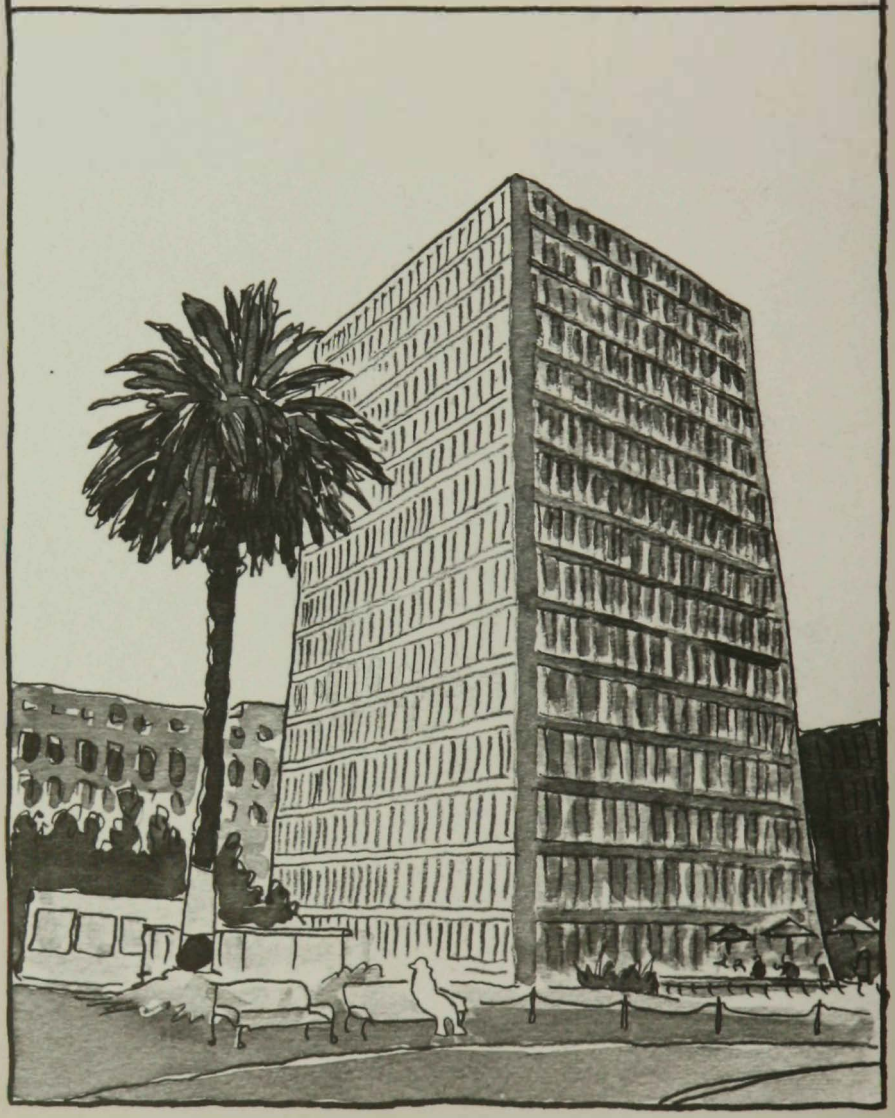
After work, thoughts blur, turn into sensations circling
around a self of loss. Sounds hover across the skin or
sink into the mind. Groan and clunk of the front door. Whirr
of a spinning disc and the machine ticking as it reads in digital
a song to drown out the day's events. Pop — a bottle opens,
beer, scotch or juice, depending on the mood, the soft sigh
of ice. Creak of an armchair's acquiescence. Warm air rushing
through each open duct as the heater switches on. Laughter
from the widescreen TV, canned and on cue. Thrum of hands
on a full stomach, the dishes grumbling in the kitchen.
Rain taps the keys of the roof over the mind's waiting page —
the walls groaning like old bones and the slow collapse
of dust are hushed. The silences lost in this speech, grief
and joy in the dictionary, shelved. Crying at the back door,
the dog who wants to sleep inside. No one else is out there.
Then, when it's quiet, breath, a slight catch in the chest,
sirens in the middle distance. What such tremors might imply
seems out of reach, the mind adrift in the body's sea. No,
it cannot be its shadow, but the return of a certain happiness.


Where the Wild Things Aren't
A story by
Oslo Davis

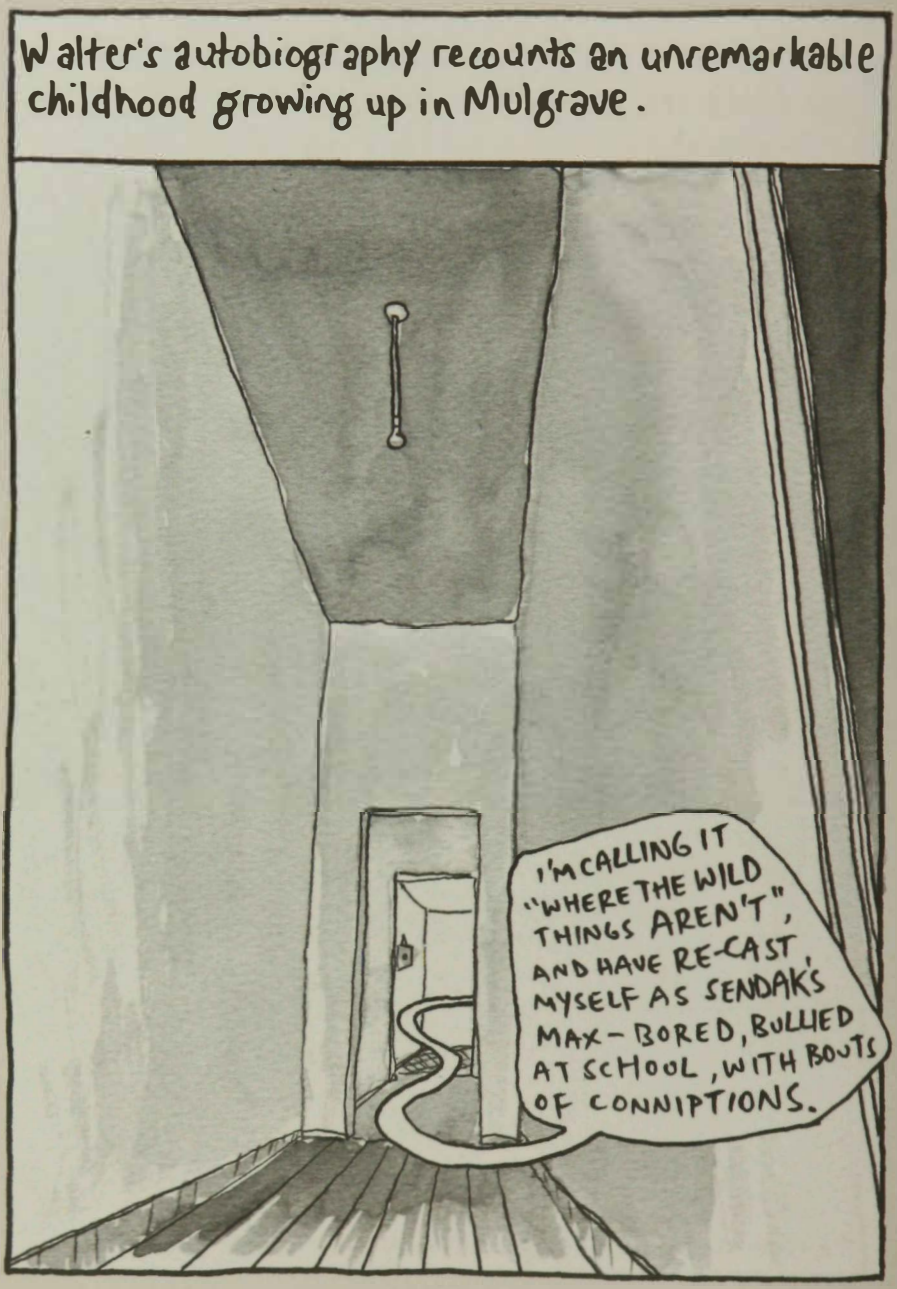
On Monday, undercover undercover ticket inspector Walter Siskind again finds himself incognito on the number eighty six.

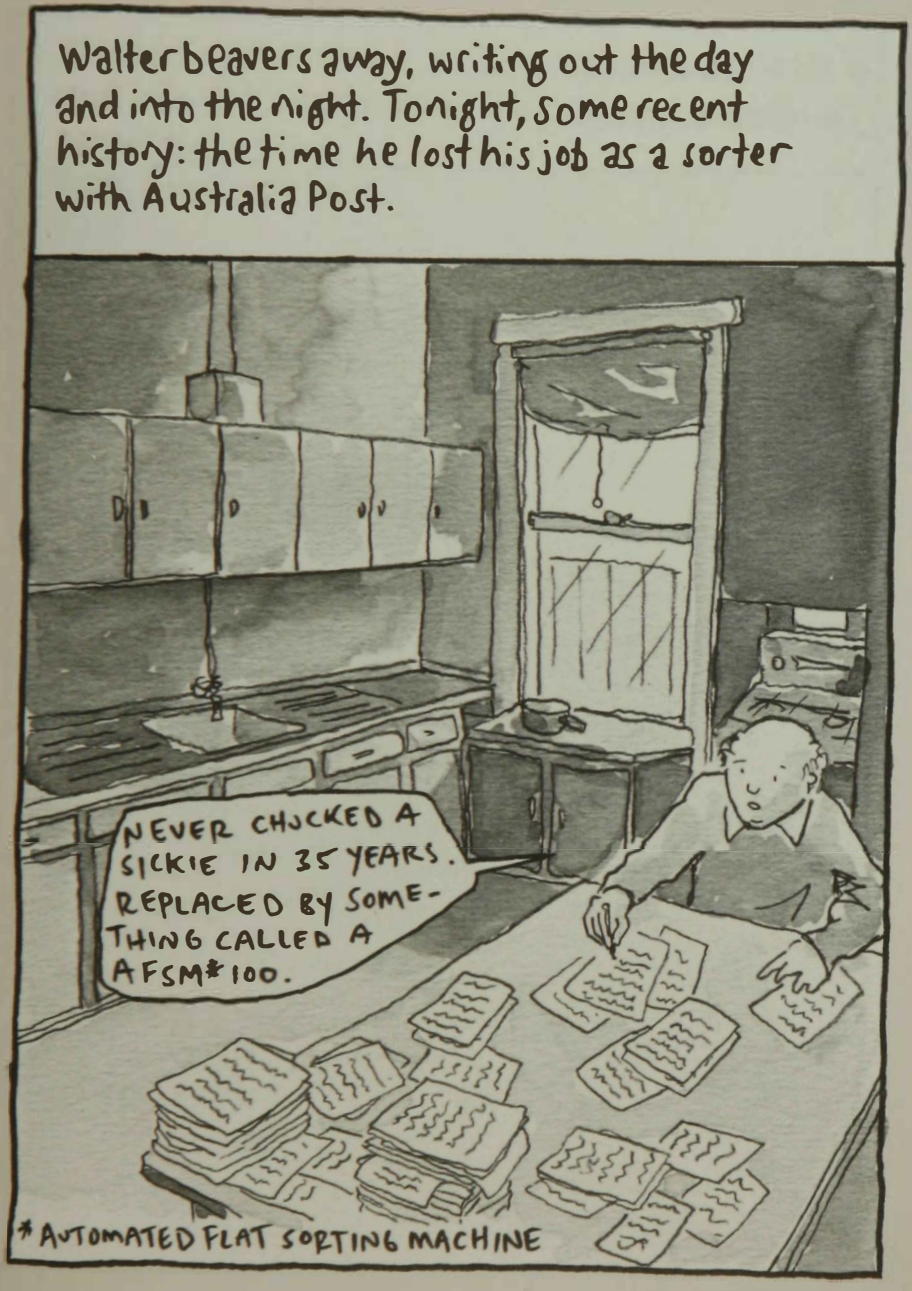

In a game where friends are a liability,
Walter manages a cheery disposition.

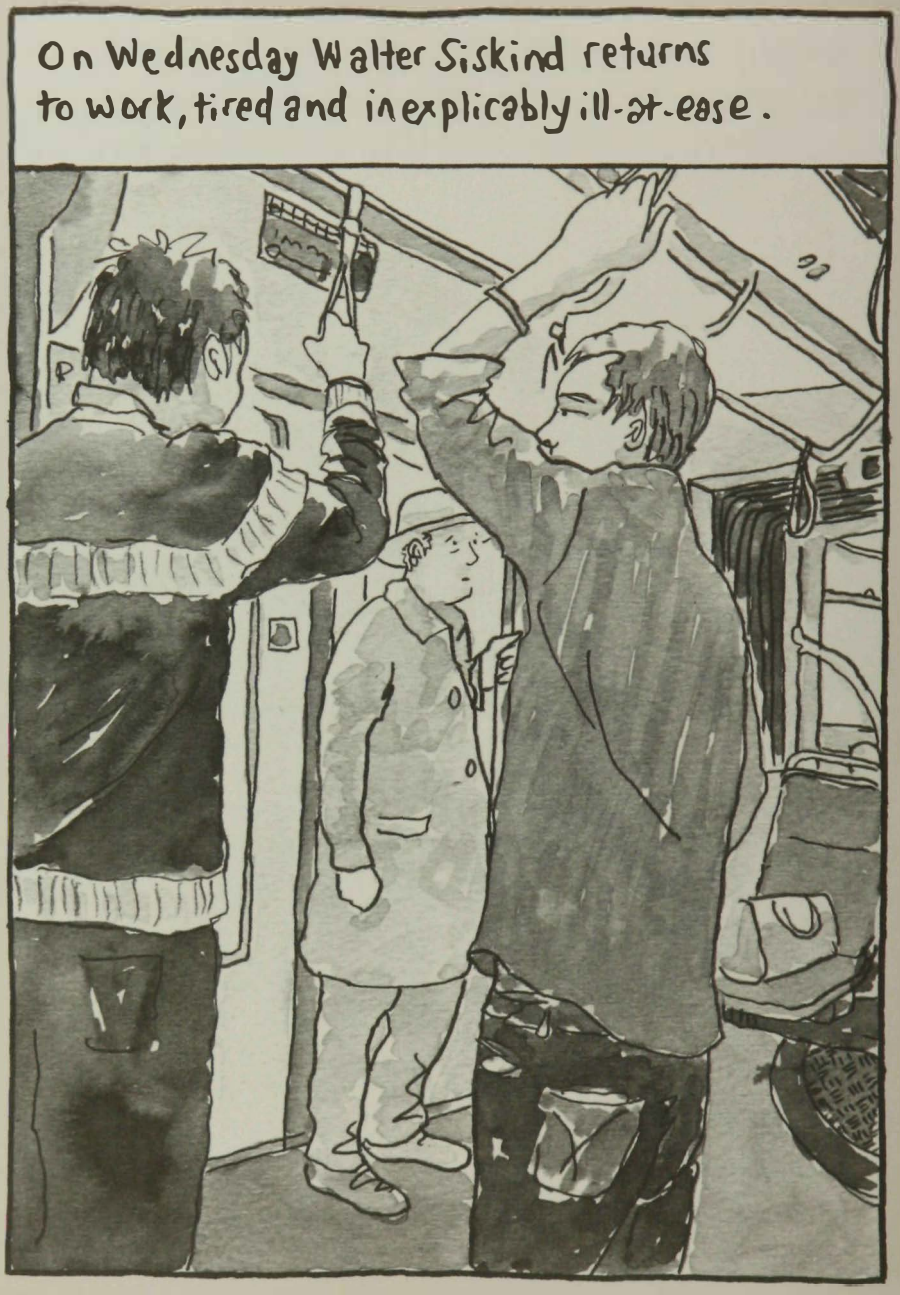
To rid public transport of lazy law enforcers
Walter must out-chameleon the chameleons.



On Tuesday, a bank holiday, Walter is home alone (as usual; he lives alone) and so returns to the writing of his memoirs.

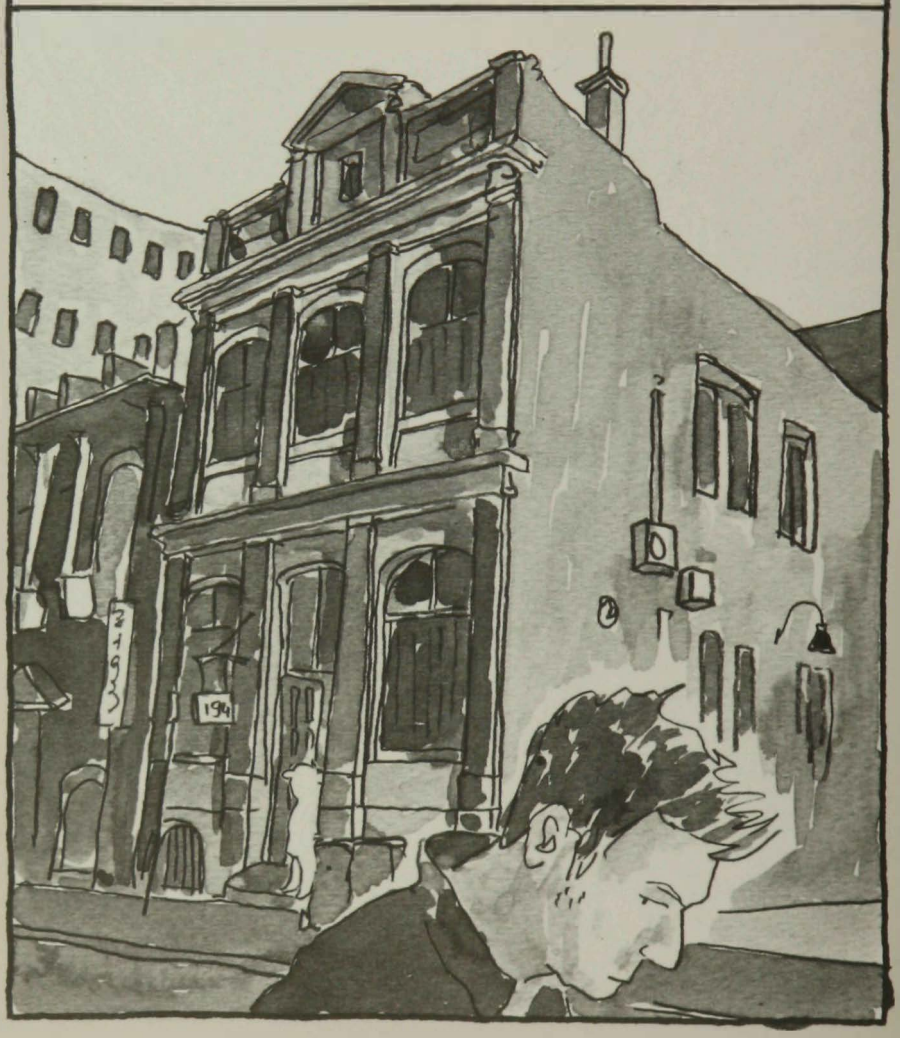

Walter's autobiography recounts an unremarkable childhood growing up in Mulgrave.
I'M CALLING IT "WHERE THE WILD THINGS AREN'T", AND HAVE RE-CAST MYSELF AS SENDAK'S MAX - BORED, BULLIED AT SCHOOL, WITH BOUTS OF CONNIPTIONS.


Walter beavers away, writing out the day and into the night. Tonight, some recent history: the time he lost his job as a sorter with Australia Post.
NEVER CHUCKED A SICKIE IN 35 YEARS. REPLACED BY SOMETHING CALLED A AFSM*100.
* AUTOMATED FLAT SORTING MACHINE


On Wednesday Walter Siskind returns to work, tired and inexplicably ill-at-ease.

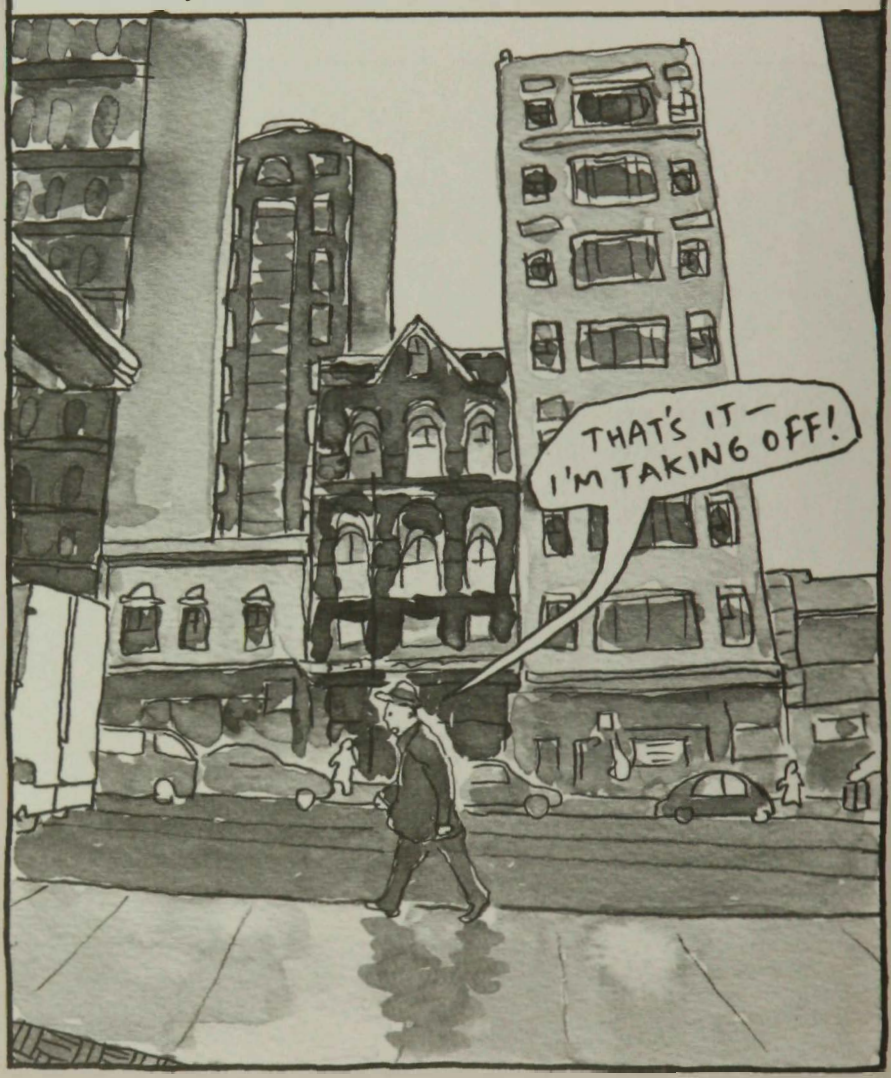
A lanky, poorly-moustached man seems to linger occasionally in his peripheries.
I SAW HIM AT MY FIRST STOP, THEN LATER IN A MEN'S. I NEVER FORGET A MO.

Walter makes no arrests today; his judgement on who exactly is an undercover ticket inspector is muddied by an uneasy feeling he's being watched.



Thursday: Walter misses his alarm and so is late for the seven-o-eight. Still shaken, he forgets to conceal himself as an eastern european onion peddler, as he had planned.

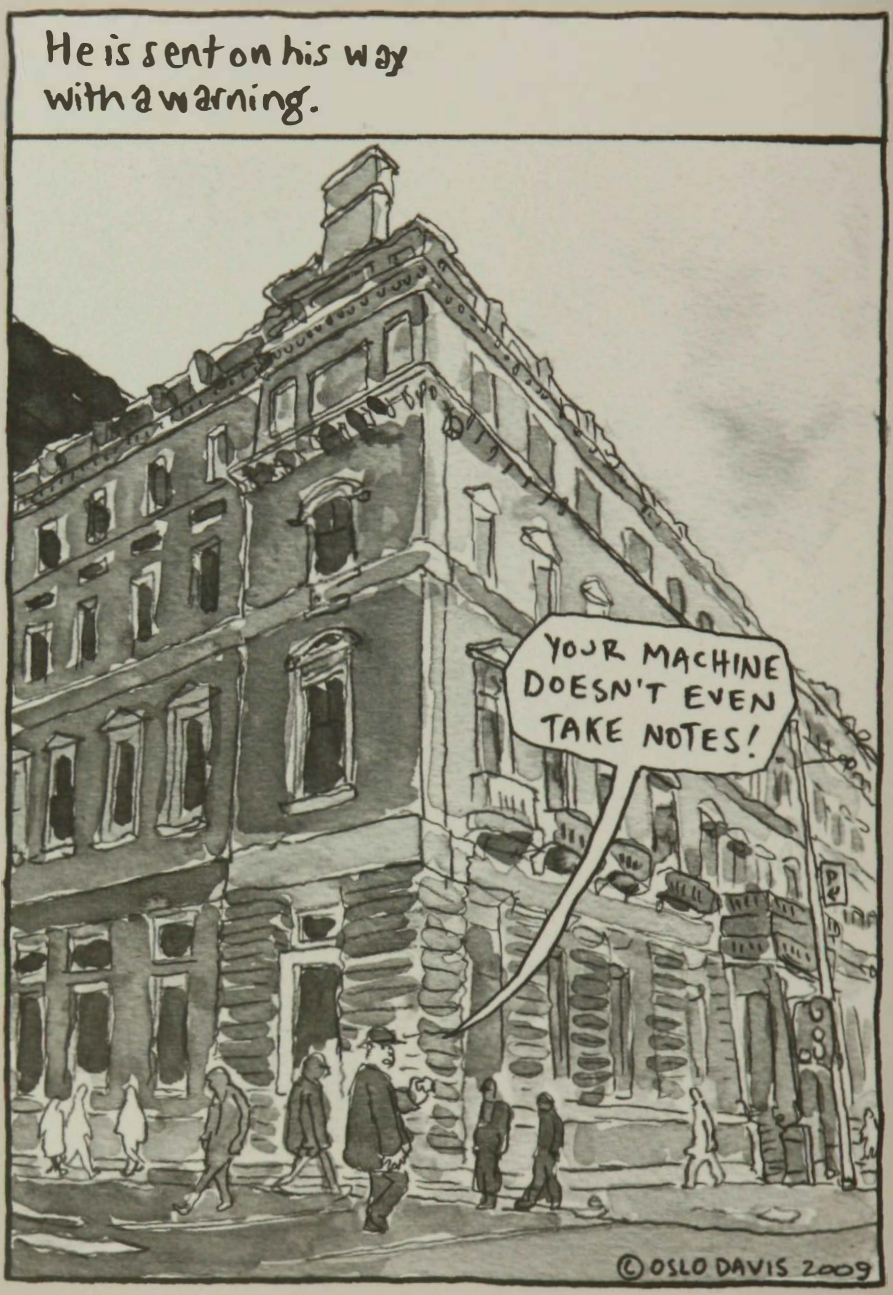
Walter believes himself to again see the lanky, poorly-moustached man, this time offering directions to a couple of backpacking Bolivians, but he's not sure.



Sucking back a root beer, it occurs to Walter that he himself, an undercover undercover ticket inspector, could be under investigation.

Friday, and Walter Siskind is completely at sixes and sevens with it all. He has a very real sensation the hunter has become the hunted.

Paralysed with fear, Walter withdraws into himself.
Excuse me sir - Can we see your ticket please?


He is sent on his way with a warning.
YOUR MACHINE DOESN'T EVEN TAKE NOTES!
©OSLO DAVIS 2009

Taxi Driver

Craig Billingham

As we crossed the Harbour Bridge
the taxi driver's cadences
dissolved
into a pistachio scented silence
(since I left Tehran ...)
as if he were considering
the duplicity of angels.

A Midnight Conversation

Susan Paterson

here is the silent unknown
(anticipation)
this moment, poised.

what rests between takes focus:
flowers, vased
thick pollen in waxy body
centres exposing
vulnerable sex

your voice spreads across the table
like spilt ink, opaque
against the evening.

if we could move through time
then we might all possess
foresight (no more these circus stomach turns
no more your face shadowed in the half-light)

only, time
they say moves through us

and the body
touched with future view
would lose the art of daring

and love
undared
might not be love at all.

inhale

there are gaps in the air.

[a] Man

Derek Motion

NEIL ARMSTRONG WAS a good-looking man who liked to fly planes. He was a highly educated man too, one of the first in his family to be able to describe himself as such, despite not ever being seen as much of an intellectual, despite being a man who could have been and was described as 'good with his hands'. Surprisingly, later on in Neil Armstrong's life someone said (or was overheard saying) that Neil 'had a mind that absorbed things like a sponge.' This may or may not have surprised Neil Armstrong. Certainly he relied on his daring above all else and so was not often shocked. Like most men who blithely succeed at life's various tasks, he wasn't one to dwell on the occasional failures. But this wasn't a conscious decision on his part. Memory — and therefore the capability to reflect upon and derive truths from the various images and narratives attached to this faculty — was not one of Neil Armstrong's strong points.

As life rolled on accordingly Neil Armstrong did try his best to remember various mundane facts and figures (some such things are necessary in any life) but he rarely could. For example, he might be out buying household items, and while counting out stray quarters and dimes he would just know there was something essential he had not remembered to purchase. That particular something would always elude him until it was too late. Milk? Toilet paper? Rodent-bait? It would worry him albeit only for a little while. Eventually Neil Armstrong would just crack a joke or make a statement about the weather; sometimes he might talk about his hopes and dreams, even to annoyed customers waiting behind him to be served. People were charmed and would usually forgive him the milk. In this way his mind only really disturbed him occasionally, when he awoke in strange hotel rooms on interstate trips for instance: why couldn't he remember the things that mattered? It made no sense. (As Neil Armstrong walked out on his mother for the last time, smiling a vague patriotic line, she said 'Pick up a bottle of gin for me, there's a good boy.' He couldn't forget that, even though it was out-of-character, almost definitely a product of her impending dementia, and therefore irrelevant). Neil Armstrong sent off an application to the Manned Spacecraft Centre thinking about whether or not it would be cold enough to wear a light sweater when he went out to the bar that evening. It almost certainly increased his sense of immortality, this lackadaisical foolishness. And when Neil Armstrong, the 'first civilian astronaut', found out that the

other more experienced astronauts had died in a terrible accident, in a gung-ho contradictory manner (that was to become typical) he and the other guys drank scotch to the tune of what happened. His predecessors (like Neil) believed a fifty per cent chance of death was what you lived with when you went out the door each morning. In those days there were risks in trusting science. And so it was determined, Neil Armstrong would be the first person on the Moon. Perhaps it was because of his small ego; perhaps it was because of his surefootedness, derring-do. Neil Armstrong wasn't told. Neil Armstrong was destined to become the living embodiment of a principle, a testament to 'fact'. Neil Armstrong drank gin when he was alone and not on the base. This was known but deemed okay. Neil Armstrong had a crescent moon carved out of Styrofoam and attached much importance to it — he thought of it often, and was stupidly sure he would never forget it. It stood for so much. Neil Armstrong was happy that he didn't suffer motion sickness as he flew to the moon and he thanked the crescent moon, privately, in his mind. He tried to focus on what he would say. It had been a long time since he'd bought his own groceries. He'd been thinking about this a lot recently: he would like to tell the world a little about himself if it were possible. But perhaps that wouldn't be relevant as he rounded upon the new terrestrial. Neil Armstrong just couldn't speculate.

Neil Armstrong decided on the moon-ploy early on. His name now meant truth. And communication hadn't advanced to where it theoretically would be in the future, yet, so he would simply stick with the story that he had said it. Or if he hadn't, if it did come to that, he had meant to. That would get him through the first round of interviews and guest lectures at any rate. Or no one would care. This was conceivable. Nobody quite new whether or not there would be any interest in his words. They were just words, after all. Nobody liked Buzz Aldrin. And Michael Collins would become a Wikipedia reference at best, or a metaphor for alienation; his hometown would never name him on the welcome sign, having better and more famous Italian things to spruik. Neil Armstrong was sure Buzz Aldrin had taken the pen they had used to guarantee the safety of the mission too. He was sticking to the line that he'd dropped it somewhere on the moon, but Neil Armstrong wasn't that stupid. The pen would probably show up years later and be purchased for millions by a collector. But it would only be because Neil Armstrong had led the mission. People liked Neil Armstrong. Neil Armstrong focused on the future and only ever contemplated success. Neil Armstrong was a good American boy, and, come to think of it, later on in his life he would be sure only to use his name to promote American companies, corporate entities that only organised such things as making cars, or digging for coal. It seemed like the right thing to do. Because even the most blatantly contradictory statements can become paradoxes, clauses that become quite useful to mankind, even if only in a 'really makes you think' literary sense. A paradox contains the seed of a deeper

truth within its ostensibly contradictory exterior. It's like 'What?' but then 'Oh ..' Less is more, et cetera. On one of the more nightmarish post-Moon days in quarantine Neil Armstrong begins to think that Man does equal mankind. It really does. It must. And the best sorts of people are American. Americans cast off their colonial oppressors years ago and then just set about pushing the boundaries. Only in America, thought Neil Armstrong, could a man like Neil Armstrong succeed. If America needs my help, as a man who didn't die — as a spokesman for man, a spokesman for [a] man, a spokesman for mankind — I must provide my services. Neil Armstrong shared his thoughts with Buzz Aldrin (Michael Collins was positioned somewhere towards the extremities of the quarantine capsule and not within earshot) but Buzz seemed only to feign interest, thinking instead of the pen hidden in his suit perhaps (Buzz Aldrin's name would come to stand for coming second; inevitably he was commissioned for less corporate advertising).

Naturally as time passed Neil Armstrong forgot all the mental processes behind his patriotic decision — but he stuck to it. The veracity of the speech didn't matter. The appropriateness of his status as a cultural icon of truth did matter. The reasons and evidence that explained all that he did in the future could never matter. Holding on to his momentum did matter. Neil Armstrong realised a poor memory had never held him back. Neil Armstrong had lived, was living, the dream. Neil Armstrong quietly thanked the Styrofoam crescent moon. Night was falling outside the quarantine shell but he couldn't tell. His course would never deviate.

Cool Bananas

B.R. Dionysius

You touch flesh & try your superpowers
Because you've over clocked your heart.
If it were a toy, children would complain
Of the noise it makes & beg you to shut
It off! Turn off that heart I hate it! Some
Would wish it to be like an ice block, licked
Minutely & replaced in the freezer for some
Hot day. But you are not ruled by temperature
Or by blood's police state. So you bit into it;
Ice headaches could not hurt you. You were
Always in lock-down hiding under your desk;
Mind-snipers drew a bead on you in utero.
But nevertheless you reported in! You have
Worked out the answers, now for the question.

November Fourth

Julie Hashimoto-McCreery

Pikake catches the scent of rain
leaves its traces soft and fragrant,
sweet and too quiet for happy sounds.

How we pluck the words so carefully from
the sides of our mouths and peel them one by one
from our tongues and plaster them to walls.

How missing has become tangible
in-between eyes exuding desolation
and the distance between coming and going.

Ask how the tide pulls out all shades
of purple and white, shines, shapes and grains
filed down by weathering haphazard patterns.

The way the body's broken down
to bone pieces and ash in the spaces between
the same way we remember in fragments.

How we miss the fragility of passing
silences between our lips and through our clumsy
fingers reaching for anything substantial.

Untitled Love Letter

Sime Knezevic

I'll write you a love letter
on a freshly fallen leaf
and let the seasons
change its meaning.

Ice Age

Emilie Zoey Baker

For fourteen days you fly
wearing crystal smoke lipstick
you pull pictures out of the air
send junk mail with your teeth.

You are a see-through witch
with a belly full of someone else
who's never going to cry in your arms.
The sex could be known,
but you are as far away from their life
as chocolate is from a cocoa bean.

Sleep is a scorpion, best avoided.
Dreams bite you in the skull.
Every drop in the shower whispers your name
tells you you're insane.
That's why you only have baths,
but the bugs can get you in there,
they love flat water.
They breed in your towel
so you dry yourself with the hairdryer,
over your big belly,
full of someone else.
Food is chalk
oranges are aliens
bread is dry skin.
Wine is full of microphones
that amplify the heartbeat to your throat
a concert in a silo.

After two ashtrays that day
you feel everything get wet between your legs.
It's time for that someone else but
the nurses breath is too white,
the doctors teeth flash like cameras.
You run,

you didn't even have time
to see someone's tiny face.
You run, before the haze slips away.
He is waiting.
Logic tells you it's the right thing to do.
It's fine, it's good.
You just want to look into the ball of smoking crystal
and see yourself again.

The Living Air

Ann Hillesland

THE HEADLIGHTS FLASHED into Marsha's living room. After three months in the house she still wasn't used to the sudden whiteness sweeping in, sending the grotesquely magnified shadows of lamps and chairs scuttling across the walls before disappearing as cars manoeuvered the turn. As a child, she used to think that her bedroom's toys and furniture moved as soon as she closed her eyes. Now she sat still, waiting for the lights to pass, as she used to lie frozen in her bed at night.

The lights hit the far wall and wavered without panning further. A squealing skid and a gasping rush of air ended in a metallic crash. She sprang to the door, squinting into the headlights. The wrecked car was humped like a crouching monster. She stepped into the light, into the sharp evening wind. A hissing sound came from the car, but otherwise the engine was silent. The headlights still shone, though the thick pine tree trunk stove in the bumper between them. It was too bright to see anything clearly.

She moved out of the direct beam, around to the driver's side. A man was inside, his head thrown back. Carefree, from a distance. As she moved closer, she saw the blood dripping down his face and leaking from the side of his mouth. Just a boy, really, pale in the reflected headlights and green dashboard glow. A goatee pasted on his chin. His eyes wide, staring.

She'd only seen one dead person before, but the chemo had wasted her husband Gene so much he was almost a skeleton when he'd slipped away six months ago — looking ancient at thirty five. She'd dozed, and awakened to the empty quality of the hospital room. Don't leave me, she thought.

'It's hard to understand when God calls the young home to Him,' the minister proclaimed at the funeral.

She touched the hair above the boy's ear. A spark nipped her fingers. She snatched her hand back. Sudden light sprang into the car, making it seem as if he'd shifted in the seat. But it was only the headlights of another car, sweeping towards them, screeching to a halt.

Maybe she was wrong, she told herself. Maybe when the ambulance came they would discover some flutter of life deep down that couldn't be seen by the amateur eye. The smell of fresh-cut pine from the gash in the tree hovered around the scene. The neighbours shouted as they came running, voices tiny as the calls of distant birds.

Malcolm, the boy had been named. A hell-raiser, though the articles in the newspaper didn't come right out and say it. Instead, they described him as

'a daredevil'. His friends told stories at the funeral about how he'd taken the black diamond snowboard runs his first time out. How he'd stretched masking tape across the road to hear the sound it made when cars tore through. He'd been going twenty kilometres over the speed limit when he'd missed the curve.

'Good thing that tree was there, or his car would be in your living room,' a cop said to her that night. The tree would survive, though the open wound oozed sap. She hated seeing the gash, hated the piney smell that seemed to seep into the walls, hang in her hair. Hated the way Malcolm's staring eyes appeared to her whenever she closed her own. Her brain was grainy from lack of sleep. She forgot to eat, forgot to set the sprinklers, walked into rooms to find the radio playing, though she didn't remember turning it on.

Just before the accident, she'd bought cans of sage green paint for the front room, new towels, bathmats, and a shower curtain striped like a beach umbrella. It all sat unopened in a corner, the filmy yellow hardware store bags crackling and breathing in stray gusts of wind. The new, thick drapes she'd ordered had not come in. At first she'd stopped sitting in the front room at night, spooked every time headlights washed through the room. But cowering in her bedroom didn't work either. She could still sense the lights, like a low radio.

Gene had liked to listen to the radio at night, but she couldn't stand it. He fell asleep with it playing and she was stuck listening to sports talk. Once she'd awakened in the middle of the night to a memorabilia evaluation show, where men called in to describe a signed baseball or a game-worn jersey, and an expert told them how much it was worth. After that night she'd bought Gene a Walkman. It was better, though she'd still wake from dreams of bees to find tinny voices humming from his ear buds. Now she missed it.

She'd taken a leave of absence from her job to care for Gene. She kept telling the people at work she wasn't ready to come back yet, that she wouldn't be able to concentrate. They didn't seem to mind. Already she imagined herself fading from the minds of her co-workers, like a photo left too long in the light. The same way the office, her job, that had seemed so vivid before Gene's diagnosis now seemed like a world of senseless motion and undecipherable sounds.

One rainy evening, as she drove her Jetta home from the grocery store, she could barely steer the car, her arms stiff and uncooperative. Her headlights lit the raindrops like sparklers as her wipers flailed. Was something moving? She peered out, searching for the dark figure she'd seen from the corner of her eye. The rain sheeted down like sheer curtains, everything beyond her headlights a tangle of gliding shadows. She felt the urge to speed up, to shoot through the curve like a racer, leaving her wrinkled mess of a life behind. She smelled pine, felt like she was floating, the world sliding around her. As

her car started to drift, the car's radio spluttered to life, loud voices splashing her like cold water. She touched the brakes, gripped the wheel tighter, and managed to keep to the curve as she sped past her house. Once the road was straight, she braked and swerved to the curb, taking deep breaths of the piney air and wondering what had almost happened. She looked back and saw nothing but darkness.

Two nights later she was dreaming of bees again when something woke her. She reached to her left for Gene and felt emptiness. One of the grief pamphlets suggested sleeping on the opposite side of the bed to get used to sleeping solo, but she'd never felt comfortable on Gene's side and had given it up within a week. She stretched to turn on the light, then blinked because there was already light, bright high beams coming from the living room. She'd taken to sleeping in a tracksuit without Gene to keep her warm, so she ran straight out.

This time the car had sideswiped the pine tree, smashed into the sport-utility across the street, and spun to rest straddling both lanes, facing her house dead on. A sedan, silvery blue grey, new enough to have an airbag. Though the way the driver's side of the car was bent, she didn't think that the bag would help. Her heart drummed as she got closer to the car. Half of the man's face was a bloody mess, but his eyes blinked open to slits. 'Did you see him?' he asked. He was older, tufts of gray sprouting from his ears.

'What?' She leaned closer. The metallic smell of blood surrounded her, but she didn't turn away.

'The boy. Did I hit him?'

She looked around, but saw no one. When she looked back at the driver his eyes had closed. 'No. You didn't hit anyone,' she said, but she could see it was already too late.

It wasn't the same cop. This one said, 'Ever thought about putting up a fence?'

'He said there was a boy. He was worried he'd hit a boy.'

The cop shrugged. 'Didn't see any sign of one. Looked like speed, pure and simple. Lots of folks get that way at night. Hypnotised. Not another car in sight.'

She thought of her drive the other night. Hypnotised. Was that what she had been? She stepped closer. 'There was another accident here just over a week ago. A teenager.'

Another shrug. 'Things happen like that sometimes.'

Marsha turned away to watch the tow truck drive off with the car. How could she make the cop understand what she didn't understand herself? But it wasn't coincidence. Something felt wrong. When the doctors had still spoken hopefully of Gene's prognosis, she'd lain awake while he slept, listening to the squeaky, stretching sound of his cancer growing.

Once again, the neighbours were out, standing in little clumps and watching. No one came over to talk to her. She wondered if they felt it too, the wrongness fogging the street.

She woke to the radio playing, 'Jean, Jean, roses are red, and all the leaves have gone green ... ' She reached out for her husband, felt cool sheet. Had she left the music on? She couldn't remember.

She'd fallen asleep with the lights on again. No. It was headlights. She jumped up, but the lights swept past and the house turned dark. She padded out to the front room. She'd stopped drawing the drapes at night. What was the point? Instead of the bright headlights, the orange glow of streetlights lit the street. The pine moved softly, a nocturnal animal.

The street was empty, the parked cars and clipped shrubs thick with shadow. Everything seemed heightened. The still-dented SUV across the street was the brightest red she had ever seen. She clamped her fingers on the windowsill as the hair prickled on the back of her neck. She smelled fresh pine sap though the windows were closed. Far away, a droning car approached.

The shadow of the car parked next door shivered. A figure crouched, turning his head to look up the road. In her bare feet she glided to the door, twisted the knob silently. The engine hum was clear now. The figure rose and moved slowly out of the shadow.

He wore black. All hell-raisers did. She crept forward, the concrete rough against the soles of her bare feet. The wind had risen, and the wide chord of it through the pine bows masked any sound she might have made.

She told herself it could be any boy from the neighbourhood, but she didn't believe it. She fought her way forward, her legs numb and heavy. Her stomach contracted and she swallowed hard, but she kept going. She didn't know what she would do when she reached him. Her hands were cold. The smell of pine grew stronger with each step.

The boy stood with his back to her. He raised one leg, stiff-kneed, stamped the ground, then raised the other, touching earth again. His clothes were creased and dirty, with a tear in his pant leg showing fish-pale flesh. The high wind didn't ruffle his hair. She was almost close enough. Almost there. He spun towards her. The blood from the gash in his head was as bright as it had been right after the accident. The car engine roared nearer as she rushed him. Though he looked solid, she half expected her arms to go right through him. But she hit the hard muscles of an active boy. He was cold, a cold that burned through her fingers as she grabbed his arms, that burned through her tracksuit as she tackled him into the shadow of the parked car and lay on top of him. The headlights of the oncoming car swept past. She looked at his bloody face, into his staring eyes, the wistful beard that made him seem so young. Worst of all, even as she grappled with him, his face was still the expressionless mask of a dead body.

Her breasts and belly froze; still she held on. She panted, but his chest was quiet beneath her. He thrashed his arms and legs as if jolted by random electrical pulses. She struggled to hold on, breathing harder. Her head sagged. When her breath touched his cheek, he screamed. She heard it inside her skull, but around them the houses stayed quiet.

She lowered her head more, till her lips almost touched his cheek. 'Malcolm.' His whole body jerked. 'Go home, Malcolm,' she said. 'It's time to go home.' He closed his eyes and became still. She felt something rush away, like a tide receding.

After a moment she stood, her legs and arms stiff. She rubbed her red, tingling fingers and blew on them while she checked the empty street. When she looked back, the boy was gone.

Inside her house, she wrapped herself in a blanket and stood looking out at the street. She felt like she'd never be warm again. But the lingering, homey smell of burnt toast from her dinner calmed her. Behind her the radio let out a comforting bounce of tinny sound. Another car came, the headlights running through the room.

Even as Gene had become feebler, he'd still done what he could for her. She'd come home and find that he'd washed the dishes, though it had meant he was too exhausted even to wake to the sound of the door opening. 'I always saw myself as your protector,' he said once after she'd helped him into the hospital bed. Usually he'd been stoic under the repeated, futile treatments. But stretched out against the white sheets, tears had trickled from the corners of his eyes. 'I wanted to take care of you, and now I'm dragging you through all this.'

'Shh. You do help me. You help me every day,' Marsha had whispered. It was true. The cancer had drawn them closer, chipping away the trivial until there was nothing but the two of them. Even as she'd tried to reassure him, she could see it didn't ease him. He shook his head, moving his legs restlessly.

A car swept by again, high beams hitting her like X-rays. 'You can go home too, Gene,' she said. In the back room, the radio kept playing. 'I want you to be at peace.' She took a deep breath, filling her chest with living air. 'I want you to do it for me.'

The radio flared louder, until she could almost make out the song, then faded away. She stood, the empty house behind her, the bare window in front of her, and beyond that, the city, humming with life.

Prayers for Cracks in the Concrete

A.S. Patric

come here - i want to tell you – there/s millions of stars - more and more - but none of them have ears - they won/t listen - not to say it/s all empty - the first illusion of birth is separation - the first of death / emptiness - but i want you – there/s this secret you and i have – i/ll tell you – me - not me - what else matters? everything – that/s the truth – there/s nothing irrelevant – it/s the first blush in a kiss - before the lips part and offer breath – there/s skin / wrinkling at the edges of our eyes like thousands of christmases worth of discarded wrapping paper - but we aren/t colourful - sometimes there/s no colour at all - and so much confusion – clarity in open sky blue almost evaporating at the horizon - if there was a place for it – doesn/t have to be a mountain - a hill with grass growing like grass that never heard / never even dreamed of the obscenity of concrete - we should laugh up on that hill - maybe not even a hill - could be flat / like a kilometre squared on a perfect bubble billions of kilometres round – see / only truth - there is no flatness - like the world never was flat - like there/s nowhere flat / perfectly flat / or perfectly round / except in our minds / and then / only then as a concept - and can there be truth in a concept – i/ll let you decide - like the concept of God - i pray at night - mostly i forget - then there/s this desire to talk to the earless black spaces up there - to throw blood up at the soulless canvas - before dreams perform our nightly obliteration - if it/s the hungry soul of this vast bear god in the caves of our bodies / / / maybe it would make the difference / the hunt / steam from our mouths in the brittle morning - beneath limitless emerald canopies singing with birds on fire with vermillion and indigo / puffs of steam in the limitless vacuum - would be you - me - but if not / then there/s unbroken concrete - more and more - what then? i imagine blades of grass - never more than seed - to sweat in the soil - the only prayer for a crack - just the smallest fissure to slither our green life through - but mostly i forget - and then i

remember you - i want you to remember me – nothing/s irrelevant - everything matters - even the eternally exploding stars with all that light to burn into the impossible gulfs of empty nothing - i wonder if they believe only in fire and light - maybe they don/t accept the concept of vacuum – i/d like that kind of bravura - just say there/s no distance between you and me - you already know - without me telling you - but maybe we should not accept the perfect circle – that/s what i/m thinking - believe only in the law of tendrils – roots - the implacable law of the squiggle - wave at each other like the tails of semen – know / like ovum / circles are just impossible - laugh at the idea - laugh at a continuum of vacuum – our silent dead womb only seeming to suffocate God and his wriggling / giggling angels – or like millions of blades of grass ruffling with the wind - and maybe you can tell me - i heard it/s true - or it/s possible - the sound they make as the wind passes – don/t they sing? - but we like walking on concrete - you and me - we want it to be poured everywhere – bare foot dreams are like perfect circles - more often / these are your dreams – imprisonment - being chased - teeth falling out - kissing ghosts evaporating in the morning - and there/s longing - and we stay patient / even though longing is the truth - we just don/t know how to feast on kisses - we get bored on love - and then wish – wishing for the death of longing - for this kiss to be like a perfect circle - you and me - no birth - no death - happy as God in the womb – silent as a prayers whispered in paradise - just the stars / singing

Eel

Hinemoana Baker

Little eel knows swimming is
a good substitute for the future.
She is the shiver of red hot pokers.
Oh! The mountain powder! she says.

Every day this table changes, bright
pages and rough rubbing dreams.

Something shining rivers through
and fades: no inklings allowed.

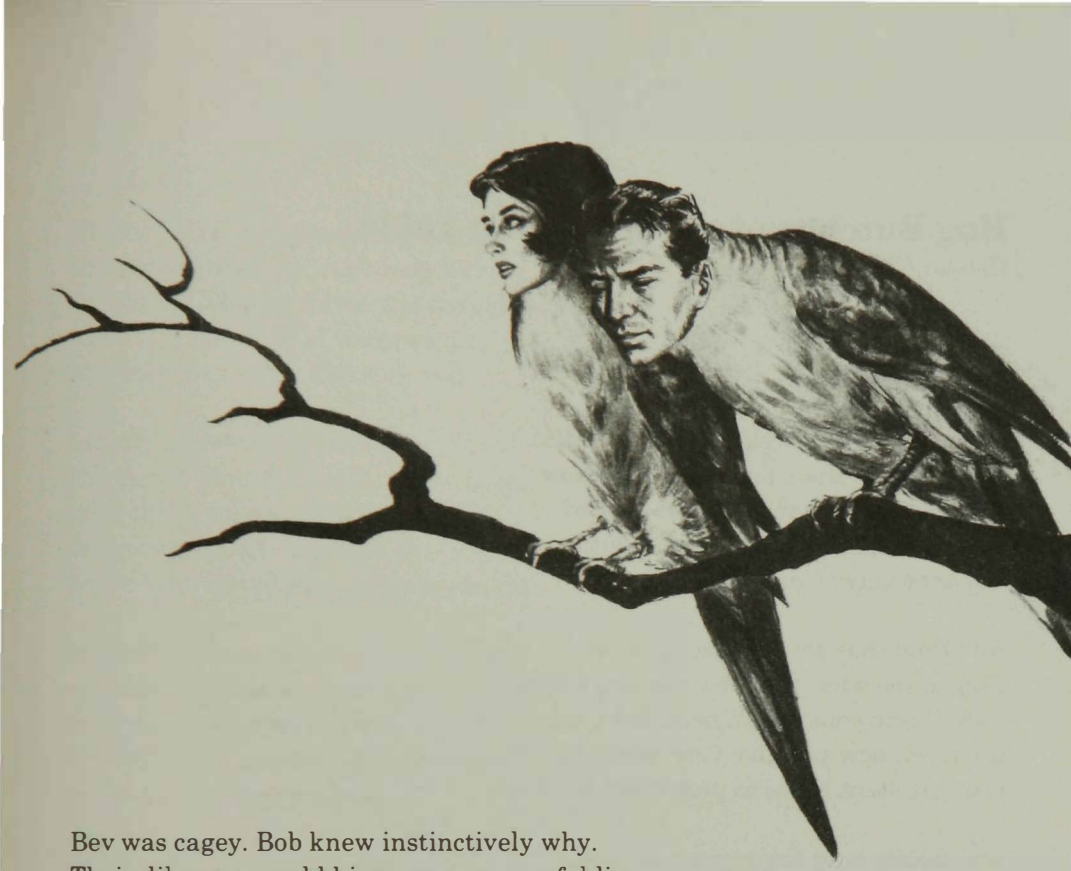
Di tells the joke about weighing a pie,
joins the decision queue, no longer
hungry. The machine delivers a coke
can with the sounds of a manufacturer.
My own day windows and purchases.

The eel wrings and scrapes, she flails and
reinstates. Cows engine up the paddock
as we move through bouncing, someone moos
and we call them out, a rove of globes.

Rearing has never been sixes and sevens
only clocking and facing. Elbows and
all other joints praise her
umbrellas and licklicking
a pot for her pito.
She is an aircraft of a thing

a mudflat factory, her feet
kicking in my throat
her fingernails
scratching the membrane of my eye.

We steamed you out, Little Eel.
We screamed and
teamed you out. Now fetch up
like a good grief girl, pinch your
wakeupfullness, it sunnies us.



Bev was cagey. Bob knew instinctively why.
Their dilemma would hinge on a successful lie.

Would she be kind or would she be honest?
Bob struggled to put on a brave budgie face.

Hog Butcher of the Workshop Table

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz

The other students say you're beautiful,
and I believe them for I have seen how
you beckon, the thrill-soaked ripcord
of your laugh, tender gash of mouth,
the dark play of your wet eyes.

And then they say you are kind, and
I try to see what they see, the small birds
tucked into your body's nest, the weak,
the tired, how you give your whole body,
your insistent lungs to prop them back up.

And finally they say you are honest,
like tetanus, like an affliction
you deserve, the honesty of being cut,
the rust, blood, clear-eyed truth of it,
how maybe you should've known better.

When they talk of you, their eyes
glitter and spin, how they draw
their fists to their hearts, ardent.
They believe in every painted inch
of you. Look, I don't deny your talent,
your shiny slate mind, the raw fever
of your words, but I have to admit

I don't like the doggish way you lick
your chops at the beginning of class,
how when we read, I can hear the knives
sharpening in your mouth, the pale retreat
when your assassin hand slaps the air,
how careless you are with their yields
to you, the abuse they take just to hear
you say their names. I know

what it is like to be ambition-slick,
so rigorous that you can't help but see
everyone's alleycat flaws, the snaggle
teeth and torn ears of their writing,
how lost they seem. But girl, you

beautiful brute, don't mistake
the knife's glint for God's brassy horn,
don't think your apocalypse road is
the only one there is, don't slit
every calf's throat just because you can,

just because you've got a clean apron
and a hungry blade, just because it begs
to be done, wriggles in front of you,
one less heart beating, one less mouth
in the field to worry about.

A Desert's Language

George Moore

It is always out there, just beyond the last gas station
south of Twin Falls, the memory of the desert in a rage.

At the time, the fields laid in the last decade had not been cultivated,
in fact, were desert still, where the stretch of land was equal

to the eye. The years between had found me at home only once
in awhile, that while, a stitch of hope between forgotten jobs.

Christmas break, and recall the whiteout darkening my way,
bald tires on the Studebaker, the radio scratching out country songs

of love's lament, sin, before righting the world with easy sentiment.
Believing what would come might extirpate a year's failings

and the weather, and wondering if there was something in that birth,
the snow and I in furious pitches dashed across the desert. I'd come

the long way home before, mapped the passage out across
and intervening emptiness, grown into an itch, and a rumour, and finally

a warmth within the rattling heater of the wagon. That snow
was no animus, rather the invitation of a storm, an awakening

to what things mean, or will, years later. North, I was a sun-blind bird,
a welter of transformations, and if I survived, home at the season,

I'd cure myself of the losses intensified with the storms fit
of appropriate language, the flash of what it means to get there,

the words we borrowed from each other to stretch time between
the lights of towns, a word across that empty stretch, just clearing.

Instructions for Bored Children on Long Car Trips

Simon Cox

1. Hope fervently, as the car pulls out of the driveway, that the Chinese man from down the street will be practicing Tai Chi in the park, that you will catch sight of him as the car drives past, and that he will be practicing Tai Chi in the park with a sword just like that one magic morning on the way to school earlier this year, when you saw him slicing broad parabolic arcs through the frosty a.m. air in his unwashed pjs, and you realised then what it was those school exercises about 'Find A Role Model' were really getting at.

2. Think about swords.

3. When the man Mum tells you is named Long fails to materialise in the early dawn, compensate by imagining him running alongside the car with superhuman speed all the way through to Mandurah. Picture him leaving a trail of decapitated street lights and decimated trees in his wake. Picture him jumping from suburban lawn to suburban lawn with the flamboyant grace of a gay grasshopper finally ready to show the world how he really feels.

4. The lawns are safe land. The driveways are lava. If Long falls in the lava he loses a life point.

5. Now the driveways are safe land and the cars are hovering platforms and the lawns are black holes filled with spiders and also scorpions and also girl germs.

6. Think about girl germs.

7. Is there not perhaps — buried deep down an unguarded crevice in the makeshift pillow fort of your mind — a part of you that secretly, desperately wants to catch girl germs?

8. Think about pies.

9. Custard, beef, pumpkin. You can't really go wrong with pies.

10. Think about Su Lin Lim from 3B.

11. Think about Su Lin Lim from 3B and her hair the colour of rich licorice and her five different types of lip balm and her eyes like the kind of marbles that make you want to play for keeps just so you have the chance to stare at them a while longer.

12. Can we maybe get some pies, from a petrol station?

13. No. Didn't think so.

14. Close your eyes real tight and let the full glare of the midday sun play on your vision through the untinted car windows. Begin to feel the blood coursing through your eyelids from inside your closed eyes, like when you shine a torch right up against your fingers and they blush with hidden red warmth. Let the splotchy patches of red and crimson pulsing on the black screen of your eyelids begin to remind you of throbbing internal organs.

15. Feel sick a little.

16. Can we stop the car for a bit?

17. No seriously I need to get out of the car.

18. Please?

19. Try to remember exactly when you ate all that carrot, and realise that it was at least two nights ago. Try to wipe the taste of stomach acid from your mouth with a tissue. Try not to think about the carrot.

20. Told you I needed to get out of car.

21. Open a window and rinse your mouth. Sleep a while, and dream of nothing.

22. Wake up, and through remarkably clear eyes, notice the way that even when passed at high speed the sheep and cattle in the surrounding fields still look scarier and smellier and meaner than they do in cartoons.

23. Are we there yet?

24. Make like the fly spot on your window is the crosshairs of a high powered laser beam. Angle your head in such a way that it aims the laser beam across the moving landscape. Remember the lesson learnt from *Star Wars* — that high powered laser beams only bring despair to feisty princesses when used for the purposes of evil.

25. Remember what you actually like about *Star Wars*.

26. Blow up cows.

27. Pssshwwww!

28. Wonder why the birds don't get electrocuted when they perch on power lines.

29. Wonder if it's true what Dad says: if a bird steps on two different power lines at the same time it will get electrocuted.

30. What kind of bird has legs that wide anyway?

31. Watch the power lines move like line graphs across an endless x-axis of a horizon. Watch the power lines dissect the sky into shifting shards of white and blue. Watch the power lines criss and cross like they might become tangled, and forget that they only appear to be moving because of the relentless pace of the car.

32. Think about dinosaurs.

BRAINLESS - VOL 2

Play

mr oCean

reel to capstan, always
in tension, we
grope in the dark, in
dizziness — still spinning —
we grope for the
pause, the
slow-mo', the
frame-by-frame; we
keep fumbling because
it's dark, because
we're dizzy, because
we can't stop spinning, because
we can't get close enough — too
short — fingers glancing
off gleaming panels — keep
grasping for controls, because
we want to stop — we
can't stop spinning — always
in tension, always
dizzy — we can't
stop spinning — and then,
one day when we've
forgotten we're even trying, when we've
forgotten we're even spinning, when we've
forgotten which button we're reaching for, we
stop.

Shards

Ashley Capes

THE BLOOD WAS OLD, like crimson salt scattered on the table. Dusk fell through windows in ribbons, split by sharp, tomahawking of the fates, their threads trailing across sky, straw colours seeping into the wall and floorboards. Dust mixed in corners, dangerous with the snide crunch of elm leaves, scraps of fruit and fabric, a coat so thin it could cut; razor legs, widow hands.

He took swigs from a cheap cauldron of liquor, slumped against the basin, where rat shit and liberty swam in lazy circles, Viking bells drifting over rooftops in God's smug fanfare, oh the faithful, scurrying to Mass.

Spinning drunken-nutcracker to the paint-peeled window he stopped shoes first and elbowed his way to the clearest port, squinting eyes allergenic, smoked out of hiding, pregnant ponds of scum — when he knuckled his sockets it was like watching a whittler carve. He moved away, leaving in an overseas-last-time-he-sees-them manner, beastly, bravado he-man, shirt concealing guts not abs, collar and cuffs touched with perfume, unholy flowers bottle between his buttons and the beaded skin of his chest.

In the mirror, another man. A face of weeds, stubble that needed a lawn mower, black-Olympic rings beneath his eyes, things collapsing like the theatre he loitered in. You look like a mastiff. He let his forehead rest against the glass, Titanic-wreck hitting the icy seabed, and shuddered, his back suddenly covered in sticky-moss. Drawing his lungs another cup he drank again, liquid coals, signalling sirens in his throat. He blinked, shutter-speed slow motion, and remembered himself in montage — leftovers from a camera, buried in a drawer so English it moved on rails and rivets, and everything he forgot to develop crystallising in his skull, like a stone funeral for Houdini.

Language and Sediment — South

Matthew Hall

hands subsequent trust, steady and culpable
vagrant images. mutability the portrayal is numbered
colour is its own assumption
ineluctable swell of greater rivers
a burial exchange composes estuaries
damask skying above liminal oystered shores
hurtles in a loosening artifice
I substitute your body for my landscape
I balk upon the unswerving woods in distance
light trails over distant hillsides no witness
to our terrestrial weather.

Scraw

Les Wicks

Why do parrots get the good lines?
It's like their call is frozen in pollen,
a stamp, or signet ring pressed onto the board wax
of each undecided clay.

Taught the bird to say
Shut up stupid & with a millet stick
she conducts the afternoon. Orderly regress
to a new woman's denim
tiny parade
with feelings peeling from the wood frame. Jazz polyester.

We promenade beneath nurses, slapstick
lords of prayer, howl & swashbuckle.
I can explain the secrets of plastic sheets.

Fresh weeks. The crash of our appetites,
search for a key with
our tight apertures.

The regular crew's onshore leave selling
their dignity while
the Bee Gees mutter from the flat below. They
have defeated the lawn so we
set sail from Port Plenty to the Bay of Dust our
small integrities for a bucket.

Rock Pool (For Thomasen)

Fiona Wright

What people carved this place
    out of the cliffstones?
The porous rock planed
with the abrasion of their insteps,

    the larger smoothness
an accidental grace
that we forget
when the salt scent has dried from the air.

The purled water purrs
    the memory of their flesh,
their swimcaps, frilled as algae
the vegetable buoyancy
    of loose and ageing skin.
It's a leonine tribe here now.

Their dappled bodies limpet-like on stone,
the glint of salt crystals
pelts on downy skin.
Muscular rustling as our footsteps
fall like trespass.
I crush periwinkles underneath my feet.

Handbags cradle in the rock, grow strange
and polyped as dead coral.
We abandon
our politeness, our prickly, anemone selves
to the salt kiss and puddle,

green our skin
beneath the water's stinging lip, we swim
lazy orbits.
The alchemy of salt and sunshine.
A spongiform language
now between us.

Some hardness there dissolves.

Fashion Update

Dean Brink

Boys in Helsinki wear layers of wool
while on equatorial Galapagos they strut in ripstop trunks
with built-in liners, left untied for comfort
show off a swagger like soldiers in Kashmir
waiting in khaki and beige along rocky valleys.
Men in NYC's hard waxed leather black out
in denim laps, the sprawling burlap smiles of country boys
near Bogota leave passers-by breathing deep the odours run over
lazy hot days. Let Tel Aviv girls in green twill ankles
spray graffiti on the steps up Gonen near the occupied Golan.
Boys in pink knit terry drag slippery vinyl side bags down cliffs
scurrying to the bay to lose themselves in stories
with rough-and-tumble merchant marines
at the nudist beach near UBC.
Let manly girls in Barcelona and girly boys in Brazil
have shoulders exalted in duchess satin
have their faux-leopard-fur stilettos
as teens in Oklahoma City cling to their Harris tweed dinner jackets
on Saturdays while in the fields cheesecloth boys
run around in gauzy frayed and severed hems.
In the shadow of Mt. Shasta hippie girls
sew their mother's hemp over holes torn in jean hems.
The disappointment of missed stitches, and ravelling silk
tangles Shanghai boys fingering in the park.
Reversible boys in Berlin sport gingham hats and sail cloth shirts
by open windows on commuter carriages
while in Bombay girls bear patches of graffiti
on unbleached seersucker T-shirts
and boys alone in Westminster sleep in Thai silk boxers,
and boys in Antwerp prefer soft, crisp alpaca with cheap antung lining,
and flannel panty girls in Osaka are charmed
by gathering seams on the strapped chintz box with frog arms,
while polyurethane boys in Taipei pair giggling in white plastic glasses
and the magic touch of linens is surprisingly cool in Jakarta summers.
Boys on San Francisco beaches
like fun snaps on synthetic batiste bikinis.

Retro girls in Bratislava tie home-dyed gauze at ankles,
the orange and red colours of sunset gurus.
Boys in Kafka's Prague bear the reverse twill weave of herringbone to class
and a lone girl in Santiago dances
under the sheer swish of red and yellow organza
while polyester boys in St. Petersburg with camel hair sweaters
gather at the convenience store.
Boys in Hong Kong slide into the stainless steel tube
in quilted viscose jackets, no liners,
and West Side Latinos wear print boxers rumpling above the belt.
A boy in Winnipeg brushing the nap of his shoulder bag down sends signals.
On a chartered bus back from Crystal Mountain
couples doze in white nylon jumpsuits.
A Milan boy folds away his stiff gabardine raincoat,
and on Wall Street in lycra socks
it folds down a foulard bag flap, acetate and easily fraying.
Sicilian boys like sharp-shouldered blazer cloth
tailored soft to their waists, striped, the nap down.
Ladyboy legs are wrapped to the shins in the wet look of cire.
Paris girls tuck in the sheer, blue chiffon and yellow charmeuse blouses.
Boys in Tashkent go for loose tricots in basic colours.
Toronto teens space in flannelette pyjamas
and blue pacifiers on transparent rose chains
while the boy in a looping boucle sweater
sidesteps not to snag the crowd on the Tokyo underground.

Emasculating Orion

K. Lou Combs

Connect the dots of seven innocuous specks of light hovering high above
and you have the outline of a fictional hunter,
name of Orion.
He was killed by Artemis,
though the reason depends on your source.
I go with the story that Orion lusted after the virgin Opis,
who had better things to do than waste her time with boys
And when he tried to take her by force,
Artemis stepped in
and ended him.

But who would linger on a story like that?
The stars themselves have no morbid tales to tell
and while there's not many to gaze at here in the city,
you can still see a spider's thread link two points of Orion's belt —
Or perhaps that
is a trick of the night, as no spider
has the silk to connect the stars.

Above, his shoulders pierce through the clouds
and below, you must picture for yourself
the two stars playing the part of knee and foot,
the means by which Orion climbs invisible steps
to face the mighty Taurus
— but as my eyes trace the curve of his calf,
his foot, to me, looks to be blinking.

This sets my mind to work:
Is it another trick of the night,
a mirage spun by Darkness herself to set bewilderment
upon the people who had always used the stars
to guide them to and fro,
to tell left from right and north from south?
To turn us into chaos, thinking we have no other choice,
our brightest star in our mightiest hunter
faltering, flickering away from us?

Or maybe that star,
thousands of years ago,
collapsed under the pressure of being the brightest in the constellation,
the one that supported Orion,
kept him from falling over,
and finally, after never finding a thread to link it to another
to help it through its loneliness,
tore itself apart,
reaching for the corners of the universe
to be
not a mass of gravity consuming itself
but light, spiraling outward into darkness,
a streak of stardust keening the only song that ever mattered
alive
till at last, it dissipated —
and we are only now seeing the last flickerings
of its existence.

Maybe that star hasn't been there since the day we first laid eyes upon it
and Orion has been one-legged all this time,
not stepping up to challenge Taurus as we thought
but wobbling as he faced the beast mid-leap,
the stillness before he fell under its might.

Maybe we'll have to go back
and take another look at mythology
because we got it wrong the first time,
we didn't
understand
the signs.
Maybe after Artemis loosed the killing arrow from her bow,
she thought of the gleam in Orion's eye
as he advanced upon Opis
and severed his leg at the thigh
so even in death, he would be reminded
who is the hunter
and who is the prey.

The Stray Bullet Theory

Ken Smeaton

A NEW SUMMER DAY, when the world is young again and the future is measured in sunshine. Ben brings his girlfriend to his kitchen tent for breakfast. He acts grown up and Yvette puts on her best little girl face for the Potatoes. Derwood informs those assembled that Mass is said in Warrnambool every day. The Potatoes have sacrificed Sunday Mass for the holidays. Marie, who is taller and older than the French girl by eighteen months, is not fooled by the giggly little girl act. Marie does not articulate her feelings, what she feels is a mix of awe and envy. She suspects Yvette has gone much further with boys than herself but she is too loyal to Ben to be anything but friendly. There is the matter of them spying on her and Skip. That episode had frightened her and she is not seeing Skip anymore, there is another boy she has her eyes on anyway. Olive is relieved her tenth has a girlfriend and is happy. Derwood insists on reminding everyone that missing mass is a sin but their mum told him not to worry, that God would understand and they could all go to Confession after the holidays to clear their souls. Ben heard; he would go to Confession, but he did not intend to clear his soul to the priest. From now on, Paul would be his confessor.

The underage lovers frolic at the beach all morning dreaming and telling their life stories. They swim on and off but the weather changes, dark clouds blow in from the south and the wind-whipped sand stings eyes. By lunchtime the sea changes from blue to heavy green, the sky is overcast and thunder and lightning roll in across the ocean. People desert the beach and head back to camp to batten down and tighten tent ropes.

After lunch Ben walks to Yvette's van and finds her parents loading their station wagon. The Aubergines are going to Warrnambool to visit friends and will be gone for a few days. As they drive off Yvette calls out the car window. 'See you at our spot on Sunday, Benny' and she blows him a farewell kiss. The young blond boy watches the car as it motors up the highway and over the ridge out of sight. Suddenly alone, he wanders to the shops with the thought of ice cream. But ice cream without Yvette does not appeal so he sits on a bench out of the wind drinking a coke watching the storm roll in. The rest of the afternoon he spends inside playing word games and Dominoes with Derwood and Marie. Bob and Lou arrive back on dark boisterous with their catch, two large silver fish from the sea and two cartons of beer from the pub. At night the storm breaks over the camp, wet and fearful. Thunder roars like cannons and lightning illuminates the tents like X-rays.

The rain pours down like nails making heavy pools on flaps and awnings, and seeps into tents wetting bedding and clothes.

The morning arrives grey and cold, a woollen jumper and long pants day. Ben sits idly on the swings, his little brother Peter playing in the fine black soil making roads for his matchbox cars. The playing area is set in a Tea tree grove at the base of the valley wall, mostly dry, protected by the thick overhang of scrub. Ben can see his father the other side of the asphalt ring road, chipping round the tents with a mattock and whistling. More rain is expected and Bob is making drains to run the water away and prevent the tent floors flooding.

Derwood has gone to Warrnambool again with his friends the Carrots. Ben dreams of Yvette. He is thrilled to the core, a quiet confidence growing out from his heart. He knows things, has done things boys his age had only begun to imagine. He is changed. When once he was fearful and confused now he feels resolute and clear. When once he ached for love and affection he now has it in abundance. When once he could not bear to think of what lay ahead, he now has a future and two friends to share it with. Only at the back of his mind a pang of fear, of guilt. His two friends are not just friends but lovers. His secrets not just secrets but mortal sins.

But twelve year old Ben Potato is different now. Whereas fear and loneliness once controlled him, he now controls himself. Just thinking on his recent memories bubbles makes him whoop in joy. Even the uniform grey day feels natural and in its turn after the glorious sunny days before.

He sees his father stop to stretch and suddenly fall over backwards. He thinks his dad has tripped on a tent rope and runs over. He kneels and sees blood oozing between his father's fingers held to his right shoulder.

'Ben. Run and get Mum, hurry boy hurry!'

Ben runs two tents down and bursts in on his mother in the kitchen tent.

'Mum. Mum, come quick. Dad's fallen over.'

Olive's face drains white. She stares at Ben and sees no lie on his face. She runs out of the tent following her son to her husband lying on the ground.

'Good Lord Bob! What's happened?'

'I've been shot Ol.'

'Dear God, Who did this?' Her heart thumping and her eyes brimming.

'I don't know. It just hit me. I didn't hear a thing.' He is losing blood rapidly, face pale and his breath short and thin.

'Ben' his mum cries, 'get Lori and Lou, quick, quick!'

The boy races off to find them. Peter, the baby, standing by his fathers legs points to the road. 'Ice man, Ice man's coming.'

The ice truck pulls up and Burnie Pine comes over in his wet leather apron. An hysterical woman nearby is yelling. 'Heart attack, help, Bluey's had a heart attack!'

Olive cradles Bob, confused and protective. A hubbub is growing. People crowd in, standing over the couple on the ground. Bob's arm and shirt front are glistening black with blood and Olive's bodice is reddening. Pearl and Casper come pushing through the crowd and Pearl, seeing her father and the glinting mass of red, lets out a little scream and faints. Lou and Lori arrive behind Ben. Lori, assessing the situation, takes control. 'Lou, get the car, we've got to get Dad to Timboon hospital. Ben, go down to Cyril's office and phone the hospital we're coming. Hurry now.'

She kneels and helps her mother rip Bob's shirt off. She pinches the wound shut and feels her father's shoulder and back. 'The bullet's still in there I think Mum. There's no exit wound as far as I can tell. We've got to staunch the bleeding, he's losing too much blood.'

Ben has to push through the crowd rushing toward the scene, he shoves at anyone in his way, full of rage at what he reads as ghoulish excitement on the people's faces. He bursts into the camp manager's office with such force both the man and his secretary wife jump in alarm.

'Mr Bones, Dad's been shot. You've got to ring the hospital in Timboon.'

Cyril Bones looks at the snowy haired Potato boy unbelieving. Someone shot in his camping ground? His mate Bluey shot? The horse race broadcast leaks thinly from the transistor radio a moment ago he'd pressed to his ear. The race caller's voice fills the silence like a message from another world. He clicks it off.

'Now calm down boy', his florid face uncharacteristically pale. 'Where's your father now?'

'Ring the bloody hospital Mr Bones!' Ben is yelling, the camp manager is stupid to question him about this. 'Dad might die, please phone please.' Each moment takes its time. Cyril's face is like a slow clock.

'Alright boy, take me to him. Merle, ring the hospital, and the police.' Ben tugs at the manager's arm and leads him out the door. The big man is slow but he moves after the boy as fast as his limp and his heart allows. A terrible commotion is coming from the knot of people pushing in around the tent. Burnie Pine is lifting Bob into the back seat of the family Buick, Lou at the wheel. Olive climbs in beside her husband and Lori sits in the front. Olive holds a lump of ice against the wound and the car speeds out of the camp and up the highway above them, the crowd watching the car until it's out of sight.

A small Englishman is gathering a posse of men and teenage boys and giving orders. 'Come on lads, we'll search every tent. We'll find the bastard before he shoots anyone else.'

Cyril is trying to disperse the crowd but the Englishman ignores him and continues whipping up a hue and cry. The mob is about to rush into a search but Burnie puts a stop to it. A huge man, black wiry hair ringing a bald pate, bare hairy chest in leather apron, holding a deadly ice hook in his left hand. He confronts the little vigilante and punches him on the nose, flattening him to the ground.

'Anyone else want to play Sheriff?' he asks the assembled throng. 'Nothing will happen till the police get here.' The crowd quietens, demurely turning away. The Englishman skulks off, blood dripping on his singlet and khaki shorts.

Blonde Pearl revives, she is shaking, her cheeks blotched red, she has Peter by the hand as she marshals the twin babies into the kitchen tent away from the commotion. Beatrice, who had been at the laundry and not seen any of the drama, is standing with Burnie and Cyril and the neighbouring campers. She questions Ben over and over to relate every detail of what has happened. She is frustrated her little brother is so vague, though Ben tells her all he saw, two, three times over. He walks away from the group who are excitedly talking about angles and trajectories and rabbit shooters and if Bluey's got any enemies. All he wants is for his father not to die and for Yvette to be with him now. He just wants to be in the egg cave with her in his arms and to get the image of his father's blood out of his mind. He wanders through the camp and finds Marie at the Rotunda surrounded by a dozen teenagers. She is telling her version of the story and the teenagers crack up laughing when she mimics the mad woman yelling 'Heart attack. Bluey's had a heart attack'. Ben leaves them to sit on the swing after one of her girlfriend's kids says, 'How much did you pay the shooter Marie?'

Lunch is a sombre affair presided over by Beatrice and Marie. Pearl and her fiance Casper sit in the manager's office waiting for Lori to call from Timboon hospital. When Casper comes to the tent he tells the girls in a hushed voice. 'We won't know anything till this arvo when the X-rays are looked at. Lori said Lou gave blood, Dad needed a transfusion. Its lucky Lou's there, his blood type's the same as Dads so they didn't have to wait.'

Ben considers this right and good. His father and brother-in-law are mates and they both have fishing and beer in their blood.

An hour or two after lunch two uniformed policemen arrive and speak to Pearl and Casper and Cyril. Ben is interviewed but the police do not write down anything he tells them. The fact that neither he nor his father nor anyone else heard a shot is significant. It is agreed that the bullet was probably a high velocity 303 fired from a long way off. This 'stray bullet' theory seems to satisfy the policemen's professional curiosity. Ben feels intimidated by them, big men with beer guts rolling over their belts and an air of superior disinterest. These representatives of the law fail to inspire confidence in the boy that they can solve this particular mystery.

The weather is blustery and cold and the adults and kids sit around the tent quietly playing games and reading. Late in the afternoon Pearl and Casper return from Cyril's office with the news that Dad is alright. The X-rays show the bullet lodged behind the shoulder bone next to a main artery. An operation to remove it is considered too risky and it is best to leave the bullet where it is.

They have given him a tetanus injection and now Casper and Pearl are needed to deliver clean clothes for dad and mum and Lori. Dad is to stay in hospital overnight and mum and Pearl and Casper are to stay with him.

After dinner Lori arrives back with Lou and informs everyone that an ambulance is taking dad home to Ballarat in the morning. Casper and Pearl are driving mum with it and all the family are going home on Saturday. Ben is devastated, Yvette is not due back until Sunday.

Derwood returns from his church trip with the Carrots and the whole sorry tale has to be repeated for his benefit. He has been to Mass and Confession and he casts a pall over the family by his suggestion that coming to Port Campbell was a mistake, that had they gone to Warrnambool none of this would have happened. Not long fourteen, Derwood is on a scholarship to Saint Patrick's College Ballarat and is also in the midst of a soul-searching quest to discover if he has a calling for the priesthood. For this good boy, everything is easily determined by its position relative to his religion. From his point of view, the reasons for the present circumstances are clear. He believes his own faithful effort in attending Mass is the reason God has spared his father's life. He is pleased he has the good sense to know what side to be on.

Ben lies on his stretcher bed that night and tries to pray for Yvette to return from Warrnambool in time for him to say goodbye. But he has no faith God will listen to him, a mortal sinner twice over, who intends to sin again as soon as possible.

The next day a small item in the *Ballarat Courier* and the *Melbourne Herald Sun* pictorial newspapers, sends three young men rushing to Port Campbell ...

> 'A Ballarat man, Mr Robert Potato was shot while on holiday with his family in Port Campbell yesterday. No further details are available but police are continuing with their enquires.'

Eddy and Jamie are trainee linesmen with the PMG in Melbourne. On reading the terrible news and having no clear information as to the fate of their father they assume the worst and rush to the Port in Eddy's car. Paul Potato, a night shift labourer for Selkirk's Bricks in Ballarat, reads the item when he comes off shift. Like his older brothers he assumes the worst and drives like a maniac to the coast.

Ben stays away from the camp and mooches around the rocks and beach all morning. When he gets back for lunch his brothers have arrived and plans are being made to depart. Cyril Bones refunds a week's camping fees and the Potatoes are to pull out the next day, just one day short of two weeks since they left Ballarat. The Potato boys are much relieved and celebrate the health of their father by indulging in the Australian male's favourite pastime, drinking beer. Their spirits are boisterous and the packing continues all afternoon to much banter and laughter. The grown-up Potato

children experience a renewed family bonding; the women happy to have the boys to help pack up and the men happy to be on hand to take charge. Just like the good old days when they were young and the little kids were not yet born.

Because of the war years ago, their mum fled the city with her five little children back to Ballarat. The town Olive and Bob were once so keen to put behind them now became their refuge, the best place to be. The authorities were evacuating city children to the country, but there was no way Olive Potato was going to be separated from her little kids. So began the life of the Potato family in Ballarat. Hard during the war, but eggs and milk and vegetables aplenty. When Dad came home from the war uninjured but still not free of malaria, the Potato boys were full of pride and love for their brave dad. As they grew older they hunted rabbits, caught fish and together with their father they put food on the table. Thus, the first five children of Bob and Olive Potato, born a year apart, bonded closely with each other and their still-young parents and grew up in the radiant glow of a childhood full of love. Two families in one, separated by the gulf only big families understand as their own.

Ben and Marie are depressed and unhappy. Marie cannot understand why they all have to go home when it's clear Dad is not going to die. Ben is plunged into a torment of anxiety over Yvette and as soon as he has packed his things he goes to the shop and buys a postcard and envelope. He writes the card on the milkbar table where he and Yvette shared stories.

> Dear Yvette,
> My family are going home in the morning because someone shot my father. He is alright now but my mother is too unhappy to stay here for the rest of the holidays. I am really sorry we won't have a chance to say goodbye. I really love you. Please write to me and tell me how to write to you. My address is 823 Darling Street, Redan, Ballarat.
> I love you Yeah Yeah Yeah. Ben XXXX.

He seals the card in an envelope and writes her name on the front.

Saturday morning, just before the Potato convoy is set to roll out of camp, he runs down to the Aubergine's caravan and pushes the letter under the door.

The next day Yvette arrives back from Warrnambool excited, expecting to see Ben. Driving along the camp road she is surprised to see empty space where the Potatoes had pitched their tents. She begs her father to let her out and she runs to the manager's office to inquire.

Mr and Mrs Aubergine pull up beside their long silver van. Jacques Aubergine alights and unlocks the van door. On the floor he finds an envelope, reads the address. then with a glance to outside, slips the letter into his pocket.

Cherry Blossoms

Dianne Cikusa

Tomorrow's paper reads:
an ironing lady
can buy her innocence
(though not her liberty)
for 100 Yen;

The Japanese know
this quaint fact:
moving forward
is an illusion
in steps
and stages
[the pink lady agrees]

Inertia paints efficiency
into the world
of object
[Do please] repeat this
to me when I next
board my train
of complex thinking

... and reputedly end up
at some new place
of preconception,
indiscreetly
arranging my hairpiece
or scribbling on notepads
and doodling
on insignificant buildings

Today's paper reads:
Freedom is often buried
inside an image
and time is displaced
by careless visitors

You are now bound
to this
small piece of knowledge.

Jane's To Do List

Ivy Alvarez

1. spring clean

I have been told to eliminate dust.
Keep a clean house. Bite down my tongue. Air, blood,
chemicals in my lungs. Bleached perfection.
Shrill ammonia. Add soap and water.
Everything polished to a worry bead.

Every flat surface glares into my eyes.
Feel dumb; stunned; half-blind. Go around by touch,
inward as a pulse, the walls plumb and true.
Who am I in these rooms? — Bed, bath, pantry,
living, dining and conservatory,
kitchen, sewing, basement, reception, den.

Prefer the interstitial life: wait out
in corridors, hallways, passages, stairs.
Who else would notice the black bread burning
in the toaster? An indelible smell

seeps into the walls. There's no end. And all
my careful cakes and pastries, my averted
gazes, my shadow industry won't stop
him from hitting me, even killing me,

and I know he'll do it eventually.

2. ask about Laura's room

My daughter's doll's dress's hem is dusty:
the shelf furred with neglect. With a head
bigger than its body, hollow and blank.

A threaded needle dangling, divining
the baby in me. Girl goes around, boy up-
down, or side to side. One girl. Then one boy.

Did a line of silver tell my future?
This I know. I never wanted to be
what I've become: a doll inside a doll

inside a doll. Dust motes settle on plastic hair.
I know that same blue-eyed stare. The eyes show
the brushstrokes. I know how moths

can eat at one's abbreviated clothes.
Unbending arms that stay right where they are.
Picked up and put down. Anybody's whim.

Lie me down, I close my eyes. Stand me up,
my lids flick open. Take everything in.
I keep my secret tattooed under skin.

3. book beauty treatment

Too open-faced. Plain as a plate, a napkin.
Somebody else. A pinprick self.
A sliver that melts. Thinned to a splinter.
In the dark.
A needle spinner.

Scolded for crookedness,
I tried to cut it straight.
But my hair would disobey.

> Drag my finger against my skin
> along and up my cheek reverse
> time's inexorable wreck wrinkles
> go back slack muscles tighten
> frown lines disappear from my
> eyes the crow unsteps its tracks
> mistakes are unmade my young
> self returned to me again

more lines than freckles
a mouth that smiles less

uncreased unstained
no bruises no pain
all blood inside me

4. replace broken mirror

I was raised on polite silences
my daily bread
my long hair shed and combed and bound again
my gaze lowered
my hands quiet
the pulse at my wrists a lie
this seemed the pattern of my life
learn to lie down
let myself be poured into
this strange shape
called wife

5. find locksmith

black blades of grass
sharpen underfoot
undulled by falling dew

nightly the stars
as the sound of crickets' legs
rub in the dark
sing their song of light years
to reach me

6. get advice

his eyes on my skin
two slugs silvering

the breast he touched and loved so much
I cut it out

failed Amazon

you can't break
what is already broke

7. write down everything

once upon a time
a lady lay unconscious on the floor

when she came to, she knew
her knight had come and knocked her down

with a swole eye, she lied
to anyone who asked

8. re-stock fridge

raspberry ripple ice-cream
blood on skin

dried grape juice
an older bruise

blueberry stain
shoulder sprain

the door's sharp edge
fed to my face

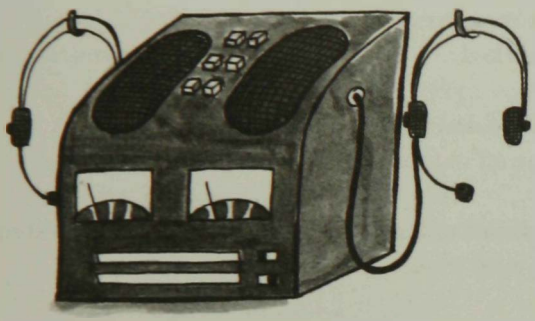
you deserve it
he said

9. write out next week's To Do List

I must not bruise
I must not bleed
I must not speak
I must not scream

COMMUNICATION DEVICES

Just in time for Christmas!



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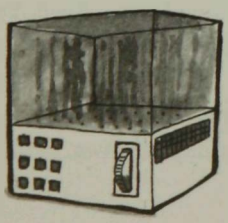

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Before Angels

Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

Before we went in all directions: ash held in abalones of shell,
roundhouses full of fire and shake.

The city recedes into reeds in the distance. Within the boundaries,
gathering continues, medicine marked.

Before water carried in aqueduct a false green, earth as skyline
— layers of bone and soil, blowing off in erosion.

Before the plateaus retreat into dunes and raw rock mountains without water,
brush grows bush in hills dotted with trees.

Eucalyptus sway as if belonging here.

Not responsible: roads, children skipping rope in schoolyards beside missions,
six and seven and still wanting milk at lunch, to roll the fat on their tongue.

Hungry, sand is many colours like flesh-toned bandaids, but for now
we'll assume dried grass teased by thunder.

Here and there, a place where water kisses. Still, there is more
in the air that reminds of the ocean not seen.

Voice, breath, sway; rustle of dry leaves. You know a plant by scent (*savia*),
sight (*zarzamora*), sound (*eucalipto*), only sometimes by name.

Dreams of water, I did not dehydrate that year, so irrigated; didn't know dryness,
thirst, didn't gather or make offering, drank myself into oblivion, walked on
and over and around
and off campus

into histories longer than any inland empire's capacity
for holding memory
    — to visit a place that wasn't; to gather
in the places that were — off and around
        and into the homes of those

who gardened and cooked,
south, east, of any campus I've lived, the families,
nations who built and cleared, planted
everything they could not eat.
I knew one, ate with them, saw barrio south of tracks,
took a patch for a son who died
years before my arrival. Un abogado, queer, Chicano,
many years in the Bay, tío I had not known,
brought my brother, patchwork, to the Quilt.
Saw the thousands laid out before him
beneath some nation's capitol.
I have always walked
in the steps of those before me.

I try to acknowledge this more,
offer songs, tabaco my trembling hand couldn't then.

The Lone Streetlight on Piliwale Road

Eric Paul Shaffer

I'm supposed to say something like light
defeats darkness and beats back the shadows,
but from the bottom of the road, the radiance
is a dull smudge on black. There's nothing
noble in the little bit of illumination the lone
streetlight spills on this short black strip
of Piliwale Road.

The stars are bold, blue,
and the edge of the galaxy burns through
the sky, every brilliant point, another ray
cast into the vast void where all light is lost.

I'm supposed to wish for dawn and see hope
in the day that conceals stars in a blue mask,
to find solace in the tragedies and comedies
we make of our lives as we make ourselves
the measure of all things.

As I drive
up the hill, the light from the bulb swells
into a dim golden ring with ragged edges
of grass and a scatter of plumeria blossoms.
In that pale glow, the spit of road is brief,
a span of black from nowhere to nowhere
and gone.

Nobody will miss that light less
than I will when somebody finally blasts
that bulb blind. I'm supposed to celebrate
the victory of light, but I just can't see one.
There is nothing more here than a faint fire,
a spark with no strength against the night.

Silkworm

Carol Chandler

AS SHE PLAYED with the thin gossamer strands of the silkworm's cocoon, she tasted the mulberry, running her tongue over the rich purple fruit, tiny indentations, indigo black with a sheen of crimson, succulent and glowing. Her mother was confined to the couch, entranced by the flickering images on the television screen, a confusion of colours and shapes, meaningless sounds. The celluloid bodies on the daily soap reminded her of how she used to model herself on Lauren Bacall in the *Maltese Falcon*, while her brother dreamt of becoming a martial artist, his sword spiralling and twisting in the air, heavy and silver with calligraphic lines, mysterious symbols.

The sheen of Chinese silk and the glimmer of a red light caught her eye, the pale green of a curling leaf soothing her mind, as she thought of her brother, a curly-haired boy who drew leviathans as a child, the intricacy of the inky lines, like the black ink of sea creatures.

Her mind drifted to the country town of her childhood, the farmhouse where her father, a carpenter and farmer, used to kill sheep in the shed. He had tried to make them understand the sacrifice, the reality of death and dying. But the images of carcasses hanging from hooks remained with her, even now, the incessant gobbling and warbling of turkeys, the darting and jabbing of their beaks, their sleek black heads and the loose vibrating folds of skin. Fleeing from the yard, she had retreated to the living room, listening to the gentle thwack of ping-pong balls, a lace tablecloth on the table for Sunday lunch, her brother and sister hitting the ball across the net; her brother with his tangled hair, proud and reckless, her sister in a white dress, the ball thwacking back and forth.

Her brother had disappeared much later and they had no idea why. The previous year they had experienced a falling out and she had been troubled by the way he had handed her a birthday card, mysteriously dated for the same day of the year before. It was the beginning of his mental illness and she remembered sitting on the beach with her nephew, the ocean tides receding, watching the gentle curve of a wave as it rolled towards the headland; her nephew toddling out towards the water, returning and touching the tears on her face.

Now, twenty years later, her nephew and mother had come to visit and she wondered how her nephew had really coped with his father's disappearance. That night as she served the family dinner, she caught her nephew's blue eyes staring at the fish as she peeled back the flesh, trying to

distract herself with the vegetables, until remnants of bone appeared piece by piece, the fish now a pathetic skeleton with its one remaining eye. She remembered the story about the loaves and fishes, the spiritual and physical needs of the multitudes continually replenished and fulfilled, realising that her sense of hope had never gone.

Her nephew's clever drawings lay on the couch, thoughtful and contemplative like his father, each line carefully placed and focused, like the strands of silk in the silkworm's cocoon, a determined set to his mouth, as he studied the drawings. His hair was a mahogany brown, not like her brother's which was auburn, burnished like the light in the red lamp, the flame of Chinese silk, and the fiery rays of the sun.

The secret of her nephew's birth troubled her, how he was born into darkness, raised by his grandmother, never connecting or finding the truth. And then, her mother, withdrawing slowly into dementia, confusing her now with her brother's girlfriend who had relinquished her son at birth.

But there was some thread of meaning in the gradual strands that connected the different neurons in her mother's mind, forever making patterns, trying to make sense of the images and objects that she saw and touched, her efforts to keep her dignity, and the very essence of her personality. The grooves and creases in her cheeks mirrored the myriad connections in her consciousness: a map of the psyche, like the whorls and ridges on her fingertips, fingers intertwined and clutched together in her lap, the folds of her dress, a soft pearly white with a repeated pattern of gloom.

She watched her mother reach for the heavy glass, clasping the diamond-shaped surface as she brought it to her lips, sipping ever so gently. Holding the glass within the curve of her hands, she studied her grandson, trying to forget the pain of her son's disappearance, confused by dementia and wondering if the young man with the silkworm was that same child who had been born two years prior to the disappearance of her son.

The old woman bent over to pick up some mulberries and as she bit into them, tasting the sweetness, began thinking of her son. Exchanging a glance with her daughter, her eyes began folding back into memory, distracted by the flickering movement of the television, the sweet taste of mulberries and the soft sensation of silk.

Language and Sediment — West

Matthew Hall

scabrous intent glamorously distils
clot functions with sylvan heaviness
a ritual of faith's uncertainty
breaches a longing for materialised risk
motion lumbers towards us in
the parchment of asphyxiated lungs
breath gauges the wounds of squalid glass
I confound the eyelets of weather
I distend sight to the meridians of your mouth
I lay in your hands
these canticles, these casements

Love as a Postmark

Josephine Rowe

I send you vitamins through the
post because I know that
sometimes
you don't eat properly.

You send me Rilke through the
post because you know that
sometimes
I don't read properly.

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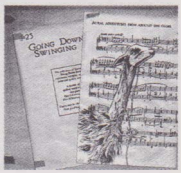

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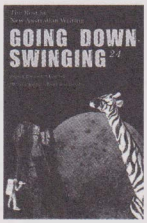

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novelty sombreros would
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from (Sunburns I Have
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'... disenfranchised? I'm
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ISBN 978-0-9804053-4-7

9 780980 405347

Cover Art: Mila Faranov
Book Design: Morpheus Studios